

Fall 2013

A room of one's own, revisited: An existential-hermeneutic study of female solitude

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A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN, REVISITED:
AN EXISTENTIAL-HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF FEMALE SOLITUDE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Karin Leah Arndt

December 2013

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Karin Leah Arndt

2013

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AN EXISTENTIAL-HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF FEMALE SOLITUDE

By

Karin Leah Arndt

Approved November 8, 2013

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ABSTRACT

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN, REVISITED:
AN EXISTENTIAL-HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF FEMALE SOLITUDE

By

Karin Leah Arndt

December 2013

Dissertation supervised by Eva Simms, Ph.D.

This study presents an existential-hermeneutic analysis of nine women's first-person accounts of extended periods of solitude. The accounts were analyzed along the five existential dimensions of spatiality, temporality, embodiment, language, and co-existentiality, producing a rich portrait of the women's lived experience of solitude. One of the first-person accounts was provided by the author of the study, who underwent three solitary retreats in the interest of this project, adding an autoethnographic component to the work. Theory from the existential-phenomenological, monastic, ecopsychological, and feminist literatures was applied to the data, enabling us to interpret the significance of the shifts the women experienced through an interdisciplinary set of lenses.

The women experienced both subtle and profound shifts in their senses of self and modes of being in the world over the course of their retreats. In the absence of direct

human relations, the women developed greater intimacy with things, non-human beings, and the Divine. Through the practice of simplicity, the women cultivated humility and more contemplative modes of seeing, revealing previously hidden contours of the material world and fostering a child-like sense of wonder. By leaving clock time and slowing down, the women became increasingly oriented toward the present moment, entrained to the rhythms of the natural world, and attuned to their desire. By retreating from the gaze of the (human) other, the women worked to heal a sense of alienation from their own bodies, experienced a respite from feminine performativity, and came to move through the world more seamlessly and comfortably. And by observing silence, the women cultivated the ability to listen beyond the human conversation and the chattering of their own minds, developed a more sacred relationship to language, confronted their emotional “demons,” and found themselves increasingly drawn toward the poetic.

Overall, through their solitudes, the women developed a greater stance of receptivity toward the more-than-human world, deconstructed elements of identity and modes of being aligned with the “false self,” and recovered aspects of their lived experience which had been neglected or suppressed over the course of becoming an adult, and especially a woman, in the context of contemporary American culture.

DEDICATION

*To the old woman living on the edge of the village,
this has always been for you*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you first and foremost to my family – to Mom, Dad, Patty, and Kristin – who have been my ever faithful cheerleaders through the years. Thank you for supporting my studies, my desires for solitude, and my life quest. I am so fortunate to have such wonderful people in my life. I seriously lucked out.

Thank you to Bo, my beautiful feline companion, who rested peacefully in the nook of my arm throughout the long days and nights of writing this dissertation. You have brought great joy to my life.

Thank you to my friends for inspiring me and walking alongside me throughout this journey. Special heartfelt thanks to Sarah Nokes-Malach for her companionship and wise counsel, and to Daniel Muller for his consistent support and wicked sense of humor.

Thank you to the psychology department at Duquesne University for cultivating and defending depth, intellectual rigor, and soul in the arid field of contemporary academic psychology. Thank you for supporting my work over the past seven years.

Thank you to my dissertation committee, most especially to my committee chair, Dr. Eva Simms, whose guidance, inspiration, and intellectual example has been invaluable to me.

Thank you to Dr. Will Adams and Dr. Anthony Barton for your guidance and feedback

on this project and for being such excellent teachers, creative thinkers, and lovely people.
I am very appreciative of you.

Thank you to the Sisters of St. Francis, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, and the School of Lost Borders for enabling me to descend into solitude safely, inexpensively, and in the context of traditions that have long supported solitary retreatants. Thank you also to my two hermitages, Greccio and hermitage #1, and to the Galisteo Basin for containing my solitude through the long days and nights.

Thank you to the women of this study. It was an honor and a pleasure to spend so much time with your words over the past few years.

Finally, thank you to _____, always a presence in absence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and well-known solitary, wrote in 1957:

Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his true self his life is always miserable and exhausting. . . . If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. (1999, p. 167)

Though his words may seem somewhat misplaced in the context of a contemporary clinical psychology dissertation, I take Thomas Merton's call for silence and solitude as a remedy for a sense of psychological and spiritual homelessness very seriously. My aim in writing this dissertation is to better understand the workings of solitude by illuminating what its practice opens up and/or forecloses in the lived world of the solitary individual. Yet it seems somewhat strange to focus on the merits of solitude in today's world, particularly from the perspective of a psychological tradition that values dialogue and interpersonal relationship to the extent that it does. Clinical psychologists are trained in the "talking cure" and are generally taught, with regard to therapy, that "it's the relationship that heals" (Yalom, 1989, p. 91). Our training stresses the notion that the path to psychological health involves higher quality forms of relationship, not higher quality forms of aloneness. This project is motivated by a desire to understand what high quality aloneness may look like and what kind of experience of the self, other, and world it helps to elicit.

Thomas Merton argues that the practice of solitude may “enable the deep inner voice of [“man’s”] own true self to be heard” (p. 167). It seems odd to hear, and take seriously, this kind of language fifty-five years later. Those of us steeped in postmodern thought don’t tend to believe in a “true self” or a “deep inner voice.” Such concepts seem to betray a belief in a pure, essential, autonomous selfhood that is on some level untouched by culture and language and exists fundamentally separate from the world. According to postmodern thought, our selves are never separate from the language we speak, the social role we play, and the interpersonal relationships in which we are embedded. Phenomenologists and postmodern scholars have worked hard to explicate a vision of the self that is radically intersubjective and “in-the-world” rather than set apart from the world and observing from a distance. How then, according to a framework that disavows an image of the self as separate and alienated, can we understand solitude, a practice that involves a basic separation of the self from others and, in many cases, also involves the intentional cessation of spoken language? Can the practice of intentional solitary retreat – understood as a partial retreat from the use of language, the performance of one’s social role, and the immediate demands of one’s interpersonal relationships – be conceived of as potentially healthy, or does it merely serve to deepen a sense of alienation and the illusion of one’s fundamental separateness that our egocentric society has taught us to believe in? Thomas Merton believed that the practice of solitude can help a person heal a sense of exile and feel “at one with his true self” (p. 167). I believe there is merit to his contention that solitude fosters a sense of homecoming rather than alienation, and it seems that his words may be even more relevant to the average person today than they were fifty years ago. I think psychologists need to pay attention to this.

I feel called to study the topic of solitude for a number of reasons. In some ways, I think of this project as an effort toward the recovery of something that has been lost. Given the massive daily increase in the extent to which various technologies – TV, iPhones, internet, etc. – infuse our existence, an inquiry into the value and workings of solitude is particularly timely. These technologies have in some important ways made our lives more efficient and comfortable, and they have helped to bring about a drastic alteration of our perception of time, space, place, relationships, and our bodies. But while giving us a sense of being more “connected” with others, these modern technologies seem to have paradoxically made physical isolation and loneliness far more rampant. They have also made privacy and the capacity for solitude exceedingly scarce. In his 2009 article titled “The End of Solitude,” literary critic and essayist William Deresiewicz argues that the contemporary internet age has fostered a sense of self that is desperate to be known, visible, and connected and is terrified of anonymity and solitude. He asserts that,

We live exclusively in relation to others, and what disappears is solitude. Technology is taking away our privacy and concentration, but it is also taking away our ability to be alone. Though I shouldn’t say taking away. We are doing this to ourselves; we are discarding these riches as fast as we can. (p. 1)

Mass produced, corporate-sponsored images have come to colonize our imaginary domains, impoverishing our individual erotic lives and diminishing our creative capacities. Our attunement to the more-than-human natural world tends to decrease with our greater reliance on technology as well. We walk through the city streets (or even city parks!) listening to our iPods, checking our email, texting to friends, or watching the Google map simulation of our geographical coordinates rather than relying on our bodily intuition or asking for help from a stranger in order to reach our destinations. In many

ways, one could argue that an experience of the real has been eclipsed by the virtual. Some postmodern writers have argued that there is no “real” outside of cultural scripts and that we cannot go back to a less mediated and supposedly more natural form of existence. I think it’s possible, however, to both recognize that our experience is always situated and mediated to some extent but believe that there are *gradations* of mediation and that there are experiences of the self and world that are more “immediate” than others. And it’s possible to acknowledge that our massive reliance on technologies, particularly cyber-technologies, has had both positive and negative effects. I believe that two of those negative effects are the degradation of a sense of immediacy and a decrease in our ability to be alone well – i.e., to enjoy solitude.

When Thomas Merton asserts that solitude enables people to make contact with their “true self,” I do not believe he is referring to an unchanging, essential self *or* a self identified with one’s social role; I believe, at least in part, he is referring to a less mediated experience of one’s being-in-the-world – an experience which is less technologically, socially, culturally, and linguistically imbued, contingent, and determined. A self that is more open and receptive. Merton believed that through the practice of solitude carried out in a particular way – a way marked by simplicity, silence, and attentiveness to both “inner” and environmental cues – people can feel closer to God and more attuned to the world around them. Henry David Thoreau came to very similar, though more secular conclusions through his solitary experiment at Walden Pond. Both Merton and Thoreau eschewed many of the technological comforts of their time, practiced silence, and carried out various contemplative practices during their solitary retreats in order to feel this greater closeness of experience, this rawer experience of self

and world. This kind of experience is largely missing in our day-to-day lives as contemporary Americans, and I believe that the practice of solitude, if carried out in specific ways, might help restore some part of our experience – and therefore some part of ourselves – that has been repressed in the process of living in 21st century America.

I think that psychologists need to pay more attention to this, but they seem to lack the interest as well as the discourse with which to talk about it. The tradition of psychology has been largely silent on the subject of solitude. Throughout time, the practice of solitude has been championed in the writings of artists (poets in particular) and spiritual practitioners across a range of traditions, but it seems a rarity to find a contemporary psychologist or psychological school advocating for its potential benefits. Indeed, it is difficult to champion aloneness in a profession that values interpersonal relationship and dialogue to the extent that it does, particularly in this postmodern day and age. I have rarely heard anyone directly address solitude as a worthy subject of consideration in my therapeutic and scholarly training thus far. It even seems as though therapists in training are taught to view aloneness in any of its forms to be necessarily unhealthy, escapist, or narcissistic. In *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Anthony Storr (1988) carefully documents the ways in which psychotherapists of a number of different schools tend to disparage solitude and view patients who greatly value solitude as necessarily deprived, disabled, and neurotic. He argues that according to these theorists,

It appears that we possess value only in so far as we fulfill some useful function vis-a-vis other people, in our roles, for example, as spouse, parent, or neighbor, and thus time spent alone is viewed as useless, regressive, and, on some level, even unethical. (p. xiv)¹

¹ Storr wrote his critique 25 years ago; given the profession's increasing emphasis on relational models of selfhood and the heavy emphasis on the necessity of community engagement for mental health, the bias against solitude not only persists but may have even deepened. The past 25 years have also seen the infiltration of cyber-technologies into all facets of our lives as well as the reach of postmodern thinking

It makes sense to me that there is a definite bias against the practice of solitude in my line of work, given the radical sociality of contemporary postmodern thought as well as the bias that contemporary psychologists, at least clinical practitioners, tend to have toward interpersonal relating and the value of “connection” at the expense of valuing the autonomous and the solitary.

I am also inspired to inquire into the value and practice of solitude because it is a value that I hold dear in my own life. In many ways I feel I have had to keep my love and appreciation for solitude “closeted” as I have found that many people appear to have a powerful aversion to solitude and or simply react negatively to the idea that it can be a potentially healthy and fulfilling practice. It seems that many of these people seem to conflate the concept of solitude with the concept of loneliness, a differentiation the pre-existing literature on solitude makes clear. I believe that if “solitude” were to be fleshed out in a more careful and descriptive manner – rather than merely discussed as a general concept – we might gain a greater understanding of how a certain imbalance in our modes of being-with-others and being alone may underlie much of our contemporary psychopathology and widespread sense of alienation. I also believe that if we can find more nuanced, intellectually astute, and poetic ways of speaking about solitude (rather than merely casting it as bad or regressive or conflating it with the experience of loneliness) we can find ways to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy modes of aloneness and find ways of including solitary practices in our personal psycho-spiritual regimens throughout our lives.

beyond the academy, making the role of solitude in our understanding of “the good life” particularly questionable.

My primary interest in studying solitude, however, was inspired by the observation I made several years ago that so many of my female psychotherapy clients (as well as female friends), much more so than my male clients and friends, appear to have such a hard time being alone with themselves, let alone find that time fulfilling and valuable. This difficulty with aloneness really surprised me at first, but after hearing the same basic resistance against aloneness of all kinds so many times I have almost come to expect it. Many of these women tell me that when they find themselves alone (which they try very hard to avoid doing) they feel anxiety or a disquieting restlessness and the powerful need to reach for the phone and call someone, oftentimes their mother or their best friend. Or they turn on the TV in order to feel like there is someone else in the room. Or they may open the refrigerator and eat to fill a sense of loneliness or emptiness. Anything other than being alone with themselves. They also tend to feel uncomfortable traveling alone, eating at a restaurant alone, spending the day outdoors alone, etc. So many of these women seem to cycle through distraction to social interaction and back again continuously through the day in order to feel okay. One woman in my acquaintance even confessed that the main reason she wanted to become a mother was so that she would feel less alone. “What’s going on here?” I found myself asking. Though a certain amount of anxiety about being alone is perhaps natural and wise, since we are fundamentally intersubjective creatures who survive in the context of community, this kind of imbalance between togetherness and aloneness seems almost worthy of the label “psychopathological.” Why does this imbalance and intense fear of aloneness seem so common, especially amongst women? Why aren’t we naming this as a problem and trying to address it in some way? More intensive and higher-quality forms of

interpersonal engagement, whether through talk therapy or community involvement or intimate relationship do not seem to me to be an effective response to the problem, in and of themselves. It seems to me that inquiring into the value and workings of solitude as well as the capacity to be alone upon which it rests might be a helpful inroad into the problem and its possible mitigation as well.

In 1928, in a speech to a woman's college in London, Virginia Woolf (1989) called for women to have access to a "room of one's own" in order to produce written works that could rival those of the great male writers. Having physical privacy, an ample amount of time, and a meager stipend on which to live are the foundational ingredients for literary women to be able to make their talent manifest, according to Woolf. Though she focused on the basic material necessities involved in the creation of art, Woolf's argument can easily be extended to women's economic, political, and psychological liberation in general. "A room of one's own" was a call for the conditions through which women could better cultivate their imaginations, their craft, their intellects, and their desires; it was a stand for female self-determination and freedom – a kind of freedom and experience of the self that was not accessible to the vast majority of women in Woolf's time and place. She helped us to understand the role that solitude and privacy play in that freedom. A valuation of solitude had been emphasized by a number of well-known male writers throughout time (e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, etc.), but Woolf's argument for its role in women's lives was a novelty. At that time, female solitude was considered an unnecessary indulgence, irrelevant to the lives of women, and a threat to the dominant social order (Koch, 1994, p. 250). It seems our society still holds that attitude to a certain extent. Perhaps one of the current frontiers

of “women’s liberation,” to use an old-fashioned but, I believe, still viable term, may be the right of women to claim and enjoy their solitude – to have a space, place, time, and imaginative container of their own. I think it’s important to be talking about this right now, and I think psychologists need to weigh in on the conversation.

Throughout time, artists, philosophers, and spiritual practitioners across a range of traditions have attested to the benefits of solitude. I believe that everyone can potentially benefit from the cultivation of solitude or at least an inquiry into the role it plays in their lives. This seems especially true of contemporary Western women today. Clearly, we all have different needs and desires for solitude, given our different temperaments, personality styles, developmental stages, socio-economic conditions, and cultural beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, this inquiry is fueled by a belief that most human beings need to cultivate both mindful relating *and* mindful aloneness in order to have a deeply fulfilling life. We are both a self-in-relation *and* a solitary self; both interdependent *and* autonomous – we need to attend to and cultivate both streams in order to maximize our well-being. How can we hold the paradox that we are simultaneously both autonomous and interdependent? How can we respect the need that people have for a sense of community, engagement, and belongingness and also respect and protect the need for solitude? But in order to respect and protect the need for solitude, we first have to understand what it is. And in order to understand what it is, we need to flesh out its particular workings in a closely descriptive manner. That is the main intention of this study.

According to Gaston Bachelard (1994), “The psychologist has an interest in finding all paths into the most ancient familiar things” (p. 4). My path into the most

ancient familiar topic of solitude involved carrying out a qualitative analysis of journals kept by women during periods of intentional solitary retreat. I set out to conduct a hermeneutic-existential analysis of women's first-person accounts of solitude in order to better understand the existential dimensions of solitude as well as women's particular relationship to solitude. Carrying out a close reading of first-person accounts of solitude helps us better understand how solitude is actually lived, rather than merely talking about solitude on an abstract, conceptual level, as is usually the case. How is the space, time, body, language, and the "other" of solitude lived? And further, how are these dimensions lived by women, in and through a female body marked and performed as "feminine" in the context of a culture with a lengthy history of stigmatizing and obstructing the practice of female solitude and self-determination?

Ways of defining solitude

This project is about solitude, but what is solitude? It is a rather elusive term. The literature that addresses solitude tends to frame it in four different ways: as a specific form of aloneness that is distinct from other forms of aloneness; as an intentional psycho-spiritual practice; as a mode of existence or psychological drive that is distinct from, but complementary to, a relational mode of existence or psychological drive; and as a psychological capacity and developmental achievement. I will briefly discuss each way of defining solitude in turn.

Solitude is often articulated in the literature as a form of aloneness that can be contrasted with other forms of aloneness such as loneliness, isolation, and alienation. Solitude is understood as a basic disengagement with other people. We may hold others

in our minds and address others through our writing or God through our prayers, but in solitude we are not directly engaged with others and are freed from having to respond to their calls, needs, and desires. This disengagement is often (though not always) experienced as positive; it is also voluntary and intentional and is thus determined by the practitioners themselves. In contrast, loneliness, isolation, and alienation are forms of aloneness in which one's experience has a negative cast and is determined and structured by other people (Koch, 1994, p. 44). Because much of the literature, particularly the psychological literature, seems to collapse the four modes of aloneness into one, the specific value and workings of solitude are often overlooked and all forms of aloneness tend to be viewed as unhealthy or unsatisfying. In her book *Stations of Solitude*, Alice Koller (1990) contends that, "Being solitary is being alone well: being alone luxuriously immersed in doings of your own choice, aware of the fullness of your own presence rather than of the absence of others." (p. 4). Solitude is a being aware of the fullness of your own presence as opposed to being painfully aware of the absence of the other, as in loneliness. In many ways, loneliness can be understood and has been characterized as the opposite of solitude (Koch, 1994, p. 33). Loneliness is felt as a lack, a painful yearning, and a sense of incompleteness. Solitude, on the other hand, tends to be experienced as a plentitude and sense of fullness (even if that "fullness" paradoxically involves a felt sense of emptiness or barrenness in the process of opening to something beyond the personal self, as we will see was the case for many of the women in this study).

Solitary retreat has also been articulated as an intentional psycho-spiritual practice or discipline, rather than merely a form of aloneness in the literature. Certain strands of the Christian monastic tradition have a long history of supporting the practice of

occasional solitary retreat as well as more permanent solitary lifestyles (referred to as “eremitic”) for those who find themselves called down the path of becoming a hermit. The values of silence, simplicity, and solitude as the basic ingredients of a particular kind of spiritual path date back to the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived in the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth centuries (Nouwen, 1974, p. 13). These men and women founded a monastic tradition that provides basic guidelines for the solitary practitioner seeking a closer connection with the Divine. Though this tradition has not been taught in any systematic way (even in religious orders) since the 16th century, there have been many who have been inspired by the desert monastic ideal and have attempted to emulate it (Fredette & Fredette, 2008, p. xvi). For example, though he was a member of an order of monks that did not readily support his desires for an eremitic lifestyle, Thomas Merton’s solitary retreat in the Kentucky woods was built after the model of the Desert Fathers.² Some Christian monasteries and convents currently offer solitary retreat space on their grounds, and there is still an active though very small tradition of practicing hermits in the United States. Though our contemporary society seems to be progressively more apprehensive about aloneness, and opportunities for solitude appear to be diminishing, there is some indication that eremitical lifestyles are experiencing a small rebirth in Western societies (Fredette & Fredette, 2008, p. 28). Solitary retreat plays a significant role in the Buddhist monastic tradition as well, and it is interesting to note that the Buddha, similar to Jesus Christ, gained enlightenment in the context of a 49-day outdoor solitary retreat. Mohammed, the father of Islam, underwent his major

² It is interesting to note that Thomas Merton also found inspiration for his solitary retreat from Henry David Thoreau, a Transcendentalist living one hundred years earlier. Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond serves as a secular, nature-oriented (rather than explicitly religiously-oriented) type of retreat that has served to inspire many Americans who have desired to integrate solitary retreat into their psycho-spiritual practice but are not affiliated with a particular religious tradition.

spiritual breakthrough during a solitary retreat as well. Intentional solitary retreat is also a significant part of many Native American spiritual traditions, as the practice of the four-day “vision quest” is designed to help young people cross the threshold into adulthood and determine their individual calling through an intense solitary encounter with nature. The belief that solitary retreat is especially useful as a rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood is also held by Western psychologist Bill Plotkin (2008), while other Western psychologists emphasize the particular value of solitary retreat for those at mid-life and beyond (Hollis, 1993; Storr, 1988).

A further way of defining solitude is as a mode of human existence that is distinct from a more relational mode of existence. Philosophers such as Jose Ortega y Gasset and Emmanuel Levinas have conceptualized solitude as a foundational ontological state that a relational mode of being rests on, and develops out of. Ortega y Gasset (1957) employed the term “radical solitude” to refer to an order of ultimate reality that lies at the root of our existence and serves as the primary ground for interpersonal relationships. This radical solitude is deeply personal but not egotistical or solipsistic: “Hence this radical reality – my life – is so little “egotistic,” so far from “solipsistic,” that in essence it is the open area, the waiting stage, on which any other reality may manifest itself and celebrate its Pentecost” (p. 40). Similarly, Levinas (1987) used the term “solitude” to describe a primary ontological state that is not opposed to collective life but rather serves as a foundation for it; it is a “a virility, a pride and a sovereignty” (p. 55) which simultaneously serves to limit our freedom since one’s primary aloneness implies that one is ultimately responsible for her own existence. Solitude as an essential mode of existence may also be conceived of as more of a psychological or psycho-physiological

drive that exists in tension with a drive toward relationship. Psychiatrist Anthony Storr (1988) contends that, “Two opposing drives operate throughout life: the drive for companionship, love, and everything else which brings us close to our fellow men; and the drive toward being independent, separate, and autonomous” (p. xiv). Storr finds this duality or tension of opposites well represented by the yin/yang symbol in which both solitude and encounter are part of the whole, and aspects of the other are contained in each (p. 94). This symbol “can be seen as portraying the proper places of solitude and encounter in a human life, as revealing the relative importance of the two ways of experiencing the world, the meaning of each kind of experience for human existence” (p. 95). Psychologist Ester Schaler Buchholz (1997) similarly uses the term “alonetime” to talk about solitude as a drive and psycho-physiological need; she writes that “alonetime” “is a new word for a vital need and state of being. ...aleness is a biological and psychological essential and just as important as the heavily documented need for attachment” (p. 21). Buchholz contends that solitary retreat enables one to “modify stimulation and to constitute or reconstitute how one functions” (p. 22) and states that though different people need different amounts of it, “solitude is a deep, soothing, and persistent call in life” (p. 24).

One final way of thinking about solitude is as a psychological capacity and a developmental achievement. Abraham Maslow (1962) is one of the few psychologists to consider solitude to be an achievement; he argued that persons who have reached the level of self-actualization tend to enjoy and seek out solitude more than most and that their social contacts tend to be fewer but of higher quality. D.W. Winnicott is another psychoanalyst who gave serious thought to the notion that solitude is a psychological

capacity. His 1958 article, “The Capacity to be Alone,” argued that an infant first develops (or fails to develop) the capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother or primary caregiver. The “good enough” mother essentially holds the space for the infant to be alone with herself. When the mother is close by, indirectly attentive and non-intrusive, she holds a space for the child to relax into herself. In this space the child can *be* in her authentic experience: “It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli” (p. 418). In this non-intrusive but loving holding space, the child can flounder and become unintegrated. Winnicott contends that, “in this setting, the sensation or impulse will feel real and be a truly personal experience.... The individual who has developed the capacity to be alone is constantly able to rediscover the personal impulse” (p. 419). Children who have developed the capacity to be alone have successfully internalized the maternal holding environment and thus have become able to hold themselves. Those children, we can predict, will have the necessary foundation to be able to find the experience of solitude as adults potentially fulfilling and enriching rather than necessarily anxiety-provoking or boring. According to Winnicott, a child who has not developed the capacity to be alone will adopt a “false self” and live a life in which she is forever in reaction to, and at the mercy of, the social world.

In their article, “The Capacity to be Alone: Wilderness Solitude and the Growth of the Self,” Hollenhorst, Frank, and Watson (1994) assert that the capacity to be alone is not something that children learn exclusively in the presence of their mothers, however; it is also a capacity that is cultivated through their interactions with the wild spaces of the

natural world. They argue that a robust capacity for solitude is rare in today's world, as most Americans are alienated from the more-than-human natural world:

Solitude is a learned behavior. It is a capacity that results from a natural progression of the self nurtured in the natural environment. The further removed we have become from the natural environment and its attendant exposure to healthy aloneness, the less we have been able to properly develop our capacity for solitude. With much of today's population living almost exclusively in the built environment, it is of little wonder we should see large-scale behavioral dysfunction in solitude development. (p. 239)

The results of this wide-ranging dysfunction with regard to solitude are not only psychological impoverishment but also extreme environmental degradation and a high rate of species extinction. Another result of this dysfunction is a state of relational co-dependency. Hollenhorst et al. argue that the human ego,

...has been progressively detached from its ecological mooring. Today, much of our self-identity is provided in how we piece together other people's definitions of who we are. ... The individual is considered well-adjusted relative to society, not necessarily to life itself. This has produced not only an interdependent culture but also a co-dependent one with an attendant fear of aloneness. (p. 234)

The individual is well-adjusted relative to society but "not necessarily to life itself." How might a capacity to be alone be an integral part of being adjusted "to life itself"? How might a practice of solitary retreat in the context of nature help connect us to our "ecological mooring"? How might solitary retreat help us make the shift from an egocentric to a more "eco-centric" sense of self?

In his paper "Love, Open Awareness, and Authenticity: A Conversation with William Blake and D.W. Winnicott," psychologist Will Adams (2006) takes Winnicott's ideas about the capacity to be alone further, writing that it is not only the internalization of the non-impinging maternal holding environment that enables us to enjoy solitude; *throughout life, others actively hold us in our solitude*, further enriching our capacity to

be alone and get back in touch with a sense of authenticity and realness. He uses the example of how William Blake's wife, Catherine, held William in his solitude throughout his adult life. She essentially permitted and attended to his process of letting go into imaginative experience; her comforting, non-demanding, but ultimately available presence provided a crucial facilitating environment for his creative work. Her love and non-intrusive caretaking essentially allowed him to, as Winnicott says, "flounder," to not have to react to the other, to "become unintegrated," and get in touch with his real sensations and impulses. So not only did William internalize his mother's holding of his solitude and thereby become able to hold himself; the ways in which Catherine held him in his solitude further facilitated his "open awareness," creativity, and mystical visions. I think this image of one person holding the other in her or his solitude is often overlooked, especially when thinking about the lives of male artists, spiritual practitioners, and writers. For example, Thoreau was not strictly self-reliant in his solitude at Walden Pond; Emerson provided the land and therefore the physical holding space for his solitude as well as a certain amount of encouragement and blessing. Thoreau's solitude was essentially permitted, held, and enabled by his mentor. Likewise, his Trappist monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani, and the work of the monks who lived there made Thomas Merton's well-known eremitic lifestyle possible. The solitude of individuals usually involves both the psychological and material support of others. The capacity to be alone, or to have a fruitful experience of solitude, is not only a psychological development that happens or fails to happen during childhood; as a capacity, it requires the care and upkeep of other people and institutions throughout the course of one's life.

Women's relationship to solitude

Very little has been written about women's relationship to solitude. For the most part, the scholarly literature on solitude tends not to address the question of gender. Entire books are written on the topic of solitude, or on the eremitical life, but the vast majority of these books fail to discuss any examples of solitary women or inquire into the gendered aspects of solitude. Perhaps the most well-known book on solitude, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* by psychiatrist Anthony Storr (1988), speaks almost exclusively about male solitaries (Storr does discuss the female writer Beatrix Potter, but only for a mere three pages) and makes no mention at all of women's particular relationship with solitude. However, philosopher Philip Koch's (1994) landmark book, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, in many ways picks up where Storr leaves off and does devote a very thoughtful though brief chapter to the experience of women and solitude. In this chapter Koch laments the lack of accounts of women in solitude and speculates on the silence that hovers around the topic. He argues, simply but powerfully, that solitude is as useful and relevant to the lives of women as it is to men, despite beliefs to the contrary in both the academic literature and the popular mind. He argues that the contemporary state of academic feminism, for example, tends to disregard or even denigrate the practice of solitude. While the feminist emphasis on the role of relationship and interpersonal connection in female psychology (e.g., women's greater "ethic of care" as delineated by Stone Center writers such as Carol Gilligan and Jean Baker Miller) has helped to "defeat the hegemony of male values," Koch fears that it has contributed to the dismissal of solitude as a valuable practice for women since solitude is associated with certain values that are conventionally considered "masculine," such as independence and self-reliance

(p. 249). I would add that, especially since the publication of Koch's book in 1994, the influence of postmodern feminist theory on the ways in which we think about women and the project of female liberation has shifted such that the practice of solitude may appear old-fashioned, if not irrelevant. The elevation of the archetype of the machine-human "cyborg" as feminist icon (Haraway, 1991), for example, has in many ways dampened a vital, and I believe very necessary, critique of the hyper-technological mediation of our experience and has made discussions of personal "experience" – "women's experience" in particular – terribly suspect. The very concept of "woman" has been called into question by postmodern writers as well. I believe that this project serves as a sensitive inquiry into the phenomenon of female solitude that is both informed by feminist and postmodern theory *while respecting experience, as it is lived*, even if it does not conform to the popular theorizing of the day. I also believe we can think and write about the experience of the solitary individual in such a way that does not deny our fundamental interrelationality or the value of interpersonal relationship. We can conceptualize the human self as a "self-in-relation" *and* value the practice of solitude at the same time.

Koch's (1994) chapter on women and solitude also clearly and definitively names two main obstacles to the attainment of fruitful solitude for women: their socialization as caretakers and the potential physical dangers to women in solitude.³ Koch argues that having one's consciousness focused on the needs of others precludes the ability to gain sustenance from solitude:

So long as women are socialized to take primary responsibility for the care of others it will be correspondingly difficult to disengage consciousness from other people in the way that solitude requires... The socialization of women to take

³ Koch also cites the economic disadvantage that women as a group are at as a further obstacle to attaining "rooms of their own" and enjoying fruitful solitude, but he does not focus on this as a major problem. This is a major problem though, even today, especially in the lives of ethnic minority women.

primary responsibility for everyone must cease. The violence must stop. (p. 272-273)

The threat of actual physical violence serves as a major prohibition against the practice of solitude as well, as it compromises women's ability to let go imaginatively, focus on their experience, and/or direct their focus outward onto the immediate environment. Women alone are at risk, though probably not as much risk as the avalanche of news stories of female abduction, rape, and murder (which serve as an effective warning to women to stay indoors or in the presence of others) would have us believe. But even if a physical attack is unlikely, a certain amount of psychological and physiological vigilance is usually required for women in solitude. Koch contrasts the ability of men to enjoy outdoor solitude versus women:

Men may wander the streets or the parks or the beaches at night but more than half of all women are afraid to do so. In the daytime the fears are still there... Men experience mainly irritation when a solitary walk on a deserted beach is disturbed by the appearance of a figure in the distance; but for very many women, that irritation would be compounded by apprehension. Even when no figure appears, a general sense of watchfulness and vulnerability pervades many women's solitudes in nature – hardly emotions liable to increase one's enjoyment of freedom, attunement to nature, or any of the other values of solitude. (p. 273)

It seems important to add that a woman not only needs to be watchful of potential physical harm but also sexual objectification while experiencing outdoor solitude. A woman walking the streets in a patriarchal society is too often understood to be a streetwalker, a visual spectacle, a commodity available at a price to men, in contrast to the male equivalent of the nomad or "le flaneur" sauntering anonymously through the city streets, communing with the world on his own terms. Women's attunement to sexual objectification from without puts a damper on their ability to lose themselves in reverie or direct their focus "internally" or externally; this difficulty may also be compounded by an

additional degree of *self-objectification* of their own bodies – a state of constant low-level self-surveillance and body-monitoring (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) – that many women experience during outdoor solitude but may carry with them into their indoor solitude as well.

Another major obstacle to the attainment of fruitful solitude for women is the long-standing and deeply ingrained stigma against solitary women. Quoting the warning from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Witches Hammer, a Medieval witch hunting guide) that “a woman who thinks alone thinks evil,” Philip Koch reminds us that the vast majority of people killed during the European witch hunts were solitary women (p. 254-255). Indeed, the quintessential (though unfortunate) image of the woman alone is the witch with her bubbling cauldron – a woman in touch with her desire and almost certainly up to no good.⁴ A woman is supposed to be a container for others, focused on meeting their needs and desires. To focus on the self in solitude is seen as selfish and as breaking the heterosexual patriarchal contract that limits woman to the roles of mother, lover, or muse and insists that woman be a visible, specular object available on demand to the eyes of others. Women are supposed to be “invaginated containers for masculine seed and male fantasy” (Henke, 2003, p. 21), not self-contained beings, and certainly not fantasizers in their own right. Female solitude is considered far more threatening, or is at least much more maligned than male solitude. The stereotypical image of a woman alone, in this culture, to this day, has a far more negative cast than the image of a solitary man. Women alone are considered spinsters, losers, barren, lacking, and sexually and

⁴ In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994) echoes this association with solitude, desire, and civil disobedience: “The passions simmer and resimmer in solitude: The passionate being prepares his explosions and his exploits in this solitude” (p. 9). It is no accident that the man most associated with civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau, was also a well-known solitary.

socially undesirable. They are “crazy cat ladies,” “madwomen in the attic.” They are, in short, failed women. Compare these images to those of the solitary man: He is the creative genius, the rebel, the hero, or the eccentric but lovable hermit.

The attempts in the literature, as well as in popular culture, to re-envision the archetype of the solitary woman are rare but powerful. For example, Suzette Henke’s essay, “Women Alone: The Spinster’s Art” (2003) argues that rather than being sad, superfluous women, spinsters belong to a long lineage of eccentric bohemian female artists. According to Henke, the spinster is a “fiercely independent woman who chooses to remain husband-free and child-free in the interest of personal, spiritual, vocational, or creative self-development” and is “society’s well-kept secret.” She is the “spinner of language and poetry, of music and art, anxiously giving birth from her entrails to magnificent fabulations, intricate spiderwebs of solitary creativity that exude an oddly Circean *odor di femina*” (p. 23). Attempts, like Henke’s, to re-envision the image of the solitary woman are few and far between, however, and certainly do not represent popular or academic thinking about women and solitude. It is my hope that this project, by giving voice to women’s solitary experiences and attempting to understand why they are worth paying attention to, may serve as a further movement toward that process of re-envisioning and reclaiming.

In addition to the social stigmas and social conditions that work against female solitude, theorists have tried to understand the relationship of women to solitude through a psychodynamic lens. Psychologist Nancy Burke (1997) argues that women often lack a fundamental capacity to be alone; it is therefore not merely social stigma or material conditions that get in the way of women’s solitude. Burke synthesizes Winnicott’s theory

that the child develops a capacity to be alone in the presence of the caregiver with Nancy Chodorow's theories of gender difference to try to understand why many women tend to have difficulty with solitude. According to Chodorow, pre-oedipal experience is different for girls and boys because mothers tend to treat them in different ways due to a deeper maternal identification with female rather than male children. As a result of this identification, Chodorow argues that, "processes of separation and individuation are made more difficult for girls" and may lead to partial or, in Chodorow's eyes, incomplete self-other distinctions (Burke, p. 335). Burke writes that,

These conditions, we might argue hypothetically following Chodorow, create less of a sense in daughters of being alone in the presence of another, thereby reducing the potential space and decreasing opportunities to develop an independent capacity to be alone for female children relative to those for sons. (p. 336)

Thus Burke argues that girls tend not to be permitted the same amount or kind of personal space by the mother in which to develop their authentic feelings and a sense of personhood and realness; to some extent they fail to get in touch with themselves in a basic way and then look to the world for self-definition and mirroring. She goes on to suggest that this failure to develop a capacity to be alone and thus be more at the mercy of the world might be one of the underlying issues involved in psychopathologies that are seen far more often in women than in men, especially borderline personality disorder and eating disorders (which often involve problems with self-other boundaries, the inability to self-soothe, and a pervasive sense of inner emptiness). Burke also suggests that one of the reasons for the strong stigma against women's solitude in both women and men is due to the fact that children have a stake in keeping mother at their disposal; her solitude is therefore threatening and anxiety provoking in a fundamental way. This deep-seated fear

of mother's independent needs and desires may carry over into adulthood and form the foundation for the fear and distrust of female solitude.

Feminist theorists who have taken up Chodorow's ideas about the origin of gender differences (such as the Stone Center theorists) have often posited that women have a more permeable sense of self and are therefore more relational, empathetic, and care-oriented than men. This female interconnectedness is usually viewed as a virtue – indeed, one that men can and should emulate. As mentioned earlier, this line of thinking has helped to disrupt the hegemony of masculine models of psychological health and give the more traditionally “feminine” sphere of values their due. Yet it seems important to point out that there may be dark aspects of this tendency towards hyper-relationality, if it is unbalanced by the cultivation of a capacity to be alone. There is a risk for an impoverishment of the psyche when one is not given the psychological and physical space to explore the world and tune into one's own authentic experience apart from the input and expectations of others. Too many of the problems I see with my own female psychotherapy patients, for example, seem to revolve around their difficulties disentangling themselves psychologically from others – especially their mothers – and finding some space to breathe and locate their own desire. This certainly seems to be linked to their difficulties with being alone. This has caused to me question whether therapy with this type of patient should be approached in a more spacious and quiet way than the approach in which I have largely been trained, an approach that emphasizes the development of an intimate relationship and provision of constant mirroring. It has caused me to reconsider the potential usefulness of the psychoanalytic couch – which I have been taught to be suspicious of – a technique that may permit such clients more

imaginative and personal space and relieve them from having to read my desires. Echoing this idea, psychiatrist Leston Havens (1989) gives similar advice to psychotherapists that Winnicott once gave to mothers: to let the patient be alone in their presence, and to not intrude upon the patient's emerging selfhood. He envisions therapy as a safe space where the patient "would be free, recovering in this protected freedom what he might have lost, or creating something new" (p. 17). This may help patients have the experience of the attentive but non-impinging maternal environment that is a crucial foundation for the development of a capacity to be alone. The idea that therapy may provide a container for the development of a capacity to be alone, rather than merely a place in which one learns how to be in relationship or to heal old relational wounds, is an interesting one that deserves a much lengthier discussion than this.

The idea that therapy might be able to serve as a container for adult solitude is related to the previously discussed idea that we are held in our solitude by other people and by institutions throughout our lives. Will Adams' (2006) example of the ways in which William Blake's wife Catherine held his periods of creative solitary reverie is a beautiful example of this. It is important to note that many female partners of artistic men, as well as philosophers, scientists, and spiritual leaders throughout time have served the function of helpmate, housekeeper, and caretaker of children in their family units, and one can imagine that their attention and care served as a container for their male partners' solitary retreats as well. But it is far more difficult, even to this day, to imagine the situation in reverse – where the man takes care of the home and children and stands guard over the woman's solitary retreat – though it certainly does happen in many families. Virginia Woolf's image of the "room of one's own" was radical because the idea that a

woman would have a space of her own in the house (beyond the powder or laundry room) in which she was permitted retreat did not fit with the prevailing image of femininity and woman's role in the family and the culture at large. And to a large extent, it still doesn't. Things are different now, but a "room of one's own" – whether conceptualized psychologically or materially – is still an issue, still a problem.

Gaps in the literature

I would now like to briefly discuss the two main gaps in the literature that this study seeks to address: 1. The lack of a focus on women's experience of solitude, and 2. The lack of a close reading of the lived experience of solitude.

As previously discussed, women's experience of solitude is not well represented in the scholarly literature. There are two edited collections on the topic of women and solitude – *Herspace: Women, Writing, and Solitude* (2003) and *The Center of the Web: Women and Solitude* (1993) – which discuss the topic from the perspective of female academics in the fields of literature and education. These writers apply literary and educational theory to the analysis of different issues regarding women and solitude and also discuss some of their own personal challenges with solitude in their lives as academics, writers, wives, and mothers. While both collections are valuable additions to the literature, their brief essays tend not to stay close to women's *lived experience* of solitude in a sustained and in-depth way. Other than those two collections, writings which describe women's experience of solitude are largely missing in the scholarly literature. There is a small, thriving literary tradition of women's journals of solitude,

however, which provide a close reading of women's solitary experience. These journals will serve as the main source of data in this study.

There is also a lack of description and analysis of the lived experience of solitude in the literature, in general. There are many books that talk *about* solitude conceptually and philosophically. The common benefits of solitude that the literature often points to – a “return to the self” (Storr, 1988), freedom, spirituality, a connection with nature, and creativity – are abstract concepts that demand to be fleshed out. I am interested in understanding what these concepts mean in terms of one's lived experience of space/place/things, time, embodiment, language, and co-existence. I am attempting to understand what shifts tend to occur in one's experience of self, other, and world in a state of solitude without reverting exclusively to abstract concepts such as “freedom,” “creativity,” and “spirituality.” In order to better understand what solitude is and why it might be a value worth protecting, it would be helpful to have a more thorough understanding of how, exactly, is it lived. And at the same time that I am trying to understand what solitude is in terms of its existential dimensions, I also want to know how it tends to be experienced by women, in particular. What does solitude look like and feel like when lived out through a female body, by a “woman” in a patriarchal society that has a lengthy history of stigmatizing and obstructing the practice of female solitude? Why, exactly, is a “room of one's own” so important for women? What happens in that room?

Virginia Woolf once advised any woman who wished to write poetry...that nothing was more requisite to her goal than a *room of one's own*. In that room, insulated from masculine sophistication and control, a woman could find her own voice, her own imagination. Nowadays, the woman – or man – who wishes to *experience* the poetry of life (even before the issue of writing comes up) might be similarly advised to have a hut of her – or his – own. Here, isolated from the

wasteland and its new world saviors, a person might gain perspective on life and the forces that threaten to smother it. Only in a hut of one's own can a person follow his or her own desires – a rigorous discipline, and one that poet Gary Snyder calls the hardest of all... Even if this hut is only one's normal abode inhabited in a different way, here in a hut of one's own, a person may find one's very own self, the source of humanity's song. (Cline, 1997, p. 131-132)

What does it mean, to “experience the poetry of life,” and how has women's lack of access to this poetry led to a widespread impoverishment of our psychological and spiritual lives? My desire is to gain some partial answers to these questions by looking and listening closely to women's first-person accounts of solitude.

Chapter 2: Research questions and methodology

This study addresses two main research questions:

Question 1: What is the experience of solitude, along the existential dimensions of space, time, body, language, and co-existence?: *How is the space of solitude lived? How is the time of solitude lived? How is the body of solitude lived? How is the language of solitude lived? How is the other of solitude lived?* In other words, how does one experience space, time, the body, language, and relationship with others (co-existentiality) through the practice of intentional solitary retreat, the practice of dwelling for an extended period of time in a “room of one’s own”?

Question 2: How, in particular, is solitude experienced by women? That is, how is solitude experienced by those who live their solitude through a female body, marked and performed as “feminine,” in the context of a culture with a lengthy history of stigmatizing and obstructing the practice of female solitude and self-determination and disallowing women space, time, embodiment, and a language/voice of their own?

It goes without saying that this study will never be able to answer these questions definitively, as the experience of solitude is different for each person and there is such a wide diversity amongst “women” that speaking about them as a whole is an exceedingly difficult thing to do – indeed an impossible thing to do, as numerous postmodern thinkers have amply pointed out. But what I *can* do is to illuminate what the experience of

solitude has been like for *a particular group of women*, through the lens of my own historico-cultural background and experience with the phenomenon. I can try to give voice to how solitude has been experienced by a certain group of women in the hopes that we may learn something valuable about the phenomenon – something that will apply to many women (and indeed many men), though not all. This inquiry may enable us to think and write about solitude in a more sophisticated, nuanced, and less abstract fashion, and we as psychotherapists may be better equipped to understand our patients' suffering and think outside of the box regarding its alleviation.

In order to adequately address the research questions, I need to use data that clearly represent the experience of women in solitude and are descriptive enough to illuminate the various existential dimensions of the phenomenon. As previously mentioned, there is a small but thriving literary sub-genre that suits the purposes of this study well. Over the last fifty-five years, a number of American women have published first-person accounts of intentional solitary retreat, and most of these accounts have been written in a journal-style format. In selecting books from within this sub-genre to analyze for this study, I wanted to represent a wide range of women's solitary experiences – e.g., secular and religiously-oriented retreats, retreats in a forest setting and retreats in a seaside coastal setting, briefer retreats (e.g., 10 days) and longer-term retreats (e.g., one year), retreats taking place in a familiar structure and retreats taking place in a foreign structure, retreats by younger adult women and retreats by older adult women, retreats by women across a range of socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, etc. I also wanted to focus on journals that offer a thick enough description of solitude that will help us flesh out a full portrait of the phenomenon. Given the small

size of the sub-genre, I believe my search met with decent success on all of the aforementioned criteria, with the exception of procuring an ethnically, educationally, and socio-economically diverse sample. Of the nine first-person accounts analyzed for this study, all of the authors appear to be of European descent, all but one of the women have a college-level education, and though several of the women in this study appear to have been struggling financially at the time of their retreat, most of the women could most accurately be described as middle-class. This lack of diversity could have been remedied to some extent by extending my search to journals written by women who are not from the United States, but this would have introduced extra contextual variables that would have further complicated this already complicated study. The group of women whose journals were ultimately analyzed for this study ranged in age from their late 20s to mid 70s. Approximately two-thirds appeared to be heterosexually-identified, while one-third were queer-identified. A couple of the women embarked on explicitly religious retreats (one was Christian and one was Buddhist), while the others appeared to be more secular in nature, albeit integrating various spiritual or religious components throughout their retreats. All of the retreats took place in a wilderness or semi-wilderness setting, with some of the women retreating by the seaside, some in the deep of the forest, and one in the desert. Though the sample attained was not as diverse as I would have liked it to be, I feel content with the range of experiences the women's journals did indeed capture. I will provide an introduction to each retreatant's demographics, life-circumstances, and overarching experience while on retreat in the next section of this project.

I analyzed the following eight published journals for this study: *Gift from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1955), *An Unknown Woman: A Journey of Self-Discovery*

by Alice Koller (1981 (written in 1962)), *Journal of a Solitude* by May Sarton (1973), *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard (1974), *Fifty Days of Solitude* by Doris Grumbach (1995), *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman* by Joan Anderson (2000), *Where God Begins to Be: A Woman's Journey into Solitude* by Karen Karper (2004), and *One Hundred Days of Solitude: Losing Myself and Finding Grace on a Zen Retreat* by Jane Dobisz (2008). My own journal, written over the course of two silent, solitary hermitage retreats serves as an additional source of data. And though I did not keep a journal during my third solitary retreat – a “vision fast” in the high desert of New Mexico – descriptions of my experiences from that retreat are woven throughout this study as well. Data from my own retreats provides the study with an autoethnographic component that goes beyond the usual self-reflexivity required of qualitative studies. My personal experience of solitude serves as an additional point of access to the phenomenon, and in carrying out the analysis I treated my own experience of solitude as I treated the other women's – as one voice in a chorus of solitary female voices. My goal in integrating an autoethnographic component was to achieve a moderate degree of personal, experiential immersion into the phenomenon and then to weave that material into my analysis in a responsible way.

In addition to keeping a descriptive journal during my first two solitary retreats, I kept a separate self-reflexive journal throughout the entire dissertation process as well. I used this journal to become more attuned to my own perspective – e.g., my personal and cultural assumptions, my biases, the challenges and frustrations I encountered, etc. This helped me gain clarity about where I was coming from in engaging with the phenomenon and with the data as I did; it helped me become more aware of when, for example I was

feeling defensive with regard to a particular aspect of my interpretation and found myself clinging to an interpretive strategy even when it wasn't really fitting the data; this enabled me to listen more closely to the material and consider other ways of viewing it. While becoming more attuned to my experience during the research process helped me listen more closely to the text, it helped me listen more closely to my own intuition regarding the data as well. For example, it helped me tune in to my felt sense of the main themes of each existential dimension, and it also helped me sit more easily with tension in the face of seemingly paradoxical findings across the different journals, without resorting to denying differences across the women or convincing myself that the data actually meant something that it did not appear to mean. In short, keeping this journal helped me become a better – a more honest, open-minded, and self-aware – conversation partner with the data.

Keeping this self-reflexive journal was an integral part of the hermeneutic research process. According to psychologist Rolf von Eckartsberg, the hermeneutic stance “acknowledges the perspectival nature and biographico-historical involvement of the researcher and makes the investigation of the implicit precomprehensions of the researcher part of the interpretive process” (1998, p. 51). Hermeneutic research involves a dialogue and between a text and the interpreter; it is not simply an objective analysis of a text by an aperspectival (i.e., ahistorical, acultural, disembodied, genderless, etc.) researcher. We engage with written texts dialogically; we can be said to be in a conversation with them, and this conversation begins with a process of becoming aware of our own feelings, thoughts, experience with, and biases toward the subject matter. We can attempt to clarify our perspective on whatever phenomenon we are studying, as we

are studying it, in order to better open up the space in which we can “hear” what the text is saying and monitor our responses to it. The dialogue we carry on with the text brings it “out of the alienation in which it finds itself (as fixed, written form) back into the living present of dialogue, whose primordial fulfillment is question and answer” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 350). Therefore our interpretation of the text is not merely a representation of it but rather the creation of something fresh and alive via the *fusion of horizons* that takes place between the interpreter and the text.

This is a qualitative, hermeneutic-existential analysis. It is *hermeneutic* because it involves the interpretation of texts via textual analysis, it acknowledges and integrates my own perspective into the research process, and it attempts to understand the meaning of the phenomenon as it is lived through a particular social and historical standpoint (i.e., as it is lived through persons of a particular gender, ethnicity, and class in a specific time and place). It is *existential* in the sense that I am interested in understanding the experience of solitude through an analysis of the existential dimensions of space, time, embodiment, language, and one’s relationship to others (co-existentiality). Viewing the phenomenon of solitude through the various existential lenses amounts to taking an uncommon stance in this postmodern age. Whereas most contemporary scholars tend to highlight the differences between people and eschew any suggestions of universality, my approach assumes *basic existential “givens”* such as spatiality, temporality, and embodiment that all human beings experience, albeit in very different ways, given any number of variables – e.g., cultural, economic, physiological, etc.

I will be discussing the themes found across the women’s journals under each existential dimension and weaving in theoretical analyses of the data as appropriate. I

will be utilizing theory across a range of traditions, with a primary focus on the existential-phenomenological, ecopsychological, and feminist traditions. Many of the theorists I will employ in my analysis overlap these different traditions, such as the ecophenomenological work of David Abram or the feminist phenomenological work of Iris Young. Relevant literature in the monastic tradition will inform my analysis as well. In some sense, it would be fair to say that this study will be a “conversation” between a number of literatures, as is common in hermeneutic research, as I will be seeking multiple points of access to the phenomenon of women and solitude.

Both the overarching existential framework and the focus on lived experience in this study are inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and Medard Boss’s approach to understanding the existential dimensions of psychopathology in *Existential Foundations of Medicine and Psychology* (1979). Merleau-Ponty and Boss provide us with a way of thinking about psychological phenomena in terms of how they are actually lived by embodied subjects in the world, and their work serves as a basic framework for an analysis of the phenomenon of solitude along the existential dimensions of space, time, embodiment, language, and co-existence. Another primary inspiration and guide for this study is Eva Simms’ analysis of the existential dimensions of early childhood experience in *The Child in the World: Embodiment, Time, and Language in Early Childhood* (2008). Simms’ work serves as an excellent example of a hermeneutic-existential method that applies Merleau-Ponty’s existential analysis of embodiment, time, and language to the lives of children. I will be using a similar methodology in carrying out my analysis of female solitude.

Carrying out the analysis: What I actually did

The first step was to read through the women's journals (eight published journals plus my own, written over the course of two hermitage retreats). I read through the journals two times, reading the entire set of journals on two separate occasions rather than reading each journal two consecutive times. For the first read-through, I attempted to gain a basic, overall feel for the text and the experience of the writer. For the second reading, I coded each journal along all of the existential dimensions, underlining various passages as I read and noting the particular existential dimension the passage or phrase seemed associated with in the margin of the text. The next step involved extracting all of the underlined sections by typing them into five different word processing documents according to the different dimensions they were associated with (e.g., space, time, body, etc.). I then read through the list of excerpts for each dimension and began delineating the main themes that appeared to run across the women's journals. For each dimension, I started with a lengthy list of main themes and then worked to pare them down to more discrete categories and a more manageable number (approximately four to six). I then broke each main theme down into sub-themes. This process took a significant amount of time as the subthemes overlapped a great deal and were quite difficult to discern.

After delineating both the main themes and the sub-themes for a particular dimension, I was ready to begin the writing process for that chapter. I began each chapter with an introduction to the existential dimension itself – to “time,” for example – as well as a basic exploration of some of the crucial overarching issues (political, historical, psychological, etc.) related to that dimension, as it tends to be lived by contemporary

Western women. I then proceeded with my description and interpretation of the themes, which constituted the bulk of the chapter. After working through the themes, I then wrote a brief closing summary of the main points of the chapter.

The chapters (e.g., space, time, etc.) both build on each other and refer back, and at times forward, to each other, referencing what was discussed in earlier chapters and foreshadowing certain key findings that will be fleshed out in later chapters. Though the chapters were written in the order in which they are presented, I did insert some references to later findings in the earlier chapters upon re-reading my work in its entirety after finishing the first full draft. It is important to note the basic point that the existential dimensions are far from discrete categories, as, for example, our experience of space is thoroughly interwoven with our experience of time and our experience of our bodies is tied up with the linguistic and interpersonal dimensions of our existence. Though useful for the purposes of this analysis, our delineation of different existential dimensions does not accurately reflect our lived experience in which space, time, embodiment, etc. form a dynamic gestalt rather than run in distinct experiential streams. We will carry on with the analysis nonetheless, exploring one dimension at a time but keeping in mind the intricate tapestry that is our lived experience.

The following is a simplified list of the research process just described:

1. First read-through of the journals, to get an overall sense of the experience of each writer
2. Second read-through of the journals, including coding along existential lines
3. Extract coded sections of the journals by typing into five word processing documents (space, time, body, language, co-existence)

4. Determine main themes of each dimension
5. Break main themes down into sub-themes
6. Carry out the writing process: include an introduction to the existential dimension, a description and analysis of the themes, and a closing summary

Chapter 3: Introduction to the Women

This section will serve as a basic introduction to the nine women in this study. Eight women's published, first-person accounts of solitude were selected for this study. My own journal, kept over the course of two separate retreats, serves as the ninth first-person account. I will discuss basic demographic information about each woman in turn and describe other pertinent details such as the setting and length of her retreat. I will also provide a brief overview of each woman's solitary experience. For some of the women, certain demographic information is unclear – e.g., their age, class, relational status – since the writer did not provide the reader with such information. Nonetheless, I will present whatever basic information we do have about our retreatants that is provided in the edition of their published account that I analyzed for this study. I will discuss the women in alphabetical order.

Joan Anderson, *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman* (1999)

Joan Anderson is a middle-class, Caucasian, married woman and a mother to two grown sons. She turned fifty years old during her year-long retreat on Cape Cod, MA. Her retreat was secular, rather than religious in nature. She was a homemaker for most of her adulthood as well as a writer of children's books. She retreated for the year in a small rustic cottage near the coast which was owned by her family and was used as a summer family retreat space. She had spent time in this cottage since she was a child and was thus quite familiar with the area as well as the space of the cottage. Her journal was among the most personal of the women's journals in this study.

Prior to leaving for retreat, Anderson was living with her husband in Nyack, NY. She embarked on her retreat upon hearing news from her husband that he had accepted a teaching job in a different state; his job search was unbeknownst to her. Their marriage had grown stale over the years and she and her husband had grown quite distant. Anderson conceptualized her retreat as an opportunity to figure out what to do next, in terms of her marriage, and she also hoped that her retreat would help her reconnect with something she had lost touch with over the years – she referred to this something as her “raw-material person” (p. 11). She also felt that she had become overly identified with being a wife and mother and did not have a clear sense of who she was outside of these social roles. Her goal was to develop her identity outside of these roles and gain greater clarity around her intentions, as she entered the next stage of her life.

Anderson’s retreat was marked by a significant amount of struggle, as she performed a life review which dredged up old emotional wounds and brought to her awareness the degree to which she was living in a perpetual state of disconnection from her own experience, including a sense of alienation from her physical body, an aspect of her being which caused her a significant amount of shame. She also suffered from loneliness during her retreat, at least for the first month or two as she suffered a sense of withdrawal from being with others and did not quite know how to be alone with herself. This loneliness and discomfort subsided over time as she worked to heal emotional wounds and gained greater intimacy with her experience and with the non-human natural world. Overall, Anderson appeared to have experienced a significant transformation through her retreat, so much so that she was able to claim, by the very end that she had successfully “reclaim[ed] my basic existence.” (p. 171) And though her brief interactions

with her husband throughout her year alone were quite charged, by the end of Anderson's retreat, he decided to retire from teaching and join her at the cottage full-time in order to work on their marriage and address aspects of his own life that were unsatisfying. At the very end of the journal, Anderson writes of how she set up a small room of her own in the cottage, in preparation for his arrival, as a statement of her newfound sense of individuation: "I've created a room of my own off the kitchen, with windows facing the woods, my only statement (to myself actually) that I must remain my own person." (p. 176)

Karin Arndt (2010 & 2011)

I am a middle-class, white, single woman. I was 35-36 years old when I embarked on my three retreats, taking place over the course of one year, from May 2011-May 2012. I only kept a journal during my first two retreats, since I purposely abstained from writing (and reading) during my third retreat. I went on these retreats in order to study solitude more closely, for the sake of this research project as well as my longstanding interest in the phenomenon. Though I have always been a lover of solitude, I had never been on an extended solitary retreat before. I was in my 5th year of the clinical psychology doctoral program at Duquesne University, and was living in Pittsburgh, PA, when these retreats took place.

My first retreat took place in a small, rustic, free-standing hermitage on the grounds of a Franciscan convent, the Sisters of St. Francis, outside of Pittsburgh, PA in May 2011. It was a ten-day retreat and I maintained silence through the majority of the retreat, with the exception of a couple of times when I had to relay necessary information

to others (e.g., safety-related information). I did not use a computer or phone. I journaled daily and also read through the other women's journals for the first time over the course of this retreat. Overall, this retreat was marked by a sense of plenitude and even an ecstatic felt sense of joy at certain times. I also felt closer to the non-human natural world than I had in a long while. I left this retreat feeling rejuvenated, centered, and very excited about this research project and the phenomenon of solitude in general.

Six months later, in November 2011, I embarked on another ten-day, silent retreat in a small rustic hermitage on the grounds of the De Sales Center in the Irish Hills of Michigan. The De Sales Center is a large wooded area on the edge of a lake which serves as a summer camp for disabled children and the place of residency for Salesian oblates – male monks in training who were affiliated with a nearby monastery. I wrote in my journal throughout this retreat as well, though I wrote far less than I did during my first retreat. In contrast to my first retreat, this second retreat was very emotionally difficult, and I felt a great sense of discomfort and restlessness throughout. While on retreat, I struggled through painful affective material and looked squarely at aspects of my life that were not working well. I experienced surprisingly powerful feelings of sadness, shame, and guilt. I also fought against an urge to flee my solitude during this retreat – not to return home to Pittsburgh prematurely, but to get in my car and drive off to a nearby town to find a place to check my email. After much deliberation, I decided to leave and check my email at a nearby public library, and then I spent the remaining four days of the retreat examining my choice to break my solitude as well as the strained interactions I had with others while I was in escape mode. Overall, this retreat was dark and somber in tone and I examined aspects of myself that were less than pleasant. I was

left feeling somewhat perplexed about what I was experiencing during this retreat and in the few months following the retreat but came to better sense of peace and understanding of what happened following my third retreat, after I became able to step back and view the three retreats as three movements, each building on and referring back to the other, within one larger solitary project. I describe my understanding of the painful aspects of this retreat in a later chapter on the linguistic dimension of solitude.

My third retreat took place six months later, in May 2012, in the high desert of New Mexico, approximately fifty miles west of Sante Fe. This retreat was quite different from the first two retreats and consisted of a four-day, four-night solitary “vision fast” in the Galisteo Basin region. This solitary experience was held in the larger context of an eleven-day “Women’s Vision Fast” program with six other female participants and four female guides through the School of Lost Borders, an organization which has been leading wilderness rites for the past 35 years. The other six participants ranged in age from their late 20s to early 60s and were from a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. For the first four days, we camped at Cochiti Lake, NM and received teachings about wilderness survival and the vision fast experience, which is based on the traditional Native American vision quest ceremony as well as similar solitary wilderness rites from traditions worldwide. We then relocated to the Galisteo Basin and underwent our four-day vision fasts, with the guides remaining at base camp while the participants underwent their solitary ceremonies. After this time, we returned to camp at Cochiti Lake for three days of “incorporation” – to celebrate together, speak about our experiences, and discuss the process of re-integration to society following our initiation.

The vision fast itself involved complete dietary abstinence with the exception of drinking water. I had a sleeping bag with me and a tarp, but I did not have a formal tent or (hu)man-made shelter of any kind. I cut out all literary practices during those four days, with no reading or writing. I did not see anyone over the course of those four days, though I communicated with my “buddy,” a fellow participant retreating in the same general area of the basin, on a daily basis by leaving a large stone each morning in a pre-selected place, indicating that I was safe. She did the same in the afternoons. This retreat was life-changing for me in many ways, due in part to the vision I received on the final night out but also due to the entire experience that transpired over the eleven days. I suffered physically during this retreat, as I felt perpetually weak and cold. I also felt a sense of emptiness and as though I were experiencing a form of psychological death, which I marked by performing a “death lodge” ceremony on the late afternoon of the fourth day, just before entering my “sacred circle” on the fourth night. On this last night, I created a circle of stones inside of which I sat throughout the night and prayed for a vision. I understand myself to have received a vision on that night, or an image/intuition of my purpose in this world in the context of the community in which I live. It was a beautiful experience, for which I am profoundly grateful. The experience of speaking to the group about my vision fast afterward, and having it mirrored back to me so beautifully by the community of women, was perhaps even more valuable to me than the vision itself.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974)

Annie Dillard, a white woman, does not provide much autobiographical information in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a book which describes her solitary forays into the wilderness near her home outside Roanoke, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Her account details a full year in her life living at Tinker Creek. As she had originally planned to publish the book under the name A. Dillard, she did not want demographic details such as her gender and age to color her reader's experience of her narrative and thus does not provide them in the text. She changed her mind about this during the publishing process. She was in her late 20s when she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (she discusses her age and its relevance to her writing in the afterword to the 1999 edition, which was included in my copy of the 2007 edition). Unlike most of the other first-person accounts in this study, Dillard's account is not written in a journal format, though it is written in first-person. Details about her solitary adventures at Tinker Creek are woven together with scientific discussions of the natural phenomena she encounters as well as metaphysical and theological musings, creating a rich literary tapestry in the lineage of American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau. Dillard explores both the beautiful and the cruel aspects of the natural world in her narrative through different lenses: the eyes of a wide-eyed child as well as the piercing gaze of the scientist. Though her solitary practice was not explicitly religious, it was no doubt spiritual, as she comported herself toward the natural world with a sense of reverence, and she intuited the inherent holiness in all of creation. Experiences of non-dual consciousness abound throughout her narrative, as she would intermittently lose a sense of separateness from the larger world during her wilderness solitude. Though her experiences in the outdoors

were no doubt solitary, it is unclear as to whether Dillard was living alone while living indoors at Tinker Creek, as she does not explicitly address this. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was Dillard's first non-fiction book; it won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1975 and remains a classic in the American nature writing tradition.

Jane Dobisz, *One Hundred Days of Solitude: Losing Myself and Finding Grace on a Zen Retreat* (2008)

Like Annie Dillard, Jane Dobisz provides her readers with little demographic data about herself. We know that she is white and middle-class, and that she had been a practicing Zen Buddhist for some time. She refers to herself as “young” in her narrative; it seems that she might be in her 20s or 30s. It is unclear whether she was partnered at the time she undertook her retreat. As the title of her book indicates, Dobisz underwent a one hundred-day solitary retreat in the Zen Buddhist tradition. This retreat took place in the New England woods during the winter months, in a rustic one room cabin with no electricity or plumbing. Dobisz had never spent time in this cabin prior to her retreat, and she had never been on a solitary retreat of this kind. She followed a strict daily schedule of rising at 3:15 am and then carrying out a fixed sequence of activities until going to sleep at 9:30 pm, including bowing, walking meditation, sitting meditation, chanting, tea drinking, etc., with a few breaks mixed in throughout the day. Her daily activities also included an hour and a half work period in which she would chop firewood (which she would use for heat) and haul water from a well a quarter mile away. Her retreat was exceedingly challenging on many levels (physically, emotionally, spiritually) and yielded powerful results such as helping her “get [her] mind and body in the same place at the

same time” (p. 115), feel a profound degree of appreciation and happiness on a more frequent basis, and feel “more comfortable in [her] own skin.” (p. 114) In contrast to the other retreatants who engaged with others to at least a minimal extent during their solitudes, Dobisz had no direct contact with other people over the course of her retreat. She had a few interesting encounters with animals, however, and came to feel a much stronger sense of connection with the non-human natural world in general.

Like Dillard, Dobisz’s first-person account isn’t highly personal and isn’t in the classical format of a journal, though it runs chronologically and is written in the first-person. Her narrative is primarily composed of descriptions of her lived experiences on retreat but classical Zen teachings are woven throughout, serving to illuminate her personal experiences and understand them against the larger backdrop of the Zen tradition in which she practiced.

Doris Grumbach, *Fifty Days of Solitude* (1994)

Grumbach is a white, middle-class writer and bookstore owner and was 75 years-old at the time of her retreat. She retreated for fifty days in the context of her home in Sargentville, ME during the winter of 1993. She is queer-identified and was partnered to a woman, Sybil, who normally shared her home with her but who gave her the gift of aloneness, through her absence, during those fifty days. She dedicated her book to her partner, writing, “*For Sybil*, without whose absence this book would not have come about.” Grumbach had some social interactions during her retreat, as she would attend church on Sundays (she sat in the very back, and entered after services began so as to avoid unnecessary conversation) and ran errands while in town. Outside of these

interactions, she had little contact with other people, except for the periodic exchange of written letters with her partner. Of all of the women in this study, Grumbach spent the least amount of time in the outdoors, given her physical limitations (she walked with a cane), the cold winter weather, and the lack of a necessity for her to engage with the elements (e.g., her retreat was not dependent upon outdoor labor). Nonetheless, Grumbach found herself progressively attuned to the temporal rhythms of the non-human natural world and she gained sustenance from her observations of natural phenomena from the vantage point of her window. While at first she did a lot of reading and writing while on retreat, her desire to carry out these literary practices waned as time went on; this seemed to parallel the quieting down of her own mental landscape and the heightening of her ability to intuit the presence of the Divine. Grumbach also struggled emotionally throughout a significant portion of her retreat, as she encountered painful aspects of her psyche, including wrestling with her fear of death and mourning the death of close friends. Overall, Grumbach found that though her retreat was difficult, it ultimately helped her come to better terms with her mortality, “renew [her] acquaintance with [her]self” (p. 114), and “cultivate” her “inner stratum” (p. 113) – a felt sense of her core being which she understood to serve as the foundation of her life in the world with others.

Karen Karper, *Where God Begins to Be: A Woman's Journey into Solitude* (1994)

In her first-person account, Karen Karper, a white woman who grew up middle-class but lived according to a vow of poverty throughout her adult life, details her solitary experiences over a four-year period of living as a hermit near Spencer, West Virginia, in

the woodlands of Appalachia. A Catholic nun in the Poor Clare tradition, she lived for thirty years in a convent prior to entering solitude at the age of 48. Karper transitioned into solitude after reluctantly answering what she understood to be a Divine call toward an eremitic lifestyle – “I was hearing an invitation that I sensed would not only shatter the shape my life had taken for the past thirty years but also demolish my image of myself” (p. 11). After locating a small, broken-down shack where she was permitted to live rent-free and with the guidance of two women who lived as hermits in the area, she set off on what was to become a very challenging journey. Transitioning to living alone, fixing up a house, and taking care of herself in the absence of financial support was difficult for Karper. At first, she struggled with painful periods of loneliness and fears regarding her safety and survival. She also encountered a significant amount of painful psychological material which she had been keeping at bay during her years in the convent but which reared its head in the silence of her retreat. However, through meeting the many challenges that presented themselves and persisting in her solitude, she found that her personal identity expanded, her faith deepened, she came to feel closer to the non-human natural world, and over time came to rediscover “the natural rhythms of [her] own body and spirit.” (p. 77) Karper experienced a powerful relationship with a companion animal, a cat named Merton, throughout her solitude as well. This relationship played a significant role in her experience on retreat; we will discuss this relationship in greater depth in a later chapter on the co-existential dimension of solitude.

Alice Koller, An Unknown Woman: A Journey to Self-Discovery (1981; written in 1962)

Alice Koller was 37 years old during her three-month retreat in a rented cottage during the winter of 1962 on the island of Nantucket, MA. She is a white, middle-class woman who had just graduated from Harvard with a PhD in Philosophy and was living a semi-nomadic existence just prior to going into solitude, working menial odd jobs in order to survive financially. At the start of her narrative, Koller felt tired: “I’m tired, from the inside out. Tired of perpetually having to fight for everything: Degree, men, jobs, money. Tired of running after things that always elude me.” (p. 2) Gathering up whatever money she could put together, Koller bought herself the time and space in which to try to get her life together by renting a cottage on the island in the off-season. She had never been to Nantucket before.

Koller set out to undertake a self-analysis and life review in order to figure out why her life was not working well and why she seemed to be hitting the same proverbial brick walls over and over again, especially with regard to her interpersonal relationships. Her solitude was emotionally grueling at times, as she uncovered very painful psychological material and came face-to-face with the reality of the actress-like quality of her existence – she realized she had been living as if perpetually on-stage, playing a role according to a script that was not of her own making. Through her solitude, she successfully began to reconnect to her desire and her naturally-arising responses to the environment and began to feel more comfortable and at home in her own skin. She experienced a process of identity deconstruction, a process so painful that it brought her to the brink of suicide. She ultimately chose life and by the end of her narrative stood

before the world feeling “naked and very small. But new. Nothing ever again has to be the way it was.” (p. 229) As with Karen Karper’s solitude, Alice Koller’s retreat was aided and enriched by the companionship of an animal, a dog named Logos. Her relationship with Logos was profound and served to help Koller open her heart, expand her circle of care, and reorient her priorities as well as her sense of self.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea* (1955)

Anne Morrow Lindbergh was a white, upper-class writer and mother of five children. She was married to Charles A. Lindbergh, the famous aviator, and was in her late 40s during her two-week retreat on Captiva Island off the coast of Florida. While on retreat, Lindbergh lived rustically, in a “bare sea-shell of a cottage” (p. 30), practicing the art of material simplicity which in turn fostered a felt sense of psychological simplicity and a closer relationship with the non-human natural world. She viewed her retreat, in part, as an opportunity for restoration and “inner stillness” (p. 50) in the interest of being “that firm strand which will be the indispensable center of a whole web of human relationships.” (p. 49) Throughout her narrative, she meditated on individual shells she found on the beach, and through these meditations reflected on the psycho-spiritual qualities the practice of solitude was helping to instill in her, qualities she referred to as “island precepts” (p. 117). She took these shells with her back to her life outside of solitude as a reminder “to keep my core, my center, my island-quality.” (p. 57) Overall, her solitude was characterized by a sense of plenitude, joy, and freedom as she reveled in the open time and space of her aloneness. In contrast to an account such as Alice Koller’s, Lindbergh’s relatively brief narrative does not go into intricate personal detail

nor reveal any particularly painful challenges she experienced on retreat. Her book is far more general in tone and also includes ample cultural critique, particularly around the challenges faced by American women in the mid-20th century. *Gift from the Sea* is considered by many to be a classic in both the environmental and feminist literary traditions.

May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude* (1973)

Journal of a Solitude documents a year in the solitary life of May Sarton, a queer 58 year-old white woman and well-known poet and novelist. The year was 1970-1971, and Sarton retreated in the space of her home in the rural village of Nelson, NH. She decided to keep a journal in the interest of showing her readers a more realistic portrait of her solitary lifestyle, after neglecting to disclose the more painful and gritty aspects of her life in her earlier autobiographic book, *Plant Dreaming Deep*. In her journal, we witness Sarton struggle with intermittent bouts of depression, mostly revolving around problems in her relationship with her female partner, “X,” who lived in a different state. Her practices of writing poetry and gardening – both of which were spiritual practices for Sarton – sustained her through these dark emotional periods, however, and helped lift her out of despair and into “state[s] of grace” (p. 40) which would eventually revert back into periods of emotional pain. We see this general cycle of suffering followed by grace throughout Sarton’s journal, interspersed with quiet meditative moments, close observations of natural phenomena, and contemporary cultural, political, and literary commentary as well. The overarching portrait is one of a highly sensitive artist with a deep love of nature engaged in a difficult ongoing journey into her psychic depths.

Of all the women in this study, Sarton had perhaps the most social contact during her retreat, as her solitude was intermixed with brief trips out of town, lunches with friends, visits from helpful neighbors, etc. Thus her solitude was frequently broken, though she would often spend several full days on end with no social contact. Sarton's solitude was also less technologically simplistic than the other women's, as she would watch the nightly news on TV, use the telephone, etc. Despite this, it seems that Sarton's rural solitary lifestyle was marked by far less technological sophistication than the average American of her day. Though her solitude was not a "retreat" in the classical sense, her readers gain significant insight into the experience of solitude from her narrative nonetheless.

Chapter 4: Space

Introducing space

On a chilly rainy day in mid-May, I arrived at the Sisters of St. Francis convent outside of Pittsburgh, PA for a ten-day silent solitary retreat. I trudged my suitcase and bags of food down a muddy path leading out of the convent grounds and into the woods toward the first hermitage in a line of three. There it stood, partially hidden by trees, a small wooden structure with a sign that read “Greccio” – referring to a pilgrimage site in Italy where St. Francis created the first nativity scene. A wreath made of twigs hung next to the door, and an old walking stick leaned against the outside wall. I had long pictured this cabin in my mind, and now I was finally here. I took off my shoes and entered the structure slowly. It was warm inside, and I could hear the sound of the rain on the roof against a backdrop of silence. Greccio had one main room with a vaulted ceiling, a small kitchen area, and a simple bathroom. There was a lot of natural light inside the cabin despite being nestled in the woods, and its furnishings were very simple and old-fashioned – a wooden desk with a candle on it, an upholstered chair facing toward the window with a small side table and a reading lamp, a single bed with a old woolen blanket, and a small table and two chairs in the kitchen area. A few books about Franciscan spirituality sat on the side table and pictures depicting Jesus and Mary hung on the walls. After unpacking my clothes and groceries, I sat on the bed and looked around. Within minutes a strong sense of fatigue fell over me to the point of almost feeling drugged and unable to move. A vague sadness was soon to follow. All I wanted in that moment was to crawl under the covers and maybe even cry. But I didn’t cry. It

was around 2pm and I fell into a deep sleep, waking six hours later to a room filled with the blue light of dusk. I continued to lay in bed stock-still for another hour, listening to the rain and bathing in the strange light. When I finally got up I felt disoriented and drained and was unable to eat. I sat up in bed all night long, keeping a strange kind of vigil, as in mourning or in preparation for something to come.

The psycho-spiritual journey I went on during this ten-day retreat happened in the context of Greccio and the grounds on which she stood. Indeed, my solitude happened *through* Greccio and my interactions with the things she contained and through my interactions with the grounds that contained her. Solitude cannot be understood as an intrapsychic experience taking place outside of the natural and built environment in which and through which it comes into being. The architectural layout of the cabin, its simple furnishings, the quality of the light, the trees that stood nearby, and the proximity to the other cabins all played a vital role in my experience of solitude – evoking certain moods, memories, and images; inviting a certain kind of presence and contemplative attitude; and calling me to use my body and perceptual capabilities in new ways while discouraging certain habitual tendencies. The fact that I was on an intentional solitary retreat had an effect on how I experienced these spatial phenomena as well. My particular presence to and behavior toward these things would have been quite different if I were at Greccio with another person, under different circumstances, or with a different intention. The insentient things that inhabited my solitude exerted an influence upon me, and my solitary presence exerted an influence upon them – not only through the physical trace that I left there but also through the particular presence I brought to Greccio which

served to reveal and, in a sense, “call forth” new layers of meaning and vitality in their materiality.

Space is not an empty stage upon which or a quantifiable geometrical grid inside which we conduct our daily lives. It is not a brute, objective fact; nor is it an abstract idea. Space is *lived*. We are “always involved in the whereness of [our] existence” (Benswanger, 1979, p. 112) and exist in a fluid dynamic interchange with spatial phenomena – imparting human meanings to places and things and physically impacting them as well as comporting ourselves according to their physical parameters and responding to their elicitations. We are constantly involved in a conversation, a passionate liaison with the material world around us – not only with people but with places, with both sentient beings and non-sentient things. This way of understanding the spatial dimension of our existence helps us transcend the view that we are subjects merely utilizing and acting upon inert objects in our environment. It also problematizes the often taken-for-granted notion that the interpersonal human world is where all the juice, meaning, and vitality of life is. By going into solitude, the women of this study separated themselves from direct contact with other people, but their communication with the wider world did not cease; their modes of relation simply shifted, opening certain horizons while closing others down. It seems that, in some ways, separating from direct contact with other people allowed them to experience a deeper, more intense, and more meaningful engagement with the non-human world in which they were embedded. Or, at the very least, it offered them the opportunity to cultivate a different kind of relationship with and orientation toward space, place, and things that might not have been possible in the midst of other people.

Women and space

For a few of the women in this study, solitude took place in the context of their already established homes, amongst their own things and in relation to a familiar landscape. For the others, solitude involved either leaving their home and entering into an entirely new environment or else retreating to a family summer house with which they were familiar and which held a significant amount of memory. While these different forms of retreat seem to have elicited different psychological shifts, what they have in common is the fact that each woman claimed a space of her own, demarcated a spatial boundary around herself and determined who, if anyone, was allowed to enter and engage with her, and in what capacity. Each woman claimed a space and made that space her own.⁵ The significance of this should not be underestimated. Each of these women made a choice to be alone and to make the break of separation and in so doing each, in some way, said “no” to others and to cultural expectations of what it means to be a woman. Demarcating a space of one’s own and the act of separation involve drawing a line, and this line-drawing may be understood as a countercultural practice or an act of resistance. It is a form of resistance against the expectation that women are to be ever-available to others for support and containment – that women are to provide and watch over the space in which the dreams and projects of others are nurtured and launched – as well as the expectation that women, especially of a certain age, are to be accessible as beautiful

⁵ Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the one possible exception here. As mentioned in the introduction to the women in this study, Dillard’s solitude was never explicitly framed as a “solitary retreat,” and though she never mentions sharing her cabin in the woods with another person, I am uncertain as to whether she was actually living alone throughout her time living at Tinker Creek or not. It is, however, her solitary walks around Tinker Creek which she details in great depth that are most significant for the purposes of this study, more so than the time she spent inside her cabin, whether that time was solitary or not.

physical objects for men to behold at their leisure. But separatism is not only an act of resistance or saying no; it is also a movement toward and a making space for something new. That “something new” is what I am trying to understand through this project.

In many ways, women are expected to not only be the guardians and keepers of space – i.e., a home for men and children – but the very idea of “woman” has been associated with spatiality and containment throughout the history of Western thought (Irigaray, 1993, p. 7).⁶ Though this association of woman with space is in some sense logical, it has served to reduce women to their physiological functions – to the womb (the original space from which we all come) and the vagina (the space in which adult men “come” and symbolically return to the mother) – and has served to determine and justify women’s social roles as helpmate, nurturer, housekeeper, and sexual object. And yet even though women are associated with space and place and often serve that function for others, women are often left with a sense of their own *placelessness* since they contain the projects and meanings and fantasies of others but often do not quite contain themselves or are able to look toward others to provide this containment for them. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray argues that “the maternal-feminine remains the place separated from “its” own place, deprived of “its” place” (p. 10) and that women’s psycho-spiritual liberation rests on women cultivating their own psychological containers or “envelopes of identity” apart from phallogocentric discourse and the dictates of male desire. She writes that “the transition to a new age requires a change in our perception

⁶ A simple example of this can be seen in my referring to my hermitage, Greccio, as a “she” earlier in this chapter. As I was writing that section, I kept noticing my desire to feminize the cabin, and though at first I made sure to keep my language gender neutral, I ultimately decided to refer to Greccio as a “she” so that I could illustrate this simple point. We can see this same basic tendency to regard holding spaces and containers as feminine in the practice of giving cars or boats female names and referring to them as “she’s,” as well.

and conception of *space-time*, the inhabiting of places, and of containers, or *envelopes of identity*” (p. 7). I read Irigaray here as calling for a reorientation of our ways of thinking about space and orienting ourselves in space. We need to learn to inhabit space differently, to see with new eyes and to feel ourselves in the world in a different way – as women and as persons, outside of the projections and desires of others, to whatever extent that that may be possible. As a difference feminist, Irigaray calls for some amount of separatism – psychological and even physical – in order for women to attain a certain measure of psychological well-being and space to breathe into their desire outside of the phallogentric order. Re-enveloping herself – whether this is taken more concretely or psychologically or both – may provide the fertile ground necessary in which new forms of subjectivity and desire can be born.

Elizabeth Grosz (1995) sums up Irigaray’s project as such: “Her concerns are directed towards the establishment of a viable space and time for women to inhabit as women” (p. 120). What would space look and feel like if it were truly *for* women and if women could actually inhabit it *as* women – rather than an extension of or in the interest of male desire? What would emerge in this space? How would this particular kind of space be lived? Because simply having a space of one’s own is never enough; it is *learning to inhabit space differently* – how to be with things differently, how to use one’s senses differently, how to learn from one’s environment in a new kind of way – that is the key. This is what I believe the women in this study, through the discipline of solitude, were learning how to do. Through their solitary retreats, they experienced a disorientation and a reorientation in terms of their relationship to space and the things in their midst and in the process developed a new kind of self and a new mode of being in

the world. For some the change was subtle while for others the impact was quite significant. Each woman, however, experienced some kind of noticeable shift through the discipline of solitude, whether her retreat lasted ten days or two years.

Four main spatial themes emerged from the analysis of the women's accounts of solitude. These themes are by no means exhaustive, they necessarily overlap with each other, and they certainly do not represent all women's experiences of solitude. Together they provide a basic sketch of some of the main spatial dimensions of solitude, as it was lived by women of a particular time and place and social position. I will discuss the following themes: the role of *simplicity* in solitude, the different visual practices or *forms of seeing* common to solitude, the use of *things as mirrors* in solitude, and the *hermitage as a womb/tomb-like container* for the emerging self. These four themes help us flesh out the spatial dimensions of one's experience during an extended period of solitude and help us better understand how a "room of one's own" is actually lived. The general portrait that emerges is one of a person who is highly attentive to her surroundings yet very attuned to her own experience, who sees the world as a more enchanted place, who is in greater touch with the unconscious or neglected aspects of her psyche, and who undergoes a process of incubation or re-envelopment in order to give birth to something new.

Theme 1: *Simplicity*

The theme of simplicity appears throughout the women's journals. Simplicity is a spatial phenomenon in the sense that it refers to one's ways of relating to things in one's environment. Intentional material simplicity is the practice of paring down one's

material engagements – e.g., one’s use of technology, rates of consumption, size of dwelling unit, amount of personal property, etc. Each of the women in this study practiced some degree of material simplicity compared to the average person of her time and place. A few practiced an extreme amount – my retreat in the desert, for example, involved four days and nights of fasting and living without any shelter while Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) retreated for 100 days in a rustic one-room cabin deep in the woods with no electricity or plumbing in the dead of a New England winter – while others, such as May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) and Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*), remained in their own homes amongst familiar things and technological conveniences (though their use of such conveniences was greatly pared down) throughout their periods of solitude. We may also understand simplicity to be a paring down of one’s interpersonal engagements as well. During a solitary retreat one is physically separated from other people, and this generally means that one is freed up from having to respond to their needs, desires, and elicitation. One has fewer worldly responsibilities, in general, and has the time and space to tune in to her lived experience and become more present to her immediate environment. In this clearing that material and interpersonal simplicity creates, something new can emerge – new ways of engaging with things, new forms of thinking and feeling, etc. This process of simplification can be understood as a discipline, and a particularly difficult discipline at that, especially for those immersed in the mainstream American way of life that is characterized by compulsive consumption, perpetual busyness and a constant state of distraction, and the valuing of quantity over quality. To voluntarily leave behind familiar comforts, amusements, and things that serve to bolster one’s identity is to shake up one’s habitual mode of being in the world

and to enter into the unknown. And since we might conceive some of those comforts and amusements as forms of “addiction” – whether to food, TV, the internet, shopping, etc. – we can understand that the act of retreating and the practice of modifying one’s habits is, for some, very difficult and disorienting indeed. And finally, I will also use the term “simplicity” to describe a *psychological* form of simplicity that was described in many of the women’s journals. By “psychological simplicity” I mean a generalized movement toward peeling away one’s defenses and forms of social conditioning to reveal a more honest, sincere (i.e., what you see is what you get), humble, and deliberate mode of being in the world. Indeed, we see this overarching movement toward greater psychological simplicity in all of the women’s journals, and this movement seems to be directly related to their practices of material simplicity. We will now turn to specific examples from the texts to understand what simplicity meant to particular women and what they gained from its practice.

Recovering a felt sense of the “central core”

Each of the women in this study, in one way or another, noted a felt sense of becoming more centered and getting back in touch with the “core” of her being through the practice of simplicity in solitude. Each noted a generalized movement toward a felt sense of residing more fully in her body and feeling a greater sense of “wholeness” rather than fragmentation. Each noted a movement toward the recovery of something most basic to her being, a stripping down of her existence such that something basic and foundational was recovered or re-accessed. In the case of Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*), for example, the overarching goal for her year-long retreat was to recover “that raw-

material person I seem to have lost” (p. 11), and she was indeed able to proclaim, toward the end of her retreat, that she was “finally scraping off the excess to have a glimpse of the original self” (p. 166) and had successfully “reclaim[ed] my basic existence” (p. 171).

One retreatant, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) understood the practice of simplicity to play a major role in her ability to contact this “core” sense and drew a direct link between the spatial dimensions of her solitude and the recovery of this core-like quality. Rather than viewing her two-week retreat as an opportunity for mere privacy and relaxation, she sought something entirely different: “I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life” (p. 23). She realized that her life, lived as a suburban wife and mother of five in the 1950s, was quite the opposite of this image; indeed, she characterized her life, and that of other women living in her time and place, as a “circus act”:

What a circus act we women perform every day of our lives... This is not the life of simplicity but the life of multiplicity that the wise men warn us of. It leads not to unification but to fragmentation. It does not bring grace; it destroys the soul. ...the problem is particularly and essentially woman's. Distraction is, always has been, and probably always will be, inherent in woman's life. (p. 26-27)

Lindbergh viewed the practice of material simplicity as a possible antidote to the psycho-spiritual problem of distraction, and thus as a route to this central core, but noted that “I find the frame of my life does not foster simplicity. My husband and five children must make their way in the world. The life I have chosen as wife and mother entrains a whole caravan of complications” (p. 24). Lindbergh decided to practice material simplicity during her retreat in order to try to recover this quality of being that she deemed the province of “the contemplative, the artist, or saint” and which she characterized as “the inner inviolable core, the single eye” (p. 28). Her hope was that by recovering this felt

sense during her solitude, she would be able to carry it with her out of solitude into her “worldly” life:

In my periods of retreat, perhaps I can learn something to carry back into my worldly life. I can at least practice for these two weeks the simplification of outward life, as a beginning. I can follow this superficial clue, and I can see where it leads. Here in beach living, I can try. (p. 30)

It is important to note that Lindbergh first set off on this course of thought regarding the value of simplicity and became able to access her desire to cultivate this “core” sense through her contemplations of a simple shell, a channeled whelk she picked up on the beach. While meditating on this shell, she felt a resonance with its former inhabitant who had “deserted” its home and run away from its former life:

He ran away, and left me his shell. It was once a protection for him. I turn the shell in my hand, gazing into the wide open door from which he made his exit. Had it become an encumbrance? Why did he run away? Did he hope to find a better home, a better way of living? I too have run away, I realize, I have shed the shell of my life. (p. 21)

Her contemplations of the shell’s bare beauty, small size, and overall simplicity – “it is simple; it is bare, it is beautiful” (p. 21) – encouraged her to reflect on the “shell” of her own life and provided her with clues for a different way of living:

My shell is not like this, I think. How untidy it has become! Blurred with moss, knobby with barnacles, its shape is hardly recognizable any more. Surely, it had a shape once. It has a shape still in my mind. What is the shape of my life? (p. 22)

It was by studying the simple natural structure of the shell, another being’s former home, that she realized the extent to which her life is encumbered by extraneous responsibilities and activities and distractions that kept her living at a distance from her “inner inviolable core” (p. 28). By gazing at the small, simple, clean, straightforward structure of the shell, she understood what was missing. Her solitude granted her the time and space to be able

to sit with the shell in this contemplative way and allow the shell to speak to her through its gestural presence, helping Lindbergh imagine new possibilities for her life.

Lindbergh longed to find a route to this experience of her central core and found a clue in the bare beauty of the channeled whelk, and that clue told her to cut out some of the distractions in her daily life:

What is the answer? There is no easy answer, no complete answer. I have only clues, shells from the sea. The bare beauty of the channeled whelk tells me one answer, and perhaps a first step, is in simplification of life, in cutting out some of the distractions. (p. 29)

Lindbergh's intention for her retreat was the following: "I mean to lead a simple life, to choose a simple shell I can carry easily" (p. 24) and followed through by practicing outer simplicity in a number of different ways over the course of her retreat. She lived in a small rustic cottage, with ample access to the outdoors, amongst few things, and without modern conveniences:

Here I live in a bare sea-shell of a cottage. No heat, no telephone, no plumbing to speak of, no hot water, a two-burner stove, no gadgets to go wrong. No rugs. There were some, but I rolled them up the first day; it is easier to sweep sand off the floor. (p. 30)

Her simplistic lifestyle called her to use her body in more active, instrumental, intentional ways:

I have no car, so I bicycle for my supplies and my mail. When it is cold, I collect driftwood for my fireplace and chop it up, too. I swim instead of taking hot baths. I bury my garbage instead of having it removed by a truck. (p. 114)

Paring down her material engagements seemed to foster a process of psychological paring down, wherein Lindbergh became able to recover a more simple, straightforward, and authentic way of being in the world. For example, as she shed clothing and make-up, she shed vanity; as she did little cleaning in her cottage and let sand from the beach

accumulate on the floor, she shed her “Puritan conscience about absolute tidiness and cleanliness” (p. 31); and as she only invited into her “shell” people she chose to be with and with whom she could be completely honest, she was “shedding hypocrisy in human relationships” and shedding her social “mask” (p. 31).

During my hermitage retreats, I also experienced a felt shift toward greater psychological simplicity, and this shift appeared to be linked to the spatial dimensions of my solitude as well. For example, by the end of my second retreat, taking place in November in a rustic hermitage at a monastery in Michigan, I wrote the following in my journal: “Image: simplicity in my dealings with others. Straightforward, authentic, guileless.” My retreat had fostered a clearing for an image of myself as a more authentic and straightforward person to come forth. This image most likely became possible for a number of reasons, including spending an extended period of time in silence which helped me to better appreciate and value language, the contemplation of certain ideas through the readings I had been doing while on retreat, the effect of not having looked at myself in the mirror for over a week, etc. But I also believe that the rustic simplicity of hermitage living, combined with ample contact with the outdoors, helped elicit this particular image and supported a more authentic and straightforward mode of being in the world with others. For example, the simple architectural layout and small scale of the cabin as well as the bareness of the walls seemed to discourage hiddenness or pretentiousness. There was also something straightforward and honest about the practice of using only what I needed – a small amount of space, a single cot, one chair, one plate, one bowl, etc. During my hermitage retreats, I also ate very simply, limiting my diet to whole, fresh foods, and I found that I ate much less than I usually do, as I ate only when

hungry rather than as a means to escape, pass the time, or de-stress. I ate much more slowly and more mindfully, resulting in a more satisfying experience and an ability to stay attuned to my body's cues signaling fullness and satiety. All of my activities during my hermitage retreats took place on a modest scale; the simple structure of the cabin and the things within it seemed to foster humility and disallow grandiosity.⁷ It felt humbling and deeply human to live in the space of the cabin and exist for those ten days on the convent/monastery grounds, rather than being transported across great distances through the use of the internet, the telephone, or my car. I stayed very local and in so doing *kept a certain kind of hold on myself*, developing greater familiarity with and awareness of my own experiencing. Most of my interactions with other beings – non-human animal beings, for the most part – happened face to face, as well (at least the ones I was directly aware of). There was something very “straightforward, authentic, [and] guileless” about that. By the time I arrived in the desert for my third retreat, the vision fast, having practiced simplicity and having made do with less during my first two retreats, I was prepared to go more radically without – without any food, shelter, electricity, plumbing, reading materials, familiar things, etc. My existence was stripped down during the vision fast such that I was left with my immediate and raw experience – of both my “inner” being and the “outer” world – which I could attend to in an undistracted way. This amounted to a reacquaintance and remembrance of relationships and experiential realities which I had become disconnected from in the midst of my harried, bourgeois,

⁷ In his topoanalysis of Thomas Merton's hermitage experience at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Theologian Belden Lane (2004) contends that Merton similarly experienced a “stripping down” of his existence in solitude, fostering psychological simplicity and humility, and attributes this stripping down, in large part, to the bare, austere space of the hermitage: “The energies of the place had a way of stripping him down to essentials. There he could... proclaim, “This is not a hermitage – it is a house. ... What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe” (p. 127).

technologically-saturated life. It also resulted in a realization that I could be okay without the usual assortment of things that I habitually surrounded myself with, at least for a few days.

I found, in fact, that I was not only okay, but indeed that I ultimately *thrived* in a new way in the absence of extraneous distractions and the company of my usual things. Part of the reason I claim to have thrived was because on the fourth and final night of the retreat I received a vision. This vision consisted of an image (both visual and intuitive, i.e., in my “mind’s eye”) of my larger purpose in this world. One could argue that through this vision I caught a glimpse of my “true self,” as compared to the self I normally identify with in my life in the world. In her book *Silence, Solitude, and Simplicity*, elderly Benedictine nun and former hermit Sister Jeremy Hall argues that simplicity, along with solitude and silence, is a discipline “of the desert” which fosters our ability to make contact with our center as it “frees us from the dominance of the peripheral and the fleeting, providing a context in which we can come to our true selves” (p. 117). For Sister Jeremy, the “true self” is a self that has transcended the contents and identity of the personal self, a self that becomes progressively emptier via the desert disciplines (silence, solitude, simplicity) as one is “making room within” (p. 86) for something beyond one’s personal ego-identity – e.g., God, nature, others. That is, essentially, what I believe I experienced on that fourth night in the desert – a glimpse of my “true self” – and what Lindbergh might be roughly referring to when she points to the notion of the “central core” (p. 23). When in touch with this central core, one is freed “from the dominance of the fleeting and peripheral” and one is in touch with something most basic and true about herself which is at the same time, seemingly paradoxically,

something larger than the personal self. Though Sister Jeremy's description of the solitary process is explicitly Christian, and Lindbergh's description is more secular, the two writers share an appreciation for the power of simplicity to help a person re-establish contact with their felt experience and to cultivate receptivity to that which is beyond the personal self – in Sister Jeremy's case, this is primarily conceptualized as God, whereas Lindbergh writes of a heightened connection to the more-than-human natural world. Both writers are pointing to a heightened sense, developed through solitude, of getting in touch with a felt center, an “inner inviolable core,” a “single eye” (Lindbergh, p. 28) rather than one's center of gravity being located exclusively in the “I” that we associate with the personal self; and both writers are also pointing to how, by living out of that core, one's boundaries relax and one becomes open to that which is outside of her personal self. This opening of one's boundaries, in turns, leads to a sense of inner richness. Ultimately, according to Sister Jeremy, “true simplicity enriches inner life” (p. 111).

Less is more: Restructuring one's system of values, cultivating beauty and significance

Practicing material simplicity also offered Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) the opportunity to develop a more conscious relationship toward the things in her midst and helped her restructure her value system with regard to these things. She found that the limitations inherent in her solitary setting affected her habits of consumption and her ability to make choices amongst things. These limitations created what she referred to as a “natural selectivity” – “The geographical boundaries, the physical limitations, the restrictions on communication, have enforced a natural selectivity” (p. 112) – which

while limiting her possibilities, helped her appreciate and see more of the beauty in what was actually available to her than she had access to prior to solitude. The physical limitations of her small cottage, for example, encouraged her to be very selective about what she brought into her space. At the start of her retreat, she found herself walking along the beach and collecting as many shells as she could fit in her bulging pockets. But as the shells began to fill up her cottage and crowd the already small space, she began to drop her acquisitiveness, discard from her possessions, and select the few that really spoke to her. Through this practice of paring down and letting go, she started to realize that three shells were far more significant to her than thirty and that “they are more beautiful if they are few” (p. 112).

Indeed, Lindbergh discovered that the fewer things one has, the more they appear as beautiful. She realized that it is only against the backdrop of open space that a thing’s beauty could be disclosed in its full splendor:

For it is only framed in space that beauty blooms. Only in space are events and objects and people unique and significant – and therefore beautiful. ... A candle flowers in the space of night. Even small and casual things take on significance if they are washed in space. (p. 112)

She learned this lesson by slowly contemplating, one by one, against the backdrop of her bare cabin walls, the few shells that she chose to keep with her, their individual beauty and significance only apparent once she pared down and discarded the rest, returning them to the shore where she originally found them. She applied this lesson to her life outside of solitude, realizing that her family life in Connecticut “lacks this quality of significance and therefore of beauty, because there is so little empty space” (p. 113). The open space provided by the practice of simplicity transformed her value system such that the “natural selectivity” inherent in her solitary setting became internalized as a freely

chosen practice of “conscious selectivity” based on a new set of values she referred to as “island precepts” (p. 117). She learned to be more selective about what she brought into her space and to cultivate beauty and significance by paring down what she already had. As she aimed to carry this set of values with her when she returned to Connecticut, she brought her handful of carefully chosen shells home with her to help her recall these valuable lessons learned.

Simplicity practiced in solitude seemed to teach several of the women that the fewer things one has, especially if they are carefully chosen, the more they appear as treasures. I had this strong sense over the course of my first retreat as well, remarking in my journal on the final day that, “Having little of something makes you realize how precious it is, helps you make it sacred... The fewer things you have, the more you respect them. The smaller your cottage, the more love each part receives.” I found myself attending closely to and taking very good care of the things in my hermitage during those ten days – carefully cleaning the counters and the floors, washing the few pieces of clothing I brought with me slowly in the sink and enjoying hanging them to dry, contemplating and sketching a single leaf and a pine cone that I had brought in from the outside, slowing preparing and then savoring the limited quantity of fresh vegetables I brought to eat, etc. Throughout that retreat, I came to learn the overarching lesson that less can indeed be more, in terms of appreciation and attention paid to the few things one engages with. We see this greater degree of appreciation – for both the things themselves and the activity of taking care of the few things one has – in the journal of Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) as well. Deep into her time living as a hermit in the West

Virginia mountains, Karper reflected on the joy she had come to experience while doing something as simple as washing dishes:

I gained something else...a deep respect for all the tasks of my daily life. ... I learned to wash the plates and dishes caringly, not just to get them clean, but to enjoy the sparkle of sunlight on clear glass and savor the sheen of polished silver. (p. 106)

Karper appeared to develop her appreciation of these things and the act of caring for these things as she became progressively more mindful and present-moment oriented⁸ over the course of her time alone; it also seems that her heightened ability to become more present-moment oriented and mindful was directly related to the discipline of simplicity that was central to her solitude.

Most of the women in this study appeared to learn through their simplified lifestyles in solitude that less can indeed be more. Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) stated this directly in observing that, "Occupying this tiny cottage with no clutter, only barren essentials, has served to help me find more in less" (p. 69). Voluntarily paring down one's material possessions seemed to help the women bring out the texture, beauty, and significance of the few things they had and served to enrich their quality of life in terms of bolstering care, attention, and appreciation.

Discerning desire

The simplicity of their lives in solitude gave the women the opportunity to really notice, stay with, and contemplate their lived experience. One such aspect of lived experience lies in the realm of desire; by desire I am here referring to the felt sense of a calling toward things. In *A Hut of One's Own*, her book about hermit's huts, architect

⁸ We will look more closely at the ways in which solitude fosters present-moment consciousness in the next chapter, on the temporal dimension of solitude.

Ann Cline asserts that, “Only in a hut of one’s own can a person follow his or her desires” and characterizes the practice of following one’s desires as “a rigorous discipline” (p. 131). This following of desire is a rigorous discipline in that it takes quite a bit of effort in the first place to identify what one’s desires are, apart from those of other people and the larger culture in which one lives. This is what some of the women in this study came to realize quite quickly. Several of the women found themselves asking the general question, “What do I want?” in their solitudes, and the answer was not all that easy to discern. It took for many of the women a sustained practice of listening closely to the layers of their experiencing – mental, affective, visceral, etc. – to discern their desire, and this process of discernment did not happen in a vacuum. It happened in the context of the space of the hermitage, in large part in relation to the things they dwelled alongside, and in relation to the beings and things and larger landscape of the natural world outside their doors. They reconnected with their desire via these relationships. It seems as though the bareness of their cottages and the fewer things they dwelled alongside fostered this process of discerning desire, as their attention was not dispersed but, rather, could be focused on one thing at a time, and their proclivities toward that thing could come into greater focus, whether that thing was a piece of fruit, a flower, a possible activity, the winter landscape, or a letter from a friend.

Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) serves as an example of someone who was largely out of touch with her own desire prior to solitude and set out on a rigorous inquiry into her desire during her time alone, retreating in a rented cottage during the winter of 1962 on Nantucket. Koller went into solitude with the expressed purpose of figuring out why her life was not working well and why she kept repeating the same self-defeating

patterns. She set out to conduct a radical self-analysis – one which took her all the way to the edge of suicide – in order to get to the bottom of her suffering and peel away layers of social conditioning and the habitual modes of thinking, feeling, and behaving that kept her from feeling a basic sense of comfort in herself and contentment in her life. One of the primary tasks of her solitude focused on the recovery of her very basic responses to things. She realized early on in her retreat that she had very little conscious awareness of her responses in the presence of things. Here, she summarizes her first month in solitude as a process of realizing that she did not know *what it was to want*:

Why am I here? There's no place else to be. What am I doing here? I don't really know. What am I trying to do here? To find some way to live. And how have I made out so far? My thumb and my forefinger rub my forehead trying to press out some distillation of my month here. This: that I've probably never done a single thing I've wanted to do, for the simple reason that I've never understood what it is to want to do something. And this: that to know what wanting is requires that I be able to recognize what I feel, but that I don't know how to do that, and I don't even know how to begin learning how. (p. 122-123)

Koller's progressive ability to tune in to her responses, intentions, and desires around things while on retreat went a long way to helping her build a new self and feel more vital and at home in the world. From the very start of her retreat, she began noticing desire as it arose along with noting her automatic attempts to shut it down or re-route it. Here, in this mundane example, we see her beginning to tune in to the chronic neglect of her desire on the very first day of her retreat, right after she first moved in to the cottage:

A feeble desire dances into the empty space: I'd like a drink. But I hesitate over the boxes. The faint wish fleshes into a full image: I'd like to sit with a drink, watching the sunset. Didn't I come here to see what I am when I divest myself of everyone else's rules? (p. 15)

In the ample time and space of her solitude, Koller was able to notice her reactions to the few things that she shared her space with; in so doing she noticed that she

did not know *how to be with them and toward them* in an immediate, natural way and therefore, in a sense, did not know her own self: “I don’t know how to respond to things. I shake my head impatiently. No, that’s not it. I don’t know how *I* respond to things. I don’t know how to find out what’s going on inside of me” (p. 111). After an intense period of self-examination and identity deconstruction that led to suicidal ideation, she came to understand that most of the major efforts in her life had been in the service of trying to please others and trying to be whomever she believed others wanted her to be. She realized that her desire was thoroughly entangled with the desire of the other, and thus did not know how to authentically respond to things. She felt helpless and angry about having to remedy so many years of self-betrayal and alienation from her desire and not even knowing where to start:

I’m fighting to break out of the pattern of what I’ve been doing for, my God, twenty-four years. A quarter of a century, a third of a lifetime. I haven’t got twenty-four years to undo the pattern slowly: I have to smash its hold as fast as I can. Each thing I do during the course of a day is something I’ve been told to do, or taught to do. I have to replace all of it with what I choose to do. I have to learn to choose one thing over another, one way of doing something over another way. That means I have to want one thing, or one way, more than another. My stomach tightens. Want one thing more than another? What will I use as a criterion? I don’t know. I know only that I have to uproot all of the old while I’m learning what I want. Tear out every habit, every way of responding to people or to things. Or to ideas. Look at it without mercy and ask: Is this mine? (p. 117)

Koller began to slowly take notice of and start to feel into her responses to things in her midst and the activity options open to her (e.g., sleeping, eating, walking, writing) in so doing began to feel more like a real person, grounded in her own impulses and perceptions and wantings, rather than an actress on a stage living at a distance from herself. Over time, Koller transitioned from being a performer, moving through the world based on another person’s script, to being a person led by her own inner compass –

akin to that “central core” that Lindbergh wrote of. In solitude, Koller began the process of creating a new set of values by which to live through becoming better able to discern her desire and intentions in relation to her environment and the things that resided there. Through her time alone, Koller built greater trust in her ability to live smoothly and continuously in the world, relying on her ability to act according to her own impulses and respond more fluidly to the world’s solicitations.

Cultivating a “healthy poverty,” cultivating faith

Through practicing simplicity in the context of solitude, Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) learned the art of surrender. Though Karper developed a greater appreciation for the few things she had, as discussed earlier, she also learned to largely let go of her attachment to material things and the sense of security, however false, they provided. In so surrendering, she came to feel closer to the Divine. She quoted Meister Eckhart in summing up her solitary experience: “There where clinging to things ends, there God begins to be” (p. vi). A 48 year-old nun living as a hermit in rural West Virginia, Karper found that letting go of her attachments to financial security and material comforts helped her feel much closer to God and become better able to sense the palpable presence of the Divine, leading to a greater sense of inner richness. During her solitude, Karper put the majority of her material needs in the hands of others, living primarily off the good will of other people and what she understood to be Divine intervention during moments of crisis. After living in a convent for thirty years – her entire adult life – Karper decided after much deliberation to move into her own solitary shack in the West Virginia mountains in order to have more time for prayer and

reflection. The space was rent-free but extremely run down, infested with insects and mice, and very much at the mercy of the elements. While living in the convent, Karper's needs for food, shelter, clothing, companionship, etc. were all taken care of for her. Her convent days were highly structured, and she knew what to do and what not to do. Shifting into an eremitic lifestyle meant that she had to give up those comforts, enter into the unknown, and experience a great deal of psychological, economic, and even spiritual insecurity, choosing a path separate from that which was deemed acceptable by her order. She found giving up these comforts to be difficult at first and faced many crises early on in her solitude. But though her solitude was marked by great psychological and material challenges, she discovered an immense sense of "inner freedom" – a degree of freedom that few of the other women in this study seemed to have experienced – through that struggle and through the long-term impoverished nature of her lifestyle. She noted that, "Poverty of place and circumstance, I realized, were to recreate me so I could discover a tremendous inner freedom. ... If I truly wished to encounter the Living God, I had to put myself totally in His hands with no material concerns to weigh me down" (p. 92). For Karper, material concerns (beyond a very basic level of sustenance) amounted to a "clinging to things" that served as a source of anxious distraction and a buffer from an encounter with the "Living God." Because she did not have material security, she had to have faith that she would be taken care of, and that faith was a spiritual gateway for her, allowing her to surrender a significant amount of personal control and open herself to the influence of forces outside of herself. By practicing simplicity on the material plane, Karper was cultivating humility as well as working to clear a space "within" in which the presence of the Divine could be felt. By not having everything she wanted or needed –

even at a most basic level, at times, such as clean drinking water – she became more open to and appreciative of the gifts that she eventually received.

In his writings on the hermit's hut in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard echoes this association between the simplicity inherent in an eremitic lifestyle and the cultivation of one's spiritual development, asserting that, "The hut can receive none of the riches "of this world." It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives access to absolute refuge" (p. 32). Though Bachelard argues that destitution allows for such "access to absolute refuge," Karen Karper fine-tunes this point by making a distinction between "dstitution" and the kind of poverty she experienced while living as a hermit. She does not make this distinction in her journal, however, but does so in a later writing, a book titled *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life*, which she wrote with her husband, Paul Fredette (a former priest whom Karper married after living as a hermit), under the name Karen Karper Fredette. Fredette and Fredette (2008) make the following distinction between "dstitution" and what they refer to as "holy poverty":

"Holy" poverty is different from destitution. Although both imply material limitations, there is a radical difference in one's attitude toward the situation. Dependence on God is the heart of the vow of poverty. Worry is its antithesis. A hermit may not know where the rent or grocery money for next week will come from. But, as a vowed solitary, she or he makes a crucial choice at this point – she or he chooses not to fret over a situation about which, at that moment, nothing can be done. The God who has called him or her into a life of solitude and prayer is as aware of the looming crisis, as the hermit is, and has deeper pockets. The spiritual person puts the problem in God's hands and waits... waits until something changes or God shows him or her what to do. (p. 108)

Karper's poverty did indeed seem to serve as a pathway to the Divine, but it was not only her material circumstances that allowed her this access; it was her capacity to surrender, to practice faith, to wait, and then to discern the right course of action to take or not take.

Solitude appears to be a fertile breeding ground for all of these capacities. Indeed each of the women in this study, whether explicitly spiritually-oriented or not, cultivated these capacities to a significant degree over the course of her retreat. Each woman cultivated a generalized *stance of receptivity* while in solitude, and in doing so, her “inner” and outer worlds came alive in new ways.

The presence of God became more accessible to Karen Karper via this heightened stance of receptivity, and this receptivity also left her progressively better able to find beauty and fulfillment in the natural world outside her door. As time went on during her solitude, the natural world becoming more of a vital subject unto itself, a participant in Karper’s daily life rather than a pretty backdrop or an object to be acted upon or contended with. It was Anderson’s poverty, in part, that helped open her to the richness and vitality of the natural world and led her into conversation with it. The simplicity of Anderson’s material circumstances encouraged her to spend more time outdoors, bolstering her appreciation for nature and leaving her feeling rich; she asked, “With such vistas unrolling in beauty, how can one be poor?” (p. 100). All of the women in this study, in fact, spent more time outside in nature during their solitude than they did in their lives prior to their retreats. It seems that the simplicity of their cabins encouraged them to venture outdoors more and receive more of their stimulation from nature.

Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek* rarely details her solitary experiences inside her home but goes into great detail about her discoveries at Tinker Creek and in the woods next to her home. She too championed the cultivation of a “healthy poverty” that enriches: “if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with

your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get” (p. 17). Dillard’s “healthy poverty” consisted of having few material needs – living on little money and in a very rustic way – which provided her with ample time to spend in nature and helped her cultivate a deep appreciation for the simple things she found there. The world is indeed planted in pennies, but we have to develop an appreciation for their value in order to receive their bounty. How does one begin to cultivate this appreciation? We will see in the next section that one path is by *re-learning to see*. We need to re-learn to love the everyday world, and this deeper love can come about through a practice of attending to what is right in front of us.

Theme 2: *Re-learning to see*

The simplicity of the spaces in which they retreated and the simplicity of the things that they dwelled amongst created an opportunity for the women to learn to live in a new way. In the relatively open spaces of their retreats, they found themselves freed up to focus on their experience (e.g., their cognitive, emotional, visceral experience) as it arose in the moment and became better able to live more deliberately and intentionally. Part of becoming better able to focus on the various layers of their experiencing, involved learning to *focus on the things* they encountered (both inside and outside their cabins) in a different way as well. In gaining this new focus, they built new relationships with the world and experienced shifts in their senses of self. With an ample amount of time and space available to them and few distractions in their midst, they found themselves regarding the things around them more carefully, more intensely, and through fresh eyes.

In so doing, the inexhaustible richness of things became more apparent and the world revealed itself to be a more enchanted place.

Seeing things “properly for the first time”

Experiencing solitude in her own house on the Maine coast during the winter of 1993 amongst familiar things, 75 year-old Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) noted,

Alone, I discovered myself looking hard at things, as if I were seeing them for the first time, or seeing them properly for the first time... They turned into new objects, seen in a curious, hard original light, no longer ordinary or familiar. (p. 22-24)

As she looked more closely at these familiar things which she had lived amongst for years, they took on a new significance and came alive to her in a new way. For example, Grumbach discovered herself noticing small pieces of memorabilia that she had not paid attention to in many years. These things caught her off-guard and sparked her memory of places, relationships, and experiences of long ago:

To my surprise I found an old matchbox hidden under a wooden candlestick. IOWA HOUSE was printed on its cover, a place I had not stayed in eighteen years. Then...I went through a pen-and-pencil holder in the kitchen and discovered an old, small, red automatic pencil with ALBANY ACADEMY on its side in gilt. Why had I never noticed it before in the twenty years since I lived in Albany? (p. 77)

She characterized these pieces of memorabilia as “choosing” to show themselves (p. 77), as if they had some degree of agency or as if perceptually engaging with her environment in a certain way invited things to come forth and reveal themselves. These pieces of memorabilia, these small things, gathered entire worlds of memory around them, and these rich worlds came to life for Grumbach in a new way in her partner’s absence.

Grumbach also found herself noticing the intricacy of natural forms in the outdoors that she would have easily overlooked in the past:

Looking hard at what I had not noticed before – the shape of snow around the bird feeder where the feet of birds have tramped a wide circle in their search for fallen bird seed, the lovely V-shaped wake of a family of newly arrived eider ducks as they cross the cove, the sight of a green log sputtering a drooling sap in the woodstove as if in protest against my feeding it prematurely to the flames (p. 25-26)

What might have been mere background scenery to her in the past now displayed its own intelligence, patternings, and even voice, as the log seemed to “protest” its being sent to the stove prematurely. Grumbach’s more intense, sustained, intentional mode of participation with her environment via visual perception was “tiring ...all this took more energy than the old, careless, eyes-once-over-the-object practice” (p. 26). Through solitude, Grumbach developed a more disciplined way of seeing and in so doing, her world opened in a new way – more was seen in less and the visible things of the world were accorded a degree of vitality and subjectivity they did not previously have.

The pieces of memorabilia and the natural phenomena that Grumbach became more attuned to contained entire worlds that became more accessible to her in her aloneness. Across the women’s journals, we see thick poetic descriptions of material phenomena, including the moods they evoke, the memories they recall, and the desire in the women to know and experience the things further. The women *plumbed the depths of things* in their aloneness. Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) is one such plumber of depths, as she stood before the world in awe of its intricacy and texture, eager to see as much as she could see. She pondered the big overarching conceptual questions regarding the mystery and meaning of life as well, but found that that line of questioning too frequently came up short. She concluded that a better course of action, a surer route to

grace, was to look closely at the material world around her, one thing at a time. In so doing she came to see the forest via the individual trees:

That there are so many details seems to be the most important and visible fact about creation. If you can't see the forest for the trees, then look at the trees; when you've looked at enough trees, you've seen a forest, you've got it. (p. 130)

Looking closely at the individual trees served to call forth the world's beauty, a door which opened to the knock of Dillard's gaze. She asks,

What do I make of all this texture? What does it mean about the kind of world in which I have been set down? The texture of the world, its filigree and scrollwork, means that there is the possibility for beauty here, a beauty inexhaustible in its complexity, which opens to my knock, which answers in me a call I do not remember calling. (p. 140)

It is via her perception that Dillard became able to access both the beauty of the world and the layer of her own being that, by nature, calls out to the world and responds fluidly to its solicitations. In so doing, she was participating with that world, rather than acting as a detached observer of it. In *The Spell of Sensuous*, ecophenomenologist David Abram asserts that most contemporary Westerners are out of touch with this pre-reflective, primordial, participatory mode of experiencing that Dillard points to. He uses the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to illuminate this pre-reflective "most immediate experience of things" which is "an experience of reciprocal encounter...we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor – as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation" (p. 56). Normally, however, via our objectifying gaze, we regard the things in our midst as *objects*, thus robbing them of their vitality, power, and presence.

According to Abram,

We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous involvement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses; we thus block our

perceptual reciprocity with that being. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies. (p. 56)

Over the course of their solitary retreats, the women seemed to be able to better access their perceptual reciprocity with things. Being out of touch with this perceptual reciprocity, according to Eva Simms (2008), results in a repression of “the gathering of things”: “We have forgotten the gathering of things. The thing, because it does not get a hearing, does not lay claim to thought, nor can we think about what it gathers” (p. 82). Through the forms of vision they practiced during their retreats, the women gave things a more proper hearing and re-called more of the inexhaustible richness and depth inherent in the phenomenal world.

Cultivating a greater sense of intimacy with things

Over the course of her solitude, Doris Grumbach developed an appreciation for the value of viewing things when alone, rather than alongside other people (which she had previously thought to be a more intrinsically satisfying experience): “I began to see in these weeks alone that a greater value lay in hearing and seeing from within that mysterious inner place, where the eyes and ears of the mind are insulated from the need to communicate to someone else what I experienced” (p. 22-23). In solitude, she became able to see from a different perspective – “from within that mysterious inner place” – rather than from an “outer” perspective associated with the social world and ideas about things generated in that social world, and the result seemed to be a more attentive and careful consideration of things as they presented themselves in that moment, a freshness of vision through which she saw things “properly for the first time” (p. 22). Through

gazing at these things in this way, she found that she felt closer to them and that their presence affected her more profoundly. In *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, Philip Koch helps shed light on this phenomenon in asserting that viewing things in solitude tends to create a sense of *rapport and nearness* between subject and object, a relationship that becomes triangulated and more “complexly referenced” when another person enters the scene. According to Koch, one can feel a greater sense of intimacy with the thing seen and less of a consciousness of one’s seeing in the context of solitude. One can be with the thing more single-mindedly rather than additionally sensing oneself seeing the thing and attempting to integrate the other’s perspective on the thing at the same time. Koch fleshes this out by describing the example of regarding a daffodil in solitude versus regarding it alongside another person:

What was a direct relationship between me and the daffodil has become a three-way affair: my rapport with the flower is lost as I feel it giving me only half its attention. Further, my sense of the flower’s nearness becomes unsettled: roughly calculating its nearness to the [other person] and my nearness to him, triangularizing myself as I feel him triangularizing me and the flower, nearness falls into limbo. (p. 26)

In *Journal of a Solitude*, May Sarton provides us with a good example of this greater “nearness” to things that solitude seems to help make possible; here she describes her experience of regarding flowers while in solitude: “On my desk, small pink roses... When I am alone the flowers are really seen; I can pay attention to them. They are felt as presences. Without them I would die” (p. 11). Her flowers came alive – they were *present* – rather than serving as mere decorative objects; she was moved by them and sustained by them. Indeed, Sarton described herself as being in a *relationship* with her flowers:

I learn by being in relation to... this becomes true of even such an apparently passive relation as that between me and four bowls of daffodils I am growing on the window sill... Every relation challenges; every relation asks me to be something, do something, respond. (p. 107)

In her solitude, she attended to her flowers, cared for them, and personified them – calling them names such as “Nevada.”⁹ Her flowers even kept her going during difficult bouts of depression during her year alone, for example, by helping her get out of bed in the morning after an emotionally painful night: “When I woke the sun hit just one daffodil, a single beam on the yellow frilled cup and outer petals. After a bad night that sight got me up and going” (p. 100). She not only found the daffodil beautiful and uplifting; Sarton’s contemplation of the simple flower also helped her realize something vitally important: “After I had looked for a while at the daffodil before I got up, I asked myself the question, “What do you want of your life?” and I realized with a start of recognition and terror, “Exactly what I have”” (p. 101). By closely attending to the flower – looking at the thing itself rather than getting lost in thoughts *about* that thing or about herself – Sarton came to realize that she already had everything she needed, that she was already whole, rather than in a state of perpetual lack or fundamental brokenness.

It would be too easy to think of Sarton’s relationships with her plants as pale substitutes for relationships with other people. It seems more accurate to understand these relationships as integral to our full humanity, as necessary to our mental health in much the same way that interpersonal relationships are necessary (albeit to a different degree, perhaps). Through cultivating these relationships with the non-human world of things, especially organic forms found in nature, we may be better able to shift from an

⁹ We see this same personification of flowers in Doris Grumbach’s journal (*Fifty Days of Solitude*), as she calls a flower she cares for in her home, “Tiny Alice”: “Since Tiny Alice, the name I gave to the oxalis, was the only flowering plant in the house, my attachment to her was strong. I took very good care of her” (p. 110).

egocentric experience of ourselves (which is largely human-centered and language-based) to one that is more *eco-centric*. By “eco-centric” I am referring to a sense of self which arises out of its relationships with the more-than-human world and understands itself as thoroughly embedded in that world, as part and parcel of something larger than itself. This eco-centric self, according to ecopsychologist Bill Plotkin (2008), “is the broader and deeper human self that is a natural member in the more-than-human community” (p. 275).

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau is an example of a person who could be said to have had such an eco-centric sense of self. In *Thoreau's Nature*, Jane Bennett argues that Thoreau's main project – in his life and work – was to transform his identity from one that was conventional and socially adaptive to one that was more self-determined and embedded in the natural world. She describes a general movement in Thoreau's life from that of an egocentric self to an eco-centric one and pinpoints a number of basic daily practices, or “techniques of the self,” that Thoreau employed to bring about this transformation. She referred to one such technique as “microvisioning,” which is clearly relevant to this discussion. According to Bennett, microvisioning is a mode of seeing that involves a “simple concentration upon this very spot at this very moment” and a close inspection of one's immediate surroundings (p. 27). Thoreau would spend hours at a time outdoors, sitting in one spot and looking intensely at a single thing – a leaf, the bark of a tree, etc. This practice gave Thoreau a great degree of practical knowledge about the natural world as well as a deep sense of satisfaction and joy. In *Walden*, Thoreau famously remarked that, “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone” (p. 53). Though technically impoverished

according to the standards of his day, Thoreau was made rich through the depth of his engagement with simple everyday things and events in the natural world. This enrichment was possible because Thoreau *could really see* these things and therefore know their value. As he cultivated his capacity to see things – to “microvision” – he cultivated his ability to *lose a sense of self-consciousness* for stretches of time. May Sarton cultivated this same ability during her solitude; she contended that the practice of looking closely at things for an extended period of time brings about “something like revelation,” as it takes the seer’s focus off of herself:

If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place. Something is “given,” and perhaps that something is always a reality *outside* of the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying the self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy. (p. 99)

Cultivating the ability to see in the ways we have been describing seems to go hand-in-hand with the ability to take one’s focus off of the self. We will look more closely at this subtle phenomenon in the next section.

Becoming again a child, cultivating “innocence”

To quote Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), a neo-Transcendentalist in the lineage of Thoreau, again:

If you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get. (p. 17)

The world is planted in pennies but we have to be able to both see them and value them in order to truly “have a day”; otherwise we are simply biding our time. Early in her

narrative, Dillard described an experience from her childhood, when she was six or seven years old, in which she would “hide” pennies for adults to find, drawing arrows on the sidewalk to alert them to the pennies’ locations. This anecdote from her childhood is presented at the very start of the second chapter, which she titled “Seeing.” Her point, it seems, is that children have the ability to see and value “pennies” – the everyday, simple things of the world – whereas adults have lost their ability to do so. Both Thoreau and Dillard appear to have significantly recovered this capacity as adults, however, through *re-learning how to see* while in solitude.

Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) distinguished between two different forms of seeing that she employed at Tinker Creek, both of which were vital to her overall project. The first kind of seeing was conceptual, rational, and thoroughly reflective, and it was made possible by having intellectual knowledge about whatever she was looking at. Dillard spent her time indoors studying the natural sciences feverishly in order to understand the things and events at Tinker Creek so that she might pick up on the intricate details that would otherwise escape her notice. She needed to know what she was looking at in order to see it: “The lover can see, and the knowledgeable” (p. 20). In this conceptual mode, she is “the knowledgeable.” She likened this kind of seeing to walking with a camera and maintaining “in my head a running description of the present... Like a blind man at the ball game, I need a radio” (p. 33). The second mode of seeing, on the other hand, is radically different; it is non-conceptual and involves a *surrendering* or a *letting go*: “When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied” (p. 33). This way of seeing is like walking without a camera or conceptual filter; thoughts quiet down, the doors of perception open, and one can “see truly”: “When I see this way

I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses” (p. 34). Indeed, Thoreau wrote of this other, more receptive and non-conceptual form of seeing thusly:

I must let my senses wander as my thought, my eyes see without looking... Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you... What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye. (as quoted in Bennett, 2002, p. 28)¹⁰

One sees without looking; thoughts and intentions cease and one becomes the famous Emersonian “transparent eye-ball”: “Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all” (Emerson, 2009, p. 3). One becomes all perception, rather than thought; by standing open to the world in this way, the world comes to you.¹¹

How does one achieve a seeing without looking wherein the object comes to you?

Of this shift in perceptual engagement Annie Dillard wrote,

I can’t go out and try to see this way. I’ll fail, I’ll go mad. All I can do is to try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of the useless interior babble that keeps

¹⁰ As discussed earlier, in *Thoreau’s Nature*, Jane Bennett described Thoreau’s practice of microvisioning – his “simple concentration upon this very spot at this very moment” (p. 27) – as a technique of the self which fostered the transition from a conventional, egocentric sense of self to a more *eco-centric* sense of self. Bennett notes that what she refers to as microvisioning also includes more detached, cool, sauntering forms of seeing as well: “Microvision is not only a specifying observation...but a detached or cool observation, a “fingering” of the scenery” (p. 28). Both variations of microvisioning – the more acutely attentive “looking” and the more sauntering of the eye variety – share a heightened stance of receptivity towards one’s surroundings. Thoreau worked to cultivate both forms of visual perception at Walden Pond, and both were integral to his project. Though one form of seeing is pointed and one is free, they both lead to a greater degree of participation with and a decreased sense of separation from the non-human natural world.

¹¹ A similar sentiment was expressed by Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) when she mentioned a particular quote from Pablo Picasso – “I find, I do not seek” (p. 163-164) – to capture the essence of her experience in solitude. Through cultivating the ability to let life happen, by surrendering control and submitting to the process and flow of life and becoming more present to the signs and gifts that appeared to her throughout the day, she began to feel a greater sense of contentment, gratitude, and self-acceptance. By surrendering to the process and becoming more receptive and attuned to the world, she no longer needed to *look for* her joy but instead found it always already there. She essentially discovered that she already had enough, and that this world, as it is now, is enough. This echoes May Sarton, as quoted earlier, who found that, via her contemplations of a daffodil, that she already had what she was looking for.

me from seeing... The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle. (p. 34-35)

She couldn't go out and try to see this way, but she set the stage for the possibility of this kind of seeing by going out alone into nature with an open expanse of time and a posture of receptivity and a relatively quiet mind. Her receptivity, her openness to nature, was born out of her love for nature ("The lover can see, and the knowledgeable" (p. 20)), which was, for Dillard, integrally related to her knowledge of nature. She would sit by the creek in stillness and silence, for hours on end, waiting. She walked without aim through the woods with her eyes open, never knowing when the moment might arrive, the moment when the "scales would drop from [her] eyes" (p. 32) and the world would come alive for her in a new way. Dillard never knew, though, what form of seeing would prevail on any given day: "I return from one walk knowing where the killdeer nests in the field by the creek and the hour the laurel blooms. I return from the same walk a day later and I scarcely know my name" (p. 35). Though she could lay the groundwork for the second form of seeing by cultivating a receptive, loving stance toward the natural world and attempting to quiet her mind, she could never seek the experience directly: "although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought" (p. 35).

Dillard described striving to maintain this non-conceptual way of seeing and failing in her attempts. She tried to view her surroundings as if she were a child or a newly sighted (previously blinded) adult – in the form of "color patches" rather than as distinct, named objects with specific meanings – and though she could achieve this illusion momentarily, it inevitably faded away. She described being able to briefly see the peaches in the summer orchard as shifting swirls of color, rather than as "peaches," but she was ultimately unable to maintain this way of seeing:

I couldn't sustain the illusion...I've been around for too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn't unpeach the peaches. Nor could I remember ever having seen without understanding; the color-patches of infancy are lost. ... I now live in a world of shadows that shape and distance color, a world where space makes a terrible kind of sense. (p. 32)

Dillard learned that, as adults who have grown up in Western culture, we are unable to go back to a way of being in which there is no distinction between things or a lack of differentiation between subject and object; and we are also not able to go back to a time before the dawn of self-consciousness. We cannot permanently regress, at least if we wish to continue to function in this world according to its current rules. But while adults cannot fully recapture the consciousness of childhood, according to Dillard *we can become child-like*, recovering certain capacities that characterize the consciousness of childhood and in so doing cultivate an approach to the world that is marked by curiosity, wide-eyed wonder, and a reverence for things. Dillard calls this way of being in the world "innocence": "Innocence is not the prerogative of infants and puppies," she writes, "it is not lost to us; the world is a better place than that" (p. 83). Dillard defines innocence thusly: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and a total concentration" (p. 83). It is a way of seeing that does not objectify what it sees; one dwells with the richness of things without attempting to penetrate, dissect, analyze, or name. One attends to the roundness, the succulent orangey-pinkishness, the soft fuzziness that invites our caress – to the gestural presence of the thing, rather than to "the peach." Though adults are not capable of a completely non-conceptual way of seeing (for extended periods of time, at least), they can cultivate a mode of seeing characterized by wonder and awe and openness, and this mode of seeing opens worlds by bringing

things to life, by reviving them from the slumber they've been relegated to under the objectifying gaze. A partial re-enchantment of the world is, indeed, possible. This re-enchantment involves a devotion to the thing seen and a forgetfulness of our selves in the process.

These moments of "pure devotion to any object" in which self-consciousness slips away are exceedingly difficult to experience in the presence of another person; it was in solitude that Dillard became able to recover her "innocence." For example, Dillard described the experience of sitting by the creek waiting for muskrats, a practice that took her several years to learn:

I was standing more or less *in* a bush. I was stock-still, looking deep into Tinker Creek from a spot on the bank opposite the house, watching a group of bluegills stare and hang motionless near the bottom of a deep, sunlit pool. I was focused for depth. I had long since lost myself, lost the creek, the day, lost everything but still amber depth. All at once I couldn't see. And then I could: a young muskrat had appeared on top of the water, floating on its back. (p. 192-193)

By watching in this way she lost herself in what she was gazing at; in a sense she ceased being Annie and became the "still amber depth." In her solitude she retreated "not within myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance" (p. 203). Access to this "abundance" was possible in her solitude. By contrast, Dillard describes her failed attempt to watch for muskrats alongside other people at the creek: "No matter how quiet we are, the muskrats stay hidden. Maybe they sense the tense hum of consciousness, the buzz from two human beings who in the silence cannot help but be conscious of each other, and so of themselves" (p. 201). In the presence of others, self-consciousness is heightened, serving to decrease one's openness to the world and one's ability to sustain the stillness and silence required for a muskrat to feel safe enough to show itself. Doing such a "childish," non-productive thing as

watching for muskrats as an adult in the presence of other adults also serves to create a subtle sense of embarrassment and therefore heightened self-consciousness. Indeed, many of the women in this study comported themselves toward the world in child-like ways, and their practices seemed to foster both a sense of the world as enchanted and a self-forgetfulness – a combination that served for many as a means of recovering lost aspects of their experience as well as a gateway to the sacred.

Through their relationships with things both inside and outside their cabins, the women in this study cultivated perceptual capabilities that brought the world into a different kind of focus and opened new psychological and spiritual horizons. By “coming to their senses,” and cultivating their visual¹² capacities, they worked to remedy sensory numbness that had built up over the years of being alienated from the non-human natural world and their own bodily experience. This process of re-sensitization has ecological and political as well as personal ramifications. In her essay, “The Skill of Ecological Perception,” ecopsychologist Laura Sewall argues that the current environmental crisis stems, in part, from a deadening of our senses and that it is through perceptual reconditioning that we may come to a greater sense of closeness with and a level of care for the natural world that is necessary for its survival over the long term. She names “learning to attend” as one of the fundamental skills involved in awakening our senses, a skill that requires nurturing a “receptive stance” and sensitivity toward the things in one’s environment. This receptive stance “requires getting out of one’s head; it is opening one’s self” (p. 206). Attending to things is a “devotional practice,” according

¹² Though this chapter focuses primarily on the recovery of visual perception in solitude, the women’s perceptual capacities in other domains – e.g., audition, tactility, etc. – appeared to heighten as well through solitude. We will explore the women’s fuller bodily sensual re-awakenings more thoroughly in a later chapter on embodiment.

to Sewall: “We experience reverence, simply by looking” (p. 213). Learning how to attend to things, “is, in essence, a spiritual practice. It is mindfulness in the visual domain” (p. 207).

Attending to things may be understood to be a “spiritual” practice as it serves to lessen self-consciousness and egocentrism while heightening appreciation and reverence for that which is outside the sphere of the personal self. It can be understood as an act of devotion, a form of prayer, and a posture of *humility* toward the things of this world. In *Silence, Solitude, and Simplicity*, Sister Jeremy Hall, contends that to be humble is to become like a child again. The trifecta of what she refers to as “desert” practices – silence, solitude, and simplicity – help us develop a sense of humility, which to Sister Jeremy means “to become as little children – small, poor, transparent, dependent, receiving all as gift, capable of surprise and wonder and growth” (p. 29). Sister Jeremy then quotes Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard on the spiritual necessity of recovering innocence in adulthood: “To *be* a child...when one simply is such is an easy thing; but the *second time* – the second time is decisive... To become again like a child...that is the task” (p. 29). Though she is speaking from an explicitly Christian perspective – her humility is a humility vis-à-vis God – Sister Jeremy and Annie Dillard seem to be making a similar point. To become child-like is to cultivate a receptive openness and a sense of wonder before the things of the world so that we might “respond lovingly to all of it as gift” (Hall, p. 116) – whether that gift is given by God or by nature or whether it is just, simply, given. Re-learning to see, retraining one’s perceptual capacities in a state of solitude, appears to be one pathway to becoming “again like a

child” and recovering a previously repressed form of relating to the world that is our birthright.

Theme 3: *A different kind of mirror*

We have seen that solitude helps foster a decrease in self-consciousness which appears to happen, in part, through the practice of mindfully attending to one’s environment – a contemplative stance that has been characterized in the Christian literature as a “long, loving look at the real” (Hall, p. 114).¹³ But though solitude may help a person let go of herself for a while, it can also help her recognize aspects of herself that she was not previously aware of or did not previously have access to. The women in this study had left behind social worlds which had provided a mirroring function that helped them understand who they were in the world and gave them a sense of security and cohesion (however illusory such security and cohesion may ultimately be). The things encountered in the context of solitude provided a different kind of mirror, reflecting back to the women different self-images. We might say that the mirroring that these things provided enabled the women to take a *long, loving look at the self* and develop the ability to acknowledge aspects of their experience that were previously left unthematized. What did they see in these mirrors? What did they learn about themselves and their place in the world?

¹³ The passage that this phrase is taken from is worth quoting in full: “Silence, solitude, and simplicity help to elicit and anchor holy wonder deep within us. In fact, without them it may well be difficult for us, in our time and in our culture, to cultivate genuine reverence. We tend to probe and analyze and experiment and commercialize so very much, including the human person, that awe and wonder may not easily be our natural response to the mystery and beauty of creation. We need a contemplative attitude, nurtured within ourselves, in order to transcend pseudoscientific, even exploitative contemporary approaches to our world. The contemplative attitude has been called simply “a long, loving look at the real”” (Hall, 2007, p. 114).

Recognizing oneself in the “gaze” of the thing

Within five minutes of arriving at Greccio, I covered the sole mirror in the cabin with a towel so that I could not see my reflection for the duration of the retreat. I wanted to know what it would be like to not be literally reflected back to myself for ten days, and I wanted to stop experiencing myself as I imagined other people experience me. My goal was to take some time off from the self that I knew myself to be in the world with others. What happened as a direct result of this covering of the mirrors is not entirely clear, but it certainly seems that being without a literal mirror served to amplify the effect of being away from the direct gaze of other people – a basic experience shared by all of the women in this study. Not only did covering the mirror seem to foster a kind of self-forgetfulness and identity diffusion, but it also seemed to increase the extent to which non-human environmental cues prompted self-reflection. The contemplation of things in solitude either seemed to generate a greater appreciation for and attunement to the things themselves, as discussed earlier, *or* I began to recognize my own likeness in what I was gazing at and became aware of myself in a new way. Either way, it seemed as though spending time attending to things either helped to reveal their qualities or my own qualities in a fuller and fresher way.

For example, in the late afternoon on the fourth day of my first retreat, I took a walk in the cemetery next to the convent grounds and sat down in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. I sat looking at the statue for a long time, attending carefully to its fine details and eventually rested my gaze upon her face. After some time, I almost felt her “looking” at me and found myself imagining what she saw. Later in my journal I reflected that,

I sat down in front of the statue of Mary in the grotto in the cemetery...and I had a thought that, well, I imagined [her looking at me]...and I thought that I look like me, like my “original face” somehow...clean, open... I thought this is how I’m supposed to look.

It was as though, through meditating on her countenance, I became able to glimpse in myself some of the qualities I attribute to her, such as her purity, goodness, and loving kindness. I had never given much thought to Mary (as person or symbol) before, but my retreat offered me the opportunity to spend some quality time with her. In so doing, I came to regard myself in a new way and make contact with a “virginal” quality that I had been largely out of touch with for some time.¹⁴

Imagining that a statue is looking at you is not a great stretch of the imagination, given its likeness to a human being. Yet at many points in their journals the women imagined that a wide variety of inanimate things were regarding them in some way, and the “gaze” of these things sparked contemplation of some aspect of their personal experience or untapped imaginal potential. For example, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) spent a great deal of time contemplating the few shells that she selected out of the bunch that she collected on the beach, as discussed earlier. She sat with each one, regarding it for long periods of time, allowing it to “speak” to her and letting herself free associate to its image. At one point she sat with a snail shell:

¹⁴ In *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Luce Irigaray conceptualizes virginity as a psycho-spiritual quality that women need to rediscover for the sake of their own development and liberation. She argues that, “Virginity must be rediscovered by all women as their own bodily and spiritual possession, which can give them back an individual and collective status...becoming a virgin is synonymous with a woman’s conquest of the spiritual” (p.116-117). In a different interview, Irigaray (2000) further highlighted the significance of the Virgin Mary as a guiding archetype in women’s quest for this psycho-spiritual re-virginization: “I primarily think of Mary as a woman figure capable of being faithful to herself. I think of her virginity as the ability to breathe free, to give herself her own soul... The possibility of returning to oneself, to preserve one’s interiority, this would be the way to reach one’s own spiritual existence, and also the way to welcome the other into oneself, while respecting him/her” (p. 175). Indeed one might conceptualize the women’s overarching project in their solitudes to be this process of *psycho-spiritual re-virginization*, this process of *re-envelopment* in the interest of becoming able to “breathe free” and open out to the world in a new way.

This is a snail shell, round, full, and glossy as a horse chestnut. Comfortable and compact, it sits curled up like a cat in the hollow of my hand. ... On its smooth symmetrical face is penciled with precision a perfect spiral, winding inward to the pinpoint center of the shell, the tiny dark core of the apex, the pupil of the eye. It stares at me, this mysterious single eye – and I stare back. Now it is the moon, solitary in the sky, full and round, replete with power. Now it is the eye of a cat that brushes noiselessly through the long grass at night. Now it is an island, set in ever-widening circles of waves, alone, self-contained, serene. How wonderful are islands! Islands in space, like this one I have come to. (p. 39)

Here we see Lindbergh meditating on the meaning and value of her aloneness and its resonance with various natural forms – the shell, the moon, the eye of a cat – as well as with the island on which her retreat takes place. Contemplating the shell not only helped her better recognize her experience while on retreat, however; attending so closely to the shell also helped her cultivate qualities such as self-containment and greater intimacy with her own experience – i.e., the shell both served as a mirror to her experience and also *elicited the felt experience of containment and intimacy* through its gestural presence.

Indeed, in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard dedicates an entire chapter to shells and the power they hold as primal images to remind us of our basic organismic desires for withdrawal, shelter, and protective holding spaces. He writes that, “an empty shell, like an empty nest, invites day-dreams of refuge” (p. 107). Contemplating various shells during her time alone invited Lindbergh to experience different modes of being, thinking, and feeling. Through sitting with the simple, primitive image of the shells she became better able to access primary aspects of her imaginal life which had lain dormant in her perpetually frazzled life prior to solitude. In so doing, she planted her solitude with her own enriching “dream blossoms” but noted that most women living in her time and place no longer knew how to use their aloneness in this creative fashion:

Instead of planting our solitude with our own dream blossoms, we choke the space with continuous music, chatter, and companionship to which we do not even listen. It is simply there to fill the vacuum. When the noise stops there is no inner music to take its place. *We must re-learn how to be alone.* (p. 42, italics mine)

Being alone well for Lindbergh meant cultivating this “inner music,” this imaginal plenitude, and she did so in part through the contemplation of a few shells she came upon on the beach.

The power of landscape and climate to foster different forms of self-recognition

The natural setting of the women’s retreats – the qualities of the landscape, the climate, the local flora and fauna, etc. – appeared to have a strong correlation with the forms that their self-reflections tended to take. It seems that retreating seaside in mid-summer, for example, would most likely elicit different experiences and reflections overall than if that same retreatant were to carry out a retreat in mid-winter in the context of the New England woods. The differences between my experience on my first retreat and my second retreat serves as a good example of this. My first retreat took place in a hermitage outside of Pittsburgh in mid-May, a time of year when the woods are buzzing with sound and movement and the warm summer weather is beginning to make an appearance. It was a time of rebirth, fecundity, and ostentatious physical beauty, and I believe these conditions helped to set the stage for certain forms of experience and self-reflection. Overall, during this first retreat, I felt an unprecedented degree of joy, aliveness, and vibrancy, and I became more consciously aware of my goodness and the depth of my ability to love. After the initial descent into fatigue, immobility and sadness

on the first day, I felt my heart begin to open and my spirit progressively wake up throughout the remainder of the retreat.

My second retreat was very different in setting and tone, however, taking place in a small hermitage on the grounds of a monastery in mid-November in central Michigan. It was very cold out, the trees were bare, the ground was covered in crackly brown leaves, and the woods were quiet except for the occasional squirrel rustling in the leaves or the sound of gunshots from hunters far in the distance. This setting seemed to help evoke a very different form of moodedness, and I believe it encouraged me to reflect on particularly difficult and painful aspects of my life. Overall, the retreat was very somber in tone, and I spent a great deal of time reflecting on my weaknesses and the sins I had committed against other people. I felt a significant amount of guilt and shame and said many prayers asking for forgiveness. As I lay in bed one night, deep into the retreat, I even experienced a vague sense of a demonic presence in the corner of the room. I felt as though I had entered the proverbial “desert” rather than the garden that was my first retreat. I felt restless and dirty, and all I wanted to do by the mid-point of the retreat was to run away. But though painful at times, this retreat was very valuable as it helped me come to terms with (or at least look closely at) aspects of myself that I wanted to turn away from. Though I do not wish to reduce my experience during this second retreat to environmental factors alone, it certainly seems as though spending ample amounts of time gazing at the bare trees and dead leaves on the ground, feeling the cold air on my skin, and being with the perpetual grayness of the skies had an influence on the forms that my reflections tended to take. The location of this second retreat was quite disorienting to me, as well. I had never been to central Michigan before; all I knew was

that I got in my car in Pittsburgh one morning and drove northwest for half the day through the rain following directions I had printed off the internet and there I was. In my journal I reflected,

I walked through the woods – which felt very dead, crackly under foot, quiet. It’s strange not to have a good sense of where you are geographically. I know I’m in the middle of Michigan, and that I drove five and a half hours to get here... It’s strange not to know where I am.

Bioregionalist Wendell Berry is often quoted as saying, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.” We know ourselves through the places we inhabit.

Retreating to an unfamiliar cabin with unfamiliar things seems to provoke a disorientation of one’s identity and sense of place in the world; undergoing such a retreat in the context of an altogether unfamiliar land can serve to heighten this disorienting effect as well.¹⁵

Indeed, we see a close relationship between the natural setting of the women’s retreats and the aspects of themselves they found themselves reflecting on. A few of the women, for example, spent time on the beach observing the tides and subsequently reflected on the cyclical nature of their lives. One woman, Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) reflected on the ever-changing nature of herself – the always “unfinished” quality of her being – through her observations of the “perpetual motion” of natural phenomena she observed at the water’s edge: “Standing on this island, I feel the perpetual motion of

¹⁵ This second retreat was indeed quite disorienting and dark and strange overall, but I do not attribute these qualities to the environmental setting alone. There are many other qualities that seem to be significant here – such as the fact that I was retreating in the context of a male space, a monastery – with male oblates sharing the property with me, in contrast to the nuns of my first retreat – as well as the fact that the status of my relationships outside of solitude had changed between the first and second retreats. Another significant factor appears to involve the ways in which the gains of the first retreat helped prepare me to address more difficult, painful material during my second retreat, which in turn helped prepare me to carry out the work I did in the desert six months after that, during my third and final retreat. We will explore this latter point regarding the changes in the psycho-spiritual work carried out in solitude over time in a later chapter on the linguistic dimension of solitude.

things – the tides, birds, seals, fish, shoreline, even myself” (p. 170). Another woman, Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) started to notice the ways in which natural elements are interrelated – “I realized that I’ve noticed the relations of sun and earth, the movements of wind and water, the aspects of the sky, the way the air smells, as though I’ve never been outside in my whole life until I came here” (p. 74-75) – and came to reflect on her place in that system and subsequently made a decision to live in a rural, wilderness setting rather than a city after her solitary retreat. Though Koller’s encounters with nature tended to prompt positive self-reflections and evoke a sense of comfort and joy, many of the women had to confront more unpleasant aspects of themselves through their interactions with nature. Being in solitude and all that accompanies it – few distractions, a lack of interpersonal stimulation, a decreased use of technology, etc. – seemed to provide these women with few avenues of escape from having to be with natural features that evoked discomfort. This was the case with my Michigan retreat; I could not tune out the brownness, coldness, and desolation of my surroundings by going online, watching a film, or meeting friends for coffee. But I also had the choice during these two retreats as to whether to go outside my cabin doors and be with these natural features in a less mediated way or not.

Other women, especially those who had to carry out outdoor physical labor in order to sustain their retreat, had far less choice about whether to directly confront these discomforts. Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*), for example, had to become a clammer in order to support herself during her solitude. “Working in the muck” in all kinds of weather caused her physical pain and encouraged her to look closely at her “dark side”: “Working in the muck tends to make me focus on my dark side, on all the faults and

vices that my husband and others have had to put up with” (p. 132). Another example of this can be found in the journal of Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*), who, while living as a hermit in the West Virginia mountains, struggled with the maddening influence of wild roses (multiflora) that began to take over her small property, encroach upon her cabin, and relentlessly hook into her clothes and skin when she would walk out of doors. She tried to destroy them to no avail; her struggle with them gave her the opportunity to consciously and vividly experience her anger – an emotion that she had been largely cut off from after so many years of living as a nun in a convent, a culture where anger was actively discouraged and repressed. She eventually found a way to peacefully co-exist with the wild roses, her acceptance of them allowing her to accept a previously unwanted aspect of her experience and understand anger’s rightful place in her life: “Multiflora, like anger, has its necessary place in an ecosystem that demands both stubbornness and vitality. ... Beware what wild roses can do to you! You may be seduced into cherishing what you once planned to destroy” (p. 65). Karper also used the omnipresence of thick brown mud that dominated her landscape and caused her to continually slip and end up covered in filth during the rainy season as a vehicle to examine the difficult emotions that it evoked in her:

I sensed that I was being called to enter fully into the depths of this dead brownness – go through it, sink my roots deep into it... So I deliberately studied the depressing landscape and consciously felt all the uncomfortable feelings of sadness, depression, and death that it evoked and graphically symbolized. I even wrote poems about the mud. I did not attempt to find any special goodness in this experience but merely strove for peaceful co-existence with the doldrums of a season in which nothing seemed to end, nothing to begin. (p. 47)

Karper’s solitude forced her to have to become more self-reliant and to have to confront the natural world in a very direct, immediate way; it also afforded her the time and space

to notice the subtleties of her experience of these confrontations and to meditate on their significance in her life, transforming them from agitations into valuable lessons learned and becoming a fuller human being who could more peacefully co-exist with the non-human natural world in the process.

Glimpsing transpersonal dimensions of the self in the mirror of trees

Thus far we've looked at examples in which the things encountered in solitude were used by the women as mirrors through which to reflect on previously repressed or neglected aspects of the self. They recognized features of the self in these mirrors, and they had the time and space to come to terms with and integrate them into their identities and emotional repertoires. But there is a different kind of reflectivity that lies beyond a conscious practice of reflecting on one's personal qualities, a different level of reflectivity in which one momentarily glimpses an image of one's deeper, more fundamental being beyond the personal self. We see this form of reflectivity in Annie Dillard's (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) account of solitude. She writes of how, while walking along the creek one day, she encountered an image that stopped her in her tracks and served to awaken an ancient part of herself, a primordial layer of her being that she had not previously been aware of. While walking along that day she suddenly sensed the world returning her gaze:

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance... Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been

my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. (p. 36)

This way of seeing is similar to, yet takes deeper and further, Dillard's non-conceptual form of seeing that we discussed earlier. It is not merely the practice of "pure devotion to any object" wherein self-consciousness falls away and one in a sense becomes that which she is gazing at; it is not just a self-forgetfulness and a sense of subtle boundary dissolution between self and world, but a remembrance of one's true face. Through this experience of seeing "the tree with the lights in it" Dillard glimpsed an image of her deeper nature which is not only the face of the other but the fundamental interconnectedness between herself and all that exists. In that moment she not only lost a sense of herself at a personal level but gained access to herself at a far more fundamental level. At that fundamental level she is a bell that rings in response to the call of the world, and the full flame of the world is, in turn, awakened by her gaze. In this fleeting moment she saw her true self and learned her true name.

A few of the other women in this study experienced something akin to Dillard, albeit not to the same degree of intensity. One example is Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) who, about half way through her 100-day Zen retreat in the New England woods, walked out of her cabin and stood before a tree and asked it, "What am I?" (p. 59) She intimated that she received an answer of some kind but does not reveal the answer to her audience; instead she beseeched them to ask the question for themselves. Though the simplicity of her description is quite different than Dillard's account of being "knocked breathless," what these two experiences seem to share is the use of nature as a mirror in which to see themselves at level beyond the personal, reflective level of experience; on this "level" that which is gazed upon is an active

participant in the creation and recognition of the self – i.e., the tree sees us, and we recognize on a deeply felt level (not just intellectually) that our self and the world are fundamentally intertwined on a most basic level, that we are participants in the same collective field of being. What these two women also share is the experience of undergoing a rigorous discipline in solitude – a visual and an intellectual practice along Transcendentalist lines for Dillard and a Zen meditation and chanting practice for Dobisz – and these disciplines helped prepare the ground for their experience of this fundamental connectedness to the world, an experience that most contemporary Westerners lack access to on a reflective level.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) used the term “flesh” to try and describe this fundamental connectedness. He argued that, on a radical, ontological level, we are connected with the things of this world via an underlying elemental tissue or matrix which he referred to as flesh. As an individual perceiving body we are part of the collective “flesh of the world” which contains all visible things and is ruled by the principle of reversibility: To see is to be seen, and vice-versa. Merleau-Ponty attempted to make the case that we are in an elemental sense “one-with” the world and that on a primordial level the perceiver and perceived are fundamentally made of the same stuff. What this means is that we are not only fundamentally connected with other sentient beings but also with non-sentient things as well. Also using the example of an encounter between a human and a tree, David Abram (1996) helps to bring Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the reversibility of the flesh a bit more down to earth and somewhat easier to grasp:

To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one’s own tactility, to feel oneself touched *by* the tree. And to see the world is also, at

the same time, to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself *seen*... Walking in a forest, we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us... If we dwell in this forest for many months, or years, then... we may come to feel that we are part of this forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself. (p. 68)

Dillard's experience of "being for the first time seen" and "knocked breathless by a powerful glance" in the presence of the tree seems to capture the fundamental interrelationality between human beings and the things of the natural world that Merleau-Ponty and Abram write of. This fundamental connectedness may indeed be a primary aspect of human existence, always already underlying our experience, but it seems to take a certain amount of deconditioning and/or reconditioning in order to make contact with and become present to it. Dillard's experience of the "tree with the lights in it" and Dobisz's experience of asking a tree "What am I?" and receiving some form of response seem to point to their making contact with this fundamental connectedness between ourselves and the world that exists beyond the reflective level of consciousness. The practices of solitude, silence, and simplicity seem to help prepare the ground for such recognitions to take place.

Theme 4: *Re-enveloping themselves: The power of the hermitage*

For the past two main themes, we focused primarily upon how, through contemplative modes of engagement with the things in their midst, the women were able to see the world and themselves more clearly and more fully. We will now turn to a discussion of the function of the cabin itself in these women's retreats since it appears to play such a vital role in their experience. At the start of this chapter we discussed the

traditional association of women with space and how women commonly function as the actual space or the keeper of the spaces in which the projects of men and children are launched and nurtured – as womb, vagina, homemaker, housekeeper, etc. Women’s bodies – women’s primary homes – are largely treated as public property, evidenced by the radical sexual objectification of the female body in public culture as well as the ongoing debate about women’s basic reproductive rights (i.e., whether they have the right to choose whether to be a physical container for another human being or not). Luce Irigaray (1993) contends that the very definition of “woman” will continue to arise out of the definition of and interests of men, and female desire will continue to be contingent upon male desire until women are granted, and can grant themselves, gynocentric places and spaces outside the bounds of patriarchal influence. A woman needs to *leave her father’s/husband’s house* in order to come home to herself, to rediscover or create for the first time her place – as both a woman and a person. She needs to find a way to envelope, or to contain, her own experiencing in order to transform her identity and sense of her place in the world. In the context of this discussion, I am reading Irigaray quite literally in thinking about women’s solitude as providing a temporary envelope for women’s experience in which, and through which, certain forms of psychological and spiritual transformation may be possible. For the women in this study, the delineation of their “solitary retreat” served as an intentional imaginal envelope that contained them throughout their experience. The hermitage, cabin, cottage, shack, or house in which their solitary vigil took place served as a literal envelope or container for them throughout the process of transformation. The significance of this physical container cannot be underestimated. Even though many of the powerful effects of solitude came about

through time spent in the outdoors or through an engagement with the things that each woman dwelled alongside in her cabin, the physical structure which protected and held the retreatant through her conversion process is vitally important as well.

Cabin as womb and tomb: Deconstructing and re-imagining the self

Upon first entering the rustic shack where she would live as a hermit for four years, Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) had the following intuition:

For reasons I could not immediately define, I sensed I had stepped into a space in which my spirit could be both contained and set free... I felt confirmed that here I could, like St. Clare at San Damiano, “fix the anchor of my soul.” (p. 16)

Karper immediately sensed that she had entered a space that would afford her both a sense of containment and of freedom, a seemingly paradoxical combination that was integral to the transformative process she experienced while in solitude. Indeed, the paradoxical blend of containment and freedom, afforded in part by the built environment of the hermitage was a thread that ran throughout the women’s journals. How does the hermitage do this?

The hermitage *contains*, functioning as a literal container that holds and protects the retreatant while she undergoes a process of transformation. The hermitage, as container, in some sense functions as a cocoon or womb in which a new kind of identity and new forms of experiencing can be cultivated and old forms recovered. The hermitage as womb-like container also seems to help foster an eventual *felt sense of psychological containment* which retreatants can carry with them out of their solitudes and into the world with others. The women needed to feel a significant degree of trust and safety in order for the hermitage to be experienced in this way. Generally speaking,

the women's hermitages were very small, usually containing only a few rooms or even a single room, and they were generally only one floor high, without attics or basements. They were free-standing and therefore clearly bounded, rather than physically connected to another structure, heightening a felt sense of privacy and enclosure. They were snug and cozy while still affording the inhabitant enough room to move around comfortably. Both of my hermitages during my first two retreats, for example, basically consisted of one main room and a bathroom and gave me enough room to walk for a few moments and then have to turn around and walk back to the space where I started. The spatial narrowness of the hermitage fit the contours of my body, providing me with a sense of being held and protected. Indeed, I experienced my hermitage as a warm and safe home base I looked forward to returning to after my walks on the grounds of the convent or monastery. During my second hermitage retreat, a retreat that I experienced as rather psychologically and spiritually threatening, I reflected on the sense of safety that I associated with my cabin and the intimacy that was developing between me and the structure: "I feel protected by this cabin. As if I am the cabin, somehow. It's my protection, and when I'm out in the cold, I look forward to coming back. I am becoming intimate with this place, these things."

The sense of protection, warmth, and containment that the hermitage provided for the women seemed to help some of them feel safe enough to descend into a painful process of self-analysis and identity deconstruction in order to create a clearing in which a new kind of self could be imagined. Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) likened this process to *shedding an old skin*:

Moving into a new house was like putting on a new skin. And donning a new skin implied shedding the old one, a painful process that threatened to leave me

somewhat shapeless and vulnerable for an indefinite period of time. I sensed that the form my future life took would be determined by my choice of a dwelling place...and what I would allow to live there. (p. 17)

Several of the women clearly underwent a process of identity-deconstruction, a letting go and a surrendering of the old self in order to for something new to be born. The felt sense of trust and safety that the structure of the hermitage helped generate seemed to foster their ability to surrender to this process, which could be frightening and experienced as a kind of personal death. In a small physical space one can feel held and protected, but the spatial limitations and overall simplicity also provide few escape routes from the difficult task at hand – the task of being present to one’s immediate experience in all its darkness, pain, ambiguity, and complexity. In this way, the womb-like container of the hermitage may also come to be experienced as a kind of prison cell. In this cell, one’s feet are held to the fire and, except for excursions into the outdoors, one has few places to run or to hide. Indeed, Catholic theological writer Henri Nouwen (1981) referred to solitude as the “furnace of transformation” (p. 25), the “place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs” (p. 27). This conversion process involves, in part, uncovering latent, unconscious material and attempting to lay oneself bare – no secrets, no hidden corners.

Several women in this study used the metaphor of cleaning out closets to describe what was happening, psychologically speaking, in their solitudes. This is an interesting metaphor to consider. A hermitage is generally marked by a simplicity of space and a lack of spatial differentiation. Everything in the hermitage is pretty much within the range of the eye, and there are few nooks and corners, very few closets, and rarely an attic or basement. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores how the spatial

features of a house and the things in it elicit particular modes of feeling and forms of contemplation. Following Bachelard's topoanalytical approach, we could imagine that the bareness and straightforwardness of a hermitage might encourage a certain bareness and straightforwardness of consciousness, a stripping down to the essentials and a clearing out of the dark corners and closets of one's mind. This process of uncovering and cleansing seems to help create a sort of psychological clearing; being apart from other people compounds this sense of openness/emptiness as social performances have largely been set aside and a retreatant can no longer see her reflection in the eyes of others. The retreatant finds herself in an in-between, liminal space. The incubator that is her hermitage provides a basic structure or scaffolding¹⁶ for the retreatant, a temporary second skin that keeps her loosely together and provides a home base as her old sense of self falls away. Out of this liminal space that is the hermitage, new modes of thinking, feeling, desiring, and relating can emerge.

Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) presents us with a good example of a retreatant who underwent this deconstructive process, a process which, as discussed earlier, brought her to the brink of suicide. We see in her narrative of solitude a generalized movement from an old, "falsed" sense of self that was people-pleasing and socially performative to that of a newer, "truer" or more authentic kind of self grounded in a deeply-felt and freely chosen system of values. It seems that the simplicity of her dwelling space provided a fertile environment for such a transformation to take place.

¹⁶ Henri Nouwen (1981) contends that, "In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me – naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken – nothing" (p. 27). As one's sense of identity is called into question and the retreatant moves toward a "shapeless and vulnerable" (Karper, p. 17) form, the physical bones of the hermitage can provide a basic structure for the self, a chrysalis which holds the retreatant loosely together as she undergoes an oftentimes painful process of transformation.

Koller's solitary retreat took place in a small, cozy, relatively bare, rented cottage embedded in a landscape that was completely foreign to her. She brought very few personal possessions with her, and thus there were few things in the cottage to serve as reminders of the social roles she had played in the world with others. There were therefore few anchors for her identity, or mirrors in which her old sense of self could be reflected and reinforced. Feminist phenomenologist Iris Young (2005) contends that one's "home" can be understood, in part, as a materialization of one's personal identity; one's everyday dwelling space contains things that serve to anchor one's identity and support one's personal narrative and sense of continuity. There is a sedimentation of historical meaning in these things, and the way in which these things are arranged is an extension of our bodily habits. Thus we know ourselves, in part, through our things and the particular relationships between them. In her essay, "A Room of One's Own," Young argues for the right of elderly nursing home residents to have their own private rooms and to be able to live amongst their personal possessions. These possessions – photographs, letters, trinkets, pieces of jewelry and clothing, furniture, wall hangings – help to maintain their sense of identity and help provide a sense of security in the face of impending death. By contrast, many of the women in this study purposely left their homes, their possessions, and familiar landscapes behind out of the desire for change rather than continuity. They wanted to peel off the disguises and put to rest the social performances that had become ingrained in their bodily habitus, and this process of self-upheaval required some measure of personal *insecurity* and not-knowing. In order to truly begin to feel more at home in herself – to feel more deeply into her own emotional and bodily experience (her needs, wants, desires, intuition, responses to things) and truly

sense her own aliveness – Alice Koller had to first move toward a state of *radical insecurity* and ask the most basic of questions of her own existence. She had to stand at the brink of actual self-destruction in order to finally be able to claim her life and say “yes.” In order to say yes to living, however, she had to come face-to-face with the reality – with the *lie* – of her false self and then choose to finally let it go.

Over the course of her solitude, Alice Koller reflected on the falsity of her life and felt into the depths of her despair until she reached a basic understanding of the root of her suffering and how she came to be in her current predicament. Her self-analysis was successful in that she came to the answer she was seeking, but the answer was an ugly one: that her life was not her own and had never had been her own. As she reached this understanding she felt a sense of relief but also emptiness; it indeed felt like a “clearing” in that she realized that she would have to, in a sense, relearn how to live. Reaching this point required Koller to relinquish her old ways of thinking about herself and to let go of the particular social performances (e.g., veiling herself with make-up and striking clothing, flattering people in positions of power, attempting to appear mysterious, speaking indirectly, acting coyly or flirtatiously with men she was not attracted to, etc.) that would get her what she thought she wanted but which were largely attempts to get approval or attention rather than serving as authentic or direct expressions of her intentions and her desire. Toward the end of her solitary retreat, in the wake of this deconstructive process, she wrote, “I feel naked and very small. But new. Nothing ever has to be the way it was” (p. 229). Through this death/rebirth process, she had indeed “become again like a child” and faced the world with fresh eyes and a new, more open and fluid sense of self whose contours could be more freely and intentionally chosen.

In “Merton’s Hermitage: Bachelard, Domestic Space, and Spiritual Transformation,” Theologian Belden Lane (2004) utilizes insights from Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* to analyze Thomas Merton’s hermitage experience at the Abbey of Gethsemani and the process of identity transformation that he experienced therein. Bachelard famously argued that houses shelter our daydreaming by providing a protective enclosure for the imagination, and he highlighted how solitude inside of a contained domestic space is an especially effective context for the production of new self-images. Following Bachelard, Belden Lane writes that, “if a house’s “chief benefit” is that it “shelters daydreaming,” as Bachelard urges, then the hermitage would prove crucial in Merton’s imaginative work of contemplating a new self before God” (p. 125). Similarly, the women in this study were also able to re-envision themselves and craft a new identity in the space of their hermitages, against the backdrop of its bare walls. But perhaps of equal importance is the power of the hermitage to help clean out old images that no longer fit and which seem aligned with an older, falser sense of self. The hermitage experience seemed to allow the women to deconstruct such images and dwell in an open space of not-knowing with regard to the self – a liminal space which bred a felt-sense of emptiness and smallness, a clearing which Koller appeared to have reached. Belden Lane’s analysis of Merton’s hermitage experience is important because it highlights the image-producing function of the hermitage – its ability to help us imagine a new self – as well as the hermitage’s ability to cut off imagery and help bring about psychic clearing: “Merton’s hermitage could function as a site where all images could be set aside in the emptiness of contemplation, as well as a “safe house” for the imagination” (p. 143). Lane contends that Merton, over time, achieved a felt experience of “personal

wholeness” due to the twin processes of self-deconstruction and self-reconstruction brought about through the “discipline of the hermitage”: “it was not until he yielded fully to the discipline of the hermitage that he was able finally to realize the deconstruction (and reconstruction) of self that were necessary for his personal wholeness” (p. 123). Both movements, according to Lane, were necessary to Merton’s psycho-spiritual growth.

Belden Lane argues that Merton, who had read Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* while living in the hermitage, realized the limitations of a Bachelardian view of solitude as primarily fostering daydreaming and image creation; Merton found that his own extended period of solitude both fostered his imaginative capacities *and* brought them “to a screeching halt”:

[Merton’s] experience of living alone in a small, contained house had been much more than what Bachelard had envisioned in his psychoanalytical analysis. While the hermitage’s romantic aura might have initially given free rein to Merton’s imagination, its austere emptiness soon brought the imagination to a screeching halt. Merton quickly learned that “solitude is a stern mother who brooks no nonsense... [She] rips off all the masks and all the disguises.” Merton recognized this when he complained in his journal that Bachelard had not gone “deep enough” in his psychological exploration of the meanings of the house. The French philosopher had spoken only of the role that a house plays in spawning daydreams. He failed to recognize the equally-important function of a house in sustaining the solitude necessary for *relinquishing* images and illusions. “A mere space for reverie... a house of imagination, will eventually get corrupt,” Merton cautioned. If a house is to serve us well, it must exercise an apophatic as well as kataphatic purpose, a letting go of images as well as a claiming of them. One goes there to lose oneself as much as to find oneself. (p. 142)

We see this dynamic interplay between reverie and emptiness, between self-finding and self-loss, throughout the women’s journals. It seems that the length of time one spends in solitude plays a major role in whether self-loss becomes a primary experience; perhaps the image-generating quality of solitude that Bachelard writes of is more short-term in

nature, as he highlights poetic pockets in one's day when one can slip away to the garret and experience vibrant reveries, compared to the experience of being on a longer-term retreat in which one attends to one's "inner" and "outer" experience long enough to reach a felt sense of emptiness in which old images fall away and ground is cleared for something new to take root. A new, different kind of self can then be born out of that soil.

The need for secret spaces, for "clearings of freedom"

About two-thirds of the way through her retreat, Alice Koller reached a point in the deconstructive process that she experienced as a clearing of freedom: "I'm cast loose. Free. Aimless. Literally: without an aim" (p. 106). Upon truly grasping that her desire had not been her own, she felt a sense of freedom but also an aimlessness and an ignorance. She saw herself as "An infant...it's as an infant that I now have to turn my eyes toward the world" (p. 107). She had at this point begun to claim her own vision – "My eyes. Good God! ... Maybe I can *see* now!" (p. 107) – but she did not know what to aim her gaze at and how to begin to move toward things. She was poised to begin the process of slowly envisioning a new identity and life plan and allowing her authentic reactions to things to emerge at their own pace. It was in this clearing, which was contained and protected and fostered by the walls of her hermitage, that she could begin to do this.

The need for children to have spaces in which they can cultivate their imagination and subjectivity apart from the influence of other people was promoted by Dutch psychologist Martinus Jan Langeveld (1983) and seems relevant to this discussion.

Langeveld argues that children at a certain developmental stage need what he calls “secret places” in which they can shape a self outside of the needs, desires, and expectations of their parents and the larger society in which they live. These solitary places are “indeterminate” and unstructured, and through them children can find a sense of peace, contentment, and a certain measure of freedom to engage with the world as they choose. Langeveld suggests that once a person reaches adulthood she no longer has a need for the unfixed, open nature of a secret place in which to imagine a new self apart from the influence of others. He contends that although adults still appreciate privacy, *they do not require indeterminacy*. But Alice Koller’s experience, as well as that of the other women in this study, suggests that indeterminate spaces are *indeed* valuable for adults, at least at certain times of their lives. The women in this study were seeking far more than privacy by entering into solitude. Their solitary spaces served as *clearings of freedom*¹⁷ in which they could become present to their experience and envision a new kind of self apart from the direct influence of others. But unlike the children Langeveld wrote about, these women were not discovering themselves and the world for the first time. They were deconstructing and de-socializing their already existing selves in order to clear a space for something new to come into being. They were also working toward the recovery of something that had been lost on the path to becoming an adult in this culture. They worked to recover their innocence – by making contact with a more primordial, pre-reflective mode of being in the world marked by a sense of wonder, awe, receptivity, humility, and a greater closeness to things – and this (partial) recovery helped them feel more alive in their bodies and more at home in the world. They were indeed, in

¹⁷ I am borrowing this term from Eva Simms (2008, p. 54) who used it to describe those indeterminate secret places of childhood described by Langeveld.

the words of Soren Kierkegaard quoted earlier, becoming “again like a child” (as quoted in Hall, 2007, p. 29).

The physical structure of the hermitage played a vital role in this three-pronged project of identity deconstruction, identity reconstruction, and experiential recovery. At the beginning of this chapter I discussed Luce Irigaray’s claim that women lack spaces of their own but require these “envelopes of identity” in order to cultivate their subjectivity, desire, and imagination apart from the direct influence of the phallogocentric culture in which they live. I understand the women in this study to have taken up that call quite literally. By entering their hermitages they were granting themselves a literal envelope so that they might become unstructured for a while and begin to cultivate new modes of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and acting in the world, which they could carry out of solitude into the world with others. Indeed, we can assert that through the hermitage experience, they became better able to hold themselves, differentiate their own thoughts, feelings, and desires from those of other people, and act more intentionally toward the things in their midst. They both lost themselves and found themselves, recovering lost aspects of their being and cultivating new, more fluid images of the self.

In summary

Though the different sections of this chapter have certainly overlapped with each other, I have attempted to delineate some of the main themes that ran across the women’s journals with regard to their experience of space and things. For the first theme, “Simplicity,” we looked closely at how the practice of material simplicity helped the women *recover a sense of their central core* – a felt sense of unification and wholeness as

well as a recovery of a basic, fundamental, “raw material” aspect of their being that they became able to access, in part, by cutting away some of the distractions in their day-to-day existence while on retreat. We then explored the idea that in solitude the women came to recognize that *less is more* – that by engaging more fully with fewer things, beauty and significance more readily reveal themselves. We saw how a few of the women came to restructure their values toward an appreciation of quality over quantity and became more adept at selecting the few things that spoke to them versus attempting to accumulate as many things as possible. We then turned to an investigation of how practicing simplicity in solitude seemed to help the retreatants become better able to *discern their desires vis-à-vis things*. We highlighted how one of the retreatants in particular, Alice Koller, became more attuned to her own responses to things and to her own “wanting” as solitude progressed. And finally, in this section we also explored how the practice of simplicity helped the women *cultivate a healthy poverty*, as it fostered their ability to let go of their attachment to material things and at the same time appreciate the inherent value of the simple, everyday things in their midst, leaving them feeling wealthy despite – and perhaps even *through* – their impoverished circumstances.

For the second main theme, we explored the discipline of “Re-learning to see.” Here we looked closely at the effect of the different visual practices that the women employed while on retreat, practices that seemed to arise quite organically in the context of solitude. We began by exploring how some of the women came to *see things “properly for the first time”* by taking the time to contemplate things that would have escaped their notice outside of the context of solitude. By spending time with these things and allowing these things to “speak” to them, the women came to intuit the

inexhaustible depths of these things and develop a sense of closeness with them. In the absence of interpersonal forms of relating during their retreats, the women seemed to *cultivate more intimate relationships with things*, and their worlds opened up in new ways as a result, as did their senses of self. Under this second main theme, we also explored how, by cultivating a more receptive stance toward the things of the world – a stance marked by awe, wonder, humility, and decreased self-consciousness – the women could be understood to have been working toward *the recovery of a more child-like, innocent mode of being in the world*.

For the third main theme, “A different kind of mirror,” we discussed how, in the absence of familiar social mirrors, the women found themselves looking toward the things they encountered as mirrors for the self. Both organic and inorganic things served as cues for self-reflection, and in the mirror of these things the women cultivated new qualities of feeling and thinking and also acknowledged and integrated more painful aspects of their experience which had been previously repressed. We investigated how *the “gaze” of different things helped prompt these forms of self-reflection* and self-recognition, and we also thematized *the power that landscape and weather* seemed to have on the women’s self-images. Finally, in this section, we also touched on the experience of *recognizing more transpersonal dimensions of the self* in the gaze of the thing – both of the cases we looked at involved the sense of being seen by trees – and in so doing gaining a glimpse of one’s deeper and truer nature.

For the fourth and final theme, “Re-enveloping themselves: The power of the hermitage,” we looked more explicitly at the role of the hermitage itself in the transformation that the women underwent during their retreats. We discussed the power

of the hermitage to foster the twin projects of losing the self and finding the self that many of the women took on during their retreats. We constructed the hermitage as both a *womb* – a safe, cozy, cocoon-like space in which new forms of thoughts, feeling, desire, and perception could be born – and a *tomb*, in the sense that it was also the place where the women could work to deconstruct their identities and where their older, falser senses of self went to die. As both womb and tomb, the hermitage was the holding space or container in which such transformative processes could transpire. We returned in this section to the image of the hermitage as a simple, relatively bare space which seemed to promote a sense of personal indeterminacy and serve as a *clearing of freedom* in which new self-images could be generated. We utilized the example of Thomas Merton’s hermitage experience, as analyzed by Belden Lane, to better understand the ways in which a hermitage can help us both extinguish old images and generate new ones, let go of our old identities and build new, more fluid images of the self.

In the introduction to this chapter, we noted that many if not most women, across time and place, have lacked access to a room of their own and, being women, have been defined primarily as a space-for-others. Solitude granted the women in this study a temporary room of their own, and in this room – indeed, *through this room* – the women transformed themselves, in both subtle and more striking ways. By re-enveloping themselves in the space of the hermitage and practicing the arts of simplicity, seeing, and self-reflection through the mirror of things, the women developed fresh ways of being in the world and came to see the world as a more enchanted place. They cultivated a greater reverence for the things in their midst and became better acquainted with the subtleties of their lived experience. Through their work both inside and outside their cabins, they re-

collected, relinquished, and reimagined themselves and learned to inhabit the world differently.

Chapter 5: Time

Introducing time

Time is a strange thing. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine (2012) wrote, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.” This quote seems to sum up the way most people living in the contemporary West regard time. Time is an omnipresent phenomenon in our lives – we live in time, through time, amidst time – and yet we rarely ever think about time as such, question the role time plays in our lives, or attempt to put into words its meaning or function. Time can be understood in many different ways – as an objective measurable fact, a vital dimension of our existence, an intellectual construct, and a power-laden discourse that serves the interests of the dominant social group and works hand-in-hand with our modern capitalist system. Time can be any of these things, depending on the conversation and the point of view. Time has *physical, intellectual, psychological, existential, spiritual, social, and political dimensions* and is therefore a challenge to write about with any amount of sophistication and depth; and, unlike the other existential dimensions I am discussing in this project, time is also largely invisible and intangible, making it difficult to bring down to earth and attempt to grasp. According to philosopher Edmund Husserl (1991), time is “the most difficult of all phenomenological problems” (p. 286). Though time is perhaps the most difficult dimension of existence to get our minds around, we must carry on with the analysis nonetheless, attempting to use time as a lens through which to understand the women’s narratives of solitude.

Throughout the history of Western thought, two ways of theorizing time have tended to dominate our thinking. One way has been called the *realist* view of time and is represented by the work of Sir Isaac Newton. For Newton, time is a fundamental part of the structure of the universe. It is absolute, true, and can thus be quantified and measured. Events in Newtonian time occur in a clear sequence and time is understood as separate from the dimension of space and other contextual variables. The other dominant theoretical formulation of time in Western thought, the *idealist* perspective, is represented by the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant understood time not as a physical fact but as an integral part of our intellectual make-up. Time, for Kant, did not belong to the physical world but was instead part of our human awareness, a way of mentally structuring the things that we perceive. Time is thus understood as internal to the human mind and not a part of the external, physical world. More recently, postmodern theorizing about time, most notably exemplified by the work of physicist Albert Einstein, called into question our scientific ways of conceptualizing time. Einstein's space-time and relativity theories highlighted the inseparability of space and time and the relative, versus absolute, nature of time. But although Einstein's work called into question ways of thinking about time in intellectual and scientific circles, it has had negligible impact on the ways in which ordinary people think about and experience time. The realist and idealist perspectives as articulated by Newton and Kant still tend to dominate our mainstream thinking (Abram, 1997, p. 204).

Lived time

An alternative, more philosophical approach to thinking about time that is in some ways complementary to the Einsteinian perspective is offered by the phenomenological tradition. In phenomenology, time is understood as an existential dimension, meaning that it is not simply a mental construct nor an absolute property of the physical world. Time doesn't just happen outside of us in the physical world, nor does it take place exclusively in our minds. Time is lived pre-reflectively by an embodied human being situated in a particular context. Lived time is unique to the individual experiencing it – given her personal history, the time and place in which she lives, her physical capabilities, her relational commitments, etc. – and yet each person, according to the phenomenological tradition, is structured by the fundamental temporal “ecstasies” of past, present, and future. These ecstasies are a fundamental part of our consciousness, understood not in a mentalist Kantian sense, but rather consciousness as lived pre-reflectively through our bodies in an environmental and relational context. Phenomenologists have further argued that these temporal ecstasies have a similar structure of transcendence as our subjectivity – i.e., they are a thrust or movement or upsurge that draw us out of ourselves toward a particular horizon – and thus we could say that time is, in some sense, synonymous with subjectivity. Though this may sound very strange, along this line of thinking we could tentatively assert that *we are, in some sense, time itself*.

Indeed, many phenomenologists have made this argument. Philosopher Martin Heidegger characterized time as “the very mystery of Being” and a “strange power...that structures and makes possible all our relations to each other and the world” (as quoted in

Abram, 1997, p. 203). Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2006) wrote the following provocative statements: “we are the upsurge of time” (p. 497), “I am myself time” (p. 489), and “we are saying that time *is* someone... We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time” (p. 490). These are powerful statements which require far more detailed attention than we can offer here to try and flesh them out adequately. Suffice it to say that time appears to be a very significant aspect of our experience, and by trying to understand time better, we might gain a clearer understanding of “ourselves” in the process. Perhaps we could also say that to experiment with different ways of living time, we are experimenting with our subjectivities; to broaden our temporal repertoire is perhaps to broaden our subjective repertoire. This line of thinking can be applied to the other existential dimensions (space, body, language, etc.) as well, but the dimension of time seems particularly poignant in this regard and often remains unthematized, given its relative intangibility and elusiveness.

Phenomenologists understand the average human being to live time as a rich tapestry woven from the overlapping threads of the temporal ecstasies of past, present, and future. For phenomenologists, past, present, and future are not discrete points that fall neatly on a line. Time is not understood as a succession of “now” points; rather, past, present, and future are interwoven in pre-reflective consciousness such that the past serves as a ground or backdrop for the present moment and the future exists as an open horizon. Thus the present moment contains protentions and retentions and is never just simply “now” (followed by the next “now,” ad infinitum). Different phenomenologists seem to privilege the relative impact of the past, present, and future in average lived experience, with Heidegger and Eugene Minkowski, for example, privileging the future

and Merleau-Ponty tending to understand the present moment as asserting a greater influence (Hoy, 2009, p. 71). In our daily lives, we tend to privilege the past, present, or future according to our projects, commitments, physiological states, and environmental/sociocultural contexts. At different times in our lives and within the course of a single day, certain temporal modes move to the forefront of our experience, calling forth different modes of attention and presence. Sometimes the past is what seems most present, and sometimes – *usually*, it seems – we are oriented toward the immediate or distant future. And at other rare times, the present is actually what is most present to us, despite living in a culture that discourages sustained present-moment awareness and encourages people to perpetually live one step ahead of themselves. We will see in this chapter that the practice of solitary retreat does indeed seem to encourage greater present-moment awareness, serving to shift the weight away from the future as our primary orientation, privileging the mode of *being* over that of *becoming*.

Unlike the Newtonian or Kantian perspectives on time but similar to Einsteinian physics, phenomenologists do not understand the dimension of time as radically separate from that of space. This is an important point since time has been conceptualized in Western culture, for the most part, as abstract and independent of space and therefore detached from the physical environment in which we are embedded. Phenomenologists have tried to flesh out the direct, pre-conceptual experience of time – before thinking *about* time gets in the way – and their work paints a portrait of temporality as being very much rooted in the physical environment. Ecophenomenologist David Abram (1997) contends that people living in indigenous oral cultures, before acquiring written language, came to understand time through a direct and intimate engagement with the land (p. 185).

Observing the cycles of nature (e.g., lunar and solar cycles, seasonal changes, etc.) and features of the local landscape (e.g., the distant horizon) informed their sense of time and their understandings of themselves and their place in this world. Our progressive alienation from the sensuous Earth alongside the shift toward written language has created a schism between our temporal and spatial experience such that most Westerners today conceive of and experience their subjectivity as fundamentally separate from the world. The harmonious interplay between space and time common to indigenous oral cultures (as well as the experience of young children (Simms, 2008, p. 137)) seems to be a primordial aspect of human existence, yet it is so far from the experience of the average American citizen in the 21st century. Later in this chapter and throughout this project I will explore how extended periods of solitude tend to set the stage for a shift toward an experiential reunion of space and time and a greater alignment of mind and body, as the women began to *come into present tense*, quiet the chatter of their minds, and engage more intimately with the real world in which they were embedded.

Hegemonic time

We don't live in an indigenous oral culture where time is experientially interwoven with space. Far from it: We live in an information society in which we spend more time indoors interacting with machines than outdoors engaging with nature. Our understanding of time and our temporal experience is largely governed by the clock, not the features of the landscape. *Clock-time* is the primary hegemonic mode of understanding and experiencing time in this culture. The omnipresent clock on the bedside table or the kitchen wall, the stately fixture in the city square, or the watch

strapped to the wrist serves as a tool to structure our lives and keep us in synch with other people. Back in the 1930s, sociologist Lewis Mumford (1962) asserted that, “The clock, not the steam engine, is the key-machine of the modern industrial age: even today no other machine is so ubiquitous” (p. 14). Though we live in a postmodern time which has seen a shift from traditional clock-time toward a compressed, digitalized form of time, clock-time in one form or another still rules our daily lives. Clock-time helps create and maintain efficient and productive societies, and it helps people organize their lives around the needs of other people. We refer to the clock throughout the day to know what to do and when, living according to its dictates often more so than our own inclinations. The clock is a source of authority and oftentimes anxiety, as it seems all too often that there isn’t enough time or we are not producing enough within the allotted amount of time we have to work with on any given day. Although clock-time represents the natural cycle of the day and therefore in some sense represents the rhythms of the natural world, modern clock-time’s function is primarily to break down time into measurable units according to a *linear time model* – a model of time that was invented, in part, to liberate mankind from cyclical nature and to gain greater control over it.

Linear time is, according to Julia Kristeva (1986), the “time of project and history” (p. 193) and is based on the idea that time began at a specific point in history and continues to march sequentially forward into the future according to a narrative of progress. In linear time, there is a beginning point and an end point and a strong orientation toward the future – i.e., perpetually chasing the proverbial carrot that hangs slightly beyond one’s grasp – at the expense of the richness and subtlety of the present moment and the preservation of and respect for the past. The linear time model along

with the clock's externalization of our temporal experience, "entails a perpetual transcendence from the contextuality and particularity of human experience... It requires a kind of estrangement from the present that entails dematerialization, abstraction and disembodiment" (Odih, 1999, p. 16). This "dematerialization, abstraction and disembodiment" is the result of the schism between time and space mentioned earlier. It can be contrasted with a cyclical understanding of time that assumes the eternal return of natural events and, in its lack of separation between time and space and its lack of adherence to a narrative of progress, tends to privilege the fullness of the present moment.

The origins of linear time as a social construction can be traced back to the shift from an oral-based culture to an alphabetic one, as the creation of the alphabet allowed people for the first time to use prose to record historical events and create a narrative of change throughout history. This allowed people to develop interest in human events apart from their relationship with the cycles of the earth, and the practice of reading text trained people to sensually disengage from their immediate surroundings (Abram, 1997, p. 188). Time became conceived of as a nonrepeating sequence rather than an eternally returning cycle. The advent of the alphabet thus led to a theoretical model of time that was abstract, decontextualized, and disembodied.¹⁸ With the rise of industrialization, a

¹⁸ David Abram (1997) argues that the final wave of extermination of the last orally-based cultures in Europe came with the witch burnings in the 16th and 17th centuries. "Witches" were primarily female herbalists and midwives from peasant backgrounds who still maintained a "direct, participatory experience of plants, animals, and elements" (p. 199). With the rise of the alphabet, nature became construed as a set of passive objects that operated according to absolute rules. Time and space came to be understood as entirely different dimensions – both of which were understood as abstract and operating according to mechanistic principles. There is no accident that the word "witch" is associated with female solitude. "Witches" upheld a tradition of healing that involved participating with the natural world, and this required, to some extent, having a foot in both the human and the non-human natural world; it required being attuned to nature and its cycles as well as the human body and its cycles and thus operated outside of a highly socially controlled temporal paradigm.

linear clock-based understanding of time in people's day-to-day lives became more firmly rooted, as it helped to organize workers not according to natural cycles but rather according to the needs and demands of those in power. The linear time model universalizes time and levels difference, as it can be reduced to measurable units that apply to all situations regardless of context.¹⁹ This leveling of difference inherent in the linear time model worked hand-in-hand with the rise of industrialization, resulting in greater efficiency and large-scale productivity but also in social oppression. People were expected to adjust to the standardized time requirements of the workplace, and time became regarded as a property that can be individually owned, bought, sold, invested, and wasted. According to Ivana Milojevic (2008),

Colonization and domination (over nature, and other peoples) have accompanied the advent of linear, industrial, clock time. Capitalism, industrialization and colonialism, as well as patriarchy, helped with a construction and an imposition of such an approach to time as well as with the attempts to standardize, to unify global temporal diversity under a banner of a normative hegemonic time. Hegemonic time is western, Christian, linear, abstract, clock dominated, work oriented, coercive, capitalist, masculine, and anti-natural. (p. 333)

Milojevic's indictment of linear clock-time may seem unnecessarily polemical, but it is helpful in highlighting how power is involved in the conceptualization and practice of time. Writing about time, social psychologist Robert Levine (1997) asserts that there is "no greater symbol of domination, since time is the only possession which can in no sense be replaced once it is gone" (p. 118). Though it would not be difficult to find ways to critique his point, Levine's assertion is effective and powerful because it articulates something that normally remains invisible and unthematized.

¹⁹ One could argue that the postmodern movement toward compressed, digitalized, globalized time further amplifies these effects.

Marginalized time

The dominance of linear clock time has resulted in the marginalization, suppression, and expulsion from social recognition of certain ways of conceptualizing and living time that do not adhere to capitalist economic principles. The most obvious form of marginalized time is *the cyclical time of nature*, which many indigenous cultures and Western people living and working close to the land are still largely in touch with. Another form of marginalized time under the dominant model is that of *event time*. In event time, social or natural events touch off the sequence of daily happenings, each event leading to new events according to the needs and desires and natural flows of the parties involved rather than according to a pre-planned schedule and the dictates of the clock. In this form of time, time is more open-ended and events flow organically in response to what came before but never in a straight predictable line. Just as clock-time may be compared to the canalization of a flow of water – being fitted into a pre-made structure and purposefully routed – event time is more akin to a meandering brook, moving along according to the earthly context in which it finds itself. *Mystical time* is another form of marginalized time; its emphasis on the “eternal now” as opposed to linear conceptualizations of temporality has been described by writers from a wide range of spiritual traditions, including the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart and the Zen Buddhist Dogen. Yet another form of marginalized time under the dominant model is that of *relational time*. Relational time is mediated by the people in one’s immediate midst and is “shared rather than personal and thus sensitive to the contextuality and particularity of interpersonal relations” (Odih, 1999, p. 10). Unlike linear clock time, relational time cannot be easily quantified and reduced to measurable units. It is spontaneous, process-

oriented, and often involves caring for others. Caring work “involves a distinctive temporal consciousness that is in many ways at odds with the dominant time culture of contemporary capitalist societies” (Bryson, 2007, 129). The temporal consciousness involved in caring work includes not only being attuned to the needs of others but also often involves carrying out work that is repetitive and which helps maintain what already exists versus creating something new. It also involves being available for others outside of a pre-set schedule and achieving particular goals outside of a pre-determined time frame. For a wide range of reasons, relational and caring time are not highly valued in this culture and are generally not considered worthy of financial remuneration or regarded as “work” to the same extent that activities that directly serve to boost the annual GDP (Gross Domestic Product) are.

Women and time

Women, to a greater extent than men, tend to experience many of these forms of marginalized time throughout their lives. The cyclical nature of menstruation keeps women in touch on a monthly basis with lunar rhythms, and the ability of women (most women, for a period of time in their lives, at least) to give birth – and therefore in a sense *produce and give time* to another person – may make their experience of time fundamentally different from that of men’s, as well (Forman & Sowton, 1989, p.6). Motherhood, which most women experience at some point in their lives, involves having to become attuned to the temporal rhythms of another person, from the event of birth through all the future years of caregiving that are usually involved. In addition to the fact that women tend to live time relationally vis-à-vis their children and families,

mothers also spend a lot of time in contact with their children's worlds – worlds with a different temporal consciousness than that of adulthood. According to Jay Griffiths (2004), children live “preindustrially, in tutti-frutti time, roundabout time, playtime; staunch defenders of the ludic revolution, their hours are stretchy, ribboned, enchanted and wild” (p. 207). Existing outside of the bounds of linear clock time to the extent that it does, children's time may be understood as another form of marginalized time. Being in contact with and to some extent sharing in children's non-linear, discontinuous time can certainly exert an influence on adult women's temporal experience. Housework, which is still being carried out to a greater extent by women than men, also tends to follow a different temporal logic than that of the clock, industrial, linear-time model. It is repetitive, undervalued, and seeks to maintain that which already exists rather than producing something new. Finally, the care of elderly parents may be seen in a similar light – as a form of care that is maintenance-oriented, repetitive, and undervalued in this culture. Eldercare is commonly left to the female members of the family to carry out, as well, though this is certainly not always the case.

Taken together, the time of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, motherhood, caregiving, (exposure to the temporal rhythms of) childhood, and the routine performance of housework that characterizes many women's lives has been encapsulated by the term “women's time” by a number of writers, the most notable example being in the landmark essay by that same name by philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1986). A number of writers with a second-wave feminist sensibility have conceptualized women's time as existing outside of and essentially in conflict with that of the dominant and “patriarchal” model of time. For example, Forman and Sowton (1989) argue that,

To speak of women and time is to speak of the ultimate theft... Regardless of circumstances, women are strangers in the world of male-defined time and as such are never at home there. At best, they are like guests eager to prove helpful; at worst they are refugees, living on borrowed time. (p. 1)

Other feminist writers, such as Emily Martin (1992), take a less polemical stance on the subject but do acknowledge that women, on a very basic bodily level, tend to live time outside of the dominant model: “Women, grounded whether they like it or not in cyclical bodily experiences, live both the time of industrial society and another kind of time that is often incompatible with the first” (p. 198). Postmodern feminist writers with a commitment to the social constructionist view of gender (and even sex, for some), on the other hand, tend to eschew any suggestion that “women’s time” is natural – pointing to the ways in which male bodies also experience cyclical rhythms (albeit in more subtle ways), the fact that some women do not menstruate (and that most women only menstruate for less than half of their lives) or become mothers, the ways in which women have been socially constructed as more caring and relational than men – leaving all the unpaid caring work for women to carry out, etc. One writer in this tradition, Pamela Odih (1999), for example, deconstructs the notion that women are naturally more relational than men. She argues that the tendency to experience relational time – which she agrees is much more common in women’s lives than men’s lives – is experienced disproportionately by people who perform “femininity” as a result of social oppression. Odih wishes to draw attention to the hazards involved in romanticizing the experience of relational time (which was common amongst second-wave feminists) since it is to a great extent a symbol of oppression and a great cause of stress and fragmentation in many women’s lives today.

Regardless of whether women's temporal experiences can be understood as more so a result of nature or social conditioning, we *can* assert that, by and large, women across categories of race and class tend to experience marginalized forms of time that do not fit neatly within a linear, clock-time paradigm. We can also assert that these marginalized temporal experiences tend to create stress and problems for women in this culture, in general. Their bodily experiences that defy this paradigm are either actively suppressed and considered dirty and secretive (e.g., menstruation) or in need of strict regulation and control (e.g., childbirth, which is now frequently initiated according to a schedule external to the mother's body). And the time women put into caregiving is often considered undeserving of financial reward and oftentimes not even thought of as real work. In addition, it has been well-documented that Western women (especially lower-income women) also tend to experience a chronic state of "time poverty," having to juggle multiple work and relational demands and having little to no time for leisure, personal hobbies, or alone time (Bryson, 2007, p. 2). Women, especially those who are working mothers, are "the great vacationless class," according to Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1955, p. 48). Even in the contemporary climate of more egalitarian gender relations (at least amongst the white middle-class), working women are still doing far more of the childcare and housework than their male partners, having to put in a "second shift" after their workday is through (Hochschild, 2012). Interestingly, although women tend to experience many forms of time that exist outside of the dominant linear clock-time model, Rita Felski (2000) points out that women, more so than men, are the "clock watchers" in our society:

Many women nowadays are, if anything, even more preoccupied with time measurement than men. Caught between the conflicting demands of home and

work, often juggling child care and frantic about their lack of time, it is women who are clock watchers, who obsess about appointments and deadlines, who view time as a precious commodity to hoard or to spend. (p. 20)

Having to straddle multiple temporal frequencies, moving at a perpetually swift pace in order to stay on top of things, and rarely having time for themselves, it seems safe to conclude that women need a time out. Time, it seems, is a problem for women.

Another way in which time could be understood to be a problem for women to a greater extent than men involves a woman's "biological clock" and the cultural taboo against female aging. Women have a much more limited time frame as far as child-bearing goes, though the viability and health of men's sperm does diminish to some extent with time as well. The pressure to have children by a certain age often dictates a woman's decisions regarding the timing of other events in her life – going to school, meeting a partner, developing a certain degree of psychological and financial stability before becoming a mother, etc. She may feel rushed into making major decisions in order to meet the demands of her biological clock and need to sacrifice certain desires and personal goals in order to cross the "deadline" in time. Many women in their mid 30s to early 40s who have waited to have children experience a "gun to the head" kind of feeling with regard to having children, feeling pressured to quickly procure a partner and longing to have the freedom to wait until they feel ready to have their own biological children – a freedom that men, especially those in positions of power, largely have. In addition to wrestling with the biological clock, many women struggle with the experience of aging in a culture which reveres youth and views female aging as particularly shameful and distasteful. Time is often understood to be the enemy not only with regard to internal, reproductive but also external, visual effects of the aging process. Women are

given the explicit message from an early age that they need to actively *battle the effects of time* on their bodies – applying dyes and moisturizers and acid treatments, getting injections to paralyze their facial muscles, allowing doctors to cut into and surgically restructure their flesh – in order to stay socially acceptable and worthy of love. This tends to lead women to wish to go back in time, freeze themselves in time, and hide their temporal truth, causing many women to attempt to cling to a youthful appearance and comportment that no longer fits their level of development. It tends to create in women a fear of their future as well as disgust with their own bodies. Time becomes a source of shame, leading, in their view and that of society, not to wisdom but to a fall from grace. Time is a problem for many women.

Women, solitude, and time: Orienting ourselves to the task at hand

In *Journal of a Solitude*, May Sarton (1973) asserts that having time of her own was “the greatest luxury” (p. 40) that she experienced in her solitude. Remarking on the letters she received from female fans of her writing, she writes that having time of one’s own seems to be what these women are largely yearning for: “this is the cry I get in so many letters – the cry not so much for a “room of one’s own” as time of one’s own” (p. 56). A solitary retreat presents a person with an opportunity to experience time that is one’s own in the sense that it is undetermined by other people. This kind of freedom can indeed be considered a luxury, though people who are uncomfortable being alone or do not feel overwhelmed by interpersonal demands might not think of it that way. Time of one’s own is a luxury not only because it is undetermined by other people but also because it presents a person with an opportunity to widen her temporal repertoire and

cultivate a new relationship to time. It enables her to be in time, with time, and move through time in a different way – a way that might not be easily accessible to people living in closer contact with the norms and expectations of the dominant culture. And if at some level we as human subjects *are time itself* – then by shifting into a different experience of time during solitude, we are in some sense becoming a different person. What changes can occur if we unplug the clock in our solitude? How do we orient ourselves in time, and how do we experience ourselves and the world differently?

Solitary time tends to be lived *non-relationally*. If women, on average, tend to live their time in a more interpersonally relational way than men, the non-relational nature of solitary time represents a divergence from the temporal status quo. By “non-relational” I am referring to the fact that, in solitude (as we are defining it in this project) a woman is not in direct relationship with other people – i.e., speaking with, seeing, touching, and being amidst another people – and her time is not contingent upon the immediate needs and desires of other people. In her solitude, she may be oriented toward other people – e.g., through her thoughts, memories, fantasies, dreams, prayers, writings, etc. – but her time is essentially her own in that others are not having a direct impact the way in which she is using her time. But it is important here to remember that relationality can be understood in a broader sense, beyond the interpersonal sphere, as discussed in the previous chapter. A person is in relationship with many non-human beings and things – e.g., plants, animals, landscapes, elements, even household objects – and in the absence of interpersonal stimulation, it seems that those relationships take on a greater significance and have a greater influence on a person’s life. Indeed, some of the temporal themes we will discuss later in this chapter involve the ways in which the

women's experience of time became synched with and informed by the temporal rhythms of the more-than-human natural world.

It is also important to mention that even those contemporary women who do not share their time or physical space with others on a regular basis and thus might not be said to live time "relationally" in the sense in which I have been writing about it (e.g., caring for children or parents, structuring their schedule around that of their spouse, etc.), they still tend to be *temporally synchronized with others* through having contact with other people throughout the day, consuming mass media, etc. Human beings living in the modern world are synched up with each other on some basic, though generally unthematized level.²⁰ According to phenomenological psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs (2001), "from the beginning, the microdynamics of everyday contact imply a habitual synchronization. They bring about a basic feeling of being in accord with the time of others, and living with them in the same, intersubjective time" (p. 181). Fuchs' work, along with that of Martin Wyllie (2005), explores the ways in which patients suffering from particular psychopathological conditions (e.g., melancholia, schizoidism) commonly become desynchronized with other people and how these desynchronizations are the cause of great suffering. Fuchs' and Wyllie's work suggests that psychosocial synchronization is crucial to our mental health. How can we understand the effect of the desynchronizations that tend to occur during extended periods of solitude? I would like to suggest that the desynchronizations that occur during solitude can be understood as potentially healthy, providing opportunities for restoration and reorientation. A retreatant can restore herself, in the sense of resting her body and mind and returning to her own

²⁰ And with the advent of cyber-technologies, it seems that this temporal synchronization has significantly expanded in scope; no matter where one is located in the world, it is always the same time on the World Wide Web.

experience after living in a more distracted and rushed mode of living in the world with others. She can also reorient herself away from the time of others and society and toward the larger world, including the rhythms of nature.

Yet, I note that these desynchronizations are “potentially” healthy since, in falling out of intersubjective, social time, one is taking a risk. In their book on contemporary hermit life, *Consider the Ravens*, Karen Karper-Fredette and Paul A. Fredette contend that solitude tends to turn people into either “psychotics or sages” (p. 1). Though they may have overstated the case a bit, it seems that extended periods of solitude can indeed threaten a person’s basic mental stability and that falling out of synch with the time of others is one of the ways that this can happen. Yet, solitude is a voluntary form of withdrawal from the time of others, as one enters the hermitage willingly. And for most solitary retreatants, there is an end date to their solitude or they get to choose when to re-enter society and re-join social time. Yet, can one come back if she’s gone too far? How far is “too far”? The answer to these question differs from individual to individual. The fragility of the retreatant’s ego-structure, the degree of social support she has in her life, her level of psycho-spiritual development, the reasons why she entered solitude in the first place and what she was seeking there all impact how “far” she goes and whether it is in a more or less healthy direction. But the potential hazards of falling out of intersubjective time do not negate the potential benefits of doing so in a controlled, intentional way. Desynchronizing from the time of others presents one with the opportunity to resynchronize to something else or simply to stand still, lie fallow, and check in with oneself without falling prey to an interminable melancholia or psychosis, though solitude may indeed foster some degree of melancholia as well as certain ecstatic,

quasi-“psychotic” experiences. Desynchronizing from intersubjective time certainly seems to play a role in cultivating such melancholic and ecstatic experiences.

One final idea that can generally help orient us toward the topic of female solitude and time is to consider how going on a solitary retreat can help a person develop a more critical perspective on time itself and encourage her to look more closely at the ways she tends to live time. By taking a break and stepping away from her day-to-day temporal practices in the world with others and experience new rhythms and attunements outside of the interpersonal sphere, she might come to live time more consciously and more fully. She may develop a clearer perspective on hegemonic time and make different choices about how she “spends” her time, thinks about time, and speaks about time. In effect, she might be able to better “take back time” and make it her own in a new way. In

Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time, Barbara Adam (1995) argues that there is an urgent need for people to become more conscious about the detrimental effects of hegemonic time on our lives:

We need to de-alienate time: reconnect clock time to its sources and recognize its created machine character. As such, concern with the multiple time dimensions of our lives is no mere theoretical, academic exercise; rather, it is a strategy for living. (p. 54)

And psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs (2001) contends that, “we are...confronted with the task to reappropriate the time that we have made our enemy, and to make it our time again” (p. 185). To de-alienate time and re-appropriate time is a central task for people today. It seems especially vital that women take up this challenge since, to a great extent, the hegemonic model of time has been “built on the exclusion of women and everything ‘feminine’” (Milojevic, 2008, p. 335) and as such continues to marginalize women’s experience as well as cut both women and men off from their full range of temporal

possibilities. The problems associated with the hegemonic time model are not merely theoretical; they have very real consequences for the quality of our day-to-day lives, the lives of others around the globe, and the health of the environment in which we are embedded.

In order to, as Barbara Adam puts it, “de-alienate” time, we need to look closely at how time is lived in particular contexts. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will be doing a close reading of the themes that characterized the women’s temporal experience during solitude. The following five temporal themes became apparent while analyzing the journals: the question of *structure*, the evolution of *a different kind of rhythm*, the practice of *waiting*, becoming *present*, and the experience of *slowness*. These themes are by no means exhaustive of the women’s experiences in solitude, but they attempt to capture the basic temporal themes that were found across most, if not all, of the journals. I will analyze each of these themes in turn, beginning with the role of structure in solitude.

Theme 1: *Structure and desire*

Solitary retreat offers a person *time*. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) comments directly on this most basic temporal gift of solitude: “Here there is time; time to be quiet; time to work without pressure; time to think; time to watch the heron... Time to look at the stars or to study a shell” (p. 113). Solitary retreat involves having time of one’s own – an experience that might be considered by some, including May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*), to be “the greatest luxury” (p. 40). Though one of the criticisms leveled at American culture is that it is individualistic, it seems to be a rarity for people to

truly have time of their own – open expanses of time to do with what they will – especially for women and economically underprivileged people. It seems safe to assert that many if not most people, women and men both, feel overworked and overextended. Yet if given the opportunity, many would probably not know what to do with an open expanse of time away from all that they know and all that they engage with on a regular basis. Many would probably feel bored, restless, uncomfortable, and experience a certain amount of withdrawal from all of the stimulation they have become accustomed to and then quickly search for an escape route. They might also not know what to do with the potentially unstructured quality of solitary time. Our days in the world are generally very structured ones – structured by work schedules, the needs of other people we are in relationship with, appointments, the hours that businesses in our community stay open, the timing of the TV shows we watch, the kind of personal schedule that is deemed acceptable in our family or culture, etc. These limits or parameters help us create a routine for ourselves that helps life feel more predictable; this predictability provides us with a sense of safety, security, and personal cohesion. A solitary retreat presents a person with the opportunity to step outside of those routines and parameters. It gives the person the opportunity to structure her day according to her choosing, rather than according to external needs and requirements – e.g., of one’s employer, one’s children and spouse, the community at large. The women studied here had this freedom of choice, and in and of itself – whether the women chose to carry out a more or less structured retreat – that freedom of choice represented a significant luxury that most people do not have access to. Having the ability to choose what to do with their time to the extent that they did was a rarity and a privilege. What did they do with this choice?

Discerning and heeding desire, cultivating the self

Each woman in this study used this freedom of choice differently. Some chose to leave their retreats almost entirely unstructured while others imposed structure upon their time in solitude, whether for reasons involving personal growth and spiritual practice (e.g., Jane Dobisz's traditional Zen retreat) or out of financial necessity (e.g., Joan Anderson's need to take up clamming in order to make ends meet). But with the exception of Dobisz's rigorous Zen retreat, all of the women in this study kept their retreats relatively unstructured and open-ended, letting the events of their days arise organically, rather than according to a pre-set plan. This was a significant deviation from their lives prior to solitary retreat and represented a major temporal shift for them. There appear to be a number of effects of such a lack of externally imposed structure. The lack of externally imposed structure on their time appeared to help these women become better able to *discern their desire* and *learn to make choices accordingly*. A loosely structured retreat seemed to foster, or at least be correlated with, the experience of reconnecting with what one wants in a more immediate sense and then acting on that desire rather than acting according to duty to others, social expectations, or a habitual way of being in the world. We saw this heightening of one's ability to discern desire in the previous chapter on space, and we see it here again, pointing to it as a prominent feature of the lived experience of solitude. As quoted earlier, in her book about hermit huts architect Ann Cline (1997) asserts that: "Only in a hut of one's own can a person follow his or her own desires – a rigorous discipline" (p. 132). To learn to disentangle one's own desire from that of other people and the larger culture isn't an easy task,

especially if one has not had much practice discerning her own wanting. Long periods of solitude offer a person the opportunity to practice this “rigorous discipline” of discerning and disentangling desire, and having a relatively unstructured schedule that allows for a great deal of flexibility seems to help this process along.

The ability to discern what one wants can serve as a major source of growth for many women. Many women are alienated from their personal desire and bodily appetites. They are largely trained to respond to the desire of others and keep their appetites bite-sized and under strict control. In working to *de-alienate desire*, one works to cultivate aspects of the self and cultivate a certain kind of freedom. It’s the freedom to choose what to do and when to do it, without concern for social rules or interpersonal responsibilities and considerations. The solitary retreatant has the opportunity to make choices about what to do next, how fast to do it, and what kind of rhythm to fall into. In her outside life, her time is usually more highly structured from without, requiring fewer choices on her part. She responds to the needs and desires of her loved ones, friends, the requirements of her job, and she falls in line with the pace and rhythms of her culture. She is certainly making choices on a moment-to-moment basis, but she is largely conforming to a pre-established template or acting in response to or in tandem with others as the day goes on. Having unstructured time to herself, and plenty of it, gives her greater freedom of choice.

Some of the women in this project went on retreat primarily because they were trying to get in touch with a part of themselves and their experience that had been shelved or neglected somewhere along the way or had never had the opportunity to develop in the first place. They were asking the general questions: “Who am I?” and “What do I

want?” Open-ended stretches of solitary time gave them the opportunity to reflect on their lives, at their own pace. It also gave them the freedom of choice with regard to how to order their time, and this freedom of choice set the stage for a greater consciousness of their personal desire. This high degree of temporal freedom was an integral part of the project of *self-formation*, whether this self-formation was felt to be more of a process of self-discovery, self-recovery, or self-creation. It seems that the more open-ended retreats suited the women who needed or wanted to become better able to discern their own desires and extricate their own needs and wants from those of others. Having an ample amount of unstructured time required the women to make choices based on their moment-to-moment inclinations. It also allowed them to be creative about how they used their time. With few distractions and plenty of open-ended time, they could hear themselves in a new way and heed a different kind of voice.

Alice Koller’s (*An Unknown Woman*) retreat in a rented cottage during a winter in Nantucket represents one extreme with regard to the degree of temporal structure that the women in this study adopted. Though there were limits on the total length of her retreat time, given her lean financial circumstances, she didn’t enter her solitude with any set plan for how she would structure the time that was available to her time. She did have an overarching goal, however, which was to conduct a life inventory and self-analysis in order to, essentially, save her own life. She knew that her life wasn’t working well upon entering solitude – that she was unhappy in her relationships, frustrated in her career life, and generally out of touch with her own experience. She felt like a shell of a person and had been battling depression for a long time. One of the most significant gifts she was to receive from her solitude was the realization that the majority of choices she had made in

her life, both large and small, stemmed from the desire to please others and earn their approval rather than being guided by her own internal compass. As discussed in the last chapter, solitude gave her the opportunity to recognize how much of her desire was not her own and to begin to feel into her own personal impulses and inclinations without the constant reference to others.

At the start of the retreat Koller wrote, “Here there’s nothing I have to do; there’s only what I choose to do, once I learn how to choose” (p. 36). At this point, she did not yet know how to make choices – real, heartfelt choices – because she was out of touch with her own wanting. In recognizing this alienation from desire, she realized that something on the basic level of her subjectivity was missing or required cultivation. A few experiences early on in the retreat helped her begin to identify and feel into this more intrinsic desire. For example, after waking up early on the second day of the retreat to take her dog, Logos, out she decided to go back to sleep. The experience of going back to sleep after she had already been up went against the “rules” that she had always lived her life by. Upon waking up from her mid-morning slumber, she reflected, “I smile. I’ve torn away another rule and put one of my own in its place: to go to sleep when I’m tired” (p. 22). Having an unstructured solitary retreat allowed her to go back to sleep, and having ample amount of time to reflect on the events of the retreat helped Koller realize just how little she had been heeding her basic bodily desires. Further on into the retreat Koller forgot to bring her watch with her when she went for a walk. This sparked the realization that she could go home when she was tired of walking rather than go home according to a pre-planned time indicated by her watch. Again, she realized from this

simple experience that the direction her life takes can be dictated according to her own internal compass rather than external rules and structures. She writes,

I see that by having left the watch at home, I've thrown out not just one more rule, but a whole collection of them. Not only does it not matter when I go home, but it doesn't matter when I eat or sleep or walk or read or do anything at all. Incredible piece of knowledge! ...that's exactly what the gain was the morning I went back to sleep. I went back to sleep because I was tired. ... Not to avoid some problem, not because I had to get a certain number of hours of sleep in order to meet someone else's schedule. I went back to sleep for a good reason: because I was tired. So not wearing my watch can teach me the other good reasons for doing things. Going home because I'm tired of walking, or because I want to write... Eating because I'm hungry. Reading because I want the refreshment of another mind. (p. 54)

In contrast to her experience being shaped by external temporal structures like her watch and other people's needs and desires, she increasingly learned to shape the time around the "self" that emerged in the open, clear space of her solitude: "[I] try to shape the hours around whatever the contours of my self will turn out to be" (p. 44). This process of learning to shape time around her own authentic needs and desires amounted to *a vital process of self-formation* – not "self" in the sense of an ego identity or social persona, in which one performs a role according to an idea of who she is, but "self" in the sense of feeling into the thickness of one's authentic experiencing as it arises on a moment-by-moment basis. Toward the end of her narrative Koller wrote that she was working on the project of "institut[ing] my own permanence" (p. 213). By acting according to her own desire rather than external rules and regulations, she was, in a sense, cultivating her selfhood, forming her subjectivity, and developing a psychological boundary around her own needs and inclinations so as to distinguish them from the needs of others. At the end, she reflected that, "I don't have to wait for someone to give me a sense of continuity: I'll carry my continuity within myself. I'll belong wherever I am. I'll

institute my own permanence” (p. 213). By undergoing a rigorous self-analysis in a context in which her impulses, desires, responses, and intentions had enough time and space to be recognized and then acted upon (or not acted on), Koller effectively developed a more solid and “permanent” home base.

Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) also underwent an unstructured retreat when she lived as a hermit for four years in the West Virginia mountains. Prior to embarking upon her solitude, Karper had been living in a convent with other nuns for over thirty years. At the start of her retreat she tried to structure her days according to the monastic schedule she had gotten used to in the convent. She did this out of a sense of feeling overwhelmed by the freedom that solitude afforded her; she did this at first because it felt safe and familiar. She wrote, “At first I defended myself against this too-much-freedom by following the daily schedule of prayer and work I had known in the monastery. Only slowly did I recognize and begin to react against this subtle tyranny” (p. 77). She began to regard this external schedule as a “subtle tyranny” since it left her unable to live according to her “personal rhythms”:

Without the established routines of the monastic day that had governed my life for over thirty years, I floundered, unable to distinguish my personal rhythms from the programmed ones. It would take me years to discover the natural rhythms of my own body and soul. (p. 77)

Karper took her time weaning herself off of a monastic schedule and progressively learned to move according to a more “personal” rhythm. Getting in touch with her own personal rhythm involved getting in touch with her own desire and making choices accordingly.

Karper understood this shift as an opening toward a sense of freedom but also understood letting go of an externally structured schedule to be an important step in her

quest to feel closer to God. By becoming more attuned to the “natural rhythms of [her] body and soul” she could become more flexible, receptive, and open to God’s presence: “If solitude were to bear its promised fruit and make me as responsive to the Spirit of God as the grass waving in the field, I had to cease controlling my own life so rigidly” (p. 77). In order to surrender control, she had to let go of a well-ordered schedule and begin to listen more closely to her own inner voice in order to know how to proceed. She writes that since there were no local spiritual directors to help guide her through her retreat given that she lived in rural Appalachia, she had to begin to listen closely to herself for guidance. She understands “herself” on the *deepest* level, however, as Spirit: “Whatever direction I required would have to be found within myself...or more precisely, drawn from the Spirit dwelling in my deepest Center” (p. 78). Interestingly, it was through learning to discern her own desire and her own personal voice that she was able to make greater contact with her God.

Reining in desire, surrendering the self

Koller and Karper both discovered that through letting go of external temporal structures they were able to become better attuned to their personal rhythms and better able to discern their desires and make choices accordingly. Though Koller’s journey was far more secular and explicitly self-reflective than Karper’s, both women experienced a process of *self-formation* through their solitudes. Interestingly, Karper’s process of self-formation enabled her to feel closer to God; through becoming more aware of and exercising her unprogrammed responses to the world she became better able to feel God’s presence in her life. She described this as a process of finding her way to “the

Kingdom within” (p. 78). Another woman in this study with explicitly spiritual aims for her solitude was Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*). If Alice Koller’s retreat represented one end of the temporal spectrum as far as structure is concerned, Dobisz’s retreat represented the other extreme. Dobisz undertook a 100 day solitary retreat in an isolated rustic cabin in the middle of a New England winter. She structured her retreat according to the classic Zen retreat framework, with nearly every minute accounted for and pre-determined. She spent the majority of her time engaged with meditative practices and chanted a mantra throughout all of her activities throughout the day. Except for a few days when she fell ill and was too physically weak, she adhered perfectly to the schedule throughout the retreat. The following is a snapshot of her schedule, from the time she woke up until noon (p. 4):

3:15	Wake Up	7:40	Breakfast
3:20	300 Bows	8:00	Work Period
4:00	Tea	9:30	Break
4:15	Sitting	10:00	300 Bows
4:45	Walking	10:30	Tea
4:55	Sitting	10:40	Sitting
5:30	Walking	11:10	Walking
5:40	Sitting	11:20	Sitting
6:10	Walking	11:50	Walking
6:20	Sitting	12:00	Lunch
6:50	Chanting		

By undergoing a retreat of this kind, Dobisz was seeking a certain kind of freedom. It was very unlike the freedom to do what she wanted, when she wanted, that Alice Koller was pleased to discover. When her alarm clock rang on the first morning of her retreat (at 3:15 am) she had to fight the urge to stay in bed and found herself justifying why she should sleep in on the first morning:

Unable to get up, I'm paralyzed by a powerful train of thought that tells me that it's the first day, after all, and no one is here, after all, and I should probably rest up a little and start at 9:00 am... In the inky darkness, I can't see anything. A voice in my head yells at me, "Get up you lazy dog! If you sleep in on the very first morning, you're completely worthless!" (p. 7-8)

This experience of setting aside her own bodily comfort and desire in the interest of a larger goal that she had set for herself can be contrasted with Koller's experience of letting herself go back to sleep on the second day of the retreat because she was tired. Both women were behaving in ways that were somewhat foreign to their experience and learning new ways of being in time.

Through these new temporal practices the women were developing a different relationship with themselves – for Koller this involved getting in greater touch with her own impulses and bodily desires and then heeding them, while Dobisz was cultivating, on the other hand, greater obedience and humility and tempering her impulses and desires. Both women were gaining new forms of freedom and a new relationship with their desire. Koller was cultivating personal desire, asking the fundamental question, "What do I want?" and learning how to act on it; Dobisz went out to the cabin in the woods in order to examine and ultimately *rein in her desire* rather than stoke it. By depriving herself of so many comforts (e.g., food, heat, physical comfort, etc.) desire was brought to the forefront of her awareness. She was able to get a good look at it, study it,

sit with; but unlike Koller and Karper, she did not act on it and found freedom in this non-reactivity. The rigid, externally determined schedule she adhered to left little if any room for her to follow her personal inclinations, whims, will, improvisation, etc. In surrendering to the practices, Dobisz was in a sense surrendering her “I.” Contrary to Koller’s desire to “institute [her] own permanence,” Dobisz had the experience of cultivating a sense of the *impermanence* of her own self, as she worked to rein in her personal desire and forfeit her freedom of choice. Through her meditative practices, she developed a new relationship with her desire and in the process came to feel more alive and present to the world around her. Koller and Karper, on the other hand, came to life in a different way by becoming better able to identify, accept, befriend, and act according to their desire, while Dobisz appeared to gain greater control over and a certain degree of freedom from her desire.

All three women – Koller, Karper, and Dobisz – had powerful, transformative experiences during their retreats. The relative merits of their experiences cannot be compared since their intentions, life experiences, and developmental levels going into their retreats differed to such a great extent and each woman’s experience was ultimately unique. Each woman received something of significant value from her retreat and achieved greater psychological balance as a result. Jane Dobisz, an economically privileged contemporary woman, found greater balance through the practice of obedience and humility. Karen Karper, on the other hand, had thirty years of practice in selflessness and humility and needed to cultivate her personal voice and subjectivity, her “self-centeredness,” her “I am” and “I want” in order to find a healthy equilibrium. And finally, Alice Koller had grown up in neglectful circumstances and was living in a time

and place (her retreat took place in 1962, prior to the second wave of feminism) that actively discouraged women's desire and authentic self-expression; what she needed was to take a step back, give a name to the 'problem with no name' in her life, and begin to create a life of her own choosing. The temporal structure each woman adopted seemed to have fostered these gains, though many other factors were involved as well.

What remains constant through all the narratives studied for this project and is perhaps the most important point, however, is that the women had *the freedom of choice* with regard to the structuring of their time. If they followed a schedule, they imposed that schedule upon themselves; though Dobisz was following a schedule originally created by male authority figures in her spiritual tradition, she ultimately chose to follow that unforgiving schedule and go out to the woods in a cabin with no electricity and no plumbing in the middle of a New England winter. Karper chose to adopt the monastic schedule upon first arriving at her hermitage but then chose to switch gears and go with the flow of the day and her "personal rhythms" (p. 77). Koller chose to go back to bed. Whether their days were well-ordered or not, the central point is that they had this freedom to choose in the first place.

Theme 2: *Evolving a different rhythm*

Yet, even with this freedom of choice that most women had with regard to the ordering of a day, it seemed that even the most unstructured retreats tended to fall into a general rhythm or pattern rather quickly. I noticed this very clearly in my first two hermitage retreats, which were for the most part unstructured, as well as in the writings of most of the other women in this study. Going into the retreat I fantasized that the lack of

structure might create a space of radical openness in which I would sleep, eat, read, daydream, etc. at random times of my choosing and in some sense fall out of any noticeable temporal rhythm, with each day's sequence being unique from the others and unbound with no rhyme or reason. I found this was not the case at all. By day three, the days developed a very noticeable rhythm to them, with my sequence of activities – eating, writing, reading, walking, sleeping, tea drinking, etc. – being fairly predictable from day to day and seeming to arise organically. And though I had fantasized about what it would be like to experience a more unbound and chaotic temporality, I found that I liked this regular and somewhat predictable flow of events. It felt comfortable, natural. Echoing this basic sentiment, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) writes that her days on retreat have “an easy, unforced rhythm” (p. 100).

Living a more cyclical, sequential, bodily-based rhythm

As the last section outlined, a temporally unstructured retreat presents one with the ability to better discern her desire and make choices regarding how to use her time. The choices the women made tended to be more aligned with their personal and bodily desires, and these desires had a discernible rhythm to them, a certain sequence and flow to them. This rhythm was *cyclical* – roughly the same basic sequence seemed to repeat itself every day. This seems partly due to the fact that there were a small number of simple options with regard to what to do. During my two hermitage retreats, for example, I was retreating in a small, simple, foreign space with a very limited amount of reading material or food to prepare. The options for activities were relatively few and simple and I had the whole day to cycle through them over and over, with varying lengths

for the different activities according to my mood and inclinations and the events that organically arose. It seemed that most of my days adopted a similar basic sequence, and this sequence was aligned with bodily desire, with what felt natural to do at the time given the options that were available to me. For example, it seemed natural to have a cup of tea upon waking and then do some light reading before making breakfast. After breakfast it intuitively seemed that going out for a walk was the next rhythmically appropriate thing to do. After the walk it seemed right to sit quietly for awhile and then write in my journal for whatever length of time felt appropriate to articulate what I had observed during my walk. Then it seemed good and right to go outside and sit on the porch and just watch the scenery, perhaps while drinking another cup of tea. Each activity undertaken took whatever length of time seemed appropriate during that sitting; sometimes I ended up writing in my journal for two hours straight, while at other times, I checked in with the journal for five minutes.

The activities undertaken tended to flow organically from one to the next, with spaces of rest and daydreaming, interspersed between and within, for as long as seemed appropriate to a more bodily-based wisdom rather than according to the time indicated by the clock, which I had unplugged and stowed away upon first entering the hermitage. This rhythmic flow of activities had a good amount of texture to it that my life outside of solitude tends not to have. There was a harmonious flow between activities and a nice fluctuation from periods of physical rest, to physical movement, to mental concentration, to sensual pleasure (e.g., eating or drinking), etc. This harmonious flow of simple, life-giving, non-alienating activities and states of mind and body seemed as though I were truly living according to, to again quote Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*), “the

natural rhythms of my body and spirit” (p. 77). The same was generally true for May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*), who stated her goal for solitude thusly: “That was what I was after – a daily rhythm, a kind of fugue of poetry, gardening, sleeping and waking in the house. Nothing else mattered” (p. 84). It was having to respond to letters and unexpected visits from the fans of her writing and having to keep appointments and meet publisher’s deadlines that interrupted Sarton’s poetic fugue. She was, however, able to attain it for a few days at a time when she would not have any appointments or have to journey out of her house or beyond her property. It seems that solitude, when truly cut off from interpersonal and work responsibilities, allows an individual to drop out of structured social time and fall into a textured, poetic rhythm – one that is aligned with bodily desire and whose activities are relatively simple and non-alienating.

This kind of poetic fugue that Sarton was able to attain for a few days at a time can be contrasted with life in the highly structured world of work and family life in our contemporary society. The rhythm produced under those circumstances tends to be fairly rigid and largely prescribed from without, with little room for deviation and improvisation. Monday through Friday days are generally spent at the workplace, which often has a pressured pace and involves working many hours “multitasking” or engaging primarily with a computer screen until the work day ends and one finally has some “free time” which is often spent collapsing on the couch and watching TV, attending to the needs of other people, or running errands in order to keep one’s basic existence in good running order. The rhythm of their solitary retreats offered the women in this study a break from the harried, cramped, and well-ordered quality of their outside lives. They could do things *sequentially, one thing at a time*, instead of having to multitask – a “skill”

that women are often characterized as being better at than men and which tends to be a skill required of low paid administrative employees such as secretaries who usually carry out the work that supports the work of other, more highly paid employees. Multitasking is also a skill that mothers and homemakers are thought to need to keep up with the demands of contemporary home life. Doing things one thing at a time allows one to pay attention to the task at hand, rather than having one's attention spread across multiple tasks. This is a freedom that solitude affords and one which many women, as well as men, do not have the luxury to enjoy.

Creative pauses, unexpected tangents, and painful little holes

Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) writes that there was a “pattern of freedom” to her days on retreat: “Its setting has not been cramped in space or time... It has an easy, unforced rhythm” (p. 100). She writes that she goes on solitary retreat every summer in order to “evolve a different rhythm” and that many women in her day (the 1950s) were yearning for this same thing: “Even those whose lives had appeared to be ticking imperturbably under their smiling clock-faces were often trying, like me, to evolve a different rhythm with more creative pauses in it, more adjustment to their individual needs” (p. 10). The ability to enjoy “creative pauses” throughout her day was the key element to the “pattern of freedom” that her solitude adopted. Her lack of firm plans and ability to go with the flow and let things organically arise allowed for pauses in her day which she experienced as *openings for creativity*. Similarly, Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) writes that although she sometimes tried to carry out pre-set plans during her solitude – such as finishing a writing project by a certain time or responding to

a friend's letter – she found that she never stuck to the plan and instead would get swept up into alternative streams of activity that turned out to be far more interesting than what she had originally planned to do:

I found that plans were useless. To plan a day began to mean to start out into it, and then to find myself on so many unexpected tangents from the forward progress, the mainstream of the plan. The digressions – what I did that I had no idea I would do – turned out to be more interesting. (p. 83)

These digressions imparted a non-linear quality to the time of Grumbach's retreat which fueled creative thought and activity and allowed the unexpected to arise. May Sarton also found that having unplanned time allowed the unexpected to arise in the form of subconscious thoughts and feelings. She wrote, "I find that when I have any appointment, even an afternoon one, it changes the whole quality of time. I feel overcharged. There is no space for what wells up from the subconscious" (p. 145). On a day without appointments during her year in solitude, she was able to make contact with subconscious material which fueled her creative writing and self-analysis. May Sarton, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and Doris Grumbach all worked for a living as writers and used some of their time in solitude to work on their writing (outside of keeping their journals of solitude). Having time that was open-ended and unplanned was key to opening up a "space" of creativity in which they could make contact with the unconscious. For Sarton, open-ended time resulted in an opening of psychic space in which there was room for that which was normally kept out of her conscious awareness.

Alice Koller also experienced these open spaces in which unconscious material arose, and she experienced them less as creative pauses and more as psychologically painful "holes" (p. 64) that she would drop into. In the midst of an intense self-analysis that brought her to the brink of suicide, she started to become aware, during the restful in-

between moments, of unconscious material that seemed to be the key to her long-standing suffering. She wrote of these times,

Time has stopped being continuous. It opens up into little holes that I fall into, then climb out of, only to fall into the next. My head is cracking open. Unless I'm very careful, I may not be able to hold it together. (p. 64)

May Sarton underwent a similar experience, though to a less extreme extent, of entering into difficult painful psychological territory during her solitude. Both women, given open-ended time without interruption or future appointments, were able to descend into these dark spaces in the service of giving birth to something new. Both women were also ultimately able to “hold it together” whereas other people plumbing such dark territory might have fallen apart. Leaving clock time and social time allowed them to fall into these holes, entering into these *creative unconscious spaces* and calling themselves into question without losing the thread that kept them tethered to their lives in the world.

Attuning to the rhythms of the more-than-human natural world

We have thus far discussed how, through their solitude, the women in this study were given the opportunity to become more attuned to their personal desire and make choices accordingly, regarding how to use their time. We have also discussed how this “personal” desire and choice that is exercised in solitude is aligned with the needs and desires of the physical body – that in heeding personal desire, one is living more so in accordance with an organically arising bodily rhythm. This rhythm consists of carrying out relatively simple activities in a one-thing-at-a-time, sequential but unplanned manner with room for improvisation, digressions, and pauses, which is where creativity and unconscious material thrive. The rhythm that the women fell into through their solitude

was not only adjusted to their personal and bodily desire, however. It also became more adjusted to the rhythms of the natural world outside their doors.

Each of the women in this study found herself more attuned to the temporal flow of the natural world than she was before her time in solitude. These natural temporal rhythms of nature affected the way the women experienced time and caused them to reflect on their lives in important new ways. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*), for example, observed that upon first arriving at her solitary retreat there was an abrupt shift in time influenced by her engagement with the sea:

One is forced against one's mind, against all tidy resolutions, back into the primeval rhythms of the sea-shore. Rollers on the beach, wind in the pines, the slow flapping of herons across sand dunes, drown out the hectic rhythms of city and suburb, time tables, and schedules. One falls under their spell, relaxes, stretches out prone. One becomes, in fact, like the element on which one lies, flattened by the sea; bare, open, empty as the beach, erased by today's tides of yesterday's scribblings. (p. 16)

Lindbergh was thrown “back” into a “primeval” natural rhythm and became “flattened” and “erased.” This flatness did not last for long, as she soon came back to life, but in a new way. She became “beach-wise”:

And then, some morning in the second week, the mind wakes, comes to life again. Not in a city-sense – no – but beach-wise. It begins to drift, to play, to turn over in gentle careless rolls like those lazy waves on the beach. One never knows what chance treasures these unconscious rollers may toss up, on the smooth white sand of the conscious mind; what perfected rounded stone, what rare shell from the ocean floor. (p. 16)

She became “beach-wise” as the rhythms of the non-human natural world became re-integrated into her temporal repertoire. In so doing she was recalled to an earlier or more fundamental primeval state in which she lived in greater accord with the time of the natural world.

The women learned something valuable about their own temporal rhythms from observing natural phenomena. Anne Morrow Lindbergh learned about her own temporality via her observations at the beach. Observing the cyclical nature of the tides, for example, taught her a valuable truth about the eternal recurrence of time that is too often repressed in the midst of a society dominated by a linear time model. Witnessing the ebb and flow of the water helped her get in touch with the ebb and flow of her own life and realize that “ebbing” was a necessary part of the cycle that she, and others in her society, felt threatened by and failed to value:

We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity – in freedom... One must accept the security of the winged life, of ebb and flow, of intermittency... Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach-living: simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid... And my shells? ... They are only there to remind me that the sea recedes and returns eternally. (p. 106-107)

Her solitude offers her the opportunity to experience “creative pauses” and learn to re-value intermittency and those discontinuities in time that give her life greater texture, richness, and a certain kind of freedom. Her solitude (symbolized by the shells she brings home with her) served to remind her that all things return eternally, teaching her greater patience and faith.

Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) also retreated by the ocean and was greatly influenced by the power of the ebb tide. She compared her solitude – which was a retreat from social roles as mother, friend, and wife – to the ebb tide: “the sea [is] at a standstill, as I am” (p. 13). She continues,

It occurs to me, just now, that perhaps ebbing can be a rest time, a “psychic slumber” from a lifetime of learning how to be a woman. I never thought about just being still, caught up as I was with escape and all it entails. (p. 14)

Anderson learned from the ocean the value of rest as well as the value of movement; she also learned, like Anne Morrow Lindbergh, to believe in the cyclical return of all things and the notion that all things will come in due time. She forewent wearing a watch during her solitude and began to time her day according to the tides,²¹ especially after taking up the practice of clamming in order to make money when she began to run out after many months in solitude:

Timing my day to the tides has helped me stop the frustrating process of forcing and manipulating my life... Clamming has taught me that all will be mine in its time and season. Forcing things works against instinct and the elements. It is an art form I was taught to perfect – forced conversations, feelings, orgasms even, prayer – but it is no longer a comfortable way for me to be. Working within the tides and the rules of the universe is fast becoming my preference. (p. 133)

Through experiencing solitary time on the beach, Anderson learned to stop “manipulating [her] life” (p. 133) and began to live in greater accord with a more primordial rhythm.

Reconnecting to the “holy”

Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) also learned to appreciate and value times of rest and dormancy during her solitary retreat in the West Virginia mountains. After living through two year-long cycles, she came to appreciate not only the rebirth of spring and the bounty of summer but also the colder, darker periods preceding the light:

²¹ Upon reuniting with her husband at the end of her retreat, Anderson held a retirement party for her husband, who had decided to join her for an indefinite period of time at the cottage. Instead of giving him a wristwatch – a classical retirement gift in American culture – she gave him a tide clock. This loving gesture symbolizes one of the most significant lessons Anderson learned in solitude – to revalue and live according to a different kind of time, one more aligned with the natural world, and therefore, with her own bodily rhythms – and was a lesson she hoped to help her husband learn as well.

Although the spring was a constant revelation, it did not take me by surprise. I had observed its arrival, stage by stage, and had been changed even more than the land by the process. I had seen the crocuses in the ell of my house poise on the verge of blooming through long days of freezing rain until one fine day, touched by the sun, the petals unfurled. From them I learned something about awaiting the right moment, about enduring patiently the vicissitudes of prayer, the ebb and flow of energy, and long periods of doubt. I came to recognize a rhythmic pulse of the Spirit that led me, through the depression and loneliness that frequently chilled my solitude, into a new warmth of companionship and contentment. (p. 97-98)

Karper's observations of the rhythms of nature became, in some sense, a spiritual gateway for her. By observing the cycles of the earth around her, she came to have a greater appreciation for the ebb and flow of her own life and was able to perceive a spiritual "rhythmic pulse" (p. 98) that flowed through both herself and the non-human natural world. May Sarton's (*Journal of a Solitude*) experience of gardening was a spiritual gateway for her, as well. Gardening allowed her to enter into a different kind of time which was both natural and "holy" (p. 118). While gardening, she was "closely in touch with process, with growth, and also with dying" (p. 11). Tending to her flowers not only taught her to appreciate the cyclical and process-oriented nature of time but also became a spiritual gateway for her; by entering her garden, she entered the mystery:

There [in the garden] the door is always open into the "holy" – growth, birth, death. Every flower holds the whole mystery in its short cycle, and in the garden we are never far away from death, the fertilizing, good, *creative* death. (p. 118)

For both Karper and Sarton, as well as many other women in this study, time spent in the natural world became a form of spiritual practice, not only via the greater visual attention they learned to pay to trees or birds or features of the landscape (as discussed in the previous chapter on space) but also through the rhythmic shifts which engaging with nature helped brings to about and the forms of reflection that observing the temporal rhythms of nature helped to foster.

Theme 3: *Waiting*

The numerous references to the value of the ebb tide indicate that the women came to value periods of stillness that were interwoven with periods of activity. These periods of ebb tide stillness in which the sea neither recedes nor rushes forward involve more than simply a state of rest, though resting the physical body may certainly be part of what they valued about the experience. There is a stress during these ebb tide periods on rest but also on the practice of waiting. References to “waiting” *abound* in the journals. The women, alone in solitude, *learned to wait*. Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) contends that, “The waiting itself is the thing” (p. 263). What does it mean, to wait? And why is it “the thing”? The word “waiting” implies that one is waiting for something, or someone. What, or whom, were they waiting for?

The subject of waiting is a tricky one for women, however. In the cultural context that most of the women in this study were embedded in – white, middle class, American culture – women are taught to wait. Becoming a woman and cultivating the “feminine mystique” involves learning to wait to be chosen by a man. The heterosexual plot generally involves women waiting for a man to make his desire for them known and then responding accordingly. A woman waiting by the phone for a man to call or waiting for the man to “pop the question” are timeworn clichés that run deep in our collective psyche and, though seemingly superficial, have a powerful impact on the way that women tend to live time. Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) writes that this practice of feminine waiting had come to dominate her life. She came to realize during her retreat that she had been waiting her whole life for a man, or for others in general, to choose her or for some

kind of experience to happen to her so that her life could finally begin. By the end of her retreat, after having had the experience of contemplating suicide, she became determined to stop waiting and to start creating a life for herself of her own choosing regardless of whether she is chosen by another person. She wrote,

Nor are there things to wait for, except things that I myself set in motion now. Waiting? Why, the stupendous thing I used to wait for was something that was going to be done *to* me, or *for* me: to be initiated by someone else, independently of my choice... Nothing to wait for, because I'll initiate what happens to me. Nothing to wait for, because these minutes now passing *are* my life. They are the minutes in which my living is to be done. Whatever I do, I'll do in my own time, and *I* will do it. I don't have to wait to get married to have a home: I'll make my own. Oh I know what that house will look like. I know the shapes and textures and colors that will fill it. Each thing in it will interest my own eye... I don't have to wait for someone to give me a sense of continuity: I'll carry my continuity within myself. I'll belong wherever I am. I'll institute my own permanence. I find myself smiling. (p. 213)

Koller was writing in the early 1960s, before the second-wave feminist movement helped many women wrest greater control over their own lives and break out of the psychological bondage of the feminine mystique. But though there have been many changes for the better for women since the time of Koller's writing, it seems evident that the practice of waiting is still an integral part of the expected feminine repertoire.

Waiting as receptivity

But the kind of waiting that the other women in this study consistently mentioned and practiced – e.g., Dillard's "the waiting itself is the thing" – was *a different kind of waiting*. The waiting implicated in the feminine mystique implies taking a passive stance in the context of one's social world. The waiting that is referred to in the journals (except for the aforementioned passage of Alice Koller's) does not indicate a form of passivity but a *receptivity*. As I am discussing it here, waiting is an active form of receptivity that

involves paying attention and waiting, not for something specific to happen, but rather simply waiting to see what happens and letting the organic flow of events occur without trying to control or direct the outcome. Though the concept of waiting generally implies waiting for a future event to take place, the kind of waiting that appears to be actively cultivated in solitude is not a practice of waiting for a specific event to take place, nor is it future-oriented in the sense that one has an idea in mind of what one is waiting for. By the end of her solitary retreat, Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) wrote, “No longer desperate to know every outcome, these days I tend to wait and see, a far more satisfying way of being that lacks specificity and instead favors experience over analysis” (p. 164). “Favoring experience over analysis” implies being present to the world and oneself, without a thick conceptual filter mediating one’s experience. Waiting is *the cultivation of a stance of patient attentive openness* to whatever is; it is a practice of really looking at and encountering something – not a seeking of something one has in mind ahead of time but a finding of what is already there. Joan Anderson quotes Pablo Picasso a few times throughout her narrative to make this exact point: “I find, I do not seek” (p. 163-164). Philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil (1951) echoes this same basic sentiment in writing that, “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them” (p. 62).

Waiting as attention, love, prayer

Rather than going out in search for something specific, waiting involves letting something come to you and being ready and open enough to receive it. The women cultivated this ability to wait through their practices of attention. In the long, quiet, open

stretches of time, they had the opportunity to develop their ability to attend closely to the things in their environment as well as their own mental, emotional, sensual experience. As their attention deepened, their love and care for that which they attended to appeared to deepen as well.

In late summer, during one of her walks at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) encountered a meadow full of grasshoppers that began detonating the grass all around her. She writes that, “I was the bride who waits with her lamp filled. A new wind was stirring; I had received the grasshoppers the way I received this wind” (p. 212). She characterizes herself here as a “bride” waiting for the appearance of her betrothed. Through the practice of attentive and patient waiting, Dillard and most of the other women came to experience a kind of loving communion with the world of nature and a greater commitment to it. For Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*), this communion with nature served to deepen her pre-existing Christian faith, while for Dillard, this communion with nature was her primary spiritual practice. The practice of waiting in the outdoors for animal appearances enhanced both women’s spiritual lives. Karper wrote about the experience of learning to wait for the appearance of deer rather than going out in search of them, which she noticed herself doing at the outset of her retreat:

One day I realized I too was hunting them in my own way. I recognized that I wanted to exercise a subtle kind of dominion over the deer, that I desired to see them when and where and how I pleased. That is not the way with deer. Deer appear or they don’t. If you are in the right place at the right moment, you will see them, perhaps even close at hand. But once you try to touch them, they flee. So, I discovered, it is with the comings and goings of the Spirit of God. If I wait... I might glimpse a trace of His activity in my life, a subtle sign that He is just beyond the edge of my vision. (p. 78)

Karper learned to stop going out in search of the deer and instead let them come to her. The development of this receptive, attentive stance in her relationship with the deer allowed her to develop her practice of waiting for and ultimately receiving the Divine. Waiting, in a sense, could be thought of as a form of prayer. In *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil writes that, “prayer consists of attention” (p. 105), and that,

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (p. 62)

When Karper waited patiently for the deer or Dillard for the appearance of her muskrats, these women were practicing their faith and taking a prayerful stance toward the world. So was Anne Morrow Lindbergh, standing at the water’s edge in her solitude, advising: “One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach – waiting for a gift from the sea” (p. 17). When the beloved arrived, it was experienced as a gift, and the women were filled.²²

With regard to the three temporal ecstasies of past, present, and future, we might assume that the practice of waiting involves a way of being that is fundamentally oriented toward the future. The concept of waiting generally implies being in a state of expectation toward the coming of a specific future event. Yet the concept of waiting as it has been used here involves the cultivation of *patience*, and patience implies a lessened

²² It may seem that what we discussed in the first theme of this chapter (regarding structure) may contradict what is being espoused in this section on the practice of waiting. The idea that a loosely-structured retreat fosters the ability of a retreatant to become more attuned to her desire and then make choices accordingly in some ways contradicts the image of a retreatant patiently waiting for the world to come to her and events to unfold organically. It seems that, for the women of this study, solitude fostered both the ability to discern their desire *and* act according to it (thus influencing the world around her) as well as to sit back in a more receptive stance and allow things to arise of their own accord. Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes that, “One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach – waiting for a gift from the sea” (p. 17). In cultivating both *choicefulness* and *choicelessness*, the women were learning to be with time differently, compared to their lives prior to solitude. They were learning both how to use time differently and be with time differently. In the earlier section on structure, we discussed the ways in which the women learned to *use time* differently, making choices and determining what to do next. In this section, on the other hand, we are discussing how women learned to *be with time* differently – greeting it with patience and openness and allowing it to flow without ‘pushing the river’.

groping toward future events, an ability to be with the passing of time in a less hungry and desirous and more accepting way. It seems that waiting as a practice of patience and receptive openness to what is implies an orientation toward the *present* even more so than toward the future. Annie Dillard contends that “the waiting itself is the thing” (p. 263). Waiting, for Dillard, is a practice that was valued in and of itself, for its own sake rather than as a mere means to an end, the end being the prized event that one expects to happen down the road. The revelations that can happen as a result of waiting are certainly precious (such as the appearance of Dillard’s muskrat or Karper’s deer), but the waiting is itself the thing. What does this mean? In the next section I will argue that one of the main temporal themes experienced by the women is the experience of *coming into present tense* and privileging the present more so than the past and future through their solitudes (or at least to a greater extent than they did prior to their solitudes). Through the practice of waiting, one does not wait for a specific future event to occur but is instead *in the process of coming into present tense*. Annie Dillard asserts that, “You don’t have to run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled” (p. 104). The women were, in a sense, *waiting for the present moment*.

Theme 4: *Becoming present*

In this section I will discuss this present-moment orientation that solitude seems to foster. Each of the women in this study, in one form or another, described how the experience of solitude fostered a greater degree of present-moment awareness than she had experienced in her life prior to solitude. For example, Anne Morrow Lindbergh

writes at many points in her journal of how being in solitude helped her achieve glimpses of present-moment awareness; for example: “The past and future are cut off: only the present remains” (p. 40). Joan Anderson described precious moments like these throughout her journal as well: “Just now there is no past, no future, only the present” (p. 98). How does solitude seem to foster a shift toward a present-moment orientation? One of the obvious answers to this seems to revolve around the various contemplative and meditative practices that most of the women carried out at points during their solitude – e.g., Dobisz’s Zen meditation, Dillard’s “waiting” for muskrats, Karper’s contemplative prayer, my meditative walks through the woods, etc. Each of these practices in some way fosters the ability to clear one’s mind and learn to focus one’s attention on the here and now, whether it is via attending to one’s breath, a sacred word, or an animal or tree. The lack of interpersonal distractions in solitude helped keep the women focused on these practices, and the lessened use of technologies such as TV, internet, phone, etc. helped keep them oriented to their immediate environment rather than toward more virtual forms of reality.

Exploring the past to reconnect with the present

Another factor that appears related to the shift toward a present-moment orientation seems paradoxical at first blush. Solitude provided the women with ample opportunities to explore their past in a vivid, concentrated way. The ample stretches of time and the lack of distractions and technological escapes that characterize most solitary retreats allowed memories to surface and to some degree return to life. Many of the women dwelled with their memories for some time, feeling into them and analyzing them

with the aid of journal writing. Solitude offered them the luxury of returning to both positive and negative memories, but it was the ability to return to negative past experiences that seemed more poignant and, eventually, healing and liberating. Solitude offered the women the time and space to revisit aspects of their past which they felt haunted by and effectively work through and ultimately release them. This process of revisiting and working through the past seemed to free them up to be able to be more so in the present time of their solitude. It seems that much of the early part of the women's journals was spent exploring their past, with the recent past being the initial focus and, deeper into the retreat, the distant past. It seems that there came a point for many of the women, however, where their painful past memories were largely plumbed, exhausted, and even to some extent healed, leaving them feeling as though they had just *caught up with themselves* in the present day.

The time frame for the process of becoming more present via an immersion in the past varied from woman to woman and seemed to depend largely on the total amount of time she had for her solitude as well as what she went into solitude to do. The time frame for my first retreat, for example, was limited to ten days, and I went into solitude not for expressly healing purposes but mainly for experimental purposes, as I was planning to undertake this dissertation topic and simply wished to immerse myself in the phenomenon of solitude. But although I did not enter solitude with the express purpose of reviewing and revisiting my past, I was called to do so for approximately the first four days of this retreat, after which time I started to become progressively more attuned to my immediate environment and oriented toward my present-moment experience. During those first few days, I seemed to have entered a strange zone of remembrance and

wrestled with certain concerns that troubled me and with questions from long ago that still needed answering. Solitude gave me the opportunity to delve into those questions and look at them undistractedly for long stretches of time. Over the course of a few days of delving deeply into those questions by writing about them, dreaming about them, walking with them, and contemplating them, I experienced a felt sense of resolution. I did not necessarily find clear-cut answers to these questions, but I did discover a greater sense of peace and lightness, as if I had let something go.

The juxtaposition of being with my memories and being present to the immediate world around me and the life that teemed there (trees, birds, the convent nearby) was powerful and profound for me. I loved the experience of getting lost in memory and losing contact with the room and then, after a period of intense indoor writing or thinking was over, opening the door and walking outside into the woods. The experience of feeling as though I was almost in two places at once and having my memories infuse my experience of being in the world was pleasurable to me because I could stay with the questions I was wrestling with, in a number of different ways, e.g., walking through the cemetery contemplating a memory versus reflecting on it through journal writing. Having the opportunity to stay with memories in different contexts helped shed new light on the psychological material I was working through and enable me to really stay with that material for an extended period of time. But as the retreat went on, this getting lost in the past and walking through the world in a state of remembrance dissipated and I felt far more freed up to simply be present to the world that surrounded me and the things I dwelled amongst. It was as if, after getting lost in a sea of memory, I could finally greet

the world on *its* terms more so than using it as a way of deepening my cognitive and affective experience.²³

The weakening of a future orientation

In tandem with this shift away from an orientation toward the past is a weakening of a future-orientation that appears to happen in solitude as well. In *Lived Time*, phenomenologist Eugene Minkowski (1970) argues that the average healthy human being operates according to a clear future bias. He argues that “our life is essentially oriented toward the future” (p. 80). This primarily future-based orientation seems particularly true of people living in a consumeristic, capitalist society dominated by the linear time model as discussed earlier in this chapter. Minkowski uses the term “elan vitale” to describe the basic metaphysical principle of *becoming* (as opposed to being) that is inherent in the individual and is the vital force that gives life a forward direction and enables the individual to carry out her projects and assert her personal ego via her achievements in the world. Minkowski asserts that,

In life, everything has a direction in time, has *elan*, pushes forward, progresses toward a future. In the same way, as soon as I think of an orientation in time, I feel myself irresistibly pushed forward and see the future pushed forward in front of me... I tend spontaneously with all my power, with all my being, toward a future. (p. 38)

Though we might “tend spontaneously” toward the future as our primary orientation when living in the world with others, it seems that in solitude our tendency to orient

²³ The role that the practice of *silence* played in this shift from a past (or future) to a more present-moment orientation is clearly a significant one. We will explore the power of silence in depth in a later chapter on the linguistic dimension of solitude.

ourselves toward the future lessens as we become progressively more attuned to the present moment.²⁴

In the women's lives prior to solitude, their time was largely structured around appointments with and responsibilities to the people they lived and worked amongst as well as the larger society in which they lived. In solitude, when there are no, or very few, appointments with others or an entrainment to larger social rhythms, there are few temporal boundaries, bookends, or goalposts that one can orient herself toward (except for the retreat's end point). As discussed previously, the women in this study came to orient themselves away from these specific interpersonal goalposts toward simple recurring cyclical events such as looking forward to an evening walk on the grounds, an experience which I reflected on during the eighth day of my first retreat:

Staying local, and present. It doesn't make much sense to think far ahead or even behind. I've noticed that my worries about the future that troubled me for the first few days...no longer do. I'm okay with letting them be. I'm thinking of how many clean shirts I have left, monitoring my bodily pains and hunger, massaging my feet with lotion, looking forward to my next walk on the grounds. ... Not three years from now, but maybe three hours from now.

While there is still a future focus in this particular example, that future is closer in time and closer to my bodily experience and the events of the natural world than the future that I would usually be oriented toward before going into solitude. Also, solitary retreat

²⁴ Minkowski contrasts the *elan vitale* with the phenomenon he calls "lived synchronism," or "vital contact with reality," arguing that these two "different sides of our being" (p. 73) coexist harmoniously throughout our lives – one, the *elan*, being more future-oriented, personal, achievement-oriented, egoic, and willful while the other, the lived synchronism, is more present-moment oriented, contemplative, and non-dualistic. With the phenomenon of lived synchronism or vital contact, the individual "vibrates in unison with the environment" (p. 73) and can be at rest whereas with the *elan*, there is a rupture between the individual and the world and the emphasis is on activity and becoming. It seems that, overall, solitude presented the women with the opportunity to cultivate this vital contact, this more contemplative, present-moment-oriented way of being in the world. It gave them the opportunity to spend more time cultivating *being*, rather than becoming. If it is true, as Minkowski contends, that a balance between the two forces creates a healthy equilibrium, it seems that the ability to cultivate vital contact for most people in today's world is limited. Perhaps solitude's emphasis on vital contact vis-à-vis the *elan vitale* is not necessarily unhealthy but, rather, could be said to serve as a corrective to our culture's overemphasis on achievement and the assertion of the personal ego via one's achievements in the world.

generally involves staying in a limited geographic area for long stretches of time and experiencing an overall decrease in one's activity level in the world and a deceleration of one's pace (this deceleration will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section).

Carrying out activities at a swift pace creates the sense of time moving forward and fuels a fundamental future orientation, according to philosopher Martin Wyllie (2005, p. 174).

When this activity decreases and the person slows down, it seems that the future could be understood to exert less of an influence on her existence.

This decreased future orientation seems related to the progressive quieting down of certain forms of thinking over the course of a solitary retreat. Almost all of the women in this project commented in one form or another on how their mental chatter eventually quieted down to a great extent, no doubt due to a number of factors that I have discussed or will discuss throughout this project (e.g., silence, simplicity, contemplative practices, etc.). If, in some sense, the past and future exist largely in the realm of conceptual thought – e.g., memories of and ideas about the past, hopes and plans for and expectations about the future – then if one can find a way to quiet her mind, she may have easier access to present-moment experience and be better able to become present to the world around her as it presents itself more so than how she would like it to be, according to her hopes and expectations. On day eight of my first retreat I also wrote in my journal that,

I'm learning how to live. I'm relearning how to live. More slowly, deliberately... Being with the real. Not ideas, concepts...not that they're not part of it. But they don't lead. They enhance and complexify and make sense. But they don't lead, or at least not as much.

Similarly, as discussed earlier, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) noted how, through solitude, her thinking shifted from “city-wise” to “beach-wise” and she learned

to allow thoughts to appear of their own accord, greeting them with a stance of openness and emptiness:

[The mind] begins to drift, to play, to turn over in gentle careless rolls like those lazy waves on the beach. One never knows what chance treasures those easy unconscious rollers may toss up, on the smooth white sand of the conscious mind; what perfectly rounded stone, what rare shell from the ocean floor...*But it must not be sought for or – heaven forbid! – dug for.* No, no dredging of the sea bottom here. That would defeat one's purpose. The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient. To dig for treasures, shows not only impatience and greed, but lack of faith. Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach – waiting for a gift from the sea. (p. 16-17, italics mine)

In solitude, Lindbergh's thinking became characterized by openness, emptiness, and choicelessness – qualities that imply a stance toward the world and her experience that accepts and engages with *what is* rather than what she wishes *would be or could be* according to ideas and expectations that she has about the world and herself. She became better able to receive and witness, rather than manipulate and lead.

Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) echoes this emphasis on “emptying” oneself in order to become more present to the world and capable of receiving its riches: “You wait in all naturalness without expectation or hope, emptied, translucent, and that which comes rocks and topples you...this is the real world, not the world gilded and pearled” (p. 263). The real, sensuous, textured, living world – the world as it is in this moment rather than how you remember it or would like it to be – came into greater relief in Dillard's solitude at Tinker Creek. But this “emptiness” not only requires a quieting down of certain forms of thinking; *a decrease in self-consciousness* is another vital ingredient in the cultivation of a present-moment orientation. Dillard contends that self-consciousness inhibits one's ability to achieve a present-moment orientation:

Self-consciousness...does hinder the experience of the present. It is the one instrument that unplugs all the rest. So long as I lose myself in a tree, say, I can scent its leafy breath...and the tree stays tree. But the second I become aware of myself at any of these activities – looking over my own shoulder, as it were – the tree vanishes, uprooted from the spot and flung out of sight as if it had never grown. (p. 82)

Dillard contends that self-consciousness is a product of living with others in society; it is a disease of city-living – “Self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies” (p. 82) – which results in the experience of perpetually biding one’s time and putting off the actual living of one’s life. Being alone in nature, on the other hand, presents one with the opportunity to become un-self-conscious and, as discussed in the previous chapter, “innocent.”

Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) experienced a radical degree of un-self-consciousness through her solitary Zen retreat, as well, and eventually felt as though her mind and body were starting to be in the same place at the same time: “One of the main purposes of my coming here was to get my mind and body in the same place at the same time. More than three months into this adventure, it’s happening more frequently” (p. 115). This mind-body alignment that Dobisz was moving toward is perhaps the essence of a present-moment orientation. Dobisz believed that if she could sustain this orientation outside of solitude, she could “actually be alive”: “What’s going on “outside” will match the “inside,” I won’t just be going through the motions of living – I’ll actually be alive” (p. 116). This reference to one’s “outside” coming into alignment with one’s “inside” as well as the experience of feeling oneself “turned inside out” runs throughout

the women's journals.²⁵ A greater present-moment orientation seems to be a key ingredient to this process of turning inside out.

Theme 5: *Slowness*

At the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard exhorts her readers to “Go up into the gaps” (p. 274). She explains that the gaps are “the spirit’s one home...the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God...the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through” (p. 274). By “gap” I understand Dillard to be referring to these moments of un-self-conscious, present-moment awareness in which one, in a sense, becomes that which one is attending to, turns inside out, and has a non-dual experience of self and other. She urges, “Go up into the gaps. ... Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock...a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can’t take it with you” (p. 274). In entering the gap, one is actually *living* time rather than saving it or biding it. This experience of the gap is brought about by a heightened present-moment awareness, a quieting of one’s thoughts, and a lack of self-consciousness – all of which the practice of solitude seems to foster.

Another basic temporal feature of solitude that appears to increase one’s ability to enter the “gap” is the process of deceleration. The quality of slowness is a central feature of solitude that has been implied in this discussion but deserves to be directly thematized.

²⁵ One example of this comes from the journal of Joan Anderson, who by the end of her narrative characterized herself as “a woman turned inside out” (p. 167), while another example comes from Annie Dillard, who described how, in waiting in stillness for the arrival of her beloved muskrats by the creek, retreated “outside herself”: “at the creek I slow down, center down, empty. ... I retreat – not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone” (p. 203).

All of the women, as they transitioned from their lives in the outside world to their lives in solitude experienced a general deceleration, a slowing of their pace that allowed them to have a different kind of experience of their thoughts, their bodies, and the world around them. The experience of downshifting one's pace seems directly linked to features of solitude previously discussed – namely the cultivation of patience, the ability to wait, and the experience of becoming increasingly oriented toward the present moment. Slowness also seems integral to the ability to discern one's desire, as was discussed in the first theme of this chapter. A solitary retreat in the context of nature and marked by technological simplicity appears to bring about a general slowing down of one's existence. Though slow time is a rare commodity in contemporary American life, it is a plentiful resource in solitude.

I was personally very struck by how long the days seemed to be and how slow the time seemed to pass, especially at the beginning of all three of my retreats. In fact, on my second day of my first retreat, I wrote, without any intended exaggeration, "This may have been the longest day of my life. I can't believe how much time there has been." Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) seemed to agree with this general sentiment, noting early on in her solitude: "With inexorable slowness, day flowed into day" (p. 48). The days and nights of my retreat seemed incredibly long, and there almost didn't seem to be enough activities to fill the time – partly because my options seemed fewer compared my life outside of solitude. Without anything to "do" in the sense of having chores, responsibilities, plans, etc., time seemed to stretch out endlessly. I noticed that when I would read books or write in my journal, time seemed to speed up, however. It seemed that the mental activity involved with those activities made the time seem to go

faster. During the first few days, I found that I craved periods of reading and writing as a way to escape this slowness. I would retreat into reading and writing to escape having to be on the retreat. During my third retreat, in the desert of New Mexico, time seemed to move even slower than it did during the previous two retreats. During the vision fast, I did not do any reading or writing; I also had no food or shelter or familiar things (beyond survival essentials) to engage with – all I had, basically was my sleeping bag and the desolation of the desert landscape stretched out before me, and the days and nights seemed to last forever.

Thus far I have cast the slowness of solitude in a somewhat negative light. While the lengthiness of the days really took me by surprise at first and I found myself seeking means of release from this experience of time through the virtual realities offered by reading and writing, this resistance to slow time and desire for escape from it shifted significantly over the course of the retreats. I came to eventually embrace and savor this slowness. This change happened not because my pace sped up but rather because my pace slowed down and I seemed to become progressively more calibrated to the pace of my surroundings – to my simple, low-tech hermitage and the pace of the natural world outside my door. The slowness of time became less of a problem and more of a pleasure, as I started to do things slowly and more carefully, in a more deliberate way, one thing at a time. I spent a large portion of my time in the outdoors during each of my hermitage retreats, and I dwelled exclusively in the outdoors during my third retreat in the desert. The slow and richly textured temporalities found in the natural world were in striking contrast to the homogenous, fast-paced temporality of machines which I engage with to such a great extent outside of solitude. Synching up with the slower temporalities

of the natural world took some time to adjust to. May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) echoed this point in observing that “machines do things very quickly and outside the natural rhythm of life” (p. 15). In contrast to this, the time Sarton spent gardening during her solitude helped her to slow down, develop patience, and achieve a state of “grace.” Even in her time – 1973 – she commented on the hegemony of fast time and the need for practices like gardening to restore a sense of inner peace and equanimity:

It is harder than it used to be because everything has become speeded up and overcrowded. So everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that forces us into the slow cycles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace. (p. 123)

Sarton’s words are perhaps all the more resonant for people living today, some forty years later.

Stretching a moment to an hour: Learning to savor time

Gardening and spending time ample amounts of time in nature, in general, can certainly be experienced as instruments of grace, but in the process of adjusting to a slower tempo, slow time can be experienced as difficult and boring. Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) experienced a sense of boredom at the start of her solitude and remarked that boredom is considered by some to be the “noonday devil” of hermits (p. 47). What solitude provides, though, is the opportunity to work with and hopefully move through one’s boredom by helping a person cultivate a different kind of relationship with time. It provides one with the opportunity to cultivate patience, attention, and present-moment awareness as well as one’s imaginative capacities – all of which could be understood to be antidotes to feelings of boredom in which one essentially rejects the present-moment and wishes she were somewhere else. Joan Anderson (*A Year by the*

Sea) found herself at one point early on in her solitude wrestling with the noonday devil of boredom and was reduced to sitting in her cottage and literally watching time slip through an hourglass: “In the past few days I’ve spent inordinate amounts of time watching sand slip through an hourglass ...Im reduced to simply watching time pass me by” (p. 94). Her relationship to time shifted dramatically over the course of her retreat, however, inspiring her to later reflect on those moments of boredom while sitting on the beach at the very end of her retreat:

I sit and grab handfuls of sand, letting the grains flow between my fingers, seeing in them my limitless future, a stark contrast from a few months ago when I was bored, counting the hours, staring into an hourglass that measured life in terms of a more prescribed amount of time. I am no longer just passing through the world, but digging deep and collecting moments. Time is a funny thing. Now that I am engrossed in life there is never enough time, but that was before I learned to stretch a moment to an hour and create multiple highs along the expanse of a day. (p. 165)

Anderson’s relationship with time shifted from one that was externally measured according to a pre-determined amount of sand trapped inside a (hu)man-made device to one that flowed freely through her hands on a beach filled with an unlimited, renewable supply. She worked through her boredom by learning to stretch a moment to an hour through slowing down and becoming more present to her life in the here and now. This becoming present involved coming to “favor experience over analysis” (p. 164) and, to borrow the words of Jane Dobisz, “actually be[ing] alive” (p. 116).

Slowness as a primary temporal feature of solitude is important to highlight since it is an experience that is not easily accessed or cultivated by many people living in contemporary, capitalist, Western culture. Slowness is not only a rare commodity but also an endangered commodity. In *Tyranny of the Moment*, Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that, “Slowness needs protection.” (p. 156) Slowness needs protection because

slow time doesn't fit well with the mainstream American cultural values of productivity and efficiency as well as our tendency to value quantity over quality. One could easily argue that speed is an affliction, even an addiction of sorts, in the contemporary United States and that spaces of slowness are precious and few. If one does not acclimate to a fast pace in this culture, one can easily fall through the economic cracks and/or be considered a social misfit and labeled as "slow" (i.e., cognitively disabled), inefficient, hedonistic, or slovenly. Taking one's time with a task or a sensual pleasure is often equated with a loss of productivity and a misuse of the precious "commodity" of time (seen as a commodity to be bought, sold, manipulated, and cut up into measurable chunks rather than experienced, felt, enjoyed, savored – i.e., *lived*). Eriksen argues that time in Western culture has become progressively more dense and accelerated, especially since the birth of the internet in the 1990s and the mass shift toward an information society. The result of this acceleration is a loss of the experience of *duration* and the experience of doing things *sequentially*, one thing at a time, with spaces in between to breathe and imaginatively wander and digress – an image that reflects the women's temporal experience in solitude. Rather than duration, one experiences "NOWS!" stacked on top of each other like a "hysterical series of saturated moments" (p. 2). The increasing acceleration and saturation of time in the Western world increases the density of time and threatens to "fill all the gaps" (p. 2). Eriksen asserts that, "All that is ultimately left, is a screaming, packed moment which stands still at a frightful speed" (p. 150). It is interesting to compare this image to that of Joan Anderson's progressive shift toward becoming able to, by the end of her retreat, "stretch a moment to an hour" (p. 165).

Reflecting on death

The darker and potentially painful side of slowness is not only that it can foster boredom but also that it seems to promote a heightened awareness of death. For some of the women, the slowness of their retreats seemed to promote a somber, melancholic sobriety and a disquieting sense of emptiness. Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*), for example, downshifted into an intensive zone of remembrance and analysis of her past until she reached what she called a “neutral point” where she faced the question of whether to end her life. At this neutral point, she looked her “own death in the face”:

So I’ve reached a neutral point: it makes no difference whether I live or die. I’m afraid of nothing that lies ahead of me, and I leave nothing behind me... To have thought myself so big, to have found myself so small. To be nothing... I’ve crossed a bridge unlike any other. I’m no longer among the living but among those who are about to die... I’m looking my own death in the face. (p. 170-171)

Here, Koller had finished her life review and found herself poised at a neutral point in the present with a powerful sense of personal emptiness and nothingness. This neutral-point was painful but seemingly necessary, as her psychological “death” enabled a rebirth to take place.

Similarly, I experienced a psychological “death” of sorts during my vision fast in the high desert of New Mexico as well. For four days and nights I felt perpetually cold and hungry and physically weak, existing without food or shelter or almost anything to “do” – no reading, no writing, no cooking, no walking (I was too weak and cold to do so). The feeling of being cold, hungry, and physically weak without the ability to distract myself or escape called me into the present tense in a way I had never before experienced. The time seemed endless, though it was only four days and nights. Everything – my body, the passing of time, the landscape – was incredibly slow. It was

not fun. I sat and waited and prayed and thought and looked and struggled to carry out a few symbolic ceremonies. The ceremonies were oriented toward letting go of the past, and the entire experience felt like a process of preparing to die. One of the ceremonies I carried out on the fourth day was actually called a “death lodge ceremony” and is a common practice for many people who undertake a vision fast. The death lodge ceremony involved creating a “grave” for myself that I physically entered, late on the fourth day. In this “grave” I laid down to “die,” closed my eyes, and could literally feel life pass out of me. Upon opening my eyes after an hour or so, I felt like a bag of bones and a skeleton of a person just looking up at the early evening sky. I stood up slowly and walked over to a sacred circle of rocks which I had assembled earlier that day on the opposite side of the grove of juniper trees that served as my shelter. I stepped into the circle and remained there until sunrise, staying up through the starry night and praying for a vision. As I understand it, the death lodge ceremony served to symbolize the death of my old self in order to prepare me to receive the vision that would help me move forward into a new life. It served to create a clearing. It was the in-between space I had waited for; it was the gap.

The majority of women in this study meditated on death during their solitudes. Alice Koller, of course, meditated on it quite seriously and concretely by deciding whether to live or to die. Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) arrived at a keen awareness of the time that remained during her solitude: “I’m fifty. I’ll be lucky if I reach eighty. I have 360 months left” (p. 87). With this stark realization came a newfound commitment to take better care of herself and live her life more fully and intensely. Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*), possibly the youngest woman in this study, fell ill for a few

days deep into her Zen retreat, leaving her unable to carry out her physical practices (e.g., bowing, cutting wood, etc.) and leaving her to lie prone on her bed for long stretches of time. There she began to reflect on her eventual death:

It occurs to me in this vulnerable state that regardless of the practice, the teachings, or what I attain or don't attain, I can't control this body. It will get sick, grow old, and die whether I like it or not... I guess I've always half assumed that someone was there in the background protecting me from this truth – God, Buddha, family, teachers, close friends. Today it hits me hard that there is no safety net. No one in the world can do this work for me. No one else can help me. Even God or Buddha can't save me. I have to do it myself. This is it. (p. 74)

These reflections, happening at a time of slowed activity after two months of silence and solitude, left Dobisz able to see the retreat through to its completion, with renewed fortitude and a radical sense of sobriety and clarity. Though she realized that “I have to do it myself,” this ruggedly individualistic attitude is characterized by humility and an acceptance of her physical limits and the stark reality of time. Her “pulling herself up by the bootstraps” mentality here is a non-narcissistic form of self-reliance that enabled her to move closer to her goal of getting her “mind and body in the same place at the same time” (p. 115) so that she wouldn't “just be going through the motions of living – [she'd] actually be alive” (p. 116). Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*), the eldest woman in this study, also reflected a great deal about her own aging and the death of those she loved during her solitude. Early on in her narrative, she observed that,

Without company I have had to remember that despair is always lurking beyond the circle of lamplight... If I took steps into any dark place I was once again afraid, despairing, and aware of how old I was and how young I would give anything to be. (p. 36)

She reflected on her fears of aging and her struggle with getting older throughout the journal until she came to a greater sense of acceptance and peace around time. The last

line of her journal reflects this shift well: “I have learned that, until death, it is all life” (p. 114).

Through their meditations on death and dying, each of these women became better able to become more present to, and embrace, the time that remained for them. Slowing down enabled them to cultivate an awareness of their own mortality – an awareness that seems difficult to grasp when one is moving at a perpetually fast pace. In some ways, we might understand our cultural addiction to speed as a widespread denial of death. On this point, Carl Honore, the author of *In Praise of Slow: Challenging the Cult of Speed* writes that speed can be understood as a way to distract ourselves from our mortality, and our cultural addiction to speed can be understood in terms of “the human desire for transcendence” (p. 33). The women in this study appeared to move closer toward an awareness of their mortality, and though these meditations were somber and difficult, their reflections served to open up an ability to appreciate the life that they did have – not the lives they envisioned for themselves in the future but rather their lives, their very being rather than their potential becoming, in the here and now.

Re-inhabiting space through the practice of slow time

Life moves more slowly in solitude, and through this general deceleration, the dimension of space comes into greater fullness and focus. Moving at a slower pace allows one to become more attuned to the particulars and specificities of the environment as it presents itself; it allows one to have more vital contact with the world and shift out of a conceptual, idealist stance into a more intimate engagement with real things. The decreased use of certain forms of technology in solitude is relevant to this point. Solitary

retreat, as it was practiced by the women in this study, is characterized by a decrease or complete absence in the use of technologies such as driving a car, watching television, using the internet or phone, etc. One could argue that each of these technologies, to some extent, thwarts one's ability to be present to the particularities of the things and beings in one's immediate environment. Walking instead of driving, for example, allows one to attend to the particular plant, animal, and mineral life along the path whereas one watches the landscape quickly go by through the window while driving (and/or watches her GPS map of the road as she drives). As pleasurable an experience as driving can be, it tends to create a sense of distance between the person and that which she is attending to versus the far more intimate experience of walking along the road. Similarly, watching television or using the internet, however pleasurable and enriching they may be, presents one with a very different experience of and engagement with space and the temporal particulars of things than, say, sitting in solitude at Tinker Creek and waiting for muskrats. Though the concept of "virtual reality" is a very complicated one, it seems that one can generally assert that there is a significant difference between sitting outside at the creek watching muskrats in real time versus watching a television program about muskrats or reading facts about muskrats on the internet. The "real time" experience allows for an encounter between *particular* beings in a *particular* time and place, not to mention a fuller perceptual experience of the animal in its environmental context that a "virtual" or conceptual experience of the muskrat simply cannot offer. Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that "Acceleration removes distance, space and time" (p. 149). If this is true, then perhaps deceleration through solitude might help add them back into the picture.

The worldwide “Slow Movement” seeks to protect the value and practice of slowness, and its popularity indicates that the culture is ripe for a reevaluation of slowness. While this movement is still relatively small, it has exerted a noticeable influence over public discourse and has helped people living in hyper-paced cultures have the language to articulate the ‘problem with no name’ that is our addiction to speed and to imagine and practice alternative values. The Slow Movement has applied the lens of slowness to many different aspects of our individual and collective lives, as reflected in its many sub-movements – slow food, slow sex, slow design, slow cities, slow money, slow parenting, etc. The Slow Movement does not seek to value slowness for slowness’s sake but to protect the value of slowness in a culture that tends only to value the opposite end of the temporal spectrum and stigmatize that which is slow. The Slow Movement is aiming for *the expansion of our temporal options* and the right and ability to consciously choose whether to move more slowly or quickly depending on what is called for and desired in the moment. A writer supportive of the aims of the Slow Movement, Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that, “The solution consists in taking conscious charge of one’s own rhythmic changes” (p. 159). Taking conscious charge of our rhythmic changes can foster a sense of freedom and help shift our temporality from that of constant speed throughout the bulk of the days toward an existence with greater temporal texture – slower, faster, moderately paced, with moments of rest and reverie in between. Having the ability and right to determine our own pace could be said to be one of our most important of freedoms. Slowness needs protection, and it needs advocacy.

But it is not just our personal lives that can benefit from learning to re-value slowness; our life as a collective society as well as the life of the larger ecosystem in

which we are embedded stands to benefit as well. A sub-movement within the Slow Life movement, the *Slow Food* movement highlights the latter point as it is centered around the value of environmental sustainability. Slow Food is not just supportive of heightening sensual pleasure and deepening interpersonal bonds via long and leisurely meals; it is also and perhaps more fundamentally about advocating for locally grown food and the protection of biodiversity. And perhaps one can only appreciate the local and one's fellow inhabitants of the local by slowing down enough to simply notice their existence. Being "slow" is about being appreciative of and present to the spatial dimension of our existence. During my first retreat I wrote, "It's amazing how a short solitary stint in a simple cabin can help slow you down and force you to be acquainted with the small things outside your door." Being slow is about *becoming acquainted*; it's about *being local*. The slowness that the women practiced in their solitude had both personal and political repercussions; it enabled the women to become better acquainted with the textures and rhythms of their own experience as well as the particularities of the more-than-human world in which they lived.

In summary

At the close of *Tyranny of the Moment*, Thomas Hylland Eriksen offers the reader an alternative image of time which could serve as an inspiration and guide for those living under the dominant temporal regime in the West. He refers to this image as "cottage time," and the image he portrays is quite similar to the image of time as it was lived by the women in this study. Eriksen describes how many Scandinavian people leave their homes in the city on a regular basis and travel to rustic, isolated wood cabins

in the wilderness and once there experience a slowing down of their existence and a renewed sense of peacefulness. He argues that the “temporal regime of the cottage” “deserves to be globalized” and applied in a variety of ways throughout our daily lives in order to combat the extremes of the fast-paced hyper-modern society in which we live:

The logic of the wood cabin deserves to be globalized. In the Scandinavian countries...the notion of the cottage...has special connotations. Only about half of the Scandinavian population have easy access to such cottages, but everybody is aware of their deeper significance. When one arrives at the cottage, which is located either in a remote and barren place in the mountains or on a deserted strip of coastline...the temporality of slowness takes over. One puts the watch in the drawer, leaving it there until it is time to return to the city. ... Many people, especially Norwegians, even refuse to have electricity in their cottages. ... Now, very few citizens in modern societies dream of a permanent return to such a state of blissful peace. We know too much about other kinds of pleasures, and understand the complexities of our present society too well for that kind of regressive dream to be truly attractive. Yet we should not forget that the temporal regime of the cottage differs radically from that fragmented, rushed regime which regulates so much of our lives in general. I should think that cottage time could profitably be applied to a wide range of activities, if not to activities that by default need to be carefully and accurately coordinated. (p. 157)

It was precisely this “cottage time” that the women in this study lived through their solitude. By going off to their hermitages, cabins, and summer cottages, or even just inhabiting their regular homes in a different kind of way, the women were entering into and living a different kind of time, indeed a very special kind of time.

This chapter described five main temporal themes to this “cottage time” that appeared across the women’s journals. The first theme involved the question of how the women chose to structure their time in solitude. Solitude offered each woman the opportunity to use her time in whatever way she saw fit, and it seemed that the more open-ended she left her time, the better able she became at *discerning her desire and making choices accordingly*. This was a significant accomplishment for some of the women, including Alice Koller, who retreated in the pre-second-wave feminist era of the

early 1960s and struggled with the inability to disentangle her desire from that of others and, therefore, in a sense, to locate her own subjectivity, her own “I.” At the start of her retreat Koller noticed that she had difficulty making choices about what to do with her time, and this led her to realize that her own sense of wanting was alien to her. Over the course of the retreat, Koller cultivated the ability to tune in to what she wanted on a basic level, and to make choices accordingly. In sharp contrast to Koller’s open-ended retreat was Jane Dobisz’s highly-structured Zen retreat. The rigid structure of Dobisz’s retreat left very little opportunity for her to make choices and follow her personal desires as they arose. This was indeed the goal of her retreat: to allow her personal will and desire to take a backseat, thus allowing her to surrender to her practice and the external dictates of her spiritual tradition. Through this process of surrender she learned a new way of being with her desire that offered her a newfound sense of freedom. She did not extinguish her desire but, instead, ceased to be at the mercy of it; in this way she, in a sense, *gained liberation from her desire*. For both Koller and Dobisz, desire came to forefront of their attention and they learned to live their desire differently. Both women discovered greater freedom – for Koller, a freedom *to* desire, and for Dobisz, a freedom *from* desire – albeit of very different kinds.

A second temporal theme that ran throughout the women’s narratives involved the cultivation of *a different kind of rhythm* from the one that normally characterized their days outside of solitude. Even if their retreats were largely unstructured, the women’s days tended to develop a certain rhythm which repeated its general sequence over time rather than being radically different from day to day. The women did not experience their time in solitude as chaotic, though most were living outside of the external

structures that normally contained and organized their time. The rhythm that their days tended to take on was both more aligned with their bodily needs and desires – desires for sleep, eating, exercise, etc. – as well as the rhythms of the non-human natural world. The women also learned to value natural temporal phenomena that were not readily valued by their culture – for example, learning from observing the ebb tide that it is natural and healthy to experience regular periods of stillness and rest. Though the rhythm they developed tended to be more regular than chaotic, it was also marked by intermittency, digression, and creative pauses between activities, creating a greater degree of texture to their days and more room for spontaneity, creativity, and upwellings from the unconscious.

The third theme discussed in this chapter involved the practice of *waiting*. In their solitudes, the women learned to cultivate their patience and their ability to wait. Waiting, in this context, implies being toward the world and one's own experience in an open, receptive way. It is about being “the bride who waits with her lamp filled” (Dillard, p. 212), awaiting the beloved and allowing it to appear of its own accord, resulting in a sacred marriage. Although waiting normally implies a future-orientation, the kind of waiting practiced by the women in this study involved, in a sense, a waiting for the present moment, or for their own present-moment consciousness and *presence* to the world. This present-tense orientation that is commonly experienced in solitude was examined more closely through the fourth theme in this chapter: *becoming present*. The women learned to cultivate their present-moment awareness through the rigorous practice of waiting, but it also seems that their ability to be more present-moment oriented was fostered, paradoxically, through spending a significant amount of time meditating on and

effectively processing material from their past. Many of the women performed a life review in solitude, in order to heal old wounds and make sense of the trajectory of their lives. The time spent immersed in the past seemed to serve the function of helping the women put certain troubling aspects of their past to rest. This in turn helped them become more present to their lives in the here and now and open up a new future horizon – a future that was far more immediate and closer to hand than a more conceptual future many years ahead. Overall, however, it seemed that the future exerted less of an influence on the women’s day-to-day existence than it did in their lives prior to solitude. Without appointments to keep or interpersonal events to look forward to and orient themselves toward, the women’s daily lives in solitude seemed to be lived with less of a thrust toward specific, planned, future events and was instead oriented toward the cyclical events of the natural world (e.g., the setting sun) or simple, humble, recurring activities (e.g., the evening meal). Thus it seemed that by becoming less oriented toward the past (at least after the initial stages of a retreat) as well as the future, the present moment came into greater relief.

The fifth and final temporal theme that ran across the women’s journals was that of *slowness*. The women experienced a deceleration in their pace while in solitude, and this slowing down seemed to have a number of different effects. Slowing down appeared to help the women develop a more intimate relationship with space and place and calibrate their temporal rhythms with those of the non-human natural world. Slowness also appeared to help them get in greater touch with their bodily, sensual experience and, in the words of Jane Dobisz, “get [their] mind and body in the same place at the same time” (p. 115). And finally, we discussed the potentially challenging aspects associated

with slowing down in solitude, namely experiencing a sense of boredom and spending significant amounts of time meditating on death. This latter feature of solitude was difficult for many of the women but seemed to help them become more present to their lives in the here and now and develop a greater appreciation for the time they had left.

The women's temporal experience outlined here offers an alternative image to the dominant hegemonic image of time described in the introduction to this chapter. If hegemonic time is linear and clock-based, solitary time is far more cyclical and nature-based. If hegemonic time is externally structured and universalized, solitary time tends to be structured around the individual's needs and desires. Whereas hegemonic time emphasizes *doing*, solitary time seems to emphasize *being*. Where hegemonic time is understood to be dematerialized and disembodied, solitary time is contextual and aligned with one's bodily rhythms. And where time and space are considered separate dimensions according to hegemonic time, solitary time helps reunite space and time, fostering a greater spatiotemporal solidarity and a more primordial and harmonious way of being in the world. Is solitary time, as it was experienced by the women in this study, "women's time"? It seems that there were many features of solitary time that do not align well with normative feminine temporality or how most women in this society tend to live time. Whereas many, if not most, women in this culture tend to experience "time poverty," the women in this study experienced an abundance of time. Whereas women in this culture tend to regard time as an enemy, many found greater peace with aging and mortality through their solitude. The women in this study also lived their time non- relationally (in the sense of direct interpersonal relatedness), and this was a radical break from the image of feminine temporality as fundamentally relational. The women also

tended to live their time in solitude in accord with their personal desire, representing another significant break from normative feminine temporality.

Through their solitude, the women became more deeply entrained to the rhythms of the natural world. I find this to be the most compelling point in this chapter. Attuning to the temporal rhythms of nature is an additional ingredient in the project of shifting from an ego-centric sense of self to what we referred to in the last chapter as an “eco-centric” sense of self. Becoming progressively more eco-centric means that one comes to experience her self as bound up with the more-than-human community in which she is embedded; this deepens her connection with not only the sensuous world of plants, animals, elements, and landscape but also with her own animal body and her human ancestors across time, as she comes to understand herself as part of an ancient lineage and an eternally recurring cycle of birth, life, and death. During my vision fast, I enjoyed a full moon on my third night out. I unexpectedly started to menstruate on that night, in a more physically intense way than I had in many years. This was a very significant event for me. Menstruating in the desert, unprotected, under the full moon left me feeling connected to my female ancestors in a way I had never before experienced. I also felt a powerful connection with the enormous desert moon that kept me company through the long nights. She taught me about myself, and about time. As a result of this experience, I felt myself to be a different kind of person, with a new but at the same time vaguely familiar, ancient form of wisdom. The process of reclaiming this knowledge – this embodied wisdom – it seems to me, as I write this many moons later, was truly feminist research.

In their critique of hegemonic time, Forman and Sowton (1989) argue that, “Linear time is not an abstract historical construct only: its manifestations are concrete and ubiquitous... Where historical process gains ascendancy over life process we face an impoverishment of our lives” (p. ix). As beings whose experience is mediated by language, historical process will always play a significant role in our experience. But making greater room for, representing, and even defending *life process* – that which has been largely relegated to the shadows in a culture committed to the control and exploitation of nature – while at the same time understanding that historical and life processes are woven together in complex ways, seems to me to still be worthy goal for feminist researchers.

As feminists...we must refuse to see our embodied connection to the world as either romantic or hedonistic and we must eschew the evolutionary approach which ties progress to greater freedom from our body and the natural world itself. (Forman & Sowton, p. x)

In describing the ways in which the women became more aligned and synchronized with the rhythms of the non-human natural world, I am contending that solitude helped create the conditions in which they could reconnect with “life process,” and in doing so put historical processes in greater perspective. This deepened connection with life process had profound implications for the individual women’s lives in this study and has important implications for feminist scholarship, as well.

Chapter 6: Body

Introducing the body

At first glance, it seems that the body is an existential dimension that can be grasped far more easily than the dimension of time. After all, bodies are *there*. You can see, feel, smell, relate to a body – your own or another person’s body – in a very real, hands-on way. Bodies are flesh and blood and bone. They are born and eventually die. It brings some degree of comfort and relief to be able to talk about the body in this way. *The body is real, this at least I know. It feels good to be on solid ground.* But the moment we begin to look closely at the body, we find that the body is so much more complex and subtle than it first appears. We find that the body is a site where the biological, psychological, cultural, historical, and political intersect. We find that the body is a material substance, an idea, and an experience all at the same time. Regarding the body in terms of its material substance may indeed be a very useful pursuit, as when a surgeon undertakes the extraction of a cancerous tumor from a suffering person’s body. But when trying to understand a person’s embodied *experience* – how she lives and takes up her body – thinking in terms of the materiality of her body is not enough. In order to understand *embodiment*, we have to expand our perspective to include what it means to actually *live* a body. This chapter serves as an attempt to understand the ways in which the women in this study lived their bodies throughout the course of their solitudes.

Embodiment is a primary existential dimension, perhaps the most foundational of the existential dimensions since we are, in a most basic way, our bodies. “Our bodies, ourselves” was an oft-heard cry during the second-wave feminist movement, and though

that sentiment may have gone out of vogue due to postmodern problematizing of both “bodies” and “selves,” second-wave feminists made the vital point that it would be a fallacy (and, indeed, a *phallacy*) to regard the self as separate from the body and the ways of thinking about and living the female body as irrelevant to the feminist project of liberation. But this notion that our “selves” are fundamentally intertwined with our bodies is certainly not a given in the history of Western intellectual thought, nor is it a taken for granted way of taking up our bodies in the minds of contemporary Westerners. The common way of taking up our bodies is founded on the notion of the *mind-body split* that is usually attributed to Cartesian thought but which Robert Romanyshyn (1989) dates back further to the advent of “linear perspective vision” – a technique that developed in artistic circles in 15th century Italy. Romanyshyn describes how this artistic technique fashioned a *way of seeing* that paved the way for Cartesian thought some two hundred years later and eventually grew into a “cultural habit of mind” which serves as the basis for our present-day technoscientific worldview. According to Romanyshyn, linear perspective vision is a viewer-based aesthetic that divides the world into clear-cut subjects and objects, spectators and spectacles. By practicing this cultural habit of mind over time, the modern Western person has become a very particular kind of self. By and large, the modern Western person has become a *spectator-self* who stands at a distance from the *world-as-object* and views this world-as-object as if through a mathematical grid. Considered to be at the disposal of the spectator-self, the world-as-object is quantified and measured for purposes of control and domination. Romanyshyn uses the symbol of the astronaut encased in his spacesuit looking down from a distance at the world to describe this modern sense of self; in living out his fantasy of departure from the

flesh and from the earth, the astronaut is the hero of our cultural technological dream that we have been progressively living out in the West over the past four centuries.²⁶

As spectator-selves living under a technoscientific paradigm, we have taken flight from the sensuous Earth, and we have also taken flight from our living, breathing bodies, as the practice of linear perspective vision relegates the body to the “object” side of the subject/object dualism. The body is viewed as dumb inert matter and as a medical *specimen* to be manipulated, dissected, diagnosed, and fixed. What is sacrificed in this way of regarding the body is our awareness of and reverence for the “lived body” – the sensuous, intelligent body of *experience*. The aspect of our existence that has been effectively abandoned with the practice of the technoscientific gaze is the “body of everyday life, the pantomimic, gestural body of lived situations,” the “animate flesh of daily life, the body of desire, memory, and movement, the individual, personal body of character in relation to the world” (Romanyshyn, 1989, p. 148). The abandonment of the lived body means that people have lost touch with the fullness of their everyday lived bodily experience. Interacting primarily with other humans amidst man-made things, we have also lost touch with a wide range of participation and communion with the more-than-human natural world. Part of the experiential fullness that is our birthright but which becomes suppressed under a technoscientific paradigm is this erotic connection with the flesh of the natural world – with the organic beings, elements, and things that invite us to think, move, sense, and feel in a variety of ways that are not available to us when spectating the world-as-object from the safety of our (hu)man-made, technologically-enclosed bubbles. This amounts to a suppression of our lived bodily

²⁶ We might substitute the contemporary postmodern icon of the “cyborg” for Romanyshyn’s astronaut to bring his work up to date.

potentials, as we remain cut off from vital contact with the natural world and disconnected from the fullness of our lived bodily experience.

It is important to note that women suffer a double burden under this technoscientific paradigm. Not only are they cut off from the fullness of their lived bodily experience and their connection with the natural world, but their bodies are objectified in a very particular way that often leads to a further crippling of their existential potential. Women's bodies have not only been constructed as specimens to be examined and worked on under the technoscientific gaze but also as *sexualized spectacles* for the viewing pleasure of others. Unlike the male astronaut in his spacesuit who can, in a sense, take leave of his specimen-body, a woman is tied to her body as sexualized or decorative object (which is further reduced to its separate sexualized body parts), is continually reminded of her object status in the world, and often comes to take up her body accordingly through both subtle and overt practices of self-objectification. A woman may thus exist as both a spectator-self and a spectacle for herself, leading to a curious sense of being "doubled," with her awareness split between spectating the world and spectating her own body (as well as other people's expectations of her body) at the same time. We will examine the impact of objectification and the practices of self-objectification (which are a result of such objectification) on women's bodily experience in greater depth later in this chapter.

Romanyshyn (1989) makes the overarching point that our cultural dreams of distance, departure, and disincarnation could be understood to be "masculine" dreams that serve to silence and control that which is "feminine": "we should note the very strong possibility that the dreams of departure and escape from matter are dreams of the

masculine psyche which have had as their correlate the repression and subjugation of the feminine” (p. 151). It is not only “feminine values” that may be said to be subjugated in this scenario but also living, breathing women. He argues that since the dawn of linear perspective vision, various “figures” have emerged on the cultural stage who could be said to “carry the shadow” of our technoscientific dreams. These “figures” – including the witch, the madwoman, the hysteric, and the anorexic – signal a return of the repressed and are for the most part feminine in character: “each of the shadows will carry the feminine form and each in its turn will be tortured, killed, confined, diagnosed, isolated, cured, treated, or otherwise silenced” (p. 151). Far more than characters in a cultural drama, these figures have been real women who have suffered under our mechanistic, ocularcentric, and essentially pornographic worldview. While the lived body in general – the experiential, sensuous, erotic body that participates in the world – is repressed under a technoscientific paradigm, women’s lived bodily experience is deemed particularly disturbing and in need of silencing.

This portrait of contemporary bodily experience is quite disturbing. It is important to note that this is a totalizing portrait which does not acknowledge that people in this culture live their bodies along a continuum of alienation and that there are many differences to be found amongst people across such variables as race, ethnicity, class, age, physical ability, rural vs. urban lifestyle, etc. Nonetheless, I believe that Romanyshyn’s overarching diagnosis of our hegemonic cultural habit of mind and its lived consequences is an accurate one. At the very least, I find it to be a useful one when thinking about and trying to articulate what has been sacrificed in the name of “progress.” Though much has been gained from our technoscientific habit of mind, gains which I

have not acknowledged here, much has been lost. The loss seems to center around our ability to live our bodies and relate to the body of the Earth in a subtle, intimate, reverential, and respectful way. How can we do this differently; how can we change this dire, lopsided state of affairs? Being that we are a people who identify primarily with the mind, perhaps the first place to start is to begin *thinking differently* about our embodiment and our body's relationship to the larger world. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents us with a vision that may help guide us in this quest. Reading his work and that of other writers in his lineage provide the reader with some hope and some breathing room. His efforts represent a shift from what Romanyshyn (2011) refers to as "thinking in exile" toward "thinking as homecoming" (p. 1), as his work serves to counter the mainstream tendency in Western thought to conceptualize the mind and self as fundamentally separate from the body. Merleau-Ponty helps us imagine and, indeed, *remember* a body that is less alienated and less objectified, a vital body that is more connected to the world. Though his image of embodiment does not resonate with most people's conceptual experience of their embodiment in the modern West, his writings reveal an experience of the body that we may indeed be able to reclaim, through practices geared toward the recovery of lived bodily experience and primordial contact with the world.

Merleau-Ponty's writings articulate a conceptual reunion between the mind and body by locating consciousness in the body and granting to the body a newfound degree of intelligence and subjectivity. His work displaces the dominant conceptualization of the "self," generally aligned with the mind and the notion of the Cartesian cogito, with the notion of the "body-subject." The body-subject is a way of thinking about and

articulating the “self” that does not imply a subjectivity separate from the body. For Merleau-Ponty, the “self” is fundamentally corporeal: *I am my body*. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, ecophenomenologist David Abram (1996) does a stellar job of fleshing out Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject:

If this body is my very presence in the world, if it is the body that alone enables me to enter into relations with other presences, if without these eyes, this voice, or these hands I would be unable to see, to taste, and to touch things, or to be touched by them – if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience – then the body itself is the true subject of experience. Merleau-Ponty begins, then, by identifying the subject – the experiencing “self” – with the bodily organism. (p. 45)

As incarnated subjectivity, the concept of the body-subject bridges the gap between mind and body. The body-subject is also always located in a context, or in a situation in the world. The body-subject is always already situated in the world since the body, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, is in a constant “silent conversation” with the world via perception (Abram, 1996, p. 52). Our body is our “first opening upon things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 111) since perception serves as our very means to accessing the world. As body-subjects, then, we are not isolated consciousnesses, locked away inside ourselves. Via our perception, we are always already participating in the world – in a sociocultural, historical situation and in a living, breathing ecosystem of which we are an integral part. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject is pertinent to this discussion because it avoids the common mistake of drawing a sharp distinction between the mind and the body and grants the body a certain degree of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty’s body is not the inert, medicalized, specimen body but is instead active and intelligent. Merleau-Ponty’s work helps us shift from a “high altitude” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 91) view of the world and the body where the “self” is, in Romanynshyn’s terms, a spectator-

self looking down from a distance at the body and the sensuous earth, to one where the “self” is radically embodied and an active participant in the world. This is indeed the “eco-centric” self that we have discussed throughout this project thus far.

In setting out to write about the ways in which the body is lived in solitude, it is important to have guides like Merleau-Ponty who can help us avoid falling into the trap of writing about the body from a distanced point of view in which the body is easily quantifiable, pinned down, and known with certainty. The women’s bodily experiences while in solitude were not easy to read; they were complex and nuanced and were for the most part implicit rather than explicitly reflected upon. In setting out to discuss the ways in which the body is lived in solitude, it is also important to have guides like Merleau-Ponty because his work and the work of others in his lineage articulate an awareness of bodily experience that the women seemed to have greater access to over the course of their retreats. In the silence and simplicity of their solitary retreats, more primordial, pre-reflective bodily experiences akin to those described by Merleau-Ponty seemed to become more accessible to them. A *recovery process* of sorts seemed to transpire. Philosopher David Michael Levin (1999) writes that each person, in the course of developing her personal subjectivity and becoming an “I” in the midst of our contemporary Western society experiences a suppression of pre-reflective experience. Levin asserts that this pre-reflective (or “prepersonal”) realm is potentially recoverable, however:

In the course of the ego-logical subject's formation, this prepersonal experience is not entirely destroyed, lost, or forgotten, but merely, as it were, deeply sublimated or suppressed: surpassed, but still preserved, and therefore, at least in principle, always to some extent potentially recoverable. (p. 222)

Solitude appears to be a potential pathway toward this recovery of pre-reflective bodily experience.

Thus far this discussion has highlighted the importance of understanding lived bodily experience. It is worth noting, however, that the validity and usefulness of the concept of “experience” has been called into question in contemporary intellectual circles, especially in the postmodern feminist literature. Though articulating women’s experience was initially the “bedrock of second-wave feminism,” more recent third-wave theorists have come to see the concept of experience, and especially “women’s experience” as terribly suspect (Kruks, 2001, p. 131). With regard to second-wave feminism, philosopher Sonia Kruks writes that, “the assertion of the specificity of women’s experience has been used to develop critiques of patriarchy and masculinism, and to insist that beginning from women’s distinct experiences is the sine qua non of any feminist project of liberation” (p. 132). Eventually, however, “multiple difference” as well as postmodernist feminist theorists voiced their criticism of the concept of women’s experience on two main grounds: that by speaking of “women’s experience” one effectively erases the differences between women and totalizes women’s experience into one monolithic construct, and secondly that by using the term “experience” one is presupposing the “existence of relatively stable “core” selves: selves that were conceived as indubitable authorities about their own experiences” (Kruks, p. 132). Instead of having a core self which has an experience, postmodern theorists tend to insist that “such selves and their experiences can never be other than discursive effects” (Kruks, p. 132).

Kruks utilizes Merleau-Ponty’s “body-subject” as a way to preserve and defend the concept of experience. She argues that the concept of the body-subject represents a

“third genus of being” that recognizes “selves as constructed neither solely from within nor from without” (p. 148). She contends that Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject, as he presents it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, maintains the Enlightenment view that subjects are capable of some degree of individual initiative while at the same time acknowledging the ways in which we are historical, situated beings that are subject to discursive effects, the latter point encapsulating the mainstream postmodernist perspective. The unique third variable that his work adds to the equation is his emphasis on sensual and affective experience as lived and felt through the flesh. One could argue that in removing this third variable from the equation we may be in a sense, *re-abandoning the lived body* by disavowing its knowledge and intelligence. Thomas Csordas (1997) argues that most scholarly work on the topic of embodiment in recent years (at least circa 1997, the time of his writing) has conceptualized bodies primarily as texts to be read and deconstructed. Refusing to speak from the standpoint of individual women’s embodied experiences out of a distrust in the validity and authority of those experiences could serve as a means of further silencing women’s voices and disavowing the intelligence of their bodies. Maintaining an emphasis on experience – while acknowledging that experience is always lived in the context of a specific social and historical situation – seems necessary to the aforementioned project of shifting from a practice of “thinking in exile” to “thinking as homecoming” (Romanyshyn, 2011, p. 1).

The remainder of this chapter seeks to flesh out the relationship between solitude and the body. How do extended periods of solitude affect a woman’s bodily existence? How is the body lived in solitude? The women in this study spent extended periods of time in solitude, and their retreats were marked by silence and simplicity and ample

contact with the natural world. What kind of body tends to emerge, given these conditions? What is the body of solitude? In the remaining sections of this chapter I will describe four main themes that emerged across the women's journals with respect to embodiment: *the transparent body*, *returning to the senses*, *the I-can body*, and *developing greater comfort in one's own skin*. The overall gestalt that these themes will bring into view is an image of remembrance and return, a coming home to something that was abandoned somewhere along the way. Far from fostering an experience of the body as alienated from the world, we will find that solitude appears to create the conditions for the possibility of greater bodily openness, vitality, and connectedness to the more-than-human world. We will discover that the practice of separating from other people for an extended period of time may serve to awaken our sensual and perceptual capacities and call us home to the more-than-human world – and thus to unfamiliar aspects of *ourselves* – in unexpected ways.

Theme 1: *The transparent body*

Going off-stage

One has virtually no sense, throughout the reading of the women's journals, of what the women looked like physically. And in many cases, it was easy to forget the fact that the journals were written by women at all, with the exception being if the woman documented an interaction with another person (especially if that other person was male), reminding the reader of the writer's gendered position in the world, or when the writer explicitly reflected in her journal about something related to her experience of being a woman. This lack of cues regarding the gender of the writer may parallel a shift in the

woman's identity toward a sense of herself as not so much "a woman alone" (the title of Alice Koller's narrative) to, simply, "a person alone." It is not that the materiality of body itself disappeared from the women's view. Indeed, the organic nature of the body came into sharp relief for some of the women in the absence of technologies that normally serve to cover up such "distasteful" realities.²⁷ But the feminine body – the gendered body – seemed to make somewhat of a disappearance act during solitude, as it was temporarily permitted to go off-stage. We might think about this disappearance act as being related to the fact that solitude presents the practitioner with a "time out" from a social world, a social world that demands specific social performances. One such performance is the performance of gender, or in the case of women, the performance of femininity.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler (1988) asserts that femininity and masculinity are not essential, internal aspects of persons but instead amount to embodied performances that take place on a social stage. These performances consist of a series of acts that get cited repeatedly, over and over again, giving the viewer the impression that the performer has a feminine or masculine essence. Butler argues that,

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (p. 519)

These gendered performances are learned from a very young age and become ingrained in one's bodily habitus over time. It would be naïve to assume that taking a temporary time out from the interpersonal world by retreating into solitude would allow one to put

²⁷ I will be discussing this further in the aptly named "Coming to terms with one's shit" sub-theme of Theme 4: "Developing greater comfort in one's skin."

her gendered performance, learned over a lifetime, to rest entirely; one never gets to go off stage completely. Yet for some women, having the opportunity to cease certain everyday gendered practices might be an opportunity to have a new experience of their bodies and might provide them with a new standpoint on the role that those practices play in their lives. It may be the first time since childhood that they have had the luxury to partially close the curtain for an extended period of time and take a rest from a certain degree of performativity.

One of the obvious ways in which the women were able to take a partial time out from the performance of femininity – or the practice that feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life*, calls being a “female impersonator” (p. 130) – is through the cessation of certain feminine bodily disciplinary practices that were previously part of their daily routine. Many of the women made explicit reference to how, during their solitudes, they forewent practices such as applying makeup; fixing, dyeing, tweezing, shaving, and depilating their hair; dressing in a “becoming” or fashionable way; wearing deodorant; or even bathing on a daily basis. The cessation of such practices may seem trivial, but for many women they constitute a daily regime that they have carried out for a large portion of their lives which plays a large role in constituting their female identities and helps them negotiate feelings of shame that arise from being female in a patriarchal, sexist culture. If these practices constitute a vital part of one's identity as a female, it might be argued that by intentionally ceasing these practices, one's sense of self may experience a shift or an opening of some kind. Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) writes of her solitude, “Being here alone, I don't have to put on a face at all” (p. 61). Putting on a face, for her, is both literal – applying makeup –

and also refers to what she considers to be her habit of performing like an actress on a stage in front of an audience. She goes into solitude to try to tap into an experience of herself and the world that lies somehow outside of the performative realm. For Koller, putting certain feminine bodily disciplinary practices to rest temporarily is a necessary and effective place to start as these practices constitute a significant part of her structure of suffering. We might go so far as to consider the cessation of these practices as representing a movement toward *un-becoming woman* – playing off the de Beauvoirian adage that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 267). If becoming a woman consists of, in part, learning to incorporating these feminine disciplinary practices into one’s habitual bodily repertoire and then repeatedly citing them throughout one’s life, then intentionally ceasing these practices for an extended period of time may constitute a subtle process of *de-gendering*. At the very least, it may provide the retreatant the opportunity to simply have a different kind of bodily experience and reflect on the role that these practices play in her life.

Covering the mirror

Solitude thus provided the women with the opportunity to loosen up regarding their habitual bodily practices aimed at decorating, depilating, deodorizing, and making the body appear “acceptable” and attractive in the eyes of others. These changes in their daily routine meant that the women spent less time looking at their reflection in the mirror than they did prior to solitude. This decrease in mirror gazing can be understood to reinforce the sense of forgetfulness that the women seemed to have of their gendered bodies. For all three of my retreats, I went further than merely decreasing my mirror

gazing and decided to take mirrors out of the equation of my solitude entirely by covering the mirrors in my hermitages during my ten-day retreats and leaving the mirror behind entirely during my vision fast in the desert. These retreats represented the longest period of time I had gone without seeing my reflection since early childhood.

My decision to cover the mirror was inspired, in part, by an essay I had read by the poet Leslie Adrienne Miller (1992) called, “Alone in the Temple: A Personal Essay on Solitude and the Woman Poet.” In this essay, Miller describes the experience of having worked the graveyard shift at roadside motels throughout her undergraduate and graduate school days, to pay for school but also to have some socially acceptable solitary time to work on her writing.²⁸ She writes about how, once she had descended into her solitude in the middle of the night, she would sometimes unexpectedly catch her reflection in the lobby mirror, which served to call herself back to the appearance of her bodily self and thus her gendered situation in the world – a situation that she had the luxury of forgetting for a few hours, lost in a state of poetic reverie. She writes,

Sometimes I caught the image of myself returned to me in the large gilded mirror in the lobby, and I was surprised to see a woman’s face and body, young, vulnerable, things I had forgotten about myself momentarily, alone as I was in my interior, which seemed to have no sex. (p. 207)

Prior to this reminder via the reflection in the mirror, she existed in a different world and her consciousness was freed up to focus on other things. She was living *a different kind of body* prior to glimpsing her reflection in the mirror; once the glimpse took place, the anonymous poet became Leslie, the young vulnerable female. For Miller, her reflection in the mirror served to remind her of how her body appears to others from the outside.

The mirror represents the gaze of the other by showing us the potential perspective of

²⁸ It was considered socially acceptable since she *had* to do it, ostensibly, to pay the bills, and was therefore allowed to do it.

others on our bodies. I wanted the mirror out of the equation of my solitude because I wanted to decrease the power of the imaginal perspective of the other on my experience and move closer toward experiencing something akin to Miller's genderless sense of self. I didn't want to be constantly reminded of myself in terms of how the world sees me. I didn't want to be perpetually called back to the surface of my body and therefore my gender; I wanted to be called to something else, something more.

Though the other women did not necessarily ban mirrors from their solitudes (though it seemed that they engaged with them far less than they probably did outside of solitude) each of them lived primarily outside of the direct gaze of other human beings during their solitude. This is significant for a number of reasons. Because one's personal identity develops and is maintained in the context of the gaze of the other, removing that gaze for an extended period of time may have fostered overall shifts in the women's sense of personal identity – fueling the process of “identity deconstruction” that we discussed in the chapter on space. This may be true with regard to one's mirror reflection as well. If the dawning of self-awareness is linked to our ability to recognize ourselves in our mirror reflection, then perhaps the removal of such a mirror, even for such a brief time as ten days, may further fuel the process of identity deconstruction. Merleau-Ponty (1964) writes of how the dawning of self-awareness via our recognition of ourselves in the mirror “makes possible a sort of alienation”:

I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately, to be; I am that image of myself offered by the mirror... Thereupon I leave the reality of my lived *me* in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious, or imaginary *me*, of which the specular image is the first outline. In this sense I am torn from myself, and the image in the mirror prepares me for another still more serious alienation, which will be the alienation by others. For others have only an exterior image of me, which is analogous to the one seen in the mirror. Consequently others will tear

me away from my immediate inwardness much more surely than will the mirror.
(p. 136)

Merleau-Ponty makes the point that it is both our interactions with the mirror as well as the gaze of the other that leads to a basic degree of alienation from our lived bodily experience which we previously had access to. As the women in this study removed themselves from the gaze of the other, and in my case also the mirror, during their retreats, we might assert that this movement away from such reflective surfaces and reflective interpersonal engagements may have helped them not only lose sight of their gendered situation and foster a certain degree of identity deconstruction but may have also helped them recover an awareness of certain forms of pre-reflective bodily experience. This is not to assert that the women were essentially returned to an infantile state of syncretism with the world prior to self-recognition in the mirror, but rather that they were able to temporarily lose sight of themselves as an object-body and partially heal this sense of alienation from their own lived experience. Avoiding contact with a mirror helps us think about ourselves outside of the limited definition that our mirror image provides for us, and it may help us to feel into the thickness of our own lived experience rather than staying attuned to the visible surface of our bodies. Lessening our contact with mirrors as well as the human gaze may also encourage us to seek our reflection in other non-human beings and things (e.g., animals, trees, etc.), as discussed in the chapter on space, thus creating an expanded sense of personal identity.

It is also important to note the basic but essential point that removing the gaze of other people afforded the women the luxury of bodily privacy and anonymity in a culture in which women's bodies are largely on display and subject to public scrutiny. The rampant sexual objectification and bodily scrutiny that women experience in this culture

can have psychopathological consequences that solitude may help to address. On the public stage, women's bodies (especially young women's bodies) are often reduced to their sexualized body parts under the objectifying gaze. The objectifying gaze causes the body to become reified or *corporealized*, according to phenomenological psychiatrist

Thomas Fuchs (2003):

Once grasped by the other's gaze, the lived-body has changed fundamentally: ... it has become a body-for-others, i.e., object, thing, naked body. The other's gaze reifies or "corporealizes" the lived-body. This applies especially for the objectifying...gaze: it throws the person back on her own body, it seizes, captivates and subjects her. The "corporealization" by the gaze of the other paralyses the lived-body and petrifies it for the moment. (p. 226)

In this movement of corporealization, the body no longer has access to pre-reflective lived bodily experience, or what Fuch's calls "lived bodiliness" (p. 225). In corporealization, "the body loses its prereflective, automatic coherence with the surrounding world" and "our spontaneous bodily expressions are disturbed, blocked, or objectified by an inversion of our attention upon ourselves" (p. 225). Thus experiencing the objectifying gaze on our bodies seizes us, takes us out of a sense of co-extensiveness with the world, and throws us back on ourselves, disrupting our ability to move through the world relatively smoothly and freely.

But women often have this experience of alienation from their lived bodiliness even in the *absence* of the objectifying gaze of the other as well. What is perhaps even more disturbing about bodily objectification is that it often leads to a situation in which women come to habitually objectify their *own* bodies through constant low-level practices of self-surveillance and body monitoring. This phenomenon is referred to in the mainstream psychological literature as "self-objectification." Feminist theorists in the existential-phenomenological tradition have written about this subtle but pernicious

phenomenon for quite some time, though it has only been recently articulated and named in the mainstream psychological literature (see Fredrickson 1997). In her landmark 1974 essay, “Throwing like a Girl,” phenomenologist Iris Young (2005) writes that due to bodily objectification experienced from a young age, women learn to be ever aware of their bodies and to constantly monitor their bodily appearance. Young asserts that this constant level of bodily surveillance and self-referral makes it difficult for the woman to be a “pure presence” to the world: “Feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world because it is referred onto *itself* as well as onto possibilities in the world” (p. 38). According to Young, this lack of “pure presence” to the world that so many women, in her estimation, experience results in a stunting of existential potential (p. 35). Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, also wrote about this phenomenon 25 years prior to Young’s landmark essay. She describes how bodily objectification experienced from a very young age can cause a girl to begin to feel as though her body is “getting away from her”:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and to show her flesh. (p. 308)

Her body begins to “get away from her” due to the objectifying gaze of the other, which she comes to eventually apply to her own body:

She becomes an object, and sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside. (p. 300)

This “doubling” creates a curious low-level dissociation in the girl, involving seeing and feeling from a place that is her own but simultaneously standing apart from herself, watching herself as a man might watch her.

This concept of “doubling” cuts to the heart of self-objectification. In his classic book, *Ways of Seeing*, English art critic John Berger (1990) captures this doubling phenomenon beautifully:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. While she is walking across a room or while she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood on she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider herself the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. (p. 46)

And here as well, in this oft-cited passage:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed, female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (p. 47)

Berger’s contention that “the surveyor in herself is male” makes it clear that self-objectification does not simply involve a sense of self-consciousness with regard to one’s appearance; it involves something much more deeply ingrained on a psycho-corporeal level. With self-objectification, women come to “internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves” (Fredrickson, 1997, p. 173). This “internalization” of an observer’s perspective may, in a sense, be understood as the *incorporation of the male gaze* – and the mirror which represents that gaze – into one’s psychological, or psycho-corporeal life, amounting to a significant crippling of one’s ability to sit comfortably in her body and be a “pure presence” to the world around her.

Contemporary psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (1997) uses more mainstream psychological language to describe the potential negative effects of this “internalization,” asserting that practices of self-objectification put a woman at risk of various forms of psychopathology including increased opportunities for shame and anxiety, reduced opportunities for peak experiences, diminished awareness of internal bodily states, and a much greater risk for unipolar depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders (p. 173).

We can hypothesize that abstaining from mirror gazing and removing the direct gaze of the other from a woman’s experience during solitude may foster a shift in a woman’s sense of her body as an object, as something which is “foreign to her” (de Beauvoir, p. 308). Though the women in this study did not address this point directly, there is indirect proof of this shift in our data, as the women’s greater bodily acceptance, comfort, and vitality indicates a decrease in alienation from their bodily experience and a sense of feeling more aligned with, rather than at a distance from, their flesh.

The reappearance of the female body-as-object with the arrival of the male gaze

Though the shift toward de-objectifying the body is difficult to directly capture by quoting excerpts from the women’s journals, we might attempt to analyze this phenomenon by looking instead at examples when the women found themselves suddenly thrown back upon their bodies-as-objects with the arrival of another person on the scene of their solitudes. We will take note of the shifts in consciousness that they experienced with the reintroduction of the gaze and the ways in which the body became directly thematized on those occasions whereas it was previously an invisible part of their

lived experience. This may help us understand the power that the other's gaze held for these women and what the privacy and anonymity of solitude enabled them to experience a reprieve from.

Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) had been living in solitude (without any direct human contact) on Nantucket for nearly three weeks when she heard a knock at the door one morning: "The sound is so extraordinary that for a moment I think I may have misheard it" (p. 82). A young man was at the door asking permission to enter her garage to pick up some of the belongings that the owner of the cottage had allowed him to store there months earlier. Upon hearing the knock, Koller's awareness immediately fell on the appearance and vulnerability her body, which was nearly nude at the time, having just stepped out of the shower. A glimpse of her appearance, previously hidden from the reader's view, suddenly breaks into her narrative: "I stand, water trickling down my body...I feel helpless wearing nothing but a robe" (p. 82). As Koller didn't feel comfortable allowing the young man to be in the garage unsupervised, she decided to get dressed and join him outside. Within seconds, she automatically began to consider how she might construct her appearance so as to be perceived as more attractive in his eyes. She attempted to talk herself out of this consideration but then decided to apply some makeup anyway – a feminine disciplinary practice that she had put to rest during her retreat up until the arrival of the knock on the door. She writes,

I don't need to be pretty for this boy. I don't need makeup. I start down the stairs, and then hesitate. Well, some. Not lipstick, though. I go back to the mirror, swiftly brush color on my brows, and go outside to the boy. (p. 82)

Prior to this interruption, the reader has little sense of what Koller looks like and what she wears from day to day during her retreat, and this appears to mirror her own lack of

consciousness about her appearance as well. The arrival of the other's gaze summons her back to a particular way of relating to her body and to a significant degree of consciousness regarding the appearance of her physical body. This was very significant for Koller. Throughout her solitude, she was engaged in a "fight": "I'm fighting to break out of the pattern of what I've been doing for, my God, 24 years" (p. 17). Part of that pattern included a crippling degree of self-consciousness regarding the appearance of her physical body and a tendency to display and comport her body in accordance with what she believed to be other people's desires. Hers was a fight to reclaim her body as desiring *subject* rather than a decorative *object* of desire. Becoming a desiring subject, for Koller, involved the temporary removal of the gaze of others so that she could come to know herself outside of the reflection she found there, to feel into her experience, and to become reacquainted with the environment around her.

I was also summoned back to my object-body via the arrival of the gaze of the other on the scene of my solitude during my first retreat. Similar to Koller, my interaction with another person, after a stretch of time alone, brought to light the extent of my own automatic concern with the way in which others perceive my physical appearance and the habitual checking behaviors that I so often carry out in the presence of others. While eating lunch on day two of my first retreat, for example, I was surprised to hear a knock on the door of my hermitage. I had been hoping for ten days of silence and a near-total lack of interpersonal engagement and then I heard this sound. I answered and a woman dressed in a nun's habit asked me in broken English whether my hermitage was cabin #3. I broke my silence and directed her down the path to #3, the last cabin in the row, deeper into the woods. After we said good-bye and I closed the door, I quickly

walked straight to the bathroom to check my reflection in the mirror (finding that the looking glass was covered, of course), wondering what I must have looked like to her, feeling somewhat ashamed by my most likely disheveled appearance and the possible food in my teeth from lunch. On reflecting on this experience afterwards, I wrote:

This lovely Asian nun just stopped at my hermitage thinking it was hers. She's staying in hermitage 3. I liked her spirit. I spoke... I immediately wondered if I had food in my teeth and what I looked like. I went to the bathroom immediately and then realized what I was doing.

In that moment I realized the extent to which my automatic response to her presence was a concern about the external appearance of my body and a sense of embarrassment regarding how I might have appeared to her. For a day and a half at that point I had had the luxury of not being conscious of such concerns. Solitude gave me a reprieve from having to be conscious of my appearance, but it also gave me the open time and space and clear mindedness to notice, during the few times that the gaze of the human other appeared on the horizon, just how much this mode of self-consciousness tends to dominate my experience in my daily life and how different an experience it represented than the one that had predominated in my solitude.

A second encounter with the human gaze during this same retreat was even more illuminating. Through this interaction I was reminded of my situation as a woman and was again called back to the surface of my body after many days of relative freedom from such concerns. By day six of this retreat, I had experienced many days of unbroken silence, and except for the aforementioned interaction with the nun on day two, I had not experienced the direct, up-close gaze of another person during my time in solitude. On this sixth day, I was taking a walk along the narrow lower path of the cemetery, which was separated from the main part of the cemetery by thick honeysuckle and blackberry

bushes and was bordered on the other side by a chain link fence. Walking along, I felt a generalized sense of lightness and peacefulness and a growing sense of closeness with my surroundings. I don't remember thinking about anything in particular. Later, in my journal, I described this feeling thusly: "I walked, gloriously, in the damp heat of the day, alive, free, open." Then, suddenly, I saw a bear running straight toward me on the path, maybe 100 or 200 yards ahead. I could not believe my eyes at first and then felt a degree of fear that I believe I had never felt before. I immediately turned and noticed a narrow opening in the bushes that led up a hillside into the main part of the cemetery. My heart beating wildly, I walked quickly through the bushes and up the hill without looking back, taking note of a lone statue of a child holding a flower on the hillside, thinking that this would be an appropriate place to die if it were to come to that. I spotted a car in the cemetery located a significant distance ahead and started running toward it. Three women were planting flowers at a gravesite near the car, and I caught my breath enough to tell them about the bear, though my words initially came out in a whisper, as I was in shock and hadn't used my voice in several days. One of the women, a mother to the other two, became frightened and called the police, who then contacted the animal warden. The four of us got into the car and stayed there, in case the bear remained in the vicinity, waiting for the authorities. The animal warden finally arrived and took a statement from me. He made it clear that he was very skeptical of my report since he had never heard of a bear sighting in that area before. He was convinced that I had seen a big dog.²⁹

²⁹ I turned out to be an accurate reporter as the bear had made the local news that evening, with many of the nearby residents making the same report after I had. I was informed of this by a nun who checked me of my hermitage at the end of my retreat. She told me that the bear had eventually been shot by the authorities but continued running despite its injuries and ultimately escaped capture.

The police officer then invited me inside his car so that he could take another statement from me. After I gave my statement, he insisted on escorting me on foot back to my hermitage while carrying a shotgun, in case there was indeed a bear and it was still in the vicinity. Once in the woods, the officer began commenting on my appearance and overtly flirting with me. Though I was still in a state of shock, I clearly remember him saying the following: “You don’t look a day over 24 years old, how could you be 35?” “Are you married?” “How can you possibly still be single?” “You are such a *beautiful girl* – just look at you!” “What a face!” “If I wasn’t married I would snatch you up immediately. What a catch you are!” “Why are you alone out here?” He said all of this as he was escorting me to my hermitage, which was deep in the woods on the convent property, while carrying a loaded shotgun. I for the most part remained quiet and answered him with one or two word replies. My unwashed hair was tied back, I was not wearing deodorant and had not bathed for some time, I was wearing an old t-shirt and sweatpants, and I had not seen my reflection in six days, let alone spoken for those six days. I went to the woods to remove myself from the eyes of others, especially men. I went there to be invisible and anonymous in the hopes of experiencing a new kind of freedom, and this was what happened. This experience was striking on so many levels. The most striking aspect of this experience was my encounter with the bear, but my interaction with the police officer was also intense, albeit in a different, surreal, almost cartoon-like way. His overt objectification of my body and unsolicited commentary on my physical appearance, in the context of my having just undergone a very frightening experience in the middle of a silent solitary retreat in a sacred space was striking to me nearly to the point of laughter. The contrast between being objectified and corporealized

and reminded of the appearance of my body by a man with a gun in the middle of the woods and the sense of freedom, openness, and lack of explicit consciousness of the appearance of my body that I felt prior to the interaction served to inspire a great deal of reflection on the role of a particular kind of gaze in a woman's experience of her body – or at the very least, my experience of my body.

Toward bodily transparency

I have thus far argued that solitude offers women the possibility of a reprieve from having to play the role of “female impersonator” by allowing her a break from feminine disciplinary practices and feminine performances as well as a certain degree of shelter from the potentially objectifying gaze of the other. I have also suggested that, through solitude, she may experience a decrease in her tendency to objectify her own body and monitor her physical body as she moves through the world. Her attention becomes freed up to focus on other things and she becomes able to attend to her environment in a new way. In so doing, she shifts from an experience of the body as frequently *corporealized* to becoming far more *fluid, vital, open, spontaneous*, and indeed, *lived*. We might understand this as a movement toward the recovery of pre-reflective bodily experience, or the recovery of a primordial experience of *lived bodiliness* that oppression via objectification serves to disrupt or suppress. As previously discussed, David Michael Levin (1999) suggests that although growing up in the contemporary West generally involves some amount of suppression of this primordial lived bodiliness, there is a possibility of its partial recovery: “This prepersonal experience is not entirely destroyed, lost, or forgotten, but merely, as it were, deeply

sublimated or suppressed: surpassed, but still preserved, and therefore, at least in principle, always to some extent potentially recoverable” (p. 222). Solitude appears to be a potential pathway toward this recovery. Though many factors no doubt contribute to this recovery process, it seems that the removal of mirrors – actual mirrors as well as the gaze of the human other – contributes to this movement toward the recovery of something, some way of being in the world and sitting in one’s body, that is too frequently lost in the process of becoming a woman.

In a sense we might say that many of the women in this study learned to wean themselves off of their reliance on reflective surfaces to know who they are and orient themselves in the world accordingly. Alice Koller, for one, made great strides over the course of her solitude in terms of letting go of her reliance upon mirrors to tell her who she is and cultivating an ability to move through the world more freely and smoothly, rather than feeling self-consciously double-backed on herself. Early on in her solitude the full realization of her reliance on mirrors hit her:

I walk: desk to couch, couch to table, table to fireside chair, chair to stove, stove to refrigerator, and there I lean, crying. The endlessness of reflecting myself in other people’s eyes. Turn a pair of eyes on me and instantly I begin looking into them for myself. I seem to believe there is no Me except in other eyes. I am what I see in your eyes, whoever you are. (p. 94)

Later, approximately one month into her retreat, Koller needs to leave the island for the first time since her arrival in order to visit a doctor on the mainland. By that point in her retreat, she had made some significant gains in terms of lessening her reliance on such external mirrors and had come to understand the ramifications of those mirrors in terms of her ability to be present to the world around her and truly feel herself to be part of the world rather than perpetually thrown back on herself. She had experienced a newfound

sense of movement and freedom. The prospect of returning to the mainland and interacting with old acquaintances left her afraid that she would fall back into her old patterns of looking for her reflection in the eyes of others and performing like an actress on a stage. Before setting out on her journey, she gave herself the following advice: “I can’t let anything cushion or come between me and my juxtaposition to my surroundings” (p. 115). She had come to realize that her practice of endlessly “reflecting [herself] in other people’s eyes” had gotten in the way of her relationship with her environment. She realized that it served as a barrier to her ability to be present to the immediacy of the world around her.

At the end of her retreat, she commented on a new kind of experience that was happening more frequently: “The sense of newness now is that the script is gone. I *find* myself thinking. I find myself talking” (p. 215). By the end of her journal, the overarching self-portrait she sketches out is no longer of a deeply troubled, highly self-conscious individual but rather a sense of lightness, spontaneity, and intimacy with her surroundings (especially the natural world); it’s a portrait of one who feels more at home in the world, trusts implicitly in her embodied connection with the world, and rests more comfortably in her skin. Though she does not explicitly articulate this shift in her journal, she portrayed her general state of being via a description of a memory from a year earlier involving an encounter she had with a nun on the campus of UC Berkeley. I believe it is worth quoting at length:

My sense of being unconnected to anyone is turning back on me and becoming something else. Something I’m not sure yet that I understand. I am disburdened. That’s it. Free... The nun who stopped to ask me directions on the Berkeley campus last year. Her black robes being blown by the winds entered my peripheral vision as I lay reading on the sloping ground, and I looked up. ...as she climbed the winding path, I realized that it was her own movements, not the

wind, that were making her robes whip and flow around her. She was walking, not mincing. Her stride was long but graceful. It was the walk of Indians. I knew what it felt like: I had read about that walk as a little girl... She was showing me what it looked like. ...she smiled at me and waved... The motion of her hand was as fluent as her walk, so much a part of one unified organism that any tutored actress would have envied her. ... She smiled at me again, thanked me, raised her hand a little...and said, "God bless you." She spoke directly to me, as though she were imprinting the words on my mind. And then, in the same astonishing harmony, her body moving without hindrance, moving with its garments rather than in opposition to them, she started up the hill again. I stood looking at her until she was out of sight. She was the only person I had ever seen who was free. ... When she blessed me, I understood that she was giving me something of what constituted the core of her being. It was something that was at once so personal and yet so impersonal... that afternoon as she walked away, I felt myself in another world from hers. ... I was seeing Stan [her boyfriend at the time] almost every day, waiting for him to look at me and see me... I know why I think of her now. Things have been feeling new to me for the past several days. (p. 219-220)

This passage was quoted at length because it so beautifully captures the spirit of the newfound freedom of movement, genuineness, ease of responding to the world, and seamlessness with her surroundings, however subtle, that Koller cultivated during her solitude. This memory came back to her at that point in her retreat because she could finally access the way of being in the world that the nun embodied. It was something she caught a glimpse of a year earlier but could only truly resonate with on a lived bodily level by this point in her retreat.

Upon leaving Nantucket and returning to the mainland after the close of her retreat, Koller found that her tendency to look to other people as mirrors had greatly diminished. Instead of seeing her reflection in other's eyes, she was able to see the other person more clearly. What she once experienced as a mirror had become *transparent glass*: "Now I'm not looking to people as mirrors to tell me who I am... the glass that used to reflect me is now transparent" (p. 240). Not only had Koller become better able to be present to the natural world around her through her solitude, but she also became

better able to be present to other people on their own terms, rather than looking to them as mirrors in which to see herself. In her article, “Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness: On Being Bodily in the World,” philosopher Dorothee Legrand describes a particular form of pre-reflective bodily experience she calls the “transparent body.” This concept captures the flavor of the shift that both Koller and I seemed to experience regarding our ability to become less conscious of our bodily selves and bodily performances and more present to the environment around us. Legrand describes the transparent body as “the bodily mode of givenness of objects in the external world” (p. 493). She explains that, “The body is *transparent* in the sense that one looks *through it to the world*” (p. 504). She contrasts the transparent body with both the “opaque body” and the “performative body.” The opaque body refers to the overtly objectified body, as when a person regards herself in the mirror, while the performative body refers to an experience in which the person is aware on a more subtle and less-than-reflective level of the way in which she is holding, positioning, and moving her body, as when a dancer performs a choreographed dance on stage. The transparent body, on the other hand, is a pre-reflective experience of the body in which the body serves an *intermediate function* rather than being an end in itself. According to Legrand, the transparent body represents what Merleau-Ponty means when he writes, “Consciousness is being-toward-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (2003, p. 159-160). It is this form of pre-reflective, primordial bodily experience that seemed to become more available to the women through solitude. Shifting away from the experience of the body as opaque as well as performative seemed to open up greater access to this bodily transparency. To move from opacity to transparency is to move from corporealization to lived bodiliness. It is a movement toward the recovery of

pre-reflective experience, toward cultivating a greater sense of connection with the world, and toward greater bodily freedom and ease.

Theme 2: *Returning to the senses*

In the previous section, we discussed how solitude appears to foster a lessened degree of self-referral and self-consciousness regarding the appearance of one's physical body, which may be related to the removal of the mirror as well as the other's gaze. One may in turn be freed up to attend outwardly, toward the world in a more single-minded fashion and experience herself as moving through the world more smoothly rather than thrown back on herself via her continual self-referral. Indeed, it was during my walks in the outdoors (rather than while indoors, where the more reflective work of thinking, writing, and self-analysis was taking place) when I felt this newfound bodily freedom and openness in a most striking way. By day seven of my first retreat, I remarked on how good it feels to walk "freely, openly" through the convent grounds. Something had opened for me, some degree of ease in my body and ability to feel continuous with the world around me. This sense of bodily ease and freedom was accompanied by a sense of being present and attentive to my surroundings in a new way, with my senses engaged on a new level. Indeed, each of the women described a similar process of sensory awakening throughout her time in solitude.

Earlier we discussed the idea that we may be able to, in a sense, recover certain forms of pre-reflective experience that were suppressed along the road to becoming an adult in this culture. Another way of articulating this is that our center of experiential gravity may potentially shift from a primarily reflective mode of experiencing toward one

that more integrative of pre-reflective modes of experiencing. A more primordial experience of being in the world may become possible for us as certain modes of cognition and practices of habitual self-reflectiveness fall away. A more primordial experience of being in the world involves a greater sense of presence to things in our environment. Part of this heightened level of presence involves our ability to be sensually and perceptually open to and aware of our surroundings. It seems that throughout their time in solitude each of the women in this study began to wake up to her full-bodied sensorial experience to a much greater extent. Indeed, each woman commented in one way or another on an experiential shift from bodily numbness to greater sensual porosity and perceptual acuity. This shift amounted not only to an awakening of the body but also a greater degree of engagement in the world, for, as David Abram (1996) argues, perception may be ultimately understood to be an act of *participation*: “participation is a defining attribute of perception itself...perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives” (p. 57). This “coupling” implies a relationship between the perceiver and perceived and some degree of vitality on both sides, whether that which is perceived is sentient or not. Indeed, Abram asserts that on the level of pre-reflective awareness, even inanimate things have a certain degree of vitality to them and may be considered partners in a reciprocal sensuous dance: “Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists” (p. 57).

Self-forgetfulness

One of the themes that continually recurs throughout this project is the notion that solitude seems to foster a lessened degree of self-consciousness, especially during times when the retreatant leaves her cabin and engages with the natural world. This self-forgetful quality appears to go hand-in-hand with the ability to be more sensually and perceptually attuned to her surroundings. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for example, Annie Dillard describes her experience of sitting stock-still while observing a muskrat for forty minutes:

He never knew I was there. I never knew I was there either. For that forty minutes last night I was as purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate; I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared... I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves. (p. 200)

Her ability to become as “purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate” depended on her ability to lose a sense of self-consciousness, which she wasn’t able to accomplish when attempting to observe muskrats in the presence of other people.

In *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson (2009) described how spending solitary time in nature hastens self-forgetfulness and allows a person to experience herself as part of the whole, or “part of particle of God”: “Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (p. 3). Alone in nature, Emerson becomes all-seeing, and his separate sense of self falls away. Though the image of the transparent eyeball points to the power of vision in solitude, it seems that solitude also helps promote

the ability to use one's wider range of one's senses in a more refined and deliberate manner as well. Indeed, writers such as Henry David Thoreau have highlighted the revitalizing effect that nature-based solitude can have on one's full-bodied sensual experience. In his essay *Walking*, Thoreau commented that, "In my walks I...return to my senses" (2007, p. 13). Almost all of the women in this study described how they came to experience a full-bodied sensual awakening of sorts, in the context of nature – most especially during their walks on the land surrounding their cabins and cottages.

As discussed earlier, this sensual "awakening" may be understood as a newfound development and/or as a process of recovery, a retrieval of sensory experience which had been lost or repressed over the course of development. As we discussed in the chapter on space, this recovery could be understood as a facet of the project of recovering our "innocence." Annie Dillard remarks of how, at a certain point in development, people lose contact with the fullness of their sensory experience:

When we lose our innocence – when we start feeling the weight of the atmosphere and learn that there's death in the pot – we take leave of our senses. Only children can hear the song of the male house mouse. Only children keep their eyes open. (p. 91)

In the earlier chapter on space, we discussed how the practices of solitude and simplicity can help a person cultivate, or recover, what Dillard calls "innocence," a term which she defines in the following way: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration" (p. 83). Innocence involves being able to use our senses in a particular way; it means being open, receptive, and present to the world around us; it also means having a more reverential and humble approach to the world around us. We discussed

how the Christian monastic literature also prescribes this movement toward re-cultivating innocence in its practitioners, as articulated by Sister Jeremy Hall (2008):

To become as little children – small, poor, transparent, dependent, receiving all as gift, capable of surprise and wonder and growth – Kierkegaard, reflecting on the gospel demand, wrote: “To be a child...when one simply is such is an easy thing; but the second time – the second time is decisive. To become again a child... – that is the task.” (p. 29)

This retrieval of “innocence” appears to involve humility and a decrease in self-consciousness, but it also involves the opening of the senses such that one can be truly surprised, touched, and moved by the world around her and consequently filled with a sense of wonder and gratitude.

“The art of shedding”

Thus it appears that, for the women of this study, returning to the senses in solitude was fostered by, or was at least related to, the experience of self-forgetfulness. It seems that spending time alone in the outdoors – and *walking* in the outdoors in particular – was particularly conducive to achieving a sense of self-forgetfulness and revitalizing their sensory experience. The revitalization of their sensory experience also appeared related to the degree of physical protection they adopted during the time they spent in nature during their retreats. There was a generalized movement toward a simplification of the layers of bodily protection that the women adopted throughout their retreats, and this paring down appeared to foster their ability to feel and perceive more, and thus be more sensually engaged with their surroundings. This movement toward simplification may be understood as both a literal and symbolic act of letting go of some of the layers of mediation between themselves and the world that they had been employing prior to their

time in solitude. This physical shedding is in keeping with the value and practice of *simplicity* that we discussed in the chapter on space and that is so often associated with solitude. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) was one of the women who wrote about the gifts that simplicity via “the art of shedding” provided her:

One learns first of all...the art of shedding; how little one can get along with, not how much. Physical shedding to begin with, which then mysteriously spreads into other fields. Clothes, first. Of course, one needs less in the sun. But one needs less anyway, one finds suddenly. One does not need a closet-full, only a small suitcase-full... One finds one is shedding not only clothes – but vanity. (p. 30)

This shedding of “vanity” happens with Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*), as well, who purposefully put away her makeup, which used to be a staple in her daily life, while in solitude. She left her house one day for a walk early on in her retreat, and realized that something felt different:

At the end of the driveway, I know I’ve forgotten something... At the end of the road a sudden gust of cold air hits my face in a more startling way than usual. I know: I have no lipstick on. I start to go back into the house, and then stop again, confused. It feels funny without lipstick... “Lipstick, for the love of God!” I say out loud... Have I not noticed that lipstick is for them, for other people? (p. 50-51)

In the context of her solitude she is able to notice how she habitually protects herself from her environment by applying a veil of makeup daily. The “startling” impact of the elements serves as a wake-up call for Koller. She is awoken to the realization that her practice of applying makeup was “for them” rather than for herself. For Koller, the cold air which she had previously shielded herself from aided her in her quest to locate her knowledge and her own desire. Later, approximately half way through her retreat, Koller wrote: “I rise to my feet. The wind is from the east, biting and strong. At least I know that: that I’m cold, that the air slices my face” (p. 113). Without the usual layers of

protection on her skin, she was able to feel the impact of the cold air on her face. Though her identity was undergoing a process of deconstruction through the reflective work happening within the walls of her cottage – work that was calling into question the definition of her very “self” – she was *at least sure of her bodily sensations* as the cold air, from the east, was slicing her face and she was present enough, bare enough, and re-sensitized enough to perceive it. This was her truth, in that moment, in all its immediacy. This moment represented a degree of presence and perceptual acuity that was not available to her prior to her time in solitude. By this point in her retreat, she was no longer startled by the elements but found herself, rather, oriented in the midst of them. Shortly thereafter, she wrote, “I can’t let anything cushion or come between me and my juxtaposition to my surroundings” (p. 115), in the context of preparing to travel to the mainland to see a doctor and rejoin the social world of which she was previously a part. This warning, or reminder, to herself was an indication that she had developed, by that point in her retreat, a greater degree of unmediated engagement with the world around her. Prior to this heightened degree of participation, she existed largely in a hall of mirrors, seeing in the things around her only a reflection of herself.

Likewise, Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) progressively shed protective layers throughout her retreat, as well, and by the end of her solitude was able to swim naked in the outdoors for the first time in her life. Toward the end of her retreat she wrote,

Stripped bare, I can truly relate to the water as it embraces my flesh. I flip onto my back and surrender myself to the currents as a school of silvery minnows flits over and under me. It feels good to be in my body without all the usual armor... I emerge from the rigors of my swim, naked and unselfconscious, standing on the shore when the sun dries my body and offers color to my breasts, which have never seen the light of day. (p. 170)

This shedding of her clothes allows her to have a more immediate, sensual encounter with the water, the fish, and the sun – naked encounters that the privacy of her solitude permitted her to experience. Having covered her body in an excess of clothing since her adolescence due to feeling ashamed of the size and shape of her body, swimming naked at age fifty was a great achievement for Anderson. This achievement was only possible toward the end of her retreat, having shed her bodily “armor” slowly, over time, throughout her solitude. She started small at the beginning, by removing her shoes and walking on the beach: “I’m walking faster now, through warm white sand, realizing even my feet are starved for stimulation” (p. 33). Feeling the warm sand on her bare feet helped her realize just how sensually “starved” and numbed she was. In general, Anderson’s solitude helped her to realize that she has been missing out on an entire world of sensual participation.

Perceptual recalibration

The lack of a physical shelter is another means through which a few of the women in this study experienced a decrease in mediation between their bodies and the non-human natural world. During my vision fast in the desert, for example, I did not use a tent for the duration of my solitude. There was no layer of protection between my body and the elements, except for the meager collection of clothing I brought with me, my sleeping bag, and a tarp which I could rig up if it started to rain (I did need to rig it up at some point in the middle of the third night, as it started to rain and eventually even snow!). This lack of shelter left me vulnerable to certain hazards and potential discomforts: animal or insect bites, sunburn, dampness, etc. Braving these elements did

indeed prove to be somewhat of a challenge, especially the intense experience of the cold that my clothing and sleeping bag could not successfully ward off.³⁰ But this lack of physical protection also provided me with a great opportunity. I had never lived for so long without a physical shelter. I had previously lived in tents for two months at a time, but this experience was very different, given not only the physical protection that a tent provides but the psychological sense of security and containment it offers as well.

During my vision fast, I had little choice but to be present to the environment around me during those long days and nights. I could barely even escape this presence to my environment through sleep since I found myself too cold to sleep through the nights. I had no reading material to use as an escape except for a safety manual detailing how to survive snake and scorpion bites, broken legs, and dehydration. I had no food to use as an escape either, leaving me with very few distractions from both the workings of my mind and the immediate environment. For the first day or two, I felt somewhat restless and found the desert environment to be eerily quiet and relatively unstimulating. I remember even finding it rather ugly on the first day or two, with its dryness and seeming lack of stimulation or diversity. But a shift in perception seemed to happen by early on the third day, when I began to pick up on many more subtle sights and sounds and even smells. I began to perceive the presence of beetles creeping onto the tarp and moving toward my sleeping bag in the night. I became entranced with the nuances of the cloud formations, watching them for hours on end while lying on my back in my sleeping bag to keep warm through the day. I could detect the subtle smell of the juniper bush that stood guard nearby my campsite. What had appeared to be a relatively empty silent landscape upon first arriving in the desert became a world rife with activity and life,

³⁰ I was fasting as well; this left me physically weak and especially vulnerable to the cold.

beckoning me to a conversation of sorts. The desert helped to stretch and fine-tune my perceptual capacities and bring my numbed, overstimulated body back to life.³¹ In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, theologian Belden Lane describes how spending solitary time in a desert environment is especially useful at helping one cultivate her skills at attending. With its “uncluttered horizon” and “tendency toward simplicity” the desert landscape provides the retreatant with the opportunity to focus intently on one thing at a time:

Plagued by a highly diffused attention, we give ourselves to everything lightly. That is our poverty. In saying yes to everything, we attend to nothing. One only can love what one stops to observe... The desert, as a lean and arid landscape having few distractions, is a place that can teach us this truth well. With its uncluttered horizon, its tendency toward simplicity and repetition, it offers little to the eye and provides great clarity in what it offers. Stars, for example, are far more brilliant in its dry, night air, stripped of humidity, than anywhere else. The desert serves as an optimal place for sharpening one’s skills at paying attention. Survival demands it. The five senses are heightened by wilderness experience. (p. 189)

Lane’s work points to the seeming paradox that sensually stripped-down situations such as the desert experience can heighten one’s sensual and perceptual capacities.

Similar to my unsheltered experience in the desert, Annie Dillard (1974) wrote of her experience camping under the stars one night at Tinker Creek, alone and without the physical protection of a tent:

I was in no tent under leaves, sleepless and glad... I lay still. Could I feel in the air an invisible sweep and surge, and an answering knock in my lungs? Or could I feel the starlight? Every minute on a square mile of this land – on the steers and the orchard, on the quarry, the meadow, and creek – one ten thousandth of an ounce of starlight spatters to earth... Straining after these tiny sensations, I nearly rolled off the world when I heard, and at the same time felt through my hips’ and

³¹ This, it seems, was the necessary preparation for receiving a “vision” on the final night. I believe that the sensual and perceptual openings that I experienced over the first few days were a prerequisite for the ability to discern the message I received on that final night in the desert.

legs' bones on the ground, the bang and shudder of distant freight trains coupling.
(p. 220-221)

In the absence of the man-made stimulations one is normally accustomed to, and especially in the context of solitude, a person has the opportunity to tune in to the subtle sensations that would normally be outside of her experiential range.³² The (hu)man-made noise of the freight train that many people would normally give no mind to served as a shock to Dillard's system as she had become sensitized to the far more subtle and varied stimuli in the natural world which surrounded her in the night. Dillard wrote of other events she was able to perceive, alone that night under the stars:

Now also in this valley night a skunk emerged from his underground burrow to hunt pale beetle grubs in the dark. A great horned owl folded his wings and dropped from the sky, and the two met on the bloodied surface of earth. Spreading over a distance, the air from that spot thinned to a frail sweetness, a tintured wind that bespoke real creatures and real encounters at the edge... events, events. (p. 221)

Her body's unprotected encounter with the night life at Tinker Creek allowed her to have a "real" encounter with "real" creatures. Later in her narrative she proclaimed: "this is the real world, not the world gilded and pearled" (p. 263). It is this "real," immediate, *lived* experience of the world that she was seeking, and she was able to get there, in part, through a process of returning to her senses in solitude.

³² In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram (1996) gives a good example of this when he describes his personal experience of living in Long Island after a hurricane had swept through and knocked out power, downed telephone lines, and strewn trees across roadways. He describes how this caused people who were previously dependent upon modern technologies and who spent most of their time indoors to spend more time outside, walk to work, and speak to their neighbors in the flesh instead of phoning them. He describes how children who had become accustomed to light pollution at night were able to see the stars for the first time: "The breakdown of our technologies had forced a return to our senses, and hence to the natural landscape in which those senses are so profoundly embedded. We suddenly found ourselves inhabiting a sensuous world that had been waiting, for years, at the very fringe of our awareness, an intimate terrain infused by birdsong, salt spray, and the light of stars" (p. 63). It seems that the women in this study experienced a similar re-inhabitation of the world through the rejuvenation of their senses in solitude.

In the previous chapter on time, we discussed the idea that the women experienced a temporal recalibration while in solitude, in which they became far more attuned to and in synch with the temporal rhythms of the natural world. Similarly, and of course interwoven with this temporal recalibration, the perceptive body seemed to become far more attuned or calibrated to the events in the natural world as well, picking up on subtle cues and becoming able to differentiate between a vast array of organic forms, tones, and textures. Compared to the rather predictable and uniform stimuli that man-made artifacts offer to the sensual body, organic entities, according to David Abram (1996), coax “the breathing body into a unique dance” and invite “the body and its bones into silent communication. In contact with the native forms of the earth, one’s senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns” (p. 63). Indeed, it seemed that each woman in this study developed, to some extent, a finer ability to read the signs of the natural world and pick up on subtle qualities of other beings, entities, and things, creating the conditions for more intimate and moving encounters. Annie Dillard, for example, describes her experience of a having coaxed a monarch butterfly onto her finger and her ability to perceive this creature beyond merely noticing its colorful wings, which is where most people’s experience of the butterfly would probably begin and end. She writes:

The closing of his wings fanned an almost imperceptible redolence at my face, and I leaned closer. I could barely scent a sweetness, I could almost name it... He smelled like honeysuckle; I couldn’t believe it. ... Now this live creature here on my finger had an odor that even I could sense – this flap actually smelled. (p. 259)

It is important to note that many of Dillard’s sensual encounters with the natural world were informed by her knowledge of natural phenomena – such as her knowledge that this

butterfly was both a monarch and a male. But it was not just her intellectual knowledge that opened up a world for her; it was her ability to slow down enough to have an encounter with the butterfly, her desire and willingness to lean in to smell him rather than merely look at him, her ability to let go of her self-consciousness enough to attend fully to him, her lack of layers of mediation between herself and the natural world, and a prior sensual and temporal calibration to the organic events of the natural world that allowed her to pick up on the subtleties of his scent and engage with him so intimately. These factors, among others, created the conditions for the possibility of a full-bodied encounter with this “real” being. They created the conditions for a more profound form of participation with the world than might have otherwise been possible.

Sensual pleasure: Less is more?

One aspect that is related to the “return to the senses” that we have alluded to but have not yet directly thematized is that of *pleasure*. Many of the women experienced an increase in their ability to experience physical pleasure during their solitudes, though they did not necessarily experience an increase in their overall amount of pleasure. It seems that their heightened ability to perceive stimuli in their environment in a more full-bodied, synaesthetic way increased the amount of pleasure they derived from such stimulation. This is interesting, given that solitary retreats are marked by the deprivation of the usual familiar comforts and stimulations that we have become accustomed to (and dependent upon) in our everyday lives and thus are generally not equated with being “pleasurable” or geared toward the cultivation of pleasure. Yet, many of the women

noted in their journals that they became capable of *more profound bodily pleasure* during their solitudes than they had been capable of previously.

By undertaking a solitary retreat the women were denying themselves a great deal of everyday social and technologically-mediated pleasures which they had become accustomed to. For many of the women, the quantity of their pleasures decreased while in solitude as they found themselves alone in a rustic cabin without seemingly much to do, without the overt forms of entertainment and stimulation that they had become accustomed to. The shift toward a more simplistic lifestyle and the social deprivation that solitude demanded of them was difficult for many to adjust to. But for some, the practice of depriving themselves of the usual comforts and stimulants seemed to help create the conditions in which the pleasures they did experience were appreciated to a much greater extent and experienced in a much more profound way. Jane Dobisz's (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) retreat is a case in point. Retreating in a stark one-room cabin in the woods without electricity or plumbing for three months during a New England winter represented a great deal of deprivation for a middle-class woman like Dobisz. During her retreat, she subsisted on beans and miso and had to chop firewood and haul water on a daily basis to keep herself warm and fed. Depriving herself of a wide range of sensual pleasures appeared to help her appreciate and savor the pleasures that she was able to experience to a far greater extent. One example of this is when she took her weekly bath, which became an intense ritual involving hauling extra water from the well that was a quarter mile away and heating it up on the stove one kettle at a time. Her "bathtub" consisted of a medium-sized basin large enough to allow her to immerse her

rear end in and a separate, smaller pail in which she would immerse her feet. The amount of sensual pleasure she derived from this weekly experience was immense:

I sit down in the hot water in the beige basin and, bringing my knees up to my chest, immerse my feet in the purple pail. Next to me is the big enamel pitcher full of water, which I now pour over my head. It runs down my chest and back, and I instantly attain a state of mind higher than nirvana... I feel the water like never before, deeply appreciating the comfort and pleasure that come from the way it feels on my skin. (p. 68)

Although the quantity of her sensual pleasures did not necessarily increase while in solitude, the *quality* of the pleasures she did experience and the *appreciation* she felt for such pleasures increased profoundly.³³

Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*) found her ability to enjoy and appreciate sensual pleasure increase throughout her solitude as well. Karper entered her solitude with an ambivalent relationship to physical pleasure, having lived for the prior thirty years as a nun in a convent, living according to vows of celibacy and poverty and denying herself many of the everyday pleasures that the larger secular society had to offer. Though those vows did not waver during her time as a hermit, she came to appreciate and allow herself to enjoy bodily pleasures to a much greater extent through her time in solitude. After living in solitude for approximately one year, Karper described a full-bodied, sensual experience that she had in the process of baking bread:

I loved the process of baking my own bread – kneading the sticky mass into a smooth dough, feeling the living yeast beginning to respond under my hands, observing the miracle as the small lump expanded, and above all, smelling the ineffable fragrance of baking bread as my loaves browned in the oven. (p. 89)

³³ Similarly, when I returned to base camp after my vision fast, the experience of eating a hard-boiled egg and a spoonful of peanut butter, treats that the quest leaders had waiting for the women upon our return, was unbelievably pleasurable. I can still palpably recall the taste of that peanut butter and remember the feeling of immense gratitude that washed over me at that time.

This excerpt is significant for a few reasons. First, it captures Karper's enjoyment of bodily pleasure – a level of enjoyment that was not evident earlier on in her narrative when she was first starting out as a hermit. Secondly, it is significant because it portrays Karper baking bread from scratch rather than simply enjoying the end result that others (or machines) made possible. During her thirty years of living in the convent, her meals had been prepared for her. She was only able to enjoy the process of consuming the final result of the bakers' efforts. Living a simplistic lifestyle as a hermit, Karper had to bake her own bread from scratch. This gave her the opportunity to be engaged in almost the entire creative process, and this granted her a more full-bodied sensual experience, involving the sensory modalities of touch, vision, and smell. Karper's body was engaged in the process of baking bread to an extent that that it would not have been if she had simply eaten a piece of bread that someone else had prepared for her during her time in the convent.

Karper's description of baking bread is also significant because has an erotic quality to it. She depicts herself as slowly kneading the sticky mass until smooth, feeling it come to life and respond under her hands, watching it rise, and smelling it as it bakes in the oven. She does not even describe for her readers the culminating sensual experience of tasting the bread – in effect teasing her readers and leaving them wanting more. Many of the women's descriptions of their interactions with the elements and with living things had a similar kind of erotic quality as well. One example is the aforementioned description of Joan Anderson's bout of nude swimming toward the end of her solitude:

Stripped bare, I can truly relate to the water as it embraces my flesh. I flip onto my back and surrender myself to the currents as a school of silvery minnows flits over and under me. It feels good to be in my body without all the usual armor... I emerge from the rigors of my swim, naked and unselfconscious, standing on the

shore when the sun dries my body and offers color to my breasts, which have never seen the light of day. (p. 170)

Anderson is “stripped bare” and “embraced” by the water, she “surrenders” to the current and experiences a school of fish “flitting” over and under her body, and the sun offers color to her breasts for the first time in her life. There is an *erotic communion* happening here, a love-making, similar to the coition between Annie Dillard and her butterfly. It is not only Dillard’s intellectual knowledge of the butterfly and her sensual attunement to nature that compels her lean in and take a whiff; it is a feeling of love and desire for the being perched on her finger. Dillard describes herself at one point in her narrative as “the bride who waits with her lamp filled” (p. 212), ready to receive the coming of the grasshoppers while camping one night near Tinker Creek. She depicts herself as the bride in her bedchamber waiting her for betrothed. In her solitude, in the absence of human consorts, Dillard sought to make love to the world.

To my knowledge, the women in this study remained celibate throughout their retreats.³⁴ It seems that their lack of sexual contact with other people while on retreat may be related to the degree to which they sensually engaged with the non-human world. Perhaps the lack of sexual contact left them more desirous of sensual contact with things and non-human others. Perhaps the lack of sexual contact also fostered the restoration of a certain degree of bodily “innocence,” allowing their bodies to recover a basic, primordial form of communion with the world, before the project of “becoming a woman” and simply becoming an “ego-logical subject” (Levin, 1999, p. 222) got

³⁴ May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) and Joan Anderson did visit with their partners at least one time during the course of their solitudes. Joan Anderson did not have sexual relations with her husband during their one visit, but it is unclear as to whether May Sarton remained celibate throughout her visits with her female partner whom she refers to as “X.” Also, as mentioned earlier in this study, it is unclear as to whether Annie Dillard was living with her partner and therefore whether she was practicing celibacy during the period of time she describes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

underway and a sense of alienation from that world transpired. The image of Joan Anderson standing “naked and unselfconscious” on the shore after her swim toward the end of her retreat is an image of this recovered bodily innocence. Recovering her bodily innocence involved “surrendering” her body to the world, and in this surrender a primordial form of communion with the world became possible. She commented soon after this swim that she had successfully, “reclaim[ed] my basic existence” (p. 171). We might read this “reclamation” in a number of different ways. One such reading is that, through her solitude, Anderson successfully carried out the work of recovering a sensual, primordial connection with the world around her. At this same point in her narrative, Anderson reflected that, “Maybe it’s not for a man to open us; instead, maybe we’re meant to open ourselves and then relish what follows, with or without a man” (p. 170-171). The reclamation of her basic existence involved a bodily “opening” – a stance of receptivity and sensual porosity that allowed her to make love to the world around her. Anderson makes the additional point that, for women, this bodily openness and potential for worldly communion may just be satisfaction enough.

Theme 3: *The “I can” body*

Karper’s experience of making bread was not only significant because of the sensual pleasure she derived from the act. As mentioned earlier, it was also significant due to the simple fact that she was creating something from scratch rather than going out and purchasing it pre-made or being served it by someone else. Baking bread is normally considered to lie within the stereotypically “feminine” range of physical activities. It is an activity normally associated with women in this culture, most often taking place in the

kitchen and involving little physical risk or exertion. While the women in this study did carry out conventionally feminine practices such as bread baking and craft-making while in solitude, their retreats also presented many of them with the opportunity to expand their physical repertoires and gain new, challenging bodily skills, many of which are conventionally associated with men and masculinity in this culture. For some of the women, this development of new physical abilities was due to necessity, such as having to make money or having to protect themselves from various dangers while in solitude. For others, this development of new skills was not necessary for their survival per se but was, rather, a goal that they set for themselves in order to develop their bodily potentials and move beyond their comfort zones. Each of the women, to some extent, pushed herself beyond her physical comfort zones and developed an enhanced ability to take care of her business in the world through her time in solitude. Each woman used her body in new ways in order to get done what needed doing.

Getting things done is the key. *Just do it, not just think it.* Merleau-Ponty (2003) asserts that, “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of “I think that” but “I can”” (p. 160). Perhaps even more so than the body’s perceptual capabilities, it is the body’s motor capacities that are capable of opening up a world for the individual (though perception and motility work in tandem, of course). It is the actual physical capacities of the body as well as the individual’s *belief* in her bodily “I cans” – of what she is capable of physically carrying out – that open or close down her range of possibilities. A healthy body-subject, according to Merleau-Ponty, faces the world with a posture of “I can” based on actual physical potentials as well as her belief in them and then carries out her intentions accordingly. Feminist phenomenologist Iris Young (2005) makes the

argument, however, that many women living in her time and place (mid-late 20th century, middle-class American culture) suffer from what she calls “inhibited intentionality,” which thwarts their efforts to carry out effective action in the world. Women, according to Young, are frequently unable to carry out their intentions in the world because they lack of belief in their bodily capabilities. She writes,

Feminine existence...often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident “I can.”... Typically the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination that are available to it. Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an “I can” and withholds its full bodily commitment with an “I cannot.” (p. 36)

Young also asserts that many women do not even attempt to carry out certain physical tasks in the first place due to their experience of their body as a “fragile encumbrance” (p. 34), their fears of getting hurt or getting messy, and their distrust in their body’s capabilities. The distrust in their capabilities is due to a lack of bodily experience and encouragement from others throughout their development: “For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop specific bodily skills” (p. 43). Young’s overarching message in this particular essay is that Merleau-Ponty’s writings about the body tend to assume a healthy male body-subject that generally comports himself with an “I can” attitude towards activity in the world and carries out his intentions accordingly. She makes the point that this is not a fitting portrayal of the experience of many women living in her day and age, as they often experience their bodies as fragile, incompetent objects rather than living their bodies as

their very *means of access* to the world and the means through which they instrumentally carry out their intentions in that world.

One could argue that Young's portrait of feminine bodily hesitancy and timidity might be outdated, as she was writing this particular essay in the 1970s. It seems, however, that although women in middle-class American culture – which most of this study's participants share as a sociocultural background – seem to have made strides in the area of bodily self-confidence due in part to, or as reflected by, their greater participation in sports and athleticism, one could argue that women are negatively impacted to an even greater extent by rampant sexual objectification, ageism, and an even narrower standard of beauty that commonly leads them to feel intense bodily shame, take up an even greater position of distance from their bodies, and hurt their bodies through developing such pathologies as anorexia or self-harming practices like cutting. These factors may not lead to the same kind of bodily fragility and timidity that Young describes, but they might lead to the experience of an even deeper sense of alienation from and objectification of their flesh than women felt at the time that Young wrote her essay. It seems important to mention that Young's analysis might be somewhat out of date, but it is also important to consider just how much of her argument may still apply, or at least might apply to the women in this study. Their solitudes presented them with the opportunity to step outside their physical comfort zones, and in so doing invited them to expand their physical repertoires, thus eliciting shifts in their self-image and expanding their bodily, and thus existential, horizons. Their retreats were primarily characterized by contemplation, stillness, and the cultivation of a receptive stance in which they practiced the art of waiting and the art of present-moment awareness. It appears that solitude also

helped them cultivate their potentials in the other direction – increasing their ability to take physical action in order to procure necessary resources, protect themselves, and explore new terrains. Their physical activity brought balance to the overarching contemplative stance of their retreats and provided the women with an opportunity to expand their physical, existential, and psycho-spiritual horizons.

Self-reliance

The development of self-reliance has long been associated with solitude, especially when one thinks of writers in the Transcendentalist tradition, such as Emerson and Thoreau. Indeed, the concept of self-reliance has a central role to play in the American imagination, though it is not necessarily an integral part of the daily lives of contemporary Americans living in high-tech urban and suburban communities. Even during a time when “rugged individualism” might have been an apt name for many Americans’ daily experience, women were largely excluded from such a mode of living, having been largely economically dependent upon men and lacking cultural and familial permission to be truly self-reliant. Solitude, for anyone – female or male – demands certain forms of self-reliance. Though as human beings we are never purely self-reliant in that we exist interdependently with other people as well as the larger ecosystem in which we are embedded, people fall along a continuum of self-reliance. Living apart from others during their solitudes necessitated a higher degree of psychological as well as physical self-reliance than the women were accustomed to. The women experienced different degrees to which they relied on themselves for basic survival needs – with twenty-something Jane Dobisz on one end of the spectrum, having to chop wood and

carry water in order to have access to basic heat and food – and fifty-something May Sarton on the other end, relying on her neighbors when something needed to be fixed around her house which she did not have the strength nor skill to carry out. Nonetheless, each of the women in this study broke with feminine convention by going into solitude and practicing a certain degree of self-reliance that was not commonplace for women, and indeed many men, in their times and places. By choosing solitude and thus choosing a greater degree of self-reliance, each woman was opening herself to the possibility of becoming more acquainted with her body’s capabilities – the fuller range of her bodily “I cans.”

Being more self-reliant means having to *do* things. Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) recognized the full weight of her decision to be self-reliant after her first day of procuring firewood and hauling water a quarter mile from its source – practices she had to carry out in order to physically survive during her solitude.³⁵ In a state of utter exhaustion and bodily soreness, she wrote that, “It never occurred to me that it would be such a physical fitness test just keeping warm or getting a drink of water” (p. 29). As time went on, she found herself stepping progressively outside of her physical comfort zones and was continually rewarded for doing so with a sense of self-efficacy and personal power: “With each small venture into the unknown, I am rewarded with a new feeling: “I can do it!” It’s very empowering” (p. 44). She also found that she came to look forward to carrying out the daily physical tasks that she once found so physically

³⁵ Of course, it is important to note that Dobisz did not *have* to chop wood and haul water in order to survive – she could have left her cabin in the woods at any time, taken off in her car and returned back to her comfortable middle-class existence. These women always had a choice to stay or to leave – even someone like Karen Karper who was technically destitute could have left her solitude and returned to the convent where she had been living for 30 years if she absolutely needed to. It is important to note the element of choice in these women’s lives in order to show that their self-reliance was an intentional voluntary choice, unlike the kind of self-reliance that a homeless person living on the streets, for example, usually has little choice but to practice.

exhausting as she gained physical mastery over them: “Splitting wood has become deeply satisfying. ... Each morning I look forward to work period as though it were recess at grammar school” (p. 45). And through challenging herself physically, she was also eventually rewarded with a new physique: “For once in my life I am lean and strong. It feels good to have the fat off, to know that every muscle is being used for something good” (p. 68). This description of her body is one of the only glimpses of her physical appearance (if not the only) that the reader is given throughout the entire book. It is important to note that instead of having an objectifying quality to it, this description serves the purpose of describing Dobisz’s physical *competence* more so than her physical attractiveness. This may indicate a significant shift in her experience of her body as well as a shift in her self-concept.

Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) was another retreatant who, out of necessity, had to use her body in new, challenging ways in order to maintain her solitude. She took up work as a fishmonger and, later, a clammer in order to make enough money to maintain her solitude. Having relied on her husband’s income throughout her entire adult life, she found herself having to earn her keep for the first time. As she was also someone who had never really been very physically active in her adulthood – partly due to the shame and discomfort she felt around her body – she experienced numerous challenges all at once. In her position as a fishmonger, she found the physical labor draining at first, and she felt quite incompetent and awkward as she carried out the tasks required of her. But soon she began to feel more physically capable and enjoy meeting the challenges of the job: “I get a kick out of proving myself – hauling and weighing buckets of lobster, shucking scallops and clams for chowder base” (p. 55). “My back is

aching, but several lobster tanks need to be scrubbed... Earning one's own keep has a great deal of merit" (p. 58).

By a certain point in her solitude, as her senses began coming back to life and she started to feel herself more fully alive in her body, Anderson realized the extent to which she had been neglecting her body for so many years. In that moment she vowed to "face my gross negligence and mend the breach between my body and mind" (p. 84). With this goal in mind, she resolved to participate in a race in town – a physical task that was far beyond her comfort zone. She barely finished the race and suffered many aches and pains afterwards. But in meeting that challenge, she moved closer to mending the "breach" and felt herself "[come] to life" for the first time in her adult life: "I must make friends with this stranger that is speaking to me with whines, creaks, and groans, coming to life after 35 years of slumber, a woman turned inside out, just now in touch with what was once invisible" (p. 89). Her goal in taking better care of her body was not necessarily to look attractive but, rather, to develop a body that *works*:

I shall give up on the idea of having a fashionable body or an Olympian body. I just want a body that works, that is durable and resilient, that can climb a mountain, carry grandbabies on its back, be vital and energized after a long day.
(p. 90)

For Anderson, participating in the race came to symbolize the crossing of a line into a new phase of life in which she let go of her past and moved forward in order to find herself in the future: "It occurs to me that I have just been initiated into the second half of my life, crossing the threshold of my past, heading toward unknown frontiers that will inevitably lead me to myself" (p. 90). It was, in part, through the cultivation of her bodily "I cans" that Anderson was able to move out of a sense of personal stagnation and into a sense of flow. For Anderson, a recovery had taken place – a recovery of both her

sensual life, as mentioned previously, but also a recovery of her bodily capabilities that made it possible to simultaneously envision a future horizon and move out to meet herself there. For Anderson, self-reliance meant not only to be able to support herself financially through physical toil but also to finally be able to *rely* on her body. She learned to rely on her body through meeting the physical challenge of running the race:

Today I had a choice: to grab the day or to be victimized by it. The gift was being given a chance to go beyond my perceived limits. I trusted the unknown, relied on a body I had been taught to fear, and it more than surprised me. (p. 90)

“A tiny flicker of pride”

Many of the women, including Dobisz and Anderson, developed a newfound sense of pride through the development of their physical capabilities and ability to take action and get things done. This sense of pride was especially poignant in the case of Karen Karper, as so much of her identity as a practicing nun in the Poor Clare tradition revolved around a sense of humility, and her narrative contained so few examples of self-aggrandizement of any kind. The fact that Karper developed a newfound sense of pride through the act of slaying an animal was particularly poignant. While collecting wood from the wood pile next to her house one day, she discovered a copperhead:

Picking up a piece of round wood from a heap in the corner, I suddenly froze in terror. Draped over the log directly before me was the ropey, diamond-patterned length of a copperhead... I choked back a scream and stared at my worst fears realized. (p. 34)

Being that the snake resided next to her home and that she would most likely encounter it again if she ran away, she decided in that moment to kill it: “the snake had to be killed, and I was the only one around to do it. The hazards of solitude!” (p. 35). She backed up slowly, grabbed an axe which was nearby, and then swung at the snake, injuring it with

the first blow and then killing it definitively with the second. She commented on the act: “For the first time in my life, I had consciously killed. And in most brutal fashion” (p. 35). The act was both a source of “dreadful loathing” for her (p. 35) but also, surprisingly, a source of a “tiny flicker of pride”:

As I stared blankly amid a swirl of feelings, an image of the Mountain Woman insinuated itself in my mind. A tiny flicker of pride licked up inside me. I had just met and eliminated one of the most feared dangers in these hills, and I had done it, if not neatly, at least adequately. Something in me had changed. (p. 36)

By killing the snake, something in Karper – a woman who had been sheltered by convent walls for thirty years – shifted and an image of a “Mountain Woman” became available to her psyche for the first time.

Through carrying out this brutal act, Karper also experienced a shift in her relationship with God:

It was a shock to discover that I could kill if I had to. It was also a shock to realize that I would not be magically protected against the perils infesting these hills to which the Lord had led me. Naivete fell away like a cloak, and I felt dreadfully exposed... Paradoxically, my heightened sense of vulnerability included a new sense of self-reliance. I did not need to be constantly protected by some great power in the sky; I had the ability to meet life’s threats. A sense of personal power flooded me. ... the scope of the possible in my life expanded. ... My self-image shifted dramatically as I savored the empowerment I had experienced at the woodpile. (p. 36-37)

Alone in her solitude, Karper had little choice but to kill the snake and consequently expand her self-image and open her future horizon. If she were not in solitude, she might have asked another person to slay the creature, protecting herself from such a violent and dangerous act but closing herself off from an opportunity for growth. Through this act, her bodily “I cans” came to include both protecting herself and taking another life if she had to – a set of “I cans” that have historically been the province of men.

Facing physical danger, opening to adventure

Through slaying the copperhead, Karper came to reflect on the power that taking a physical risk, out of an interest in her own survival, offered her. She learned that she could protect and take care of herself rather than relying on her omnipresent God to protect and look after her at all times. Through her solitary time in the West Virginia mountains, she also learned that taking physical risks for the purpose of exploring her surroundings (rather than for strictly instrumental reasons such as slaying the snake) opened up the possibility of adventure and excitement – possibilities that were not readily available to her while living in the convent for so many years. For example, while taking walks along a creek near her hermitage, she discovered an old railroad trestle that lay across a deep gorge and served as the connection to the “other, wilder side” (p. 76) of the creek. Karper was too afraid to cross it, however, due to the bridge’s rotting wood and dilapidated structure. She visited this site many times over the course of a few months and finally got up the courage to cross the bridge one day:

I set my booted foot on the first of the crumbling ties and set out. About midway across, I felt faint from the height; a dizzy sensation threatened to overwhelm me. I could turn back, but the return distance was roughly equal to that of the other end of the trestle. Trembling, I fixed my eyes on the far side, refusing to glance at the frothing water visible beneath my feet. Step by step, holding on to thin air, I reached solid ground. (p. 76)

Crossing the bridge allowed her to access “a wilderness paradise” on the other side of the creek and provided her with the opportunity for an intense spiritual experience:

A sense of the Sacred invaded me, and I prayed with my eyes, my ears, my senses of touch and smell. For a long time, I merely absorbed the marvels of this mysterious abode of the Holy. Part of the delight that flooded me was a wonder that I, *I* had been led to this place by the God whom I was seeking...and who, I now realized, had also been seeking me! (p. 77)

Summoning up the courage to cross the bridge opened her up to the possibility that she was being sought and called by her God, rather than it being a one-way relationship of seeking on her part: “I felt both privileged and beloved. The Holy One who was calling me to risk all and follow new trails had shown His face to me in that sacred glen” (p. 77). For Karper, God became one who encouraged physical risk taking and asked her to stretch herself beyond her comfort zones – not just mental comfort zones, but physical comfort zones, and the reward was pleasure and personal empowerment, rather than pain or deprivation. It is also important to note that Karper was able to access the sacred not only through her physical risk-taking, but also through the use of her senses – e.g., “I prayed with my eyes, my ears, my senses of touch and smell” (p. 77). Her sensual participation with the world provided her with greater access to God. For Karper, this was a new avenue of contact with the Divine; bodily pleasure thus began providing her with a new form of spiritual practice.

Though far more physically adept in the natural world and twenty or so years younger than Karper, Annie Dillard also continually challenged herself physically in the context of the natural world and felt enriched as a result. Similar to Karper, she wrote of how she was physically separated from a natural “paradise” by a dangerous flow of rushing water. She needed to cross a dangerous dam to reach her “magic garden” (p. 214) on the other side. She writes,

I like crossing the dam. If I fell I might not get up again. ... Below is a jumble of fast water and rocks. But I face this threat every time I cross the dam, and it is always exhilarating. The tightest part is at the very beginning. That day as always I faced the current, planted my feet firmly, stepped sideways instead of striding, and I soon emerged dripping in a new world. (p. 214)

By crossing the dam and facing physical danger, she was able to experience a “new world.” There appears to be something about meeting the physical challenge itself that allowed both Karper and Dillard to experience their “paradise.” Perhaps it was not only the physical qualities of the destination – e.g., its lushness and beauty – that constituted it as a paradise. Perhaps the movement beyond their physical comfort zones and the sense of exhilaration that came from taking a physical risk could allow them to see the world as a magical place and intuit the presence of the Divine. Perhaps it was the person that emerged on the other side of the bridge, rather than solely what she found there, that was the deciding factor.

It is an oft-recited phrase that, in contemporary American culture, girls are given *roots* and boys are given *wings* – meaning, of course, that girls are supported and encouraged to stay close to home and set down roots while boys are supported and encouraged to roam, explore, and project themselves outwards into the world. It is important to note that women and girls, by and large, are still to a great extent not encouraged to physically explore the wilderness or city streets, especially not on their own, out of a fear of potential danger. The fact that these women went into solitude is a counter-cultural practice in and of itself. Add to that their brave forays into the wilderness, and their practices can be seen as breaking the mold of acceptable femininity to an even greater extent. But by developing their bodily “I cans” they were not only breaking with cultural convention; they were changing themselves. Many of them emerged on the other side of their solitudes as new women – more physically competent, confident, and hungry for adventure.

Theme 4: “*Feeling comfortable in my own skin*”

At the close of her retreat, Jane Dobisz remarked that she was, “Paid with peace and feeling comfortable in my own skin. Paid with a reason to live” (p. 114). It seems that most of the women articulated, in one way or another, the basic sentiment that they developed a greater sense of comfort in their bodies over the course of their solitudes. This sense of comfort was psychological in the sense that the women came to develop a greater degree of self-acceptance with regard to their physical bodies – developing greater acceptance around the size and age of their bodies, for example. But this sense of comfort also had a more deeply embodied and experiential flavor, in that the women came to develop a greater sense of physical ease and sense of feeling “at home” in their flesh. Earlier we discussed how women growing up in a sexist society often come to feel a sense of alienation and distance from their bodies. We quoted Simone de Beauvoir’s (1989) description of the feeling that girls in this situation often have upon entering adolescence and the realm of public visibility: “it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside” (p. 300). An integral part of becoming a woman, for de Beauvoir, was to be plagued with a vague sense that your body is not quite your own and that you don’t quite coincide with your body – not only in the sense of experiencing a mind/body split but also in the sense of psychically standing apart from and surveying your own body through processes of self-objectification. I believe we can confidently assert that most women living their bodies in this way do not have the experience of feeling a significant degree of comfort and “at home-ness” in their flesh.

In an earlier section, we discussed how solitude may foster an experience of the body as transparent – as the means *through which* one accesses the world – rather than an opaque, corporealized object that one is tied to and constantly referred back onto. This movement toward greater bodily transparency serves as a movement toward recovering a primordial form of participation in the world that the practices and mores of contemporary life and the process of “becoming a woman” serve to suppress and disrupt. Through moving toward the recovery of this form of primordial contact with the entities and things of the world, we remember vital aspects of ourselves. In order for this process of remembrance to take place, however, we must, in a sense, learn to forget ourselves. By living the body more transparently, we lessen our self-consciousness and learn to retreat outside ourselves. Annie Dillard writes, “I retreat – not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of the water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone” (p. 203). This process of developing the transparent body helps us to feel more at home in the world and helps us to know ourselves through knowing the things and entities of the world rather than knowing ourselves exclusively via our reflection in the mirrors and the story we tell ourselves about who we are.

The movement toward bodily transparency may help us to feel more alive and connected to the world, rather than numb and cut-off. This greater sense of aliveness and participation and retreat “outside” ourselves may have the curious effect of helping us feel more comfortable “inside” ourselves – i.e., help us feel more comfortable in our own skin. How can this be? Earlier we discussed how practices of self-objectification leave one feeling alienated from her own bodily experience and as if existing at a distance from

her own flesh. It seems that the movement toward the recovery of primordial contact with the world helps in some sense to heal that alienating, doubling effect since it helps us be present to the world *through* our bodies rather than having our attention thrown back upon our own bodily selves. In this way, our consciousness comes to be “aligned” with our bodies and experience our surroundings from that more unified perspective. In coming to make greater contact with the world around her, she is coming into greater contact with her own lived experience. She is reunited with her lived body which had been to some extent abandoned along the way. This is a form of homecoming.

A few of the pathways toward recovering a sense comfort in their skin that the women discovered will be discussed in the remainder of this section. One such pathway involves “coming to terms with their shit,” or confronting and accepting aspects of their bodies that cause them to feel shame or disgust. The overarching movement toward the healing of shame will be thematized in greater depth as well. And finally, I will discuss how the development of gentle and respectful bodily self-care practices may be understood as a pathway toward developing greater comfort in the body for the women in this study as well.

Coming to terms with one’s shit

Solitude appeared to foster a greater sense of acceptance amongst the women of the reality of their biological bodies. Though, as we saw in the previous section, being alone seemed to encourage physical risk-taking and a movement beyond their physical comfort zones – challenging them to be more physically competent and courageous than they previously were – it also at the same time seemed to promote a greater sense of

acceptance of what is, physically speaking. Becoming more familiar with aspects of their bodies which had previously been considered distasteful or which they had not yet come face-to-face with seemed to promote a greater ability to rest within themselves and feel more at home there. In general, with regard to their bodies, the women adopted an attitude of, in the words of Alice Koller, “Don’t turn away: look at it” (p. 149). As we discussed in the chapter on temporality, the slowness of the women’s solitudes appeared to foster reflection on death and mortality as well as on the reality of their aging bodies. Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*), the eldest of the women in this study, spent a great deal of time reflecting on her own mortality and the aging of her physical body and her decrease in bodily capabilities. For example, with regard to her failing memory she wrote that,

In those cold days, I noticed that I found it hard to recall the names of persons I had met up here for the first time. I tried to fix names to faces I dimly remembered... But they had all faded quickly. I now understood the truth about the elderly: the persons of one’s younger days adhere to one’s memory permanently, but newcomers rarely find a foothold... Recent acquaintances? Not one of them could be retrieved from my failing memory to populate my solitude. (p. 73)

As discussed in the chapter on space, the fact that Grumbach undertook her fifty days of solitude during the dead of a Maine winter also seemed to foster her reflections upon aging and death. She saw in the natural world a mirror of her own experience of growing old:

I took a walk along the icy path to the beach, clinging for dear life to my cane in one hand, my pointed stick in the other. The snow was a perilous disguise for the hard crust that covered the grass, the field, and then the pebbled shore, as though the earth had shrunk into its elderly self leaving this skin of ice to protect it. (p. 72-73)

Grumbach reflects on death throughout her time in solitude, seemingly coming to a greater acceptance of its inevitability, and for the final line of her journal of solitude is able to write: “I have learned that, until death, it is all life” (p. 114). Her greater degree of acceptance of death involved not only coming to terms with the idea of death but also coming to accept her declining bodily capabilities.

In a less profound way than Grumbach, I used my first retreat to come to greater terms with my own bodily realities as well. I did reflect to some extent on my mortality – for example, my encounter with the bear caused me to reflect on my vulnerability to sudden death, and I found myself journaling extensively about issues related to my biological clock. What was more so at the forefront of my consciousness, however, humorously enough, was the issue of my body’s natural odors. I spent a significant amount of time giving thought and attention to the smell of my own armpits during my first retreat. Prior to this retreat, I had never gone without wearing deodorant since my early adolescent years, and like many bourgeois Americans, I carried a strong and irrational fear of being perceived by others as emitting body odor of any kind. During my retreat I decided to dispense with wearing deodorant and to cut back on my use of bodily cleansing agents, such as soap and shampoo. I described in my journal my intention in abstaining from the use of such products:

I have decided that I will not use deodorant during the retreat or body cream or shampoo (except every three days). My hope is that my body might be given an opportunity (the first ever! since early adolescence) to find its own rhythm, find a way to replenish itself on its own terms

I quickly found that these products, especially the deodorant, have been covering up a bodily reality that was quite off-putting: “The FUNK is bad! ... My armpits get wet and then they smell... it’s interesting wearing shirts around the cabin and funking them up,

only within a few hours! I'm not used to this." I was surprised by the amount of wetness and odor that the deodorant had been keeping at bay and found myself feeling a little distracted and even disgusted by my body odor during the few days of the retreat. I wanted nothing more than to reach for the deodorant to cover up the "problem." Over the course of a few days, however, I came to actually enjoy this new experience of my non-deodorized, unshaven armpits – (Day 5): I'm starting to love, or at least really enjoy the smell of my own armpits. And the look of the armpit hair." By the next day, I even describe myself as "getting off" on the odor (Day 6):

I'm...getting off on the smell of my own body odor – enjoying it, strangely. Is this narcissistic, auto-erotic, a troubling thing? ... I'm starting to like my funk. It's really, truly how I smell – not just after [my encounter with] a bear...but simply from hanging out for the day sans deodorant. Me. And I like it.

Solitude provided me with the privacy to be able to experiment with not wearing deodorant, whereas I would not have felt comfortable doing so if I had to be in direct contact with other people. I not only came to a greater sense of acceptance of my natural bodily odors but even developed an affinity toward them, which might be understood as developing a healthy form of self-love to replace shame, rather than an indication of an unhealthy degree of narcissism. At the very least, I became more familiar with and accepting of my body by not wearing deodorant, more familiar with and accepting of a bodily reality that I had been consistently covering up for the past 25 years. I stopped noticing my body odor, commenting on it in my journal, and "getting off" on it by the last few days of the retreat. By that time it was no longer worth thematizing because it just *was*. By confronting it, I had effectively gotten over it.³⁶

³⁶ Though earlier we discussed how solitude seems to help a person lose sight of the body as object, the smell of my armpits certainly served to call my attention onto the surface of my body rather than contributing to the project of self-forgetfulness. However, this mode of bodily objectification is quite

Another retreatant who took the approach of “just looking at it” with regard to her bodily realities was Jane Dobisz. In her solitude, she had to confront her shit, quite literally. As she did not have running water in her cabin, nor easy access to an outhouse, she had to defecate into a chamber pot which she kept on the front porch of her cabin. After a few weeks of solitude, the pot was full, and she had the unpleasant task of having to empty it. She hauled the heavy pot to the dumping site and found that its contents were frozen solid. She struggled with trying to get the frozen excrement out of the pot by digging it out with sticks but met with no success. She then worked at trying to melt it for a few days, moving the pot around the property so that it could be effectively melted by the afternoon sun. One day, while checking on the progress of her “project,” she discovered a mouse in the pot “snuggling up and rolling around in the melted layer of my shit” (p. 94). Seeing the mouse’s utter delight in her shit caused Dobisz to reflect on how what she found disgusting was a source of survival and pleasure to another being. It caused her to think about her “shit” not as a merely disgusting but necessary reality but, instead, as a part of a complex biological system:

In this universe, everything is eating something else... And all of it is going around and around – from me and you to the mouse, to the bug, back into the earth, fertilizing the next fruit or vegetable, back to you and me... Pretty good system. (p. 95)

Through having to “deal with her shit” by foregoing plumbing during her solitude, she became finally able to understand an ancient Zen teaching which at one time eluded her:

different than the mode of bodily self-surveillance I discussed earlier since it involves the sensory mode of smell rather than sight. My self-consciousness revolved around how I smelled rather than how I looked, and this reorientation toward myself served the purpose of helping me encounter aspects of my natural, organic body that I had previously felt ashamed of and had not yet incorporated into my identity. Whereas prior to solitude my experience of my body was primarily ocularcentric, attending to the way my body smelled rather than looked served to reorient myself toward my body and sit somewhat differently, and less shamefully, within my skin.

“Two thousand years ago, Zen Master Un Mum, when asked about the utmost master, said, “This utmost master is a lump of shit.” I now know what he means” (p. 95).

Healing bodily shame

Looking squarely at the reality of the organic body appeared to help these women heal some of the shame they were carrying or at least helped them come to a greater sense of self-acceptance. Through these encounters with the organic body they were better able to accept the “uncivilized,” animal nature of themselves that the technologies of modern living – which the simplicity of their retreats allowed them to take a significant break from – serve to cover up. A mouse helped Jane Dobisz come to terms with her shit. Joan Anderson, who also experienced a lifting of her bodily shame throughout her time in solitude, was helped through an encounter with seals. At the start of her retreat, she discovered seals swimming in the ocean and admired their bodily freedom, apparent sense of joy, and ease of movement. She reflected,

I envy how the seals handle their fat, furry bodies, instruments that truly work for them. Why am I not at home in my body? Probably because I am a large woman, and society only applauds the slight ones. What a waste to feel only shame and disgust for something that should be celebrated... No one seems as real and free as the seals in front of me. (p. 36-37)

Witnessing the seals at play caused Anderson to reflect on her longstanding history of shame and disgust in her body: “The loathing of my body started long ago” (p. 36). It was her observations of natural phenomena that inspired her to go through an extensive process of self-reflection regarding her ways of thinking about and caring for her body. The seals also invited her to re-inhabit her sensual, animal body – in other words, to recover a certain facet of her pre-reflective bodily experience. By the end of her

solitude, Anderson was able to swim naked un-self-consciously and feel pleasure and comfort in her bodily self. She credited the seals for helping her reclaim her primordial bodily existence: “We pass several seals, bottling just now, and I give them a wave of thanks for helping me reclaim my basic existence” (p. 171).

At the end of her retreat, Anderson was preparing for a reunion with her husband, who was about to arrive to join her on the island, marking the end of her solitude. In preparation for his coming, she dressed up nicely, put on a little makeup, and looked at her reflection in the mirror: “You don’t look half bad, I think as I peer into the mirror. A leathery tan accentuates my wrinkles, the overall effect is handsome and hearty, a salty lady full of grit, sensitivity, and earthiness” (p. 176). Whereas at the start of the retreat she felt shame in her appearance, by the end she was able to acknowledge her appearance positively, without overstatement or chastisement. The words she used to describe herself do not have an objectifying flavor and paint a rich and slightly androgynous portrait of a woman who is full of vitality and who is no longer shame-ridden. Similarly, though not to the same degree, I went through a process of healing some of my own bodily shame during my first retreat as well. By the end of my retreat, on day ten, I commented on my appearance as well, but did so by describing the overall quality of my experiential being rather than my external appearance: “I like the way I look right now. I can’t see myself but I like how relaxed and joyous I am. No, not joyous. Just content.” Something had shifted in me, and it involved, in part, healing of a sense of shame and developing a greater sense of peace and lightness of being.

If it is true that solitude, when practiced in a particular way, can help foster a decrease in bodily shame, this is a very significant finding. This is especially significant

when considering the relevance of solitude to the lives of women, since shame seems to dominate so many women's emotional experience. In *Femininity and Domination*, feminist phenomenologist Sandra Bartky (1990) contends that due to social conditioning and bodily objectification, "women are more shame-prone than men" and that the experience of shame is a primary feature of femininity (p. 85). This discussion of shame very clearly connects to our earlier discussion about women's tendencies toward self-objectification. We might understand shame to be, in the words of Thomas Fuchs (2003), the experience of the body as "corporealized" rather than lived. Practices of self-objectification serve the purpose of effecting a shift from a mode of lived-bodiliness to that of corporealization. Fuchs asserts that the

...phenomenological structure of shame means that the lived-body has taken up and internalized its being seen; the exposure as corporeal body before the eyes of the others has become a part of its feelings. Thus we may say that *shame is the incorporated gaze of the other*. (p. 228)

If the practice of solitude helps women, in a sense, *de-incorporate* the gaze of the other – through temporarily removing the other's gaze as well as decreasing self-objectifying practices such as mirror-gazing and beautifying – then we might think of this de-incorporation as a technique to heal shame. Fuchs' conceptualization of shame provides us with a useful and intriguing way of understanding how undergoing a solitary retreat may help one heal a sense of shame and allow for a greater sense of lightness, fluidity, and freedom.

Developing greater self-care

The women also cultivated a greater amount of care for their bodies in general through their time in solitude. By "care" I am referring to tending to their bodily well-

being, comfort, and pleasure rather than tending primarily to the external appearance of their bodies. This movement toward greater self-care seemed to indicate a growing sense of intimacy with their bodies and a more acute ability to discern the nuances of their bodily experiencing. Indeed, living apart from the stimulations and distractions of their outside lives, solitude provided these women with the time and space to slow down and learn to discern the subtleties of their bodily experience. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, theologian Belden Lane makes the point that living in the midst of a highly stimulating and consumeristic culture – i.e., the situation of most contemporary Westerners – causes us to “give ourselves to everything lightly”: “Plagued by a highly diffused attention, we give ourselves to everything lightly. That is our poverty. In saying yes to everything, we attend to nothing. One can only love what one stops to observe” (p. 189). By providing the conditions in which one can slow down and focus on one thing at a time, solitude enables a person to attend more closely to the nuances of her bodily experience. According to Lane, being capable of attending to something is required before being able to love that something. We might therefore assert that attending to their bodily experience in solitude – to their bodily needs, desires, functions, intuitions, sensations, perceptions – fostered the women’s ability to love their bodies, and hence, to love themselves. This attention to and love for one’s body is the very definition of self-care.

One of the ways that spending time in solitude helped Alice Koller come to develop better practices of care for her body was by helping her discern her bodily desires. Koller’s central quest throughout her solitude was to be able to know her own desire and to disentangle her desire from that of other people in her life and the larger

society in which she lived. Once she became better able to discern what she wanted – rather than what she *thought* she wanted, what she thought she was *supposed* to want, and what others wanted *for* her – she started to treat herself differently by heeding (or at least paying closer attention to) her desires, however mundane, as they arose throughout the day. She was able to heed her desires because she knew what they were and also because she finally felt that she was deserving of pleasure and fulfillment. One small example of this is the commitment she made to start buying herself “sweet butter,” which she would normally reserve for special occasions only. One morning in the final days of her solitude she wrote, “I start to carve a pat of butter for my toast, then draw back my knife. From now on I’ll buy sweet butter. I don’t have to wait for special occasions to use it, because from now on my whole existence is a special occasion” (p. 212). By the end of her solitude, Koller became able to discern such seemingly trivial preferences such as sweet vs. regular butter and to decide that her desires were worth heeding. In contrast, at the apex of her suicidal despair she questioned whether even feeding her body was worth it: “Is it worth feeding this body?” (p. 171) Far from being a superficial hedonistic decision, the choice of sweet butter symbolized a commitment to her own self-care and a movement toward creating a life truly worth living.

One example of increased self-care from my first retreat was the act of tending to my fingernails, which I had gotten in the habit of biting ever since early adolescence. I had not given much of any thought to my fingernails throughout my adulthood, and prior to my retreat I always considered the maintenance of one’s nails to be quite unnecessary and superficial. However, I found myself at one point during my retreat (on day four) beginning to pay attention to my hands in a new way. Sitting with my hands stretched

out in front of me, I looked closely at my fingers for some time and began to discern the clear message that I had been essentially abusing them for more than two decades. I took the time to truly pay attention to my fingers and in doing so my neglect became clear to me and I knew what steps I needed to take to remedy the situation. The next day I reflected in my journal:

[I'm] trying to respect my fingers and not bite my nails. Yesterday I groomed my hands. They looked a bit gnarled, old, and dry and so I creamed them and even worked on my nails a bit (pushed the cuticles back!) – haven't done that...since high school (17 years ago)! I always thought having "nice nails" was a feminine trap: complete waste of time and utterly ridiculous and buying into the patriarchal ethos. Yet, now...I'd like to be better with and to my hands. I talked to my fingers today! I told them I wanted to start taking better care of them and they wiggled them in response. I told them it would be a few months, probably, before I'd actually be able to let them be. They seemed up for the transition and their liberation!

Solitude provided me with the opportunity to pay greater attention to the quality of my fingers and discern what I needed to do to take better care of myself.

By day eight of this same retreat, I commented that I was practicing "staying local, staying present," and by day ten, I related this process of localization to my greater self-care with regard to my hands and nails: "I needed to localize, come down. Example of biting my nails. Localization. Attention. Care." The process of localization, for me, was a process of becoming more present and attentive to what was right in front of me – which at that time happened to be my hands – thus opening up the possibility for care. On the last day of the retreat I reflected that, "I think I've learned to relate to my body differently." This different form of relating to my body involved becoming more aware of my body and developing practices of care out of that heightened awareness – not for the sake of improving its appearance but, rather, for the sake of bodily health and comfort and, in the case of caring for my nails, freedom from a habitual form of low-level self-

harm that made up an integral part of an anxious structure of being in the world. The act of caring for my nails was an act of self-care as well as a gesture of self-respect. Solitude provided me with the opportunity to notice that I was disrespecting and neglecting myself in the first place. The slowness, the present-moment consciousness, the lack of distractions, the lack of mirror gazing (which helped shift my attention to the actual living fleshy organism that is my body rather than a flat representation of it) all contributed to my ability to notice my neglect and to care enough to make a change in my habitual ways of being.

In summary

In this chapter, we explored some of the themes that were found across the women's journals as they pertained to the existential dimension of embodiment. Of course, so many of the ideas presented here overlap with those found in previous chapters and will no doubt overlap with ideas developed in future chapters as well. This is necessarily the case since the distinction between the different dimensions, however useful it may be, is artificial at best. Our experience of space, for example, depends on our bodily perception and bodily motility, and different modes of bodily experience evoke different experiences of temporality. We carry on with our analysis nonetheless, understanding that everything is connected but that we must sometimes articulate the matter as though these dimensions are distinct.

We explored a few core themes in this chapter. First, we fleshed out the idea that solitude granted the women the luxury of relative bodily invisibility. It allowed them to live outside of the gaze of the (human) other and temporarily put to rest certain feminine

bodily disciplinary practices and performances that they habitually carried out in their lives outside of solitude. This allowed them to, in effect, go “offstage” for a stretch of time and cultivate a different mode of being in the world. One of the different modes that they gained greater access to lies in the pre-reflective domain of bodily existence, and we referred to this experience of the body as the *transparent body*. The transparent body is an experience of the body in which the individual sees through the body to the world; Dorothee Legrand (2007) defines the transparent body as being “pre-reflectively experienced as the bodily mode of givenness of objects in the external world” (p. 493). We discussed how living the body apart from the gaze of others (as well as the mirror, in the case of my retreats) seems to foster an ability to live the body transparently since one experiences a de-incorporation of the objectifying gaze of the other. In solitude, the women’s practices of self-objectification seemed to lessen, and they became increasingly freed up to attend to the world around them in a more un-self-conscious way rather than focusing their attentions back onto the surface of their bodies. We characterized this movement toward bodily transparency as a movement toward the *recovery of pre-reflective lived bodiliness*, an experience of the body that the process of becoming an ego-logical subject and a woman in this culture serves to suppress and disrupt.

The second theme we discussed follows directly from the first theme. An integral part of the pre-reflective experiential recovery process involves a *return to the senses*. Through their solitudes most of the women described a process of sensory awakening in which they became more present to and acutely aware of their surroundings and took pleasure in sensual experiences that engaged them in a fuller-bodied, multi-sensorial fashion. Unprotected, unmediated contact with nature (e.g., less clothing, lack of

physical shelter, etc.) appeared to foster this process of sensual awakening, as the women's unprotected bodies were able to have "real encounters" (Dillard, p. 221) with the real elements, things, and beings found outside their door. The opening of their sensory channels amounted to a greater level of *participation* in the world on a primordial, pre-reflective level, and this participation might be understood as a form of *intercourse* with the world or, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) would have it, "a coition, so to speak, of my body with things" (p. 320). Though the women practiced celibacy throughout their retreats, there was a significant degree of love-making going on nonetheless.

For the third theme, we fleshed out the proposition that solitude fosters the development of a more instrumental mode of living the body, or what we referred to as the "*I-can body*." Solitude presented the women with an opportunity to use their bodies in novel, physically challenging, and intimidating ways. Using their bodies in these new ways appeared to help them cultivate a newfound sense of pride and self-reliance and opened up the possibility of a greater degree of adventure in their lives. And finally, for the fourth theme, we explored the notion that solitude can help a woman come to feel *more comfortable in her own skin*. We discussed how many women in this culture experience a certain degree of alienation from their bodies and a significant degree of bodily shame, leading them to feel as though they are not "at home" in their own bodies. We discussed how the movement toward recovering pre-reflective bodily experience through solitude, as discussed in the "transparent body" section of this chapter, may help a woman develop a greater sense of "at home-ness" in her body by helping to ease her practices of self-objectification and lessen the sense that she is "doubled" and psychically

existing outside herself. We then looked at other aspects of the women's experience which also seemed to foster a greater sense of comfort in their bodies. We explored how confronting certain distasteful or uncomfortable truths surrounding the organic nature of their bodies (e.g., the breakdown of bodily functioning due to aging, bodily odor, the reality of excrement) seemed to help them heal bodily shame and embrace their animal natures. In this subsection we also discussed the greater degree of attention that the women brought to the nuances of their bodily experience during their retreats. This greater attentiveness to bodily experience led to a commitment to greater self-care.

Take altogether, these themes point to the idea that solitude may help effect a generalized *homecoming* to the body. By and large, becoming a woman in this culture involves the cultivation of bodily alienation. From a young age, many a young woman learns to regard her body as something other than herself and comes to experience her body as a "body for others" rather than a body of her own. Through solitude, she may come to cultivate a greater sense of at-homeness in her body and come to feel more aligned and unified with her flesh rather than living at a perpetual distance from it. But beyond the psycho-corporeal disruptions that becoming a woman implies, simply becoming a *subject* in contemporary Western culture involves a significant degree of alienation as well which practices of solitude may also help address. Becoming a subject in the context of our technoscientific culture involves a progressive sense of alienation from the beings, things, and elements of the surrounding world. The lived, sensuous, experiential body is abandoned and a vital degree of contact and participation with the world is lost. By contrast, there is a movement toward a generalized *re-inhabiting* of both the body and the world such that one of the women in this study could declare that

her time in solitude enabled her to “reclaim [her] basic existence” (Anderson, p. 171). To reclaim one’s basic existence in this context is to move out of exile into greater participation, to resuscitate the lived body and reclaim its erotic connection to the more-than-human world.

Chapter 7: Language

Introducing language

At first blush, it might seem somewhat odd to include a chapter on language in this discussion of solitude. Language is, after all, merely a tool that human beings use to communicate information to other humans; a system of classifying, naming, representing, and capturing objective reality; a useful *add-on* to our existence rather than a fundamental aspect of it, right? Such is the hegemonic way of conceptualizing language. In this chapter, however, we will approach language as an integral existential dimension, exploring how the women *lived language* during their retreats and how shifts in their linguistic practices had a profound effect on their overall experience of solitude.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger (1978) has famously referred to language as “the house of being” (p. 193). Though we will not attempt the arduous task of interpreting Heidegger’s curious statement, we will use it as a source of inspiration while exploring the vital role of language in human existence and in asking the more precise question: *If language is the house of being, how did the women’s changing relationship with language over the course of their solitudes serve to restructure their existence?*

Language shapes and structures human experience

Before we delve into the question of language and solitude, a few introductory remarks about language are in order. Language is far more than a system of human communication and a group of signs which serves to merely represent the actual, real things of the world. Humans do not merely employ language as a tool; our very

experience of our “selves” and the world is formed, in large part, by language. Language is powerful. It is the house of being because it structures our perceptions, as we tend to pay attention to that which we have a name for. Language marks out the general territory through which we move, rendering certain phenomena visible and other phenomena invisible and thus creating hierarchies of meaning and value. Language (especially in its more literal, scientific forms) delineates phenomena as separate from other phenomena, creating boundaries around entities and fueling a dualistic worldview, separating I from you, self from world, and woman from man. Language is highly political, and those with the power to name have the power to control cultural discourse. It is political because it shapes how we think about certain people, issues, and phenomena, and how we think about these things determines how we treat them. Language has the power to open or close down our existential horizons; certain forms of language create rigid, unimaginative definitions of self and world, leading to existential restriction, while other forms of language can lead to existential enrichment as they aid us in perceiving connections between things, developing greater curiosity about the world, developing a higher level of care for our fellow beings, and having more highly nuanced and deeply felt experiences. Language as the house of being can be a stifling, isolating, prison-house or a comfortable dwelling space that supports fuller, more satisfying experiences and more fluid and imaginative conceptualizations of self and world. Summarizing the power of language to shape our experience (in perhaps a too overly optimistic and generous way), Czech writer and politician Vaclav Havel (1990) asserts that,

Words could be said to be the very source of our being, the very substance of the cosmic life form we call people. Spirit, the human soul, our self-awareness, our ability to generalise and think in concepts, to perceive the world as the world (and not just as our locality), and, lastly, our capacity to know that we will die – and

living in spite of that knowledge: surely all these are mediated or actually created by words. (p. 44)

Far from merely serving to *represent* our experience, language has the power to shape and structure our experience, either breathing life into our existence or serving to close it down.

Language is shaped and structured by the phenomenal world

However, though our experience is certainly shaped by the system of language we are born into, our experience cannot and should not be wholly reduced to the discursive domain, as argued in the previous chapter on embodiment. The complete reduction of our experience to language not only amounts to an unhelpful form of nihilism but is also simply inaccurate, given our innate bodily intelligence and pre-reflective modes of relating to the world that operate largely outside of the domain of the discursive. It is also important to acknowledge language's debt to the more-than-human world. On a very basic level, language originated from human beings' interactions with the natural environment, as embodied human speech arose in the larger context of the calls and gestures found in the non-human phenomenal world. Indigenous oral linguistic traditions mirror the "speech" found in that world, and the development of human language may be understood to be an effort to join a larger "conversation" that includes the cries of birds, the sound and feel of the wind, and even the visual and tactile expressiveness of stones. Human language may therefore be understood to be *secondary* and *derivative*, stemming from our relationship with the natural world and also modeled on the "wild" logic found there: "Ultimately, it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in

language” (Abram, 1996, p. 84). Even the written word, seemingly completely divorced from our participation with the landscape can be traced back to our primary environmental embeddedness, our primordial connection with the non-human phenomenal world.

The view that language has the power to shape and structure our experience can be held while simultaneously appreciating language’s primal rootedness in the phenomenal world; these two perspectives need not contradict each other.

Ecopsychologist Andy Fisher (2002) articulates the intertwinement between language and the phenomenal world – the “gestalt” they form together – thusly:

Language...originates as a kind of gesture that draws its meaning from our contact with the world, but our perception of this world is itself structured by the language already sedimented into it. ...language, on the one hand, and the phenomenal world, on the other, form two open systems which mirror and feed one another...the world knows itself as is it reflected in language, and language knows itself only as it is reflected in the actual world... The great power of language inheres precisely in the correlation and interaction that obtains between these two systems, in the gestalt they form together. (p. 128-129)

While acknowledging language’s ability to structure our experience of the world, we must remember that language originally arose out of that world. We must recall language’s ties to our perceptive bodies and to the animate earth even though the disembodied and disembedded forms of language commonly used today certainly lead us to think otherwise.

The powerful effect of literacy

The claim that language ultimately arises from our relationship with the sensuous landscape seems a major stretch in our contemporary context. Our mainstream use of language seems hardly linked to our perceptive bodies, let alone the expressiveness of the

local landscape. Our language seems radically disconnected from the phenomenal world, closed off in its own virtual system rather than having fleshy ties to the earth. David Abram (1996) points to the shift from oral culture to alphabetic literacy in Western history as the primary cause of this disconnection. For the vast majority of human history, people have lived in the context of indigenous oral cultures, in which language was not written down and people communicated through speaking in the immediate presence of others. The shift to written language in the West began with the advent of the Greek alphabet in the eighth century B.C.E., which spread slowly across Europe until it was firmly entrenched in daily life many centuries later. Abram contrasts the form of language embodied by the Homeric epics, which were most likely written down in the context of a largely oral culture around the 7th century B.C.E., with the Platonic dialogues coming out of the fourth century B.C.E. to exemplify the original shift in the West from environmentally-embedded language to the more disembodied, abstract language commonly used today (p. 104). The Homeric epics were poems which had evolved over time, “orally evolved creations, oral poems that had been sung and resung, shifting and complexifying” (p. 104). These epic poems were not the work of a single author, though Homer was the one who actually, finally wrote them down. They were *rhythmic*, to fit the breathing body which spoke the words, and they were also closely *aligned with the land*, portraying specific places and disclosing an animate world. In contrast to these poetic epics, the Platonic dialogues represented “thoroughly lettered constructions” of a “manifestly literate author” (p. 104) and embodied the newfound self-reflexivity and abstract thinking fostered by the practices of reading and writing. This shift from Homer to Plato/Socrates “may be recognized as the hinge on which the sensuous, mimetic,

profoundly embodied style of consciousness proper to orality gave way to the more detached, abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy” (Abram, 1996, p. 109).

The shift to literacy also made language far more of a solitary, self-reflexive endeavor. It made the written word the product of one author alone rather than part of an ever-changing story that is passed orally from person to person. The new practices of writing and silent reading also enabled people to dialogue with their own thoughts, strengthening (and perhaps even helping to create, in the first place) a sense of personal subjectivity and “interiority.” This was a remarkable development in that the “conversation” that once took place in the world relocated to a significant extent to the “inside” of a person’s mind. This relocation fostered the experience of possessing a “self” that is cut off from the world and thus marked the birth of the modern psyche:

This new seemingly autonomous, reflective awareness is called, by Socrates, the psyche, a term he twists from its earlier, Homeric significance as the invisible breath that animates the living body and that remains, as kind of wraith or ghost, after the body’s death... The Socratic-Platonic psyche, in other words, is none other than the literate intellect, that part of the self that is born and strengthened in relation to the written letters. (Abram, 1996, p. 112-13)

The roots of our modern conception of the “self” can thus be traced back to the shift from an oral-based culture to a literacy-based culture.

Isolated, cramped, noisy houses of being

The overarching linguistic situation in which we find ourselves in our contemporary technoscientific society is one in which language has lost its connection with the phenomenal world, and this disconnection has resulted in the commonplace use of arid, unimaginative language – both written and spoken – which fails to “sing” the

earth and resonate with our embodied experience. This linguistic situation leaves us with a sense of ourselves as distinct and isolated “skin encapsulated egos,” to use a well-known phrase from philosopher Alan Watts (1961, p. 13), cut off from our embodied experience and alienated from the organic world that lies outside the borders of our well-constructed, human-centered domains. The problem we face – a problem which not only serves to degrade our relationship with the world and with our felt experience but also serves to endanger the health of the ecosystem in which we are embedded – involves the quality of language we use and how we use it, and the problem also seems to revolve around the sheer *quantity* of language in our lives as well. It seems that part of the problematic linguistic situation we find ourselves in as contemporary Westerners (especially middle-class, well-educated, urban Westerners) is that there is simply *too much* language in our daily lives – a much too plentiful and frequent consumption of words, through reading and writing but also through watching television, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, immersed in the virtual world of the internet, etc.

Perhaps we might understand our current crisis to be one in which we are overrun, overwhelmed by language, expected to “process” a quantity of (cheap and unimaginative) language at a rate that is better suited to computing machines. Our contemporary post-industrial society is an *information society*, undergirded by a knowledge economy. Living in an information society brings with it a superabundance of words that one is expected to engage with on a daily basis, and few people seem well-equipped to handle this kind of stimulation in a healthy, balanced way. We live in a noisy world; it does not seem a stretch to assert that our house of being these days is very loud and overcrowded, and that much of the language we engage with on a daily basis – especially that which

serves the interests of the market or the interests of those in power – serves more so to close down, rather than open up our existential horizons. This is not to assert naively that language as it is used by the average citizen today is wholly unhealthy or empty, but it is to argue that the general patterns of language consumption and use in this culture do not seem to support a participatory worldview or foster practices that work toward experiential richness and compassionate regard for both human and non-human others. What is to be done in the face of this arid linguistic situation? Is there a way out of this isolated, cramped, noisy house of being?

Introducing silence

By entering solitude, the women restructured their relationship to language in a rather drastic way. The most striking aspect of their linguistic experience on retreat was their practice of silence, and this will serve as the overarching theme of this chapter. Practicing silence represented a major departure from their lives lived in the world with others; it represented a very different mode of inhabiting the house of being that is language. By practicing silence, they learned to move within its rooms differently, paying greater attention to certain things and less attention to others, listening in different and more profound ways, and relating to words differently. By entering into the kind of solitude that they did, the women entered a great silence. What was their experience of this silence? What new, or old, aspects of their beings did it call forth? What emerged within the clearing of silence, what were they able to hear within its vast openness? The rest of this chapter takes up these questions.

The seven themes we will explore within the overarching theme of silence include *listening to the “inner” voice, listening to one’s pain, listening beneath the personal, listening to God, listening to the world, greater care in the use of language, and poetry.* The first five “listening” themes reflect the ways in which the practice of silence appeared to help the women cultivate both “self” discovery – as they practiced listening “inwardly” to their inner voice and the thickness of their felt experience – and “self” loss, as they practiced forms of “outward” listening, to God and to the phenomenal world. As Belden Lane (2004) writes of the practice of solitary hermitage retreats such as Thomas Merton’s at Gethsemani, “One goes there to lose oneself as much as to find oneself” (p. 142). Indeed, many of the women found that these sustained “interior” listenings came to support the “exterior” ones; “self”-discovery came, over time, to support the process of “self”-loss. The latter two themes – “greater care in the use of language” and “poetry” – reflect the ways in which the women came to take up language in new ways over the course of their solitudes, developing a greater reverence for it, using it in a sparer way, and being drawn toward poetic language rather than more linear, narrative forms of writing. These seven sub-themes are meant to reflect the overall effect of silence over the course of their retreats; this is true even of the final two themes, as the women’s ways of using language in solitude appear to have largely *arisen out of* the larger context of silence – i.e., silence bred a more sacred perspective on language and fueled a turn toward the poetic.

In *The World of Silence*, written in the 1940s, phenomenologist Max Picard (1952) argued that, “Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence,”

The invention of printing, technics, compulsory education – nothing has so altered man as this lack of relationship to silence, the fact that silence is no longer taken for granted, as something natural as the sky above or the air we breathe. Man who has lost silence has not merely lost one human quality but his whole structure has been changed thereby. (p. 221)

If there is validity to Picard's assertions here, we can imagine that his argument rings far truer today than it did seventy years ago, given the radical increase in the sheer amount of words and information we encounter in our daily lives and the amount of noise pollution we live amidst. In Picard's view, silence is not merely a practice but a fundamental *aspect of our humanity* that is either cultivated or lies dormant. Exploring the women's lived experience of language, which was dominated by the practice and presence of silence, may help us better understand what aspects of our humanity are neglected in living amidst so much noise, so many words. This is not to overly romanticize the women's experience, but it is to point to the ways in which the practice of silence appeared to open up a world of experience – an image that contradicts a view of silence as a mere experiential deficit and as a refusal to participate in the world. Through their silence, the women were indeed refusing to participate in certain forms of social intercourse, but this refusal should not be understood as a refusal of participation *in toto*. By refusing to participate in social intercourse via speaking and listening to human speech, the women became more capable of listening to something else – something beyond the exclusively man-made world and perhaps even “beneath” the linguistically constructed, and thus man-made “self,” as well.

Women and silence

It is important to briefly touch on the historically fraught relationship between women and silence. Women have historically been *silenced*. Throughout Western history, women's voices have been largely left out of the cultural conversation – their needs, opinions, intentions, and experiences have largely been either theorized about by men or left unarticulated and unrecorded by women themselves. Feminist movement, in large part, involves a movement toward *coming to voice*, to the articulation of experience, to the speaking of one's mind. This is true of women as well as other oppressed or relatively disempowered groups who have relegated to the “seen but not heard” social category. In *In a Different Voice*, feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1993) articulated what was previously “a problem with no name” amongst adolescent American girls wherein by adolescence they appear to lose voice and become uncertain, hedging, circular, and censored in their speech. This loss of voice, or the development of a “different voice,” can be understood, in part, as a result of oppression and part and parcel of the project of becoming a woman and cultivating femininity in this culture. In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, feminist psychologist Mary Pipher (2005) echoes this notion in asserting that, “Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They ‘crash and burn’ in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle” and then quotes French author Denis Diderot's observation of adolescent girls to describe this loss of voice, and thus self: “You all die at 15” (p. 19). That “death” involves girls, who were once spirited, communicative, and more fully embodied children becoming insecure, self-

conscious, and uncertain of their desires, beliefs, and personal identities as they enter womanhood and the territory of the highly visible.

In the previous chapter on embodiment, we quoted Simone de Beauvoir's (1989) description from *The Second Sex* of the psycho-corporeal sea change that many adolescent girls in mid-20th century French bourgeois culture undergo in the process of becoming women:

She becomes an object, and she sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*. (p. 300)

Though they may be highlighting different aspects of girls' experience which undergo drastic changes under patriarchy (i.e., speech vs. embodiment), it seems that Gilligan, Pipher, and de Beauvoir are nonetheless pointing to a similar process of alienation and self-consciousness that is part of becoming a woman in Western culture for many, if not most, girls. Something in the relational, psychological, physical existence of our girls appears to go underground, some degree of vitality and ability to sit comfortably within their bodies and within the world becomes far less accessible in the process of becoming a woman and might not be fully recoverable into adulthood, except under certain conditions and after a significant amount of intentional, sustained work.

By going into solitude – by choosing silence and thus choosing to forfeit voice – the women in this study may, in a strange and seemingly contradictory way, be understood to have been working toward a process of recovery, and, indeed, feminist movement. Their silent endeavors might be understood to be part of a process of recovering something more foundational, more primordial, more central to the core of their beings than their voice, as associated with the personal self. Perhaps the language

that finally arises out of deep silence speaks of a different form of wisdom and experience; perhaps this new language, indeed, speaks through a different voice.

Choosing silence vs. being silenced

The women in this study chose to be silent. To be silenced is a very different experience from choosing to be silent. This distinction is akin to the role of choice in aloneness in general – to be isolated against one’s will (e.g., solitary confinement, aloneness as a result of social rejection or ostracism, etc.) is very different from choosing to embark upon a solitary retreat. The aspect of choice frames the experience of the phenomenon. In our attempts to flesh out the experience of silence, it is important to keep in mind that the silence being explored here is based on free will and choice. The fact that women have been historically silenced gives women an impetus to exercise their voices now that there are more venues to do so. But it also gives them the choice *not* to use their voice – and this choice of silence may be thought of as a privilege. To be silenced is oppression; to choose silence is a luxury.

In *A Book of Silence*, English writer Sara Maitland (2009) describes her process of progressively embracing silence and solitude, beginning in her late forties.³⁷ She began her journey into silence by embarking on a “40 day, 40 night” silent solitary retreat in a rural cottage which she moved into following a separation from her husband. She vividly chronicles this retreat, and the overarching portrait is that of an enriching and positively

³⁷ Though Maitland’s first-person narrative of solitude would have been an excellent addition to the list of women’s journals receiving a close reading for this study, it was not added to the list as I was unaware of its existence at the time that I initially set out on this project. Even if I had been aware of it, however, it would not have officially made the list given that it was written by a non-American (this study was limited to the writings of American women in the past fifty years). Nonetheless, Maitland’s discussions of silence are so rich and useful to the discussion of language and solitude that I will be making use of her insights throughout this chapter.

life-altering experience (albeit with movements through painful periods of suffering, nonetheless). Not too long after this experience, however, Maitland found herself unexpectedly snowed in and unable to leave her home or communicate with others for ten days. She was silent for both periods of time but found the two experiences radically different, as the first experience was life-giving while the other left her feeling exposed, panicky, and frightened by the least whistle of wind outside her door. Her involuntary silent period entailed a struggle get through the long days and amounted to an overall soul-damaging experience. Maitland clearly points to choice as the main factor responsible for the stark difference between the two experiences: “I now believe that the strongest determining factor in whether a silence ends up feeling positive or negative is whether or not it is freely chosen” (p. 92).

But to say that the choice of silence is a luxury is not to say that it is an easy choice to make. Silence is a very difficult choice for many people. We live in a loud, noisy culture in which silence tends to be discomforting or even disturbing, and this is so partly because silence is so rarely experienced. Silence is the unknown; we don’t know what to do with it, generally speaking. To be silent is to be possibly missing out on something and to be left stranded without the predictable, comforting protection of words. Silence in contemporary Western culture is threatening to many people, even though, as Sara Maitland points out, there is a tendency in our culture to romanticize this choice:

We all imagine that we want peace and quiet, that we value privacy and that the solitary and silent person is somehow more ‘authentic’ than the same person in a social crowd, but we seldom seek opportunities to enjoy it. We romanticise silence on the one hand and on the other feel that it is terrifying, dangerous to our mental health, a threat to our liberties and something to be avoided at all costs. (p. 3)

Indeed, leaving the world of speech and man-made noise/auditory stimulation appears dangerous. What might one discover there? What if we find nothing at all? The fear of finding nothing in the context of silence seems to indeed be the greatest fear for most.

Silence as a positive, autonomous phenomenon

Is silence merely an absence of sound, an absence of language? If so defined, silence can be understood as a deficit, as a loss of something, as a fundamental subtraction from one's experience. Yet, overall, that is not what the women's journals, nor thoughtful writings on the subject of silence reveal to be true on a felt, experiential level. Silence is not experienced simply in terms of a deficit or a negation but is, rather, experienced as a positive phenomenon – as not merely an absence of language but the presence of something else, something which the noise in our lives tends to cover over. Sara Maitland (2009) agrees with this statement: “I began to sense that all our contemporary thinking about silence sees it as an absence or a lack of speech or sound – a totally negative condition. ... I did not see lack of absence, but a positive presence” (p. 27). Maitland was seeking a fullness of experience through her extended period of silence rather than quietness: “I was not very interested in ‘peace and quiet’ or in the absence of anything. I was interested in silence... I wanted not absence or lack of sound, but to explore the positive power of silence; I wanted the fullness of the experience” (p. 30). In *The World of Silence*, Max Picard (1952) echoes the contention that “Silence” is a fundamentally positive, “autonomous” phenomenon:

Silence is not simply what happens when we stop talking. It is more than the mere negative renunciation of language... When language ceases, silence begins. But it does not begin *because* language ceases. The absence of language simply

makes the presence of Silence more apparent. Silence is an autonomous phenomenon. It is therefore not identical with the suspension of language. It is not merely the negative condition that sets in when the positive is removed; it is rather an independent whole, subsisting in and through itself. It is creative, as language is creative; and it is formative of human beings as language is formative... Silence belongs to the basic structure of man. (p. 15)

Indeed, the women found that silence was not merely an absence of sound and speech, and it was not necessarily experienced as a lack, though some of the women struggled with the sense of personal emptiness or nothingness that silence appeared to foster over time, and some of the women yearned to connect with others through speech and initially felt painful symptoms of withdrawal from language early in their retreats. All of the women, in one way or another, characterized the experience of silence as a rather uncanny and ineffable phenomenon which elicited different forms of experiencing which, though painful at times, were largely deemed fruitful and ultimately life-giving.

The question of reading and writing

It is important to note that although the women remained in silence for the vast majority of their solitudes – certainly for much longer, sustained stretches of time that they had prior to solitude – they still, for the most part, continued to engage directly with language through reading and writing. Most of the women read books and journaled, to lesser to greater degrees, throughout their time in solitude. A few of the women even wrote letters to other people while on retreat. Can we claim that the women were truly silent if they were engaged with language in these ways? This is a difficult question to answer, as a black and white answer doesn't seem to fit. I struggled with the question of whether I was sullyng the experience of silence during my two hermitage retreats by reading, for example. I came to notice that I was relying on both reading and writing, to

some extent, as a means of escape from the demands of having to be present to my experience and immediate environment. I found myself looking forward to reading and writing with a great hunger, and when during my second retreat I considered embarking on a two-day fast from reading in order to decrease these opportunities for escape into virtual reality, I found myself trying hard to justify the reasons why reading was still a good idea. I found myself clinging to reading, and indeed underwent the fast and found it to be *very* uncomfortable. This brief fast helped prepare me to give up reading, along with writing, entirely during my third retreat – the vision fast in the desert. The progressive letting go of reading and writing seemed to mirror the progressive movement toward self-emptying that transpired over the course of my three retreats – leaving me empty enough on the final night of the third retreat to receive the great gift of the vision. This progressive movement toward self-emptying will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

It is interesting that the other women in this study did not comment on this struggle or even articulate the notion that reading and writing might not square with their commitment to silence. The only exception to this was the following justification that Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) gave for her reading practice while on retreat: “I did not cut myself off from the written words of others, figuring that there would be no interruption to an interior search if I heard only the unspoken (but fortunately not unheard) voices in books” (p. 4). In *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland (2009) explicitly reflects on this issue, however, when questioning the role of reading during her solitude:

If reading is a separate language by which authors communicate with readers, in what sense can we properly describe [her time on retreat] as ‘silent’ at all, particularly if we think of silence as predominantly an absence of language? Should a person seeking true silence be reading? (p. 151-152)

Maitland goes on to discuss how different religious traditions have approached the role of reading during a period of sustained solitude and notes that for Protestantism and Catholicism, reading is understood to be central to contemplative life whereas for classical Buddhists, “reading has generally been seen as antipathetic to meditation and enlightenment” (p. 152). Maitland could not imagine giving up reading during her silent retreat, but found that over time the quality and quantity of her reading changed:

I read, of course I read. I cannot really imagine not reading. But I gradually became aware that, through silence, I was beginning to read in a new way. I still, too often, use reading as a way to escape from silence...but during my time at [her hermitage] I discovered a new way of reading. I read more slowly and therefore in a sense I read less, but I read more carefully and attentively. I felt less excited by plot, tension and pace, and more engaged with language and mood and place. I started reading more poetry and enjoying it more. I want to say that I learned to read more silently, but I also read with a sense of the mystery of what reading is and how deeply and silently it has shaped our sense of self. (p. 152-153)

Maitland did not cease her practice of reading but instead came to approach it differently. We see something similar happening with most of the women in this study, as they came to be more careful, spare, and deliberate in their engagement with written language. These shifts in language use will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. For now, however, it suffices to say that although most of the women did not experience radical silence through the complete banishment of language, they experienced a clear shift in their modes of language use and appreciation. The larger context of silence seemed to help effect this shift.

Theme 1: *Listening to the inner voice*

The first five subthemes highlight the ways that silence fostered the women's ability to listen both "inwardly"³⁸ and "outwardly." "Listening" here denotes not just the ability to perceive auditory stimulation more acutely but also the heightened ability to discern meaning, messages, and significance in general. Baba Ram Dass is often quoted as saying that "The quieter you become, the more you can hear." Indeed, the women became progressively better able to hear, listen to, and discern meaning, both "inwardly" and "outwardly," throughout their solitudes.

The women became better able to tune in to a kind of inward voice which prior to solitude had largely escaped their notice. Prior to becoming able to turn their attention to this inner voice, however, some of the women expressed discomfort with not speaking, and it seemed they needed to go through an initial period of withdrawal from speaking and auditory stimulation in general before they could settle in to silence. Though I longed for silence upon entering my first retreat, for example, I found myself unexpectedly talking aloud and carrying on (my end of) conversations with imaginary others quite often during the first few days of the retreat, and I would chastise myself for doing so, given my commitment to silence. Interestingly, I would also chastise myself in my dreams if I spoke aloud, seemingly vigilant around my commitment to silence even

³⁸ By "inward," I do not mean to assert the existence of a strictly bounded "inside" of a person or imply the notion of an essential "self" that is separate from the world and filled with a storehouse of fixed contents – i.e., Alan Watts' "skin-encapsulated ego" (1961, p. 13). By referring to "inward" listening, I am pointing to the heightened ability to discern the nuances of one's experiencing – the intricate tapestry of affective, emotional, visceral, proprioceptive, and cognitive experience that prior to solitude remained largely latent but which became more accessible and meaningful in the context of silence and solitude. As we will see, an ability to attend "inwardly," to that more personal and "interior" region of being in a courageous, sustained, honest manner seemed to eventually lead to (or co-arise with) in many of the women a better ability to attend "outwardly"; again, the term "outwardly" is not meant to imply a strict separation between the self and world but rather points to a generalized region that is "not mine" and lies outside my immediate felt awareness.

while sleeping. Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) found herself missing the sound of other people's voices and surprised herself by spontaneously talking aloud at the start of her retreat as well:

At first I missed another voice, not so much a voice responsive to my own unexpressed thoughts as an independent one speaking its own words. On occasion, I spoke aloud, only to surprise myself. My voice sounded low, toneless, coarse. I thought: it would be agreeable to be answered in another, more pleasing tone, even to be contradicted, gently. (p. 2)

In time, however, Grumbach discovered there was a reward for this deprivation – an ability to hear an “interior voice”:

There was a reward for this deprivation. The absence of other voices compelled me to listen more intently to the inner one. I became aware that the interior voice, so often before stifled and stilled entirely by what I thought others wanted to hear, or what I considered to be socially acceptable, grew gratifyingly louder, and more insistent. ... I listened hard to it, more intently than I had to the talk of my friends in the world. (p. 2-3)

At first she found listening to this inner voice to be very gratifying, as she felt it to be the voice of a more authentic self rather than the voice of the social persona she adopted when speaking to others. This inner voice, amplified by silence, seemed all her own, more authentic, unguarded, *true*.

Searching for the endolithic self, finding the inner voice

Even though she found this inner voice interesting and stimulating, spending time with it was somewhat of a disappointment for Grumbach, as she had hoped that solitude would help her uncover what she referred to as an “endolithic self” – an inner terrain that contained a storehouse of secret personal contents. About her expectations regarding the buried treasure that she had hoped solitude would help her turn up, she wrote,

In this way, living alone in quiet, with no vocal contributions from others, no sounds...from beyond my own ear, I was apt to hear news of an inner terrain, an endolithic self, resembling the condition of lichens embedded in rock. My intention was to discover what was in there, no matter how deeply hidden, a process not unlike uncovering the treasure that accompanied the body of a Mayan king, hidden in a secret room in a tomb within a pyramid. (p. 3)

Behind her desire to excavate this endolithic self, however, lurked a fear that there would be nothing there when she went digging, a fear that she was “all outside”:

I thought that if everything beyond myself was cut off, the outside turned inside, if I dug into the pile of protective rock and mortar I had erected around me in seventy-five years, perhaps I would be able to see if something was still living in there. Was I all *outside*? Was there enough inside that was vital, that would sustain and interest me in my self-enforced solitude? A treasure of fresh insight? A hoard...of perceptions that had accumulated, unknown and unnoticed by me, in the black hole of the psyche? (p. 3-4)

Grumbach’s experience of this “inner terrain” did not turn out to be what she had hoped or imagined it might be. Her experience of this newfound “interior” dimension was far less sensational than the discovery of a hoard of secret contents. She discovered, for the most part, a language-based inner voice that “sounded” to her like a muted version of her actual voice. This voice did seem more refreshingly candid than her actual voice, but it did not reveal great wisdom or information that had been repressed or tucked away somewhere. Instead, this voice simply made its presence known and helped Grumbach regard things (in her immediate environment but also in a more abstract sense) from a fresh angle:

It was not that [the inner voice] spoke great truths or made important observations. No. It simply reminded me that it was present, saying what I had not heard it say in quite this way before. It began to point out the significance of the inconsequential, of what I had overlooked in my hunger for what I had always before considered to be the important, the Big Things. (p. 3)

The inner voice as companion and reassuring indicator of personal existence

Grumbach's inner voice served as a commentator and a witness to her experience, and it even felt somewhat like a friend. Indeed, she seemed to experience this voice as a companion of sorts, an old faithful friend whom she had not heard from in a long time and was renewing her acquaintance with. The voice kept her company and helped to stave off loneliness. In *The Life of the Mind*, political theorist Hannah Arendt (1978) explains how the ability to internally divide oneself "into the two-in-one" in order to furnish oneself with companionship is the chief characteristic of the ability to endure (and indeed enjoy) solitude:

Thinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company, when, as Jaspers used to say, 'I am in default of myself', or to put it differently, when I am one and without company. (p. 185)

Solitude is here contrasted with a sense of loneliness, which is characterized as a failure to keep oneself company and, indeed, as *a failure to think*. Grumbach's inner voice was indeed *her thinking itself*, her cognitive activity at work rather than the voice of a "self" which was doing the thinking. The inner voice was the constant stream of mental commentary that accompanied her throughout her day-to-day life but which she had rarely listened to in an undistracted way prior to solitude, let alone directly thematized. It seems that Grumbach's ability to split herself "into the two-in-one" did indeed serve to people her solitude and protect her from loneliness.

Grumbach's inner voice served the function of companionship. It also seemed to reassure her of her very existence, which was called into question over the course of her retreat. As mentioned previously, Grumbach feared that in digging around for her

“endolithic self” she might discover that there was nothing there – that nobody was, in fact, home. Her inner voice was soothing because it helped to stave off not only loneliness but also nothingness. Philosopher and poet Denise Riley (2004) writes explicitly about how the phenomenon of the inner voice, in its “self-immediacy” and seeming authenticity, serves as the quintessential marker for the existence of the individual “self”:

While our capacity for communicative speech (with others) has often been proclaimed as the sign of the distinctively human...the inner voice, as a strong tangible aspect of the self with itself in solitude, can be taken as a reassuring touchstone of my very existence. Here Descartes’ *cogito* could be rendered instead as “I am aware of my inner voice, therefore I am.” (p. 67-68)

Not only does the inner voice seem to reveal my interior, individual “self” in its immediacy, the inner voice seems to speak the authentic truth of my existence:

“Together with its strong sensation of self-immediacy comes the impression, at least, of truth telling. ... My own inner voice does not lie to me. To possess an *inauthentic* inner voice is impossible” (p. 68). Indeed, Grumbach found this inner voice to be refreshingly authentic and more honest than the actual voice she employs in the world with others.

But although the inner voice seems to provide evidence of an authentic self, this is ultimately a form of self-deception, according to Riley. The inner voice is language-based, and language, being a social phenomenon, is never truly our own. The inner voice is instead “a vehicle for words from elsewhere, much as a ventriloquist’s dummy or doll is made to speak vicariously” (p. 72-73). Our inner voice does not have a direct line to a pure, uncontaminated Mind; our mental activity is inextricable from the world of language, and our thoughts always arise in an embodied, social context rather than a

vacuum. Indeed, Riley contends that if one is to look closely enough at the inner voice, one discovers that this voice is largely a citation machine for the words of others:

My supposition is that ventriloquy isn't only a passing and banal companion to any inner voice, but is its incisive constituent. For inner speech is no limpid stream of consciousness, crystalline from its uncontaminated source in Mind, but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterative quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard, the strenuously sifted and hoarded, the periodically dusted down then crammed with slogans and jingles, with mutterings of remembered accusations, irrepressible puns, insistent spirits of ancient exchanges, monotonous citation, the embarrassing detritus of advertising, archaic injunctions from hymns, and the pastel snatches of old song lyrics. (p. 73)

Although I view Riley's analysis to be rather extreme in its indictment of the inner voice's fraudulence, superficiality, and attempts at duplicity, her view is a good foil to the common Romantic notion that we are able to hear our "true selves" in solitude, and then to equate this "true self" with the inner voice. This is not to argue that the sense of interiority, companionship, or even authenticity that the inner voice fosters should be written off as a mere illusion – Grumbach did indeed have a felt experience of her inner voice as such, and she found value and meaning in this experience, at least for a time. Though the felt senses of interiority, companionship, and authenticity may in some sense be illusory – even dangerously so – they still played an important role in Grumbach's overall journey in solitude, a journey into the realm of the deeply personal and beyond.

The inner voice and the project of self-loss

It is useful to contrast Grumbach's experience of her inner voice with that of Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*). Dobisz undertook an explicitly spiritual, Zen Buddhist retreat. Grumbach, on the other hand, did not have explicitly spiritual aims for her solitude, though she had spiritual experiences in solitude and identified herself as a

Christian. Grumbach did not view her inner voice as a foe as or a roadblock of any kind, whereas Dobisz, in her explicit efforts to mitigate a separate and personal sense of self most certainly did. Dobisz seemed to regard her inner voice as mere mental chatter that provided her with a false sense of self and identity and inhibited her present-moment awareness. It seems as though Dobisz engaged in very little journal writing while on retreat, especially given her very demanding schedule, and if this is so, we can surmise that this lack of self-reflection via journaling probably aided her efforts to quiet her inner voice and “lose herself”³⁹ while on retreat. But although she did not seem to do a significant amount of journaling, she did engage with language on a moment-to-moment basis by silently reciting a mantra (*The Great Dharani*: “Namak alya baro gije sebaraya, moji sadabaya, maha sadabaya...” (p. 8)) in her mind throughout all of her activities, all day long. The recitation of the mantra helped keep her thinking in check, creating little room for it to sneak in, and fostering Dobisz’s presence to her immediate environment. She describes her experience of the mantra, one morning late in her retreat thusly:

The mantra this morning is a bare wisp of a filament, quiet, steady, and porous enough to allow in fast-moving shadows on the floor, flickering and changing with the clouds passing and the wind. Branches, leaves, and the side of my head rush to and fro in silhouette. A plane flies overhead through it all, through me, through the mantra, through the shadows of branches. This has all been going on for thousands of years, yet it is only now. No one is in any of it. (p. 105)

As part of her rigorous daily schedule, Dobisz also chanted the mantra aloud for a significant length of time at three different times during the day. Chanting enabled her to focus on each audible syllable at a time, helping her stay with the present moment:

During chanting, when my mind wanders off to think about this or that, I bring it back to the sound of the syllable I’m on. SIJ. JIN. OP. With all energy and attention focused on each syllable, there’s no room for thinking to wiggle in. Like

³⁹ Indeed, the full title of Dobisz’s first-person narrative is *One Hundred Days of Solitude: Losing Myself and Finding Grace on a Zen Retreat*.

everything else in Zen, chanting is yet one more way to pay attention in this moment. Chanting practice uses sound as a means to wake us up. Perceiving sound in its purest sense means listening without preconceived ideas of any kind. (p. 21-22)

Both silent recitation of the mantra and chanting aloud appeared to have helped Dobisz disidentify with her inner voice and thus her “self.” In this way, she appears to have used language to fight or dispel language, to fight or dispel her “self.”

Grumbach and Dobisz approached their solitudes with very different overarching purposes. Grumbach approached hers with an exploratory attitude, a desire to work on her writing (especially her fiction writing), and an aim of attempting “a trial return to the core of [her]self” (p. 2). Dobisz entered hers with an already established meditation practice under her belt, a clear-cut body of spiritual knowledge that guided her aims and specific practices during retreat, and the single-minded purpose of losing a discrete, separate sense of self. Having had a long history of meditation practice, Dobisz was already quite attuned to her inner voice upon starting her retreat, and as the tradition in which she practiced held an unfavorable view of the inner voice, she was not very charitable toward it, in contrast to Grumbach’s more welcoming stance. But although these differences favored a greater emphasis on the process of “finding oneself” in the case of Grumbach and “losing oneself” in the case of Dobisz, it is interesting to note that even though Grumbach felt favorably toward her inner voice, it eventually petered out. After a few weeks in solitude and silence, Grumbach’s inner voice began to slip away; sensing its slow dissipation, Grumbach strained hard to hear it and grasped after it frustratingly. Eventually, however, she let go. In so doing, she surrendered to a process of self-emptying, and discovered in the clearing that there was actually quite a bit there. We will return to the discussion of Grumbach’s self-emptying process in the third theme:

Listening beneath the personal. For now, however, we will continue by exploring a different form of “inward” listening – that of *listening to one’s pain*.

Theme 2: *Listening to one’s pain*

Thus far in this analysis, after having explored the inner voice, it might seem as though predominantly mental processes transpired in the context of silence. This was not the case. Although it would be unwise and inaccurate to make a gross distinction between one’s affective and one’s cognitive experience, we will focus on the more emotionally-oriented⁴⁰ forms of “listening” that silence seemed to set the stage for. Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti has observed that, “You try being alone, without any form of distraction, and you will see how quickly you want to get away from yourself and forget what you are” (as quoted in LeClaire, 2010, p. 45). This is an apt quote describing the affective experience of the women in this study. The women’s affective experience while on retreat was certainly not altogether painful, as their solitudes were littered with moments of ineffable joy, giddy excitement, and quiet contentment, and it is fair to assert all of the women’s retreats (except perhaps my second retreat) ended on an unambiguous up note. The process of getting to that final up note, however, involved encountering many “emotional” demons and looking squarely at emotional material that had long been relegated to the closet shelf. Solitude involved clearing out those closets, or at the very least opening the closets, letting in some fresh air, and acknowledging and accepting the chaos that dwelled there. In using a closet

⁴⁰ Though there are fine distinctions to make between the terms “emotion,” “affect,” and “feeling,” I will be using these terms interchangeably here for the sake of simplicity.

metaphor I do not mean to imply that this process amounts to uncovering secret hidden contents; I instead mean to argue that solitude helps one, not necessarily excavate fixed contents, but feel more fully into the experience of, and bring more conscious awareness to latent painful experiential felt “material” which prior to solitude had been seemingly too threatening, chaotic, or simply out of reach to make contact with. This involved a different form of listening, one which was not primarily language-based (as compared to the inner voice) but did utilize language – primarily through the women’s journal writing – to help them articulate and make greater sense of troubling affective material, thus helping the women move on from certain situations in the world that left them feeling stuck and restricted in their lives.

Clearing a space for the “intense, hungry face at the window”

Many of the women descended into painful emotional territory soon upon entering solitude. The lack of distractions, along with the decreased use of language, seemed to allow affective material to quickly rise to the surface of their awareness. Doris Grumbach, for example, explained that her pre-existing tendencies toward depression became quickly amplified in solitude, given the lack of distractions: “Solitude became the rich breeding ground for my natural depression because I had ruled away every possible deterrent: phone calls, dinners out, television” (p. 35). As Grumbach’s depressive affect became more insistent, she struggled through the experience of it and tried to faithfully describe and make sense of it in her journal. Her journal writings reflect the strong emotional sway that the experience of aging and mortality, in particular, held for her. Being alone, in silence, for an extended period of time allowed her to really

delve into the fear, shame, and sadness she experienced around growing older. She explained that,

When I am among people I have usually been able to forget, or bury, or disguise, my despondency. Without company I have had to remember that despair is always lurking beyond the circle of lamplight, the flames of the woodstove, the warmth of the gas oven. If I took steps into any dark place I was once again afraid, despairing, and aware of how old I was and how young I would give anything to be. (p. 36)

This despair, this fighting against the reality of her older age and the painful shame she felt around it, eventually transmuted into a sense of growing acceptance, surrender to the natural process, and affirmation of life despite the inevitability of death; this transmutation was captured nicely by her journal's parting words: "Until death, it is all life" (p. 114).

In *Listening Below the Noise*, Christian writer Anne LeClaire discusses her practice of observing silence every other Monday. She described how during her third Monday in silence, her heart quickly became heavy with grief, a grief that she knew had been lurking at a low level for some time but which made its presence more fully known in silence:

Underneath, something continued to brew. ...as I continued walking, seeds of other, more personal disappointments and disconnections took root. Silence may hollow out the empty space essential for something to enter, but what appears is not always lovely. I found myself thinking about sad and hurtful things. (p. 43)

Here, LeClaire points to the power of silence to clear a space for latent affective experience to make its presence felt, especially for certain forms of experience which do not sit well with our image of who we are in the world. May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) echoes the notion that solitude (and its attendant silence) creates a space for that which we do not normally wish to look at or feel into; this space-making quality is indeed

the essence of solitude for her: “When I talk about solitude I am really talking about making space for that intense, hungry face at the window... It is making space *to be there*” (p. 57). Sarton was alluding here to a hungry, stray cat who frequently came to her door seeking warmth and food, and this cat’s visitations proved to be an apt metaphor for the latent felt material which stood at the edge of Sarton’s awareness, desperately seeking attention and care. Silence allows such affect “to be there,” and in the sheer acknowledgement of such affect – the allowing of it rather than the shelving or repressing or intellectualizing of it – one may eventually come to a sense of greater peace and acceptance.

The value of bringing language to painful affect

By referring to the intellectualizing of affective experience, I am pointing to the ways in which one often rationalizes one’s emotional experience as a way of defending against the pain of it. I do not mean to imply that bringing cognition to the pain is necessarily a negative thing, however. Indeed, many of the women seemed to find reflecting on their pain via the practice of journaling to be ultimately in the service of the ability to move through the pain and eventually let it go. Describing their emotional experience and trying to make sense of it in the context of their larger lives (e.g., their childhood, their current relationships, etc.) seemed to deepen and prolong a sense of despair in the short term for some of the women, however. For example, May Sarton observed that, “Cracking open the inner world again, writing even a couple of pages, threw me back into depression” (p. 12). Reflecting on her pain through journal writing deepened her sense of despair for a time, but Sarton seemed to consider it a necessary

step toward the eventual relinquishment of that pain. Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*), on the other hand, found that journaling about the painful affect which arose in solitude served to quickly dispel that pain and bring about a sense of peace and greater self-acceptance rather immediately:

There was no quick fix, no magic bullet with which to slay these undisciplined squads marauding within me. My first step had to be recognition and acceptance of these forces so deeply rooted in my psyche. It was a humbling moment when I finally looked honestly at what so frequently choked my energies or cast gloom over my best endeavors. Anger, rooted in resentment and guilt as well as fear and anxiety, gnawed relentlessly at the ragged edges of my peace. ... All these emotions made me angry. My feelings were not particularly rational, but there they were... When I began to put them into words, risked naming and defining what caused them, I was astounded to discover that they weren't the towering enemies of my peace that I had imagined them to be... At first I only dared to make small forays into this uncomfortable world of negative feelings. As with my assault on the wild roses [which were taking over her land], my best hope seemed to be in getting at the smaller briars before they got too entangled. This meant a self-awareness and an honesty I was not used to. My daily journaling proved to be the arena where I dared to notice and acknowledge the proliferating briars in my inner world... The guilt I felt diminished as I dared to write about it in my journal. And with it, some anger. A new peace began to grow. (p. 63-64)

Whether journaling seemed to bring more immediate pain or more immediate relief, it seems clear that bringing language to their emotional experience was generally very helpful to the women. Bringing language to their latent emotional experience, in the safe and contained context of their journals, seemed to help them “process” and “integrate” their unfinished or blocked emotional experience, to use terms commonly used by psychotherapists to loosely describe how bringing language to emotional experience in the context of therapy can bring about relief from pain and a felt sense of greater spaciousness and freedom.

Taking a moral inventory, moving into right relationship with the world

Listening more closely to their pain fueled a desire in some of the women to change the way they had previously been conducting their lives in the world with others. Reflecting on the experience of beginning to tune into uncomfortable aspects of her emotional experience while observing silence on Mondays, Christian writer Anne LeClaire (2010) notes that,

On that February day, as it has many times since, intentional silence was serving as a yellow light in my path, halting my stride, leading me to recognize matters shoved beneath the rug. And forcing me to acknowledge that I was out of right relationship with the world. (p. 45)

LeClaire here speaks for many of the women in this study by acknowledging that silence can foster not only greater self-acceptance and a sense of emotional peace and freedom, but also greater humility and a concomitant desire to change one's behavior upon re-entering the interpersonal sphere post-solitude.

Doris Grumbach wrote of how solitude created the space for her "vices" to become more apparent, as she was no longer sheltered by the flattery of other people:

I realized how much more I was aware of my vices (envy, gloating, egotism) when I was alone. In the presence of others, it was possible to ignore them, or even deny that they existed. In solitude, there they are, omnipresent and bountiful, unable to be dispelled by the unknowing flattery of kindly others. (p. 56)

Sitting with these vices enabled Grumbach to evaluate the way she had been living in the world with others and decide to make changes accordingly. I experienced my vices becoming much more apparent during my second retreat as well. The degree of shameful affect that arose in the context of that retreat was surprising to me, given the contrast in tone between my first and second retreats. Though my first retreat was very emotionally provocative, the emotions tended toward the positive end of the spectrum, especially

toward the end of the retreat. To my surprise, my second retreat was all-around bleak – e.g., the weather, my mood, my thoughts. After the joyous explorations and breakthroughs of the first retreat, during my second retreat I felt as though I had begun to, as I put it in my journal, “enter the desert.” I struggled with boredom, restlessness, and especially with shame and self-disgust, looking honestly at my past behavior as well as my interpersonal behavior in the context of the retreat. My sense of restlessness became so strong at one point, for example, that I broke my silence and called my sister. In my hunger to get out of the hermitage and find a place to check my email, I also found myself, like a junkie searching desperately for a high, impulsively getting into my car and driving off in search of the closest decently sized town. I drove until I happened upon a public library in the town of Jackson, MI. In order to have access to the internet there, I needed to provide proper ID, which I didn’t have on me. I immediately felt impatient and became angry and was very nasty to the librarian; immediately following this interaction I ran to the bathroom and burst into tears. Having been in solitude for six days, I suppose that my emotional life was very close to the surface (and the emotions I had turned up were not very pleasant in general), and I carried that into my interactions with her. Upon returning home, I reflected in my journal that, “I’m disgusted by myself... I went into Jackson, MI and was disgusting and short-tempered. I acted like a real bitch to the well-meaning librarian. I nearly lost my shit with her and then started crying.” Later, during that same writing period I reflected,

I’ve been nasty and uncharitable to others and myself. So, so far, Karin has no: humility, patience, communal feeling or desire, and she has a terribly loose connection to spirit/God... I am a fallible person. May God have mercy on me. I am a sinner and need help. May God have mercy on me. I am only as good as I am to and with others. God have mercy on me and help me be a more loving person.

Solitude and silence granted me the opportunity to come face-to-face with my personal ugliness, to hold a mirror to myself in this way. It also prompted me to reach beyond myself and ask for help from something or someone that I did not even rationally believe in. In essence, for me, solitude and silence prompted faith.

My interaction with the librarian turned out to be a powerful lesson. After returning to the hermitage after my great escape into town, I spent two days rigorously examining myself and, by abstaining from reading, did not allow myself to escape this pain through imbibing the written word. This was a difficult decision to make as it felt like I was sacrificing A LOT. One day seven I reflected on the events of the day before:

Yesterday turned out to be a great learning experience...or at least it left me stranded, dropped on my ass, not knowing what to do. This morning I feel the coldness outside, think I hear the wind. This is not like my first retreat. I decided last night to enter the desert. I've been guarding against it. But it's time, I think to face time, the blank nothingness... A fear of going without. Without words.

On the night of day eight, my "desert" experience culminated in the intuition of a demonic presence in the corner of my cabin, frightening me. At the same time, however, I was able to witness my fear rather than being immersed in it. I slept well that night and noted in my journal the next morning that,

There is something there, some demon to be wrestled with in the dark quietness of solitude... I came here to see what I'd see and I've seen the demon of boredom, guilt, shame, a feeling of being a failure – a spiritual and material and relational failure.

Despite this pronouncement, and although I felt cut down to a smaller size, I was generally at peace. The demonic figure briefly returned again later that night, but it did not frighten me. I left the retreat early that next morning, and drove through the rainy day back home to Pittsburgh. It was not a joyous, triumphal return as with my first

retreat but was instead a quiet, humble return. I felt like a slightly different person, somehow – a little older, a little more sober, a little more mature. It was with this sense of sobriety that I entered my third retreat six months later, in the desert of New Mexico, where instead of delving into the thickness of my experience and processing the latent painful emotional material lingering there, I instead simply sat and waited. I waited in a stance of emptiness, and I was indeed filled.

Theme 3: *Listening beneath the personal, cultivating anonymity*

What happens after the inner voice and latent affective experience is attended to? What arises in that clearing? Though the forms of listening thematized in this chapter did not take place in clear succession, it does seem that the first two forms of listening we have discussed (listening to the inner voice and painful affect) enabled the women to “drop down” into a different kind of “space” and become better able to attend “outwardly” – to God, to the natural world, etc. This ability to attend outwardly seemed to go hand-in-hand with the progressive quieting down of their mental activity and the development of a greater sense of emotional peace. In this way, the women’s centers of gravity appeared to shift from a more personal to a less personal realm of being. We will return to the example of Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) to explore this curious phenomenon further.

Mind as “featureless plain”

Although Doris Grumbach’s inner voice was at first “gratifyingly” loud, it eventually quieted down and even began to bore her:

I discovered it was sometimes very hard to hear what I was thinking, or even to discover whether I was thinking at all... It turned out that the words in which my thinking was necessarily couched were hard to catch, because the tone, the voice, was mine, and I had grown immune to that voice. Try as I might to listen, I found that I had become bored with the *sound* of my own thoughts embedded in that old, omnipresent voice, and so I stopped listening. (p. 50)

Grumbach found this development to be unfortunate, as she went on to reflect, “This, I discovered, was one of the unavoidable disadvantages of being alone” (p. 50). Though she had initially enjoyed listening in on her inner commentary she grew tired of her own words, tired of her own mind, exhausted with having to put everything into words and mental concepts; she therefore, in a sense, gave her mind permission to stop working so hard.

Late in her journal Grumbach came to describe her mind as a “featureless plain”:
“my mind appeared to be a long, low, insensate, featureless plain. It contained no peaks of drama and no deep troughs of despair... In that state I felt somewhat barren but still comfortable” (p. 89). By this point in her retreat, Grumbach had lost connection to the inner voice, and her mind reached a state of comfortable barrenness, a state of emptiness that bespoke a loss of personal content, a draining of life from the personal self. Indeed, Grumbach started to wonder whether she “herself” was even there:

The reason that extended solitude seemed so hard to endure was not that we missed others but that we began to wonder if we ourselves were present, because for so long our existence depended upon assurances from them. The pronouns I was using now, the generalized first person plural I used to think with in the world – we, us, our – came more easily to the pen when such matters as these suddenly concerned me. The first person pronoun makes a statement about our unique singularity of which we are only sure when we are in society. Alone, we hesitate to use it (as I am doing now) because we fear we may be talking behind the back of someone who is not here. (p. 18)

As she approached this barren, featureless territory she found it difficult to write, especially in terms of the novel she had been working on, and felt frustrated by her failed

attempts at conceptual thinking. Eventually, however, she began to feel okay with the empty quality of both her mind and the page and in that emptiness even discovered an invisible beauty:

I had been paralyzed by a lack of ideas, but now I saw that I did not need to produce anything on the page to feel better, even, somehow, complete. What I did not produce was...more beautiful than anything I could have written. (p. 80)

A similar process of feeling a sense of *completeness in incompleteness* can be seen in Grumbach's extended meditation on a painting hanging in her home, in which the top seventh of the page was filled with winter trees and distant snow covered hills while the rest of the picture was blank. She gazed at this painting for some time and described her sense of the "heavy" and "impenetrable" snow that lay in the white space on the canvas. She noted, "Another lesson learned in solitude: To look hard at what I did not notice before and even harder at what is not there, at what Paul Valery called "the presence of absence" (p. 24). She mentioned the phrase "presence of absence" several times in her journal, each time describing her heightened ability to feel the presence of the invisible and sense the fullness inherent, but barely discernible, in emptiness. It seems that as Grumbach became more comfortable with what was not there in her "self" she became more comfortable with the blank space on the page and the canvas. The silence allowed her to both empty her mind of content and intuit presences of that which was not readily perceived. She seemed to experience a process of clearing a space in which something normally imperceptible could make itself known.

The “zone of nonbeing”

This seemed to amount to a progressive shift in Grumbach’s center of gravity from the region of the personal toward the non-personal – a shift which many of the women seemed to experience, though few described it as explicitly as Grumbach. This shift toward the non-personal region of being might be illuminated through the Merleau-Pontian concept of *bodily anonymity*. In her article, “The Place Where Life Hides Away,” philosopher Gayle Salamon (2006) examines a passage in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* in which he discusses the case of a young woman whose mother has forbidden her to see the young man she loves, resulting in the loss of the young woman’s speech. Merleau-Ponty characterizes this loss of speech, this silence, as “the refusal of co-existence” in which the patient “tends to break with life itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 186). Salamon understands the young woman’s loss of speech, rather than merely serving a gesture of turning her back on the world, to be an entry point into the non-personal “zone of nonbeing” which is “this anonymous life” (p. 107). Silence here is understood to be the body’s method of retracting from “its own particularity” and slipping beneath the personal into the non-personal, into anonymity:

When the body says no – to speech, to food, or to interactions with others – when the body refuses the world and burrows into itself, it retracts from its own particularity as surely as it retracts from the external world. Instead of delivering to the self an identity that might be fortified and amplified by solitude, this inward turn is, quite the opposite, a draining away of life from the self. The retreat from the world transforms bodily life into “anonymous life,” in which the pulse hums beneath the skin and is amplified in the ears, and the body’s functions persist, maintaining a life that exists beneath any sense of self. (p. 107)

The ability to access this anonymous zone is necessary for the ability to relate to others and the capacity “to have a world” (p. 107). She acknowledges the need for these movements of retreat from the world and from personal existence, as anonymity is here

conceptualized as foundational to the ability to open out into the world and be an active participant there. If one does not return to this ground and cultivate this anonymity, one's ability to participate in the world becomes compromised. Salamon understands Merleau-Ponty, in using this example of the young woman with aphonia, to be ultimately advancing the notion that, "in order to engage with the wider world, the self must be able to become lost to itself in the opaque thickness of the body" (p. 107). The ability to enter the "zone of nonbeing" and the ability to engage with the wider world are mutually supportive: "The body's capacity for openness is the same as its capacity for withdrawal into apparent solipsism; this is the fulcrum of its being" (p. 106).

This notion of bodily anonymity is helpful in discussing the case of Doris Grumbach, as well as many of the other women, because we can better understand how silence may foster an experiential shift away from the personal self toward a more foundational zone of being. Grumbach closes her journal with a reflection on how she trusts that she can return to solitude in the future in order to "renew [her] acquaintance" with herself. She uses the metaphor of having to put on several layers of clothing in order to brave the cold to describe the feeling of leaving her solitude and re-entering society:

In these harsh days of winter, when the distance between my cove and Deer Isle was one white, frozen stretch of land and water, I dressed in what up here we call "layers." ... In this way, metaphorically, I now needed to live, with the top layer of my person known to the outside world and displayed for social purposes. But, close to the bone, there had to be an inner stratum, formed and cultivated in solitude, where the essence of what I was, am now, and will be, perhaps to the end of my days, hides itself and waits to be found by the lasting silence. ... I closed the door to the house which seemed to have a prescient, lonely air about it. I felt like a deserter who had heartlessly left behind someone who had sheltered her warmly against the harsh elements, against all the discouragement and disillusionment of an inward journey. ... I would survive this parting and return here soon, to renew my acquaintance with myself. (p. 113-114)

The “inner stratum” which Grumbach appeared to recover and cultivate in solitude, with the help of silence, turned out to be more, and less, than she had first expected. This inner stratum lay underneath the persona she normally adopts in the world, and it also lay underneath the different emotional and cognitive layers she discovered in her solitude, as well; it was a form of truth that lay even closer to the bone.

Theme 4: *Listening to the voice of God*

As the inner voice quiets down and uncomfortable affective material is acknowledged and worked through, a retreatant’s center of gravity may shift from the personal toward a progressively more non-personal, anonymous zone of being. In greater contact with this anonymous zone, the retreatant may become better able to discern “voices” beyond that of the personal self; one such voice has been conceptualized by some as the voice of God. While it is beyond the scope of this project to adequately explore the phenomenology of religious experience, it seems important to at least touch on this phenomenon, since the ability to “hear the voice of God” is such a common description of what happens during periods of solitude, especially in Christian contexts, and, indeed, some of the women in this study reported making contact with the Divine. Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*), for example, described literally hearing “His” voice at a few pivotal moments during her solitude, when she was in need of answers to particularly difficult questions she was wrestling with. While none of the other women in this study reported making contact with God in this very direct way, a few of them did indeed describe sensing God’s presence in one form or another over the course of their solitudes.

A brief look at the book, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude* written by Christian spiritual director Ruth Haley Barton (2004) may help shed some light on this phenomenon from a Christian perspective. Barton describes the process by which, through practices of silence and solitude, one can become open to discerning God's voice in their lives. This discernment process is strikingly similar to the general process that many of the women in this study went through, and involved working through painful personal material and undergoing a deconstruction of the self until a space was cleared, a space in which God's presence could become more fully known and felt. The first stage of this process toward hearing the voice of God, according to Barton, is to allow uncomfortable or unacceptable cognitive and affective material which we had previously kept out of our awareness to rise to the surface. Our task is to look intently at these aspects of ourselves, sitting for extended periods of time with ourselves in all our sin and woundedness such that we can come to accept our brokenness and let go of defensive patterns of thinking, being, and doing which she refers to as the "false self." She writes of this chaotic and painful process,

When we have been stripped of external distraction, we face the fact that the deepest level of chaos is inside us, at our very core. In this place we are buffeted by all manner of questions and emotions. False patterns of thinking and being that have lurked unnoticed under the surface busyness of our lives are all of a sudden on the surface, wreaking havoc on the structures and foundations on which we have built our identity. Things that seemed sturdy and utterly solid...now swirl around us in broken pieces. (p. 98)

This encounter with one's inner chaos, if faced bravely and relatively undefensively, leads eventually to a state of emptiness which, to Barton, is prerequisite to being filled by the presence of God:

While the experience of being empty is painful, emptiness is prerequisite to being filled. As it turns out, the presence of God is poured out most generously when

there is space in our souls to receive him. In the vast emptiness of the human soul there is finally room for God. (p. 92)

According to Barton, it is through silence that we become open to the possibility of having a deeply felt *experience* of God, rather than just an intellectual understanding of God, since “words can never contain God” and in the absence of words we become capable of surrendering to non-conceptual experiencing:

In silence we give in to the fact that our words can never contain God or adequately describe our experiences with God. When we give in to the exhaustion that comes from trying to put everything into words and mental concepts, we give our mind permission to just stop. We give ourselves over to the *experience* of the Reality itself. (p. 75)

But although our minds have “permission to stop” in extended periods of silence, Barton suggests that we do not cease mental processing nor seek to “ignore the intellect” in this listening to God but, rather, allow our mind to “settle into the heart”: “It is not that we seek to ignore the intellect...in times of solitude; instead we let the mind settle into the heart, the very center of our being where God dwells in us as redeemed people” (p. 73). She argues that the heart is much more so the seat of our true self as it “encompasses the essence of who we are” and is “deeper in its reality” than the mind: “Silence helps us drop beneath the superficiality of our mental constructs to that place of the heart that is deeper in its reality than anything the mind can capture or express in words” (p. 74).

Experiencing “the presence of God’s absence”

Ruth Barton’s description of this process resonates quite strongly with the women’s experience, in that all of the women appeared to drop into a “deeper” reality than the one which they were attuned to prior to their solitudes, whether that deeper reality was explicitly associated with contacting the spiritual realm or not. Indeed,

Barton was quoted at length here because of the striking resemblance between her description of the progressive journey toward hearing God's voice and the women's experience which we have already discussed. Doris Grumbach's ability to discern "the presence of absence" after her inner voice quieted down and she reached a state of comfortable interior barrenness fits very nicely with the portrait that Barton sketches out of the process by which one can hear the voice of God. Many weeks into her solitude, Grumbach indeed extended the "presence of absence" image to include explicit reference to God. She took up a practice of silent prayer and through this practice was able to intuit "the presence of God's absence":

When I prayed alone in the morning and evening, God seemed nearby or at least available to my unspoken words. Without the distractions of other persons, without the extraneous sounds of their voices and my own, I felt the presence of God's absence...not a noisy landscape of the mind but a still life. (p. 65)

In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, theologian Belden Lane (2007) echoes this spiritual intuition of Grumbach's by describing how God is often experienced as an absence:

"The presence of God may, as often as not, be perceived as an absence. God is revealed in what others may blithely disregard as a barren nothingness" (p. 63). May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) makes reference to God as a felt absence in a prayer she recorded in her journal, as well: "May God be with me. There is really only one possible prayer: Give me to do everything I do in the day with a sense of the sacredness of life. Give me to be in Your presence, God, even though I know it only as absence" (p. 58).

The role of silence in apophatic spiritual experience

Belden Lane (2007) describes how the apophatic Christian spiritual tradition – commonly aligned with figures in the mystical tradition such as Meister Eckhart, Thomas

Merton, and John of the Cross – emphasizes silence as a means of contacting the Divine.

He summarizes the apophatic tradition thusly:

We can summarize the principle themes of the apophatic tradition by tracing them as movements within the life of contemplative prayer. They begin with an embrace of silence – relinquishing language, along with its powers of naming, entitling, and possessing. This leads, in turn, to the letting go of one’s thoughts, the emptying of the self, the act of loving in silent contemplation what cannot be rationally understood, even a new freedom with respect to others and one’s life in the world. (p. 66)

Lane uses the example of Christian mystic Julian of Norwich’s major spiritual breakthrough to illustrate apophatic spiritual experience, which involves “the relinquishment of self that accompanies the renunciation of language” (p. 64):

Over a three-day period when she was thirty years old, she appeared to have been struck with a sudden illness in which she could not speak. She struggled to focus her attention on a crucifix as her sight failed and the room grew dark around her. She was given up for dead and received the last rites of the church. Yet during this time of utter silence and complete loss of control, she experienced something she would spend the rest of her life trying to describe. It was an experience of knowing herself as “nothing,” being wholly stripped of language and identity. Yet this experience-that-was-not-an-experience joined her more closely to Christ than anything she had ever known. It was the deepest participation in his suffering on the cross. (p. 68)

Here the cessation of speech is followed by a sense of personal nothingness and a radical openness to the Divine.⁴¹ Belden Lane asserts that becoming able to hear God’s voice entails a relinquishment of one’s identity and an ability to let go of our grasp on language; it is primarily through the practice of silence that one becomes capable of meeting God. He argues that we surround ourselves with noise in order to protect ourselves from the terror of divine encounter and that we grasp onto words to “clothe our

⁴¹ While it would be a great mistake to equate Julian of Norwich’s experience with the experience of the aforementioned young woman with aphonia in the work of Merleau-Ponty (as interpreted by Salamon, 2006), it is important to note a very basic similarity – that with a loss of speech came a gravitational shift in the seat of the self from the personal to the impersonal, conceptualized as an entrance into bodily anonymity (in the case of Merleau-Ponty’s young woman) and understood as a visitation by the Divine (as with Julian of Norwich).

nakedness”: “Words are the fig leaves we continually grasp in the effort to clothe our nakedness” (p. 68). It is only when we become capable of surrendering our hold on language – and therefore become capable of surrendering our personal self – that we can tap into our deepest truth:

At that point in human experience where language ends, we find ourselves at the foot of an inaccessible mountain, at the edge of a marvelous desert. We enter with Moses into a dark cloud of unknowing. Yet the abandonment experienced in these threatening places may prove more fruitful than we ever expected. We may find ourselves, in fact, proclaiming with poet May Sarton, “I am lavish with riches made from loss.” (p. 77)

It is interesting to note that the line which Lane quotes from May Sarton here was written during Sarton’s year-long solitude chronicled in *Journal of a Solitude*. Later, we will look at how Sarton’s ability to emotionally, cognitively, and relationally “let go” ultimately allowed her access to temporary “states of grace” in which “sonnets come.” For Sarton, it is the *poetic image*, more so than the voice of God, which visited her in the clearing that silence effects.

Loss as central to Divine encounter

Belden Lane (2007) asserts that silence is a source of terror but also desire; we are afraid of going without words but simultaneously long for an encounter with God:

This is T.S. Eliot’s “wasteland,” where language breaks down and relationships shatter – a desert so utterly threatening, and yet familiar, to modern consciousness. It is a bitter end, but it offers a new beginning. We cannot imagine letting go of the mastery of reality that our words once occasioned for us; and yet we know our words to be hollow. We long for silence, realizing that our only way out of the desert is to go deeper into it, beyond the breakdown of language to the “still point” where God meets us in emptiness. (p. 67)

This meeting with God is terrifying because it entails radical loss; the desert is understood in this passage to be a place of emptiness and loss – of language,

relationships, illusions about the self and world, etc. My three retreats culminated in an intense spiritual experience in the desert, and I believe that the path toward that culminating experience entailed a succession of losses and a process of continual letting go. To quote again from the seventh day of my second retreat:

Yesterday turned out to be a great learning experience...or at least it left me stranded, dropped on my ass, not knowing what to do. This morning I feel the coldness outside, think I hear the wind. This is not like my first retreat. I decided last night to enter the desert. I've been guarding against it. But it's time, I think to face time, the blank nothingness... A fear of going without. Without words.

The retreats followed a distinct pattern of progressively moving toward the desert, both literally and symbolically, and culminated in receiving a vision – being filled from without after experiencing a painful “death” of the person I believed I was upon first entering solitude one year (and two retreats) earlier. My very challenging experiences during my second retreat, which left me feeling simultaneously confused, small, and hollowed out, served as preparation for my third retreat in the high desert of New Mexico. Given this preparation, I was able to enter the desert more fully, more nakedly, and with less resistance and to doing the work required of me there: to sit and wait. Waiting for the vision was a form of listening, and this listening was ultimately a form of prayer.

Theme 5: *Listening to the “speech” of the world*

In this section, we will explore a final form of listening that the women practiced throughout their time in solitude: *listening to the world*. By progressively turning their attentions “outward,” the women became better able to tune in to all of the meaningful

“speech” inherent in non-human world around them. To quote Thomas Merton (1957)

again:

Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his own true self, his life is always miserable and exhausting. For he cannot go on happily for long unless he is in contact with the springs of spiritual life which are hidden in the depths of his own soul. (p. 167)

Merton’s claim, that we are able to hear the voice of the “true self” in solitude, would most certainly be endorsed by the women in this study. At the least they would probably assert that they became acquainted with a “truer” self through solitude, and this truer self that they came to rest in encompassed far more than the personal domain. By listening to the world and progressively tuning in to the chorus of non-human voices found there, the women in this study were reminded of yet another face of their true selves. For as archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1995) asserts,

An individual’s harmony with his or her “own deep self” requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world. The deepest self cannot be confined to “in here” because we can’t be sure it is not also or even entirely “out there”! ...the most profoundly collective and unconscious self is the natural material world. (p. xix)

This final “outward” form of listening is yet another practice geared toward remembering our true face, our birthright as living, breathing animals embedded in a world in which we belong.

In the last section we explored a very different point: that silence seemed to enable some of the women to hear the voice of God and intuit the presence of God’s absence. This ability to hear the voice of God, however, may in fact be closely related to our ability to listen to the “outside” phenomenal world of nature. In *Becoming Animal*,

David Abram (2011) makes this case by asserting that the ability to make contact with the Divine – to listen to God – ultimately stems from our ability to make pre-reflective contact with the natural world via our perceptive bodies. Abram asserts that, “The instinctive rapport with an enigmatic cosmos at once both nourishing and dangerous lies at the ancient heart of all that we have come to call “the sacred”” (p. 277). The inherent pre-reflective reciprocity between human beings and the breathing earth undergirds our formal religions and nourishes them

...from below like a subterranean river... Our greatest hope for the future rests not in the triumph of any single set of beliefs, but in the acknowledgement of a felt mystery that underlies all our doctrines. It rests in the remembering of that corporeal faith that flows underneath all mere beliefs: the human body’s implicit faith in the steady sustenance of the air and the renewal of light every dawn, its faith in mountains and rivers and the enduring support of the ground, in the silent germination of seeds and the cyclical return of the salmon. There are no priests needed in such a faith, no intermediaries or experts necessary to effect our contact with the sacred, since – carnally immersed as we are in the thick of this breathing biosphere – we each have our own intimate access to the big mystery. (p. 278)

Though no doubt controversial,⁴² Abram’s analysis here is useful to this discussion, as it points to how the silent clearing in which the Divine makes its presence or absence felt in

⁴² There is a fascinating debate in the transpersonal psychology community about whether conflating pre-reflective bodily participation in the world with transpersonal/spiritual experience is a mistake. Transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber (1983) has termed this debate the “pre/trans fallacy” and argues that one should not equate pre-personal, primordial, non-dual experience with higher order transpersonal experience. Wilber describes the pre/trans fallacy thusly: “The essence of the pre/trans fallacy is easy enough to state. We begin by simply *assuming* that human beings do in fact have access to three general realms of being and knowing – the sensory, the mental, and the spiritual. Those three realms can be stated in any number of different ways: subconscious, self-conscious, and super-conscious, or prerational, rational, and transrational, or prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. The point is simply that, for example, since *prerational* and *transrational* are both, in their own ways *non-rational*, then they appear quite similar or even identical to the untutored eye. Once this confusion occurs – the confusion of “pre” and “trans” – then one of two things inevitably happens: the transrational realms are *reduced* to prepersonal status, or the prerational realms are *elevated* to transrational glory. Either way a complete or overall world view is broken in half and folded in the middle, with one half of the real world (the ‘pre’ or the ‘trans’) being thus profoundly mistreated and misunderstood.” (p. 202) It indeed appears that David Abram’s work, along with the work of ecopsychologists in general, largely aligns the pre-personal with the transpersonal and roughly falls into the category of what Wilber refers to as “retro Romanticism” and deems misguided and even potentially dangerous in its implications. For a sensitive discussion of Wilber’s critique of spiritually-oriented deep ecologists’ tendency toward what he regards as the pre/trans fallacy, see the work of philosopher Michael Zimmerman (in particular his 2001 essay “Ken Wilber’s Critique of

solitude might be conceptualized as a different version of the same clearing in which we open out onto the world of non-human nature, leaving us better able to discern its calls and cries and participate in the conversation always already in progress there. The initial focus “inward” in solitude – by witnessing our inner voice and encountering our personal “demons” – can lead to a progressive shift away from personal concerns and an ability to attend “outwardly,” toward God and nature, and the things we live amongst. Silence plays a decisive role in this progressively outward facing turn. David Abram (2011) asserts that most people in the Western world today remain trapped in a linguistically constructed hall of mirrors in which all they can see is their own reflections; silence grants us access to the world beyond human reflection and thus a route out of a strictly bounded sense of “interiority”:

The actual exit is to be found only by turning aside, now and then, from the churning of thought, dropping beneath the spell of inner speech to listen into the wordless silence. Only by frequenting that depth, again and again, can our ears begin to remember the many voices that inhabit that silence, the swooping songs and purring rhythms and antler-smooth movements that articulate themselves in the eloquent realm beyond the words. (p. 178)

We must still the mind in order to frequent that “depth,”⁴³ and once we reach that clearing we become able to perceive that an active conversation is always already afoot in the more-than-human world around us.

Ecological Spirituality”). See also Michael Washburn’s (1995) *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground: A Transpersonal Theory of Human Development* for a perspective within the field of transpersonal psychology which serves to counter Wilber’s strictly ascending model of transpersonal development by emphasizing the value (for adults who have reached a certain stage of egoic development) of recovering lost aspects of pre-personal experience in the service of transpersonal development.

⁴³ This is a different way of thinking about the turn “outward” (toward God, nature, the non-human world at large) that appears to happen in solitude – as a shift toward greater “depth.” We frequent the depth of primordial contact with the world when we drop “beneath” the spell of inner speech; thus our relationship with the non-human natural world might indeed be conceptualized as “deeper” than our so-called “interior” life of inner speech and thought.

Listening to wild animals

Listening to the voices of wild animals and attending closely to their varied expressions served as a rich source of stimulation, enrichment, and even “conversation” for each of the women throughout their solitudes. For example, my first retreat took place in mid-May – a very fecund and “noisy” time of the year – and enabled me to attend more closely to animals large and small, as the woods surrounding my hermitage was constantly abuzz. One memorable conversation I took part in during this retreat involved an encounter with a fox and a crow. On day four, I heard a tree fall nearby my hermitage followed by the cries of birds. I went outside to investigate and had a somewhat unsettling encounter with a fox who appeared to be in distress. Upon returning to my hermitage I wrote in my journal,

Just took a walk at sunset after hearing a tree fall nearby and birds starting to cry. Was shocked and afraid after hearing an animal cry that was so loud and ugly, then saw a fox looking at me some distance away. Maybe some of her home was destroyed. She was barking at me! It started running, then stopped and looked straight at me. I was afraid – can angry foxes attack people? Why not? Still I mustered up the courage to keep walking toward her. At a few points me, the fox, and a loud squawking black crow formed a triangle. The crow yelling at the fox, the fox staring at me angrily and nervously, and me. I thought to bow, and I did.

This passage was immediately followed by the following line: “I want my “religion” or faith or what have you – my reason to be alive, I guess – to be based on something that feels real and right, to me, right now.” Solitude and silence enabled me to discern and respond in some (albeit awkward) way to the cries of these beings, to participate in what had just transpired in the larger life-world outside my door. This very real encounter with real beings, which would not have happened in the context of my urban life in the world with human others, genuinely moved me and prompted an immediate reflection on my faith and “my reason to be alive,” as simple as the encounter was. The encounter also

helped me feel part of the greater community of beings around me and caused to consider the impact that the fallen tree might have had on their lives. Two days later, on day six, after encountering the bear on the path in the cemetery, I reflected on encountering the bear, fox, and crow and wrote, “Maybe they’re communicating their pain to me – telling me they’ve lost their habitat and I need to know that.” After these encounters, I spent a substantial amount of time thinking about the negative effect of human encroachment on natural habitats. I also reflected on day six in my journal on the naïve view I tend to have that nature is merely wondrous and beautiful, writing that these encounters, among others during the retreat, have shown me that nature “isn’t a magical garden path, it’s mysterious and ultimately outside of my control. I might have to surrender to it to be saved.” This reflection on the need to surrender to the darkness inherent in nature no doubt paralleled the forms of emotional/psychological/spiritual surrender I was preparing for and which I eventually experienced more fully during my second and third retreats. These conversations with wildlife helped effect a shift in me toward greater humility with regard to my place in the world.

Listening to the larger landscape

Listening to the world in solitude includes far more than listening to the non-human sentient beings that share the life-world with us, however. Practicing silence enables us to hear the literal calls of wild beings, but it also enables us to hear the whispers of the wind and the sound of leaves rustling on ground. It allows us to tune into the natural backdrop, which though wordless is far from silent. Retreating in a rustic cabin in the deep of a New England winter, for example, Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred*

Days of Solitude) became able to discern the sound of branches creaking and snow melting. Unsurprisingly, these sounds came to the forefront of her awareness as her mental activity settled down: “The sounds of the woods are varied and natural... The buzz in my head gives way over time to the cold creaking of the branches, the soft slumping of snow melting off the roof, the chickadee’s song” (p. 37). Dobisz found the “silence” of her retreat to be quite rich and alive:

Perhaps people think that silence is the most difficult aspect of a retreat only because they haven’t tried it. The silence is the best part. It’s unimaginably rich and spacious... Silence? It’s not silent at all! There’s so much going on. In the silence I can hear the snow melting and it’s beautiful. (p. 37-38)

Dobisz’s extra-human conversations while on retreat were varied, including with wild animals (e.g., the mouse who resided in her bucket of feces, as discussed in the last chapter) but also trees, as mentioned in the chapter on space. On this occasion, Dobisz ventured outside her cabin, stood in front of a tree, and asked, “Who am I?” Dobisz insinuated that she “heard” an answer and, without revealing that answer to her readers, beseeched them to try asking the question for themselves (p. 59).

Other retreatants found themselves listening closely to non-sentient entities, as well, seeking answers that could not be disclosed through human language alone. Like Dobisz with her tree, they sought the guidance of these life-forms in the quest to understand themselves and discern the next right step to take on their life paths. For example, Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) credited her encounters with a local colony of seals, who taught her how to feel more comfortable and free in her body, with her ability to “reclaim [her] basic existence” (p. 171). While struggling to come to terms with painful psychic material, she also turned to the moon for answers: “Then, in a flash, I know why I’m here. I return to the pillow on the window seat and talk to the moon” (p.

42). During my vision fast in the desert, I also prayed to the landscape and the moon for guidance regarding my life path. The retreat culminated in my lying awake on the fourth night, bathing in the light of the moon and crying out for a vision, asking “Who am I?,” “What is my true name?,” and “How can I best be of service to my people?” The four days leading up to this event consisted of fasting, waiting, and performing rituals designed to let go of the past and allow the old self to die. The vision that I received did not come in the form of a voice; it presented itself both intuitively and as barely perceptible visual imagery on the horizon of the night sky. It came, as I understand it from a felt-sense perspective, as a gift or message from the living breathing earth itself.

Listening to the built environment

Silence and solitude clearly fostered a greater felt sense of communion for a few of the women with the built environment as well. This was most striking in the case of May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*), who wrote of her ever deepening relationship with her house, “Nelson” (which is also the name of the town she lives in), throughout her journal. Upon returning to her solitude at the very start of the journal (for she had undergone solitary periods there previously), she noted the significant role that conversations with her house have played in her solitude:

Begin here. It is raining. I look out onto the maple, where a few leaves have turned yellow, and listen to Punch, the parrot, talking to himself and to the rain ticking gently against the windows. I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my “real” life again at last. That is what is strange – that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here and “the house and I resume old conversations.” (p. 11)

In this opening paragraph to her journal we see her listening to her parrot-companion⁴⁴ and to the rain and also mentioning another primary source of companionship and conversation: her relationship with her house. Indeed, her journal is filled with loving and careful descriptions of the various aspects of Nelson: the fireplace in the cozy room, the sunny yellow kitchen floor, the various views of the garden from its windows, its frozen pipes that Sarton attends to throughout the long winter nights, etc. At the same time, however, the house is unwelcoming to Sarton on occasion: “The house is no friend when I walk in. Only Punch gives a welcoming scream” (p. 32). Returning to the house is like returning to an old friend with whom she has built a relationship (with all its ups and downs) over the years.

In *Becoming Animal*, David Abram (2011) argues that a person’s relationship with her house “is hardly a relationship between a pure *subject* and a pure *object* – between an active intelligence, or mind, and a purely passive chunk of matter” (p. 32). He describes the experience of having to abruptly leave a beloved house that he and his family had lived in for a year. Just prior to moving out, he woke in the middle of the night with the sense that someone was in the house. He went downstairs and experienced the house in a new light – the wooden beams shining “most vividly in the moonlit room, their cracked and splintered surfaces radiant with a somber fire.” (p. 34) The beams appeared alive, full of power and singular character and beauty. They spoke to him that night, and he realized that they had been speaking to and with him, that they had developed an “uncanny kinship” (p. 35) over the past year:

⁴⁴ We will look more closely at the role that relationships with animal-companions (rather than wild animals) played in the women’s experience of solitude in the next, and final, chapter on co-existentiality.

I realized, somewhat surprised, that I already *knew* these powers, that the fluid lines along each beam, the parallel swerves and ripples in the grain of each post, had become familiar to my senses, somehow... The beams of this house had been quietly conversing with my creaturely body over the course of the year, coaxing my eyes and my wandering fingers in countless moments of distraction, and I now noticed that I already knew them as individuals – knew them without knowing them, that is, until tonight, when they suddenly broke through the cool callous of my assumptions, forcing me to acknowledge the silent exchange, this language older than words. (p. 34)

In claiming that she and her house were “resuming conversations,” May Sarton was indeed acknowledging the ancient silent exchange between herself and the immediate built world in which she lived. In conversing with her house, she was not merely solopistically conversing with herself, though there is no doubt that her house seemed to take on certain qualities according to Sarton’s mood. Her house was both its own entity and an integral part of Sarton’s life-world; it served as companion, protector, and conversation partner, of sorts, during her time alone.

The world “comes close to us” in silence

To practice silence is to practice listening to the speech of the world. The world is alive and animate, and all things, all sensible phenomena, when seen in a certain light, have the capacity for speech:

All things have the capacity for speech – all beings have the capacity to communicate something of themselves to other beings. Indeed, what is *perception* if not the experience of this gregarious, communicative power of things, wherein even ostensibly “inert” objects radiate out of themselves, conveying their shapes, hues, and rhythms to other beings and to us, influencing and informing our breathing bodies though we stand far apart from those things? (Abram, 2011, p. 172)

It is, in part, through practicing silence and displacing the role of language in our lives that we become capable of shifting into this more animistic view of the world. It is by

quieting our minds through silence that we are able to “drop beneath the spell of inner speech” and recover a fuller awareness of our pre-reflective contact with the world.

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton (1999) argues that language, as used in the modern West⁴⁵ no longer “serves as a means of communion with reality” (p. 82). He contends that language not only gets in the way of our ability to encounter the Divine, but also gets in the way of our ability to *feel close* to everyday things of the world:

We put words between ourselves and things... This solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things. In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. ... The world our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it. (p. 81-82)

The world comes close to us in silence. The world came closer for the women during their retreats, and this closeness, this communion, bred respect in the women for the intelligence of the natural world as well as for their own intuitive and perceptive capacities. The world came close to Merton (1966), in his hermitage at Gethsemani as well, as he listened to the ample speech of the world “pouring down”:

I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread at the log fire. The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down... What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows! Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen. But I am also going to sleep, because here in this wilderness I have learned to sleep again. Here I am not alien, the trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it. (p. 9-10)

⁴⁵ Merton wrote this book in the 1950s. One could argue that his assertion is even truer today, in the post-postmodern West.

The women learned to do more or less what Merton learned to do: to listen to the speech of the world. They bore witness to “all that speech pouring down” through their perception, their active behavioral responses, and their mere presence as perceptible beings in an ecosystem full of perceptive beings. Their “conversation” partners were wide-ranging, and these conversations had a clear impact on the women’s ability to feel close to a world of which they were an active, vital part.

Theme 6: *Care in the use of language*

We have looked at how silence fosters different forms of listening and how the practice of journal writing, at the women carried it out, appeared to aid them in the more personal, “inward” forms of listening. Beyond journaling, the women also engaged with the written word via reading and practicing other forms of writing. By maintaining practices of reading and writing throughout their solitudes, the women did not shun the written word but came to re-evaluate its role in their lives, engage with written language far more sparingly, and attend more closely and carefully to the written words they did encounter. They also became more sensitive to the power of language and receptive to the significance inherent in seemingly insignificant signs. In this way, written language took on a more sacred quality and served to enrich, rather than restrict the women’s horizons while in solitude.

Missing the sunrise, reconsidering reading

Compared to the rest of the women in this study, Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) spent the most time indoors while on retreat and thus had the most ready access

to the written word. She was also among the most “literary” of the women, as her identity seemed closely aligned with her career as a writer and the practices of reading and writing appeared to be a significant and dearly cherished part of her life. For these reasons, it is especially noteworthy that Grumbach came to reconsider and subsequently adjust her practice of reading over the course of her solitude. This reconsideration began early one morning, approximately two weeks into her retreat. She was sitting at the window watching for the sunrise and eventually grew tired of waiting and instead became engrossed in a book. The next time she looked up, the sky was filled with dazzling colors. She felt disappointed, “the way one must feel if one has watched at a death bedside for a long time, gone out for a breath of air, and come back to find the beloved dead” (p. 27), and reflected on the lesson learned through this experience:

I went back to the book I had been reading, Elizabeth Drew’s *The Modern Novel*, in which she says that “the test of literature is, I suppose, whether we ourselves live more intensely for the reading of it.” No, I thought. At the moment I missed the sunrise by looking too closely at the printed page, I had diminished my life in a curious way. (p. 27)

Grumbach’s experience had been diminished by the written word, as her attention was pulled from the real-time event of the sunrise to the virtual form of reality evoked by the flat pages of her book.

In *Becoming Animal*, David Abram (2011) provides another example of the ways in which the written word can serve to diminish our sensory experience while practicing silence in solitude. He describes his experience of the landscape suddenly “deflating” upon encountering a written sign along the trail while on a solitary hike in a remote area:

PLEASE DEPOSIT WASTE HERE. As soon as I see those black words on the white rectangle, the weirdest thing happens. The entire landscape deflates, like a pricked balloon...shrinking abruptly down to about a fourth of the size it just had... There is something eerie about the ability of the written word to shrink the

elemental power of a place. Something bizarre about the power of printed letters, even a few painted words on a metal sign, to domesticate the bursting at the seams agency of the wild... It is the influence of the verbal mind in ceaseless conversation with itself, dialoguing with its own symbols. ... The afternoon's wordless silence, and the edge of danger that had nudged my skin into such an acute and animal alertness, have now dissipated, replaced by the comforting security of a completely human-made world. (p. 262-263)

Upon realizing that reading interfered with her ability to be present to the elemental power of the sunrise – and that *that* form of “reading” caused her to live more intensely – the comforting security of the written text began to appeal far less to Grumbach. She began to shift her focus from the written text to the natural world outside her door, such that, after many weeks of attending to the environment in this way, she became able to experience the boundary between herself and the outside world become a bit more permeable: “Odd: Yesterday, after an unexpected thaw, I felt myself literally growing larger, taller, even deeper when I looked out my study window at the wild world before me” (p. 111). The categories of “inside” and “outside” became less firmly fixed as Grumbach’s “I” began taking up greater residence in the world rather than the safe confines of a book and the familiar comfort of her verbal mind.

Words “take on a kind of holiness”

The power of the written word to diminish, rather than augment, her experience appeared to be a new discovery for 75 year-old Grumbach, and shifted her behavior accordingly – toward spending more time gazing out the window rather than at the printed page but also using language more carefully, intentionally, slowly, and reverentially:

Care in the use of language came with seldom hearing it or using it aloud. I discovered that when I began to write in those dark, early mornings I approached

the whole act of word choice warily. I attributed this to not wasting my verbal energies in hearing talk and in speaking. Every word I put down on paper seemed to take on a kind of holiness. (p. 33)

Her carefully chosen words at this stage in her retreat took on a kind of sacred quality.

On day seven of my first retreat I noted something quite similar: “Having little of something makes you realize how precious it is, helps you make it sacred, helps you look at it, cultivate it, protect it. It’s been like that with speech, with words.”

Doris Grumbach’s writing took on a kind of holiness throughout her solitude; this quieter and more sacred use of language eventually progressed to the point where she did not even need to write anything to feel “complete,” which represented a major shift in Grumbach’s very literate way of being in the world. As Grumbach became able to detect “the presence of absence,” she felt full enough, without having to reach for words:

“Imbued with the presence of absence I suddenly felt occupied and productive. ... I saw that I did not need to produce anything on the page to feel better, even, somehow, complete” (p. 80). It is important to note, however, that Grumbach became capable of this sense of completeness in incompleteness only after finding the right words – the phrase “presence of absence” – which resonated with her felt experience in solitude. She discovered this perfectly-fitting poetic phrase on a wall in the local bookstore on a non-productive day of writing:

On a day of absolute nonproduction, a day as blank inside as the white stretches of covered ground outside my study window, I began to wonder if white was the color of creative drought. I made the trek to the bookstore to find on the wall a framed quotation from Paul Valery... Finding it saved the pallid day for me. Imbued with the presence of absence I suddenly felt occupied and productive. ... I saw that I did not need to produce anything on the page to feel better, even, somehow, complete. (p. 79-80)

It appears that the shifts that Grumbach was experiencing in solitude – e.g., the experiential shift toward a featureless mental plain and the more careful use of language – may have prepared her to receive the sign on the wall, a sign which seemed “meant” just for her. There are many ways to interpret the event of finding that quotation on the wall – e.g., accident, coincidence, luck, fate, synchronicity, etc. – but what is clear enough is that Grumbach had been able to not only perceive this sign but also take the time to contemplate its relevance to her life in the context of silence and solitude. Outside of these contexts, she may have been too distracted, too fast moving, too mentally “noisy” to be able to perceive this sign and contemplate its significance. Through the practices of silence and solitude, she became better able to hone directly in on the treasure and discern its particular meaning for her life.

I experienced a similar synchronistic encounter with written text on day eight of my first retreat which was incredibly moving and even life-altering. It was late afternoon, and I was resting on a chair facing a large window which looked out onto the woods. I was holding a notebook which I had found in the desk drawer of the hermitage. Previous retreatants had used this notebook before but had ripped out the used pages, leaving only blank ones. As I went to write in it I happened to notice very faint markings on the top page, and when I held the paper at just the right angle in the afternoon light, I could almost discern the words that someone had written on the last piece of paper which had been torn out. I took a pen and slowly traced out all the words along the grooves in the paper. As I came to the end of the message, deciphering almost all of the words, I began to cry and then to weep like I hadn’t wept in years. I wept so hard and so loudly and by the end of this weeping was curled in a ball on the floor of the cabin, so utterly

emptied and depleted that it seemed like something was leaving me and/or that I was letting go of something that I had been carrying for a long time. I later described this experience in my journal, hesitatingly but faithfully:

I had a breakthrough yesterday that I am hesitant to put into words. For the sake of recording my experiences I will, but only a little. I found an old notebook in the desk of Greccio with only blank pages. But I noticed that the top page bore the faint marks of a letter... In a certain low light...I could scarcely make out some of the words. It seemed okay to read it. It almost seemed – at the time and now – like a sign, a sign I needed to encode. It seemed to be written in a woman’s hand, and it was addressed to her daughters. Once I came to the end – almost able to make out every word – I realized it was written by “Daddy” and I started to cry – no, weep – in a way I hadn’t cried in a very long time. It was a letter about how much he loved his daughters and loved to watch the peacefulness on their faces as they slept. He wrote that he loved them, no matter how old they are or how far away. He said that he hoped that he had shown them, through his example and way of treating them and their mother, how a man should treat a woman. I realized I never got that, and that what was contained in that simple letter was what...I was missing as a girl. My father did not give it to me, and my step-father didn’t either. And it isn’t something a mother can give. I thought, “There was no one there to watch over my sleep. And to show me how a man is supposed to love a woman, or a daughter.” So I wept.

I wept so hard that it ached; it was a weeping that felt like a kind of surrender, a giving up of something. That man’s letter was so deeply moving to me and truly seemed to *find* me at just the right time, as I had had eight days of silence and solitude to prepare to receive its message⁴⁶, much like I had prepared for the vision which awaited me at the end of my

⁴⁶ Part of this preparation seemed to involve my contemplation of a particular poem on day four of this retreat – a poem by Zen Master Ikkyu which I had read in Jane Dobisz’s journal (p. 61):

ten dumb years I wanted things to be different
furious proud I still feel it
one summer midnight in my little boat on Lake Biwa
caaaaawweeeee
father when I was a boy you left us
now I forgive you

I found this simple poem very striking, and its themes resonated strongly with the felt experience of my relationship with my father. It seems as though this poem may have helped prepare me to receive that man’s letter to his daughters in the way that I did. Indeed, the evening after I had read the man’s letter and wept profusely, I could not immediately bring myself to write directly about the experience (though I did the next day). All that remains in my journal after that experience, until my writing from the next day, was a copy of Zen Master Ikkyu’s poem and the following lines after it: “There was no one there to watch over my sleep. No words now.” It seems that my earlier meditations on the poem may have helped me initially

vision fast in the desert. I was ready and thus able to hear and heed its call, to discern the message in the faint marks on the paper and receive the gift it had to offer.

A few hours after deciphering the letter, I set out on a walk, feeling rather hollowed out and depleted, but lighter. During that walk I had a realization: “I decided to take a walk later on that evening and realized while walking that he *did* give me so much – just not that vital sense of protection and security.” On that walk I had the additional realization – and indeed, *remembrance* – that there was much more to the story of my relationship with my father than what he failed to provide me with at a certain age. A fuller picture became much clearer, as memories of wonderful times spent with my father during my childhood flooded back into my awareness. On that walk I remembered jumping off high cliffs into Lake Winnepesaukee in the summertime and sneaking up to the bell tower of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to listen to the Sunday chimes; I thought about my father’s great sense of adventure, open-mindedness, non-conformity, and zest for life, and I thought about how, through his example and encouragement, he instilled those same qualities in me. I had always thought of him in this way, but somehow I really *got it* on this day, as something became clearer and the situation finally felt complete. That man’s words resonated deeply with my felt sense of the situation with my father, and this resonance helped shift something in me, creating more spaciousness and room to move and breathe. Discerning the message allowed me to acknowledge that which had not been properly acknowledged (that my father was not

access some blocked or unacknowledged aspect of my experiential world which the man’s letter then “unlocked” or completed in some way. Zen Master Ikkyu’s poem seemed to have opened me to the possibility of heeding the call of that man’s letter and receiving its message as fully as I did. We will discuss the role of poetry in solitude more fully in the next section.

“there to watch over my sleep”) and then finally let it go, as I no longer needed to hold on to it.

Theme 7: *Poetry*

Thomas Merton (1999) contends that our common use of language in the contemporary West “defiles” reality, whereas silence teaches us to respect it. To quote Merton again: “The world our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it” (p. 81-82). As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, one of the drawbacks to the widespread adoption of the written alphabet in the West was the resulting interference in people’s ability to make pre-reflective contact with the world (Abram, 1996, p. 131). Literacy interfered with people’s ability to feel at home in their animal bodies and develop a sense of intimacy and closeness with nature, as the written word served to contain them in a world of self-reflection and conceptual thinking *about* a world which was kept at a reflective distance and deemed “object” vis-à-vis its newly delineated position of “subject.” Further, the language we commonly use reflects the technoscientific worldview that dominates the contemporary social landscape, encouraging people to employ language that indeed serves the interests of classifying, controlling, and in some sense despising the world, as Merton argues. At the same time, of course, words need not function in these limiting, restricting ways. Words can *arise out of* our felt experience and therefore not serve to alienate us from that experience and the worldly situation in which that experience took place. Indeed, this appeared to be the case with the women’s journaling practices, as they

involved a sustained listening to and a thick description of their visceral, affective, and cognitive experience.

Poetry is another form of language that seemed to spontaneously arise out of silence. Many of the women found themselves drawn to poetry during their time in solitude, and this pull toward poetry appeared to strengthen in intensity over the course of their retreats. Why was the call of the poetic so strong? It seems that different aspects of poetry – its metaphoric nature, non-linear structure, faithfulness to bodily rhythms and breath, etc. – resonated with the women’s felt experience in solitude, and thus the reading, writing, and contemplation of poetry just seemed to make sense. It also seems that poetry and silence go hand in hand; silence permeates poetry, and poetry makes room for silence. Contemporary hegemonic language use, in contrast, has little room or respect for silence, according to Max Picard (1952). Picard argues that contemporary language, being divorced from silence, is an “orphan” rather than a “mother tongue.” It is only in poetry that we still have glimmers of the “real world...connected with silence”:

When language is no longer related to silence it loses its source of refreshment and renewal and therefore something of its substance... By taking it away from silence we have made language an orphan. The tongue we speak today is no longer a mother-tongue but rather an orphaned tongue... It is only in the language of the poets that the real world, the world connected with silence, still sometimes appears. It is like a ghost, full of sadness that it is only a ghost and must disappear again. Beauty is the dark cloud in which such words appear to disappear again. (p. 41)

Poetry is capable of capturing the flavor of this “real world” connected with silence, and in so doing does not serve to alienate us from that world but may draw us closer to it.

Thomas Merton (1999) asserts that “silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it” (p. 82); poetry may do the same.

“Losing the plot”: From prose to poetry

Doris Grumbach found herself very drawn to poetry during her fifty days of solitude, and this attraction to the poetic increased as time went on. She recorded the following realization: “Discovery: I found that the more suitable form of reading matter, in solitude, was poetry. Lyrics especially” (p. 61). She not only found that her interest in reading novels began to waver, if not completely cease, she also found it nearly impossible to write prose fiction in her solitude and eventually gave up on the novel she had planned to work on during her retreat. Though she did not appear to *write* poetry while in solitude, she frequently copied out and contemplated other writers’ poems for long stretches of time. Here we see her copying out and sitting with a short poem for half a day:

I was not entirely sure of the meaning of Yvor Winters’ early poem, “Song,” but I liked it well enough to copy it out and then read it again and again throughout one stormy morning. To run before oneself from silence only to fall into an even better silence. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, if anything means anything, this means something, but I was not sure exactly what. ...the little poem proved interesting and stimulating for half a day. (p. 61-62)

She found meditating on the poet’s metaphorical language satisfying and enriching, especially as it shed light on her personal experience in solitude. The polysemic nature of the poem invited Grumbach to entertain different meanings and experience her own silence in new ways. A few of the other women in this study similarly turned away from reading (and writing, in the case of May Sarton) fiction and moved toward poetry during their retreats as well.

One possible reason for this shift away from prose fiction may be illuminated by the example of Sara Maitland’s (2009) experience in solitude, as detailed in *A Book of Silence*. Maitland describes entering into an extended period of solitude with the desire

to work on her fiction writing, which she found exceedingly difficult to do. She explains that she went into extended solitude for four conscious reasons:

...to study and think about silence, to find out if it was delightful to me, to deepen my prayer life and to write better. I was indeed doing and enjoying all the first three, but I was not, in fact, writing. Or, to be more precise, I was not writing any fiction and certainly not of the kind I wanted to write. When I had come north it had been with a sense that the stories were not *enough* – I wanted to dig deeper into them, to pull more out of them. It had not occurred to me that I would abandon them, nor they me. ... Now quite simply stories did not spring to mind; my imagination did not take a narrative form. I had in a peculiarly literal way ‘lost the plot’. (p. 189)

As Maitland’s imagination and sense of self did not come to take a linear, narrative form in the context of silence and solitude, the words she was able to conjure could not follow a linear, narrative form either. Maitland found that her experience of time and space shifted dramatically during her solitude, and these shifts disabled her ability to write fiction – a form of writing which depends on specific times and places:

If, and I think it is true, silence really does produce the effects I was investigating in [her hermitage] and have been working with ever since, especially the collapse of time and space – those boundary confusions – that is not going to be too good for prose fiction, which utterly depends on specific times and place. Plot (the idea that things happen in an orderly pulse of cause and effect) just doesn’t work anymore. Narrative doesn’t drive anything forward in the silent vacuum. (p. 284)

Maitland also found herself drawn to reading poetry instead of fiction, as she became less attracted to plot and “more engaged with language and mood and place” over the course of her solitude:

I discovered a new way of reading. I read more slowly and therefore in a sense I read less, but I read more carefully and attentively. I felt less excited by plot, tension and pace, and more engaged with language and mood and place. I started reading more poetry and enjoying it more. I want to say that I learned to read more silently, but I also read with a sense of what reading is and how deeply and silently it has shaped our sense of self. (p. 153)

She attributes her increased engagement with poetry to silence. She believes that silence allowed her to drop beneath the realm of the symbolic, associated with narrative, linear forms of language, into the pre-lingual realm that French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva refers to as the “*semiotic*,” a realm associated with the poetic. Maitland notes that outside of her solitude, during life lived in the presence of others,

What I experience is not a struggle to emerge from the semiotic into the fully symbolic, but the reverse: I find it difficult to move down and access that range of expression, to be more permeable, available to whatever is ‘down’ or ‘out’ there. It seems to me that silence offers those people who want it a return journey into the semiotic, the seedbed of the self. (p. 281)

Maitland conceptualizes this movement into the semiotic via silence as a temporary return, albeit through the lived experience of an adult, to the “messy” state of infancy:

If the contemporary French psycholinguists are right, it is through language, through words, that we enter into the law of the Fathers – the social controls that allow ‘public’ life to be endurable for individuals. It is as though language and all its benefits were a ‘pay-off’ for leaving the pre-lingual, warm, self-absorbed, messy and demanding state of infancy... I stepped outside that social place, back into infancy, out into the wild, ‘beyond the pale’. (p. 54-55)

We have seen this theme of returning to an un-self-conscious, child-like state in solitude in order to recover something which was lost many times in this study thus far. We find ourselves returning to it again here, in the context of silence. Poetry appears to arise out of this child-like space and speak from the experience recovered there.

Poetics and the recovery of innocence: The object comes first

It is indeed this return to a child-like state in the context of solitude which Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) characterizes as a return to “innocence” and links to the un-self-conscious, nature-based world of the poet, as opposed to the self-conscious, citified world of the novelist:

Self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies. It is the glimpse of oneself in a storefront window, the unbidden awareness of reactions on the faces of other people – the novelist’s world, not the poet’s. I’ve lived there. ... I remember how you bide your time in the city, and think, if you stop to think, “next year...I’ll start living; next year...I’ll start my life.”
Innocence is a better world. (p. 82)

The poet is associated with “innocence,” and innocence, for Dillard, involves sustained present-moment consciousness and “pure devotion” to objects: “What I call innocence is the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object” (p. 82). Dillard’s innocence points to the ability to perceive the world in a child-like way – unself-consciously, relatively non-conceptually, and with a sense of wonder, awe, curiosity, and humility. Poetry is related to this child-like way of perceiving the world, as it more closely articulates our pre-personal, pre-reflective experience of being in the world – the level of our primordial participation in the world in which we have a naked encounter with real objects – “real creatures and real encounters” (p. 221) – rather than an experience of objects as filtered through our concepts and ideas about such objects. In silence, the “dangling newspaper”⁴⁷ can be removed from our view, making room for an experience of the objects themselves.

In *The World of Silence*, Max Picard (1952) echoes this perspective by asserting that as opposed to most forms of writing, poetry begins with the things themselves, rather than an idea about the things: “the real poet starts in possession of the object, and goes in search of the words, and not *vice versa*” (p. 147). The poet begins with the image and stays with the image, and *then* find words that resonate with the image. Poetic images, according to Gaston Bachelard (1994) in *The Poetics of Space*, are “primal images,”

⁴⁷ To quote Annie Dillard again: “I can’t go out and try to see this way. I’ll fail, I’ll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of the useless inner babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes” (p. 34).

“simple engravings” which invite us to “start imagining again” as we had imagined “during the “original impulse” of youth.” These child-like imaginings articulated through poetry, according to Bachelard, “give us back areas of being” (p. 33). These areas of being which may be re-cultivated through reading, writing, and contemplating poetry are related to the recovery of more participatory, pre-reflective modes of being in the world; though a refined art form, the creation and appreciation of poetry may paradoxically help us remember our most basic, primary sensibilities.

Indeed, David Abram (2011) uses the term “poetics” to describe the practice of attending to the more-than-human conversation of the natural world in which we live, a practice that plays a major role in this recovery process. He argues that even though the written word has largely come to be disconnected from that more-than-human conversation – serving, in fact, as the primary means of disconnecting us from that participatory stance soon after we enter the domain of the symbolic early in life – it is the poets who have kept the participatory spirit alive through their writings:

Even as the written word and its conventions came to dominate all our discourse, our anarchic oral eloquence quietly kept itself alive through various means, including the careful and patient craft of literary poets. A renewal of oral culture in the coming era may mean that poetry increasingly frees itself from the printed page and the digital screen, to become a spontaneous part of every person’s practice. Poetics, in this sense, would become the practice of alert, animal attention to the broader conversation that surrounds – to the utterances of sunlight and water and the thrumming reply of the bees, or the staccato response of a woodpecker to the hollow creaking of an old trunk – and the attempt not to violate this wider conversation every time that we speak, but to allow it, to acknowledge it, and sometimes to join it. (p. 291)

Rather than serve to violate and defile the world, poetic language can respect and indeed *sing* the world by re-attuning us to its aural, visual, tactile textures and its inexhaustible layers of truth.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, that as the women progressively became able to tune into the speech of the natural world, they became more drawn to poetry, as poetic language resonates more closely with the forms of expression and “speech” found in the more-than-human world. In *Radical Ecopsychology*, Andy Fisher (2002) contends that poetic language lies closer to our pre-reflective experience of the world as opposed to the overly objectifying (i.e., classifying, controlling, despising) language commonly employed in the context of our techoscientific society. He writes that poetic language is the original form of language:

Poetry...is not an adornment of the prosaic world, but its origin. Literalness is a quality some words acquire as they become sedimented into habitual usage, but only as they lose their metaphorical or poetic ring, which may yet survive as the hidden “soul” of the word. (p. 44)

The metaphoric, imagistic, rhythmic, and polysemic qualities of poetry resonate more closely with our more participatory, pre-reflective experience of the world, which we have greater access to during extended periods of silence. Poetry reveals the soul of language in the context of silence.

Poetics as soul-making and the art of “attentive waiting”

The creation of and sustained contemplation of poetic images is a form of *soul-making*, according to Gaston Bachelard (1999):

To specify exactly what a phenomenology of the image can be, to specify that the image comes *before* thought, we should have to say that poetry, rather than being a phenomenology of the mind, is a phenomenology of the soul. (xx)

This association of poetry with the soul is an association made by May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) as well, when comparing the writing of poetry to prose:

Why is it that poetry always seems to me so much more a true work of the soul than prose? I never feel elated after writing a page of prose, though I have written good things on concentrated will, and at least in a novel the imagination is fully engaged. Perhaps it is that prose is earned and poetry is given. ...only when I am in a state of grace, when the deep channels are open...when they are, when I am both profoundly stirred and balanced, then poetry comes as a gift from powers beyond my will. (p. 40-41)

Poetry, for Sarton, is *given*, rather than earned or actively created. This sense of *givenness*, in general, is so prevalent throughout the women's journals and points to the stance of receptivity that they cultivated during their solitary retreats. For Sarton, this givenness is possible when she is in a "state of grace," and this state is intermittent throughout her time in solitude. When in this state of grace, her "channels" are open and she is "in touch with the deep source that is only *good*, where poetry lives" (p. 37). She understands her ability to get in touch with the "deep" source to be linked to her ability to surrender, to "let go":

Has it really happened at last? I feel released from the rack, set free, in touch with the deep source that is only *good*, where poetry lives. ... It has been stupidly difficult to let go, but that is what has been needed. I had allowed myself to get overanxious, clutching at what seemed sure to pass, and clutching is the surest way to murder love, as if it were a kitten, not to be squeezed so hard, or a flower to fade in a tight hand. Letting go, I have come back yesterday and today to a sense of my life here in all its riches, depth, freedom for soul-making. It's a real breakthrough. I have not written in sonnet form for a long time, but at every major crisis in my life when I reach a point of clarification, where pain is transcended by the quality of the experience itself, sonnets come. (p. 37)

It is only when Sarton adopts a receptive, humble posture that sonnets are able to come. Bachelard (1999) describes the poet's task in just this way, explaining that receptivity rather than cognitive effort is required of the poet: "The long day-in, day-out effort of putting together and constructing his thoughts is ineffectual. One must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears" (p. xv).

For Sarton, poetry as soul-making is a practice of letting go and of waiting for something to come to her rather than “clutching” onto something or trying to make something happen. Like Sarton, the other women also cultivated the art of waiting in their solitudes and found that, as Annie Dillard expresses so pithily: “The waiting itself is the thing” (p. 263). With poetry, the waiting itself is the thing, as well. You do not go out seeking the image; the image comes to you. In *The Cloister Walk*, a memoir detailing her experience living in a Benedictine monastery, poet Kathleen Norris (1997) explores the link between waiting, poetry, and monasticism. She argues both poets and monastics are in the business of “attentive waiting”: poets wait for the image, while monastics wait for God. Norris writes,

Once when I was asked, “What is the main thing a poet does?” I was inspired to answer, “We wait.” A spark is struck; an event inscribed with a message – *this is important, pay attention* – and a poet scatters a few words like seeds in a notebook. Months or even years later, those words bear fruit. The process requires both discipline and commitment, and its gifts come from both preparedness and grace, or what writers have traditionally called inspiration. (p. 142-143)

Practicing the poetic arts requires humility, as with monastic prayer. One must be willing to wait, able to listen, and then be willing to surrender and *obey* – “which is an active form of listening”:

“Listen” is the first word of St. Benedict’s Rule for monasteries, and listening for the eruptions of grace in one’s life...is a “quality of attention” that both monastic living and the practice of writing tend to cultivate. I’m trained to listen when words and images begin to converge. When I wake up at 3 am, suddenly convinced that I had better look into an old notebook, or get to work on a poem I’d abandoned years before, I do not turn over and go back to sleep. I obey, which is an active form of listening. (p. 143)

Both prayer and poetry also require a clearing of one’s mind, the quieting of one’s inner voice, in order to receive the image/object or God’s presence; Norris argues that “both

prayer and poetry begin deep within a person, beyond the reach of language” (p. 143). Both prayer and poetry thus begin in *silence*, and both are forms of sacred listening that require metaphoric consciousness in the context of a culture “which educates us to think of metaphor as a lie” (p. 157). Both poets and monks are thus countercultural and have no place in this literally-minded, capitalist, utilitarian society:

I regard monks and poets as the best degenerates in America. Both have a finely developed sense of the sacred potential in all things; both value image...over utilitarian purpose or the bottom line; they recognize the transformative power hiding in the simplest things, and it leads them to commit absurd acts: the poem! the prayer! what nonsense! (p. 146)

Though the women in this study were not technically monastics (except for Karen Karper who was a practicing nun), they could be understood to be practicing, through their solitary retreats, a sort of secular version of monasticism. May Sarton captures this monastic image nicely in characterizing her retreat space as a “nunnery where one woman meditates alone” (p. 73). In this “nunnery” which was Nelson, Sarton was able to open her “deep channels,” beyond the reach of language, and access the poetry living there.

Poetry, for Sarton as well as many of the other women, resonated deeply with her felt experience in solitude. She used poetry to speak from the deep silence in which she was embedded, to give voice to the realm of the “soul” – to indeed *make soul* by cultivating that soulful space – which she became able to contact over an extended period of solitude and after giving up her attempts to make rational sense of the problems that beleaguered her. She was granted access to that soulful space through a stance of surrender, humility, and receptivity, and into that open soulful space, sonnets did indeed come.

In summary

The women's experience of silence served as the overarching theme of this chapter. We explored the ways in which the practice (and presence) of silence served to restructure the women's existence while on retreat and foster the process of recovering pre-reflective modes of experiencing – a theme that we have been developing throughout this project thus far. Silence enabled new forms of listening, as the women shifted their attentions from the noisy world of human culture to the nuances of both “interior” and “exterior” layers of experiencing. For the first subtheme, we explored the phenomenon of *listening to the inner voice*, which, using the example of Doris Grumbach's experience, revealed not so much a hidden “self” as a language-based stream of consciousness that had accompanied her throughout her days but which silence enabled her to explicitly thematize. We then focused on a different form of “inward” listening that all of the women engaged in during their retreats: *listening to one's pain*. We explored how, over extended periods of silence, the women confronted painful aspects of their affective experience and seemed to “process” this felt material through carefully describing and reflecting on it in their journals. This emotional “processing” coupled with a finer attention to the inner voice eventually seemed to create a clearing effect and enable the women to shift their centers of gravity from a more personal to a less personal zone of being. We articulated this process of progressively dropping “beneath” the personal into a state of greater anonymity in the third subtheme, *listening beneath the personal*.

Shifting the focus “outward,” we then explored the women's heightened ability to *listen to the voice of God*. While only one of the women, Karen Karper, reported hearing

an actual voice which she understood to be God's, many of the other women became able to feel the presence of the Divine in one form or another throughout their time in solitude. It seemed that the experience of personal emptying was prerequisite to this ability to listen to the Divine. In this clearing, the women also became better able to *listen to the "speech" of the world* – to the larger conversation taking place outside of the exclusively human sphere. This more-than-human conversation included the expressive "speech" of wild animals, natural non-sentient entities and elements, and even the built environment. In the silence of their retreats, the women experienced the world as more animate and meaningful. By simply listening more closely to the speech of the world, the women became able to enter into fuller participation there.

The sixth subtheme explored the ways in which sustained silence encouraged greater *care in the use of language*. We examined the following shifts in language use and appreciation that were seen across the women's journals: a greater sense of reverence and respect for language overall, a sparser use of language in their writing, a decreased rate of consumption with regard to reading, and a strong desire to utilize carefully chosen words as they arose out of their felt experience. And for the final subtheme, *poetry*, we explored the central role that poetry played in so many of the women's solitudes. The women made a turn toward the poetic over the course of their solitudes, as they came to read, copy out, contemplate, and create far more poetry than they did prior to going on retreat. Poetic language appeared to resonate well with the women's felt experience in solitude, given its non-linear, non-narrative, imagistic, metaphoric, and fundamentally "innocent" nature. We also explored how the practice of waiting, which the women had been cultivating throughout their time in solitude, plays a

vital role in poetry creation as well, further contributing to poetry's natural fit within the overall gestalt of silence and solitude.

In the introduction to this chapter we discussed the history of women's experience of being silenced, and we noted that many feminist thinkers frame women's psychological liberation in terms of *the process of coming to voice*. Though at first blush the turn toward silence may seem to run counter to women's psychological growth, the women's experience in this study indicates otherwise. Though they may have forfeited their adult voices in choosing silence, they regained something perhaps even more valuable, more fundamental, and more resonant with their "true self": a more profound connection to the world and a (partial) recovery of the voice of the lost girl.

Chapter 8: Co-existence

Introducing co-existence

Thus far we have examined the spatial, temporal, bodily, and linguistic dimensions of solitude, as the women lived them during retreat. Each of the previous chapters has investigated the existential ramifications of leaving the world of direct human interaction and undergoing, essentially, a process of *de-socialization*. In de-socializing, the women cultivated different ways of *relating* with the wider world as well as different modes of relating to their own experiencing – i.e., their thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, etc. In this sense, we can assert that the women *worked on their relationships while alone*, though these relationships lay outside the bounds of what is normally thought of as the relational sphere, associated primarily with the interpersonal domain. Some of the worldly, non-human relationships we have thus far investigated include the women's relationships with the man-made things they dwelled alongside of in their hermitages as well as the organic forms and the larger landscape outside their doors. In the slowness, simplicity, and silence of their solitary retreats, the women shifted into greater present-moment consciousness and became better able to attend closely to these things and life-forms. The world appeared increasingly animate as the women stood waiting receptively before it, ready to discern its calls and read its messages. As we discussed in the last chapter on language, things and non-human beings *came closer* to the women in their silence of their retreats.

The women developed these closer relationships in their aloneness, and these relationships challenged them in new ways. Referring to the array of non-human

relationships she cultivated in solitude – e.g., with daffodils in her home, the wild cat outside her door, etc. – May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*) asserted that, “Every relation challenges; every relation asks me to be something, do something, respond” (p. 108). Even a flower in a vase in her home challenged Sarton as it called forth specific forms of attentiveness, appreciation, wonder, and care. Every relation challenges, and every relation counts. When we neglect our more-than-human worldly relationships, aspects of our human nature lie dormant. Our horizons become constricted and we feel ourselves alienated from the larger non-human world, a world in which we feel we have no place and we do not belong. Through providing a context in which we have the time and quietness and present-moment consciousness enough to cultivate these neglected relationships, solitude may be understood as a method of healing our alienation from the wider non-human world. Solitude may therefore be understood as a pathway home.

Interpersonal relationships do not feature prominently in solitary retreat since the prime characteristic of solitude is, of course, disengagement from other people. Yet our co-existence with others is nonetheless an integral dimension of solitude. We are co-existential creatures, even in our solitude. In using the term “co-existence,” I am pointing to our relationships with other people, and I am also referring to relationships with significant, specific non-human others, such as the animal companions we care for and cohabitate with. In this study thus far we have explored the significance of relationships with wild animals in the natural world outside the doors of our cottages, but we have not yet discussed the significance of the relationships with specific domesticated animals that were integral, even central, to a few of the women’s solitudes. We will look closely at those relationships in this chapter. We will also explore the ways in which the women’s

relationships with other people played a significant role in their solitudes, though these relationships served more of a backgrounding, rather than foregrounding, function. We will look at how human relationships served to support and contain the women's solitudes, and we will also look closely at the claim that solitude and community are ultimately mutually supportive. By examining the literature which suggests the fecund dialectical relationship between solitude and community and looking closely at the women's own assertions in this regard, we will attempt to better grasp the seemingly paradoxical claim that solitude can serve to ultimately support life in community. We will assert that solitude is not a zero-sum situation; a gain on one side of the dialectic need not equate to a loss on the other.

Though the commonplace conceptualization of a person is that of the *isolated individual monad* –who in contemporary intellectual circles is nonetheless conceptualized as being *radically mentally connected* and thoroughly mentally “networked” with others (reflecting a cybernetic model of human being)⁴⁸, our reality as human beings is that we are co-existential creatures from the very start and remain so, albeit in different ways, throughout our lives – whether we are standing amidst a crowd of thousands or are living alone in a hut deep in the forest. The reality of our co-existentiality is most obvious, and

⁴⁸ In his article, “The End of Solitude,” William Deresiewicz (2009) writes of this turn in the academy toward conceptualizing the human mind as radically social, radically horizontally connected and lacking vertical depth. Of this social turn in the field of psychology Deresiewicz writes, “we no longer believe in the solitary mind. If the Romantics had Hume and the Modernists had Freud, the current psychological model – and this should come as no surprise – is that of the networked or social mind. . . . The ultimate implication is that there is no mental space that is not social (contemporary social science dovetailing here with postmodern critical theory). One of the most striking things about the way young people relate to one another today is that they no longer seem to believe in the existence of Thoreau’s “darkness”” (p. 6-7). In referring to Thoreau’s “darkness,” Deresiewicz is pointing to one’s psychic depths that can be explored via introspection in the context of solitude – a lost art, to his mind, in the digital age: “And losing solitude, what have they lost? First the propensity for introspection, that examination of the self that the Puritans, and the Romantics, and the modernists (and Socrates for that matter) placed at the center of spiritual life. . . . Thoreau called it fishing “in the Walden pond of [our] own natures,” “bait[ing our] hooks with darkness”” (p. 6).

certainly most tangible, when considering a human being's earliest life experiences. We begin life as part of another human being's body – not merely located inside of, but *developing out of* our mother's flesh.⁴⁹ We are made from our mother's flesh and sustained by it into our first year or so of life, via her breast milk and her direct care (and/or the direct care of others). Human babies require physical care, contact, and protection for many years before they become able to take care of themselves. Engagement with others enables us to develop our individual mental, emotional, physical, and social capacities, and this is true not only in childhood but throughout our lives as well.

Even our very *capacity to be alone*, interestingly enough, seems to require the presence and care of another person. In his essay "The Capacity to be Alone," Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1958) famously described how the capacity to be alone is a developmental achievement, possible only when the mother or other primary caregiver provides and guards a safe space in which the child can be alone without intrusion or distraction. In this solitary but contained space (in which the caregiver is present in the background but not immediately experienced or directly engaged with), the child becomes able to make contact with her authentic bodily responses to the world, develop her imaginative capacities, and cultivate the felt experience of a "personal" life. The child essentially learns to be alone well (or at least tolerably) via the presence of the other and via the caregiver's permission and provision of her aloneness. By embarking on a period of solitude as adults, we might understand the women to be, in a vague but meaningful sense, returning to that Winnicottian zone of protected aloneness in which

⁴⁹ For an in-depth exploration of the co-existential dimension of early childhood (including a fascinating discussion of the radically co-existential nature of breast milk), see Eva M. Simms' (2008) *The Child in the World: Embodiment, Time, and Language in Early Childhood*.

they became able to reconnect to their felt experience, recover their imaginative capacities, and tune in to their genuine responses to the world without the interference of others. And much like the child who is alone in the presence of the mother, the women were alone in the “presence” – both implicit and explicit – of others. Other people (and, as we will see, certain animal companions as well) served to support, watch over, inspire, and indeed make possible the women’s periods of deep aloneness. We will explore the function that the presence of these others played in the women’s solitudes later in this chapter.

Women and co-existence

The example of the infant’s bodily co-existence with the mother (e.g., during pregnancy, through breast feeding, etc.) illustrates the ways in which the mother’s existence is entwined with that of her child in a very tangible way. These fleshy markers of co-existence are vital reminders of this primary truth of human existence: that we are fundamentally bound up and existentially interwoven with other human beings. Just as we are spatial, temporal, embodied, and linguistic creatures so too are we fundamentally co-existent with others. As with the dimensions of spatiality and embodiment, co-existentiality often has overt feminine associations in Western culture, as compared to the dimensions of time and language which are commonly aligned with men and masculinity. Women’s fundamental co-existentiality is assumed and acknowledged far more readily than that of men’s. While this assumption no doubt stems in part from women’s biological maternal capacities which men lack, it is also largely due to the ways in which women have been socialized and “woman” has been socially constructed. Women have

been socialized to be the caretakers of others – not only at the very start of others’ lives (during infancy) but throughout the duration of human life as well (e.g., caring for elderly parents). Despite the social advances women have made over time, they are still expected to do, and indeed carry out, a greater proportion of the direct caring work in the family as well as in the larger society than men.⁵⁰

“Woman” is constructed as a maternal/relational being, and women are often reduced to this aspect of their being. While a maternal/relational model of human nature that is often applied to women may be understood as a positive corrective to the quintessentially masculine image of the human being as isolated self-reproducing monad, it can also be a limited image of personhood for a number of reasons. One such reason involves the ways in which a highly relational model can exclude solitude as a healthy, legitimate practice for women. The hegemonic social construction of women as relational caregivers not only leaves one with the impression that solitude is unhealthy and even dangerous for women but may also color women’s experience of solitude by eliciting in them a sense of selfishness or unnaturalness if they do choose to embark on it. Eileen Manion (1987) echoes this in asserting that, “The solitary woman must constantly combat the idea that she is not living ‘as she should’, that she is not a true woman, a good woman because she is not caring for others” (p. 309; as quoted in Koch, p. 258). Philip Koch (1994) argues that if more women are to enjoy the fruits of solitude, the socialization of women to be caretakers needs to change (and men need to share more of the load):

⁵⁰ The question of whether this inequity stems from women’s greater innate skill at such tasks and greater desire to carry them out, more so than being a result of social oppression and a sign of their lack of power vis-à-vis men, is beyond the scope of this study but is certainly a valid question to raise. The answer to this question is no doubt very complex.

So long as women are socialized to take primary responsibility for the care of others it will be correspondingly difficult to disengage consciousness from other people in the way that solitude requires. ... The socialization of women to take primary responsibility for everyone must cease. (p. 273)

Thus while women, like men, are fundamentally co-existential beings, they are often reduced to this aspect of their beings, and this reduction has political, economic, and psychological ramifications. Just as women have been reduced to the dimensions of space and embodiment (*for-others*) in the eyes of the larger society, women have also been reduced to their co-existentiality in ways that may serve to limit their development – or at the very least, in terms of this study, may limit their ability to access, practice, and enjoy solitude. By choosing solitude, the women in this study were taking leave of their direct caretaking responsibilities to others and were thus transgressing the rules of femininity. In an earlier chapter on embodiment, we discussed how, by departing from the social stage in which their bodies were on display for others and by ceasing to perform certain feminine bodily disciplinary practices during their retreats, the women's time in solitude amounted to a cessation of the performance of femininity, albeit a partial cessation. By refusing to perform femininity on the public stage, the women, in a sense, underwent a subtle process of *un-becoming women*. Looking at the women's retreats through the lens of co-existentiality, it seems that the women were doing much of the same in temporarily taking leave of their relationships and refusing to take care of, and be responsible for, human others. This relational leave-taking was an integral part of the process of un-becoming woman, another way of temporarily closing the curtain on the performance of femininity.

Solitude is nonetheless threaded with relationship

Yet, to characterize solitude as non-relational would be a mistake. As discussed earlier in this introduction and woven throughout the entire project thus far is the essential point that solitude is a relational practice – just not in the way that we commonly conceptualize relationality. Leaving direct human relating may indeed serve to open us up the possibility of other relationships – with the landscape, with man-made things and organic forms, with the elements, with God, with deeper and more highly nuanced layers of our experiencing; this much seems clear. What we have not yet directly thematized are the ways that solitude is relational vis-à-vis other human beings – i.e., the ways in which our retreats, though solitary, are nevertheless threaded with human relationships, even if these relationships largely serve a backgrounding, rather than a foregrounding, function. Though the women were alone in their solitudes, to some extent it “took a village” to make their aloneness possible.

It is also important to note that although they spent *most* of their time alone, all of the women, with the exception of one, did actually interact with other people during their solitudes, albeit on a very limited basis. There was a wide range of interaction, with Jane Dobisz’s Zen retreat in which she had no contact with others for the entire 100 days on one end of the spectrum and May Sarton’s retreat, in which she had the occasional overnight visitor, called on the services of others to help with the upkeep of her home, and made a few trips out of town over the course of her year in solitude, on the other end. But although the quantity of the women’s interactions with others was drastically decreased, the interactions they did have tended to take on much greater significance and meaning for the women, as compared to their interactions with others prior to their

solitudes. These social interactions also seemed to add to the overall value of their retreats rather than taint the purity of their solitudes by detracting from the women's experience of being alone. Later in this chapter we will look at a few specific examples of how the women's human relationships during retreat played a significant role in their overall experience of solitude.

Getting what they needed

The women's solitudes were not only threaded with human relationship in significant ways; solitude also provided a few of the women with the opportunity to repair or cultivate their relational capacities. For the most part, it seems that the women got what they needed in this regard, whether it was greater open-heartedness and loosened self-other boundaries, or a greater sense of self-containment and the ability to "close the door" to others when need be. Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) is a powerful example of a woman who defined herself primarily in terms of being a caregiver prior to her solitude and not only experienced an expansion of her identity beyond that of caregiver but also learned to develop healthier boundaries vis-à-vis other people during her time alone. At the start of her retreat she described the realization that her role as perpetual caregiver was stifling and that her modes of relating had become unhealthy:

I found myself feeling more and more oppressed by a role I had undoubtedly created. My twisted sense of loving was about giving and giving and giving until I saw the pleasure of my efforts on the other's face, so my own happiness was wrapped up in making [her husband] feel good. ... So here I am...refusing relationship for the time being, or perhaps seeking relationship with myself. (p. 4-5)

Through solitude, Anderson developed a closer relationship with her own experience (her bodily needs, desires, thoughts, feelings, etc.) as well as a closer relationship with non-human beings, and she credits one such relationship, with seals, for helping her “reclaim [her] basic existence” (p. 171). Through these new relationships, Anderson developed a greater sense of self-love and self-confidence and learned how to better contain herself in the context of her relationships with other people: “I’m learning to sponsor myself, no longer the servant but a master of my own time and destiny. It’s all about intention – knowing when to open the door and then when to close it again” (p. 123).

In contrast to the experience of Joan Anderson, who was perhaps overly identified with the feminine caregiving role and felt drained and spread too thin by her human relationships prior to solitude, a few of the other women in this study entered solitude perhaps too highly defended against loving or were at least largely inexperienced with intimate human relationships. For these women, solitude enabled them to become more capable of giving and receiving love. The slowness, simplicity, and quietness of solitudes allowed them to examine what might be getting in the way of their ability to love and helped them feel into their loving feelings and the vulnerabilities associated with these feelings. The two retreatants who experienced this most vividly were Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) and Karen Karper (*Where God Begins to Be*). Both Koller and Karper developed their capacity for affection and care for others through their relationships with companion animals during their retreats. For both of these women, leaving human relationships for a stretch of time enabled them to develop very intense connections to animals and to access a degree of attachment and commitment to another being that they had not previously experienced. For these women, solitude helped them

reconnect to their loving selves and allowed them to practice caring for and loving another in a way that was perhaps safer and less threatening than loving a human being. One might understand their love for these animal companions as perhaps the first important step toward becoming able to more fully love and care for another person. We will discuss these relationships with companion animals in greater depth later in this chapter.

Human beings are naturally co-existential, and this holds true *even* in solitude – in fact, perhaps we might go so far as to say *especially* in solitude. We may indeed proclaim, with the Romantic poet Lord Byron (2008), that we are “least alone” in our solitude: “Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt, in Solitude, where we are *least* alone” (p. 131). By taking a leave from their human relationships and entering into deep aloneness, the women experienced richer forms of relation with the world and a newfound ability to care for themselves and others. Though the women underwent an initial *de-socialization* experience by moving away from human relationships, they cultivated richer modes of relating to their own experience and to the non-human world and in so doing may have also become more capable of caring for other people. Let us now look more closely at the co-existential dimension of solitude.

Theme 1: *Solitude is contained by the other*

As mentioned earlier, in his classic paper, “The Capacity to be Alone,” Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1958) theorized that the capacity to be alone without distress is a developmental achievement of early childhood. The ability to be alone well, or at least tolerably, in adult life hinges on this developmental achievement. Winnicott

suggests that this capacity develops in the context of the relationship with the mother or primary caregiver – that infants develop the capacity to be alone *in the presence of the other*. The primary caregiver in effect stands guard over the child’s aloneness and is available to the child should the child need the caregiver, but the caregiver is not intrusive nor overly watchful; the caregiver essentially *lets the child be* without leaving the child completely alone. Winnicott contends that this kind of non-intrusive containment allows the child to relax and tune in to her own impulses and sensations, resulting in the cultivation of a “personal experience”:

It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his personal life. ... In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. (p. 418)

Without this ability to tune in to her personal impulses and sensations, Winnicott suggests that a person can go on to develop a “false life” characterized primarily by reactions to external stimuli and the desire to fulfill the desires of others rather than being attuned to her experiential truth and behaving in resonance with her personal desires. Thus, for Winnicott, it is through one’s aloneness (which is contained by other people) that one builds an authentic, personal life.

Like the child who settles into her aloneness in the unobtrusive presence of the caregiver, the women settled into their aloneness in the “presence” of others as well. Though not immediately accessible nor even necessarily nearby, other people or larger communities served as containers for, and keepers of, their solitude. As Philip Koch (1994) notes, adult solitude is “usually structured by an implicit sense of containment in some human community” (p. 69) and that “solitude, in both its secular and religious forms, is regularly threaded through and hemmed around by diminished modes of

[human] engagement” (p. 78). Indeed, the women’s retreats show that although they were primarily alone – and thus we can indeed call their retreats *solitary* – engagements with other people were threaded throughout their time alone, and these engagements had a notable effect on the women’s overarching experience of solitude. The presence of these engagements was not unique to the women’s solitudes; it was not because they were women rather than men, for example, that they required these engagements in order to survive or tolerate their aloneness. Though iconic male solitary figures such as Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Merton conjure up images of ruggedly individualistic or radically eremitic lifestyles, it is important to note that their solitudes were very clearly contained by, emotionally and materially supported by, and indeed *peopled* by others. For example, it is well known that while living at Walden Pond, Thoreau welcomed unexpected visitors who happened upon his cabin as well as hosted friends as guests.⁵¹ Thoreau also took walks into the town which was only 1.5 miles away to have weekly dinners with his mother and at times with friends as well. He would also dine with Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family on a regular basis, who inhabited the same stretch of land as Thoreau. Indeed, Emerson owned the land upon which Thoreau built his cabin; Emerson’s generosity and support of Thoreau’s experiment served to contain and support Thoreau’s solitude in a very literal way. Thoreau’s solitude also appeared to have had the blessing of Emerson as well as a few of his other friends in the Transcendentalist circle; and if it wasn’t quite their blessing that he had, he at the very least knew that they were watching over his solitude in some capacity. As Philip Koch (1994) describes it, “Those friends kept an eye on his “backyard experiment,” and their presence must have been felt

⁵¹ Referring to the peopled quality of his life at the pond, Thoreau (1995) wrote, “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” (p. 91).

back at the pond” (p. 78). Similarly, Thomas Merton, in his hermitage in the woods behind the Abbey of Gethsemani, welcomed visitors to his cabin and walked to the monastery on a nightly basis to share dinner with his fellow monks. His solitude was made possible by the Trappists, as the hermitage was located on their land, they permitted him his retreat (albeit after a lengthy petition on the part of Merton), and they financially supported Merton’s day-to-day lifestyle. In writing about solitude (and other topics) for a larger audience during his solitude, Merton no doubt also felt his potential readers’ “presence” and support for his solitary endeavors. One can easily imagine that Merton also felt the “presence” of the earlier Desert Fathers and Mothers and other Christian solitaries in his lineage as well. Thus though both Thoreau and Merton practiced solitary retreat, they were supported and contained by both the implicit and explicit presence of others, and these presences, these engagements, no doubt helped make their aloneness possible and fruitful.

All the invisible hands

As was the case with Thoreau and Merton’s retreats, many invisible human hands played a role in the women’s solitudes. The work of these invisible hands helped to prepare and sustain a safe, non-intrusive place in which the women could be alone well, or at least tolerably. Each of the women experienced some degree of human containment and support, in both explicit and implicit ways.⁵² I will use my first retreat, in which I

⁵² In this section, I will highlight the sources of support that the women received from other people. A few of the women, however, wrote of various sources of resistance and criticism they experienced upon choosing solitude. Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*), for example, wrote: “Misunderstandings. I had told people of my intention to be alone for a time. At once I realized they looked upon this declaration as a rejection of them and their company. I felt apologetic, even ashamed, that I would have wanted such a curious thing as solitude, and then sorry that I had made a point of announcing my desire for it. I should have hidden the fact that I wished to be alone... To the spouse, or the long-time companion, or the family,

spent ten days in a hermitage at a convent outside of Pittsburgh, PA, as an example of this basic point. A cursory reading of my retreat would simply note that I lived in a cabin in the woods alone for ten days, having very few direct encounters with people. Looking more closely, however, it is obvious that there were many other people and institutions involved in my solitude, and they deserve partial credit and definite thanks for the experiences I garnered while alone. I entered solitude, in part, because I wished to study the phenomenon for my dissertation. Many people expressed an interest in my research and my potential “findings” and were thus in a sense invested in my retreat. Many expressed overt support to me (e.g., friends, family, dissertation committee members, etc.), though a few in my acquaintance seemed disapproving or skeptical about my experiment (e.g., my psychoanalyst at the time). Overall, however, I felt more blessing than resistance from others, and I carried this blessing with me into solitude. I also knew that many of those who supported me were eager to hear about my experiences upon returning home; their interest and desire helped me view my solitary endeavors as useful, interesting, and potentially valuable, though I certainly had doubts about its value at many points. In a culture which tends to look at solitude as selfish, useless, and/or potentially dangerous, it was no doubt helpful to feel that there were others in my life who were open to the possibility of my finding solitude to be otherwise. These supportive people essentially gave me the gift of solitude, not only through their support

and to the social circle, as it is called, the decision to be alone for any length of time is dangerous, threatening, a sign of rejection. . . . Having never felt the need to be alone themselves. . . they looked upon my need as eccentric, even somewhat mad. But more than that, they saw it as fraudulent, an excuse to be rid of them, rather than a desperate need to explore myself” (p. 21). Though some of the women faced these kinds of criticism, the sources of support from others definitely seemed to outweigh the sources of resistance to their aloneness – or at the very least, the sources of support seemed to have a stronger impact on the women’s solitudes than the sources of criticism. We might hypothesize that, having chosen to undergo solitary retreats in the first place and having come out of their solitudes in a healthy state of mind and body, the women had an adequate degree of personal strength and resolve to withstand others’ criticisms in the first place.

of my endeavors but also through *granting me the gift of their absence*. They gave me a gift by staying away, leaving me be, and trusting that I would be okay. This gift enabled me to relax into my solitude without carrying too much guilt, discomfort, or fear that someone would come looking for me and disrupt my process.

Indeed, conceptualizing the absence of others as a gift is echoed in the dedication of Doris Grumbach's journal (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) in which she credited her partner, Sybil, for her solitude: "For Sybil, without whose absence this book would not have come about." Sybil's acceptance of and allowance for her partner's solitude was experienced by Grumbach as a great relief in the context of the cultural expectation that women find their sustenance exclusively in groups. Grumbach noted that she, along with many women, did not easily fit into a group-oriented mold:

The call to come to a circle inspires only an irresistible desire to walk away, to learn what I want to know in the quiet which can never be found in a group or a community, to practice in private. For too long women *have* existed in groups. ... The long loneliness of which Dorothy Day speaks was felt by some of us only when we were *with* other people. What we yearned for were periods of solitude to renew our spirits. How seldom were most women alone, *left* alone. (p. 19)

We see another version of this image of absence-as-gift in the work of May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*). At one point during her year-long solitude, Sarton had made plans to spend her birthday hosting her friend, Anne, for lunch. Knowing that Sarton was committed to solitude during this time and that Sarton would be away on the day prior to their planned meeting, Anne dropped off some presents while Sarton was away and included a note that indicated she was also giving Sarton a day of solitude as a present, rather than coming for lunch. Sarton described arriving home to the presents thusly:

I walked into a house full of surprises – a hanging fuchsia, two marvelous rose plants, a little bag of supremely good brownies...and a note from Anne to say that she was giving me a day's time. (She had come on purpose while I was away.)

This is the day she has given me and I have two poems simmering, so I had better get to work. (p. 149)

Sarton characterized her friend's generous, loving gesture as "my best birthday present" (p. 149). In this way, Anne's absent, but nonetheless deeply felt, presence supported Sarton in her solitary quest and was perhaps more meaningful to Sarton than if they had spent the day directly engaging with each other.

Besides carrying the blessings of others in my life and the gift of their absence into my solitude, my first retreat was also supported by the nuns who lived and worked at the convent as well as the tradition of the Franciscans and the larger institution of the Catholic Church who support the tradition of hermitage-style solitary retreat. Though I only saw the nuns in the distance during my stay (except during check in and check out), I could feel their presence throughout my retreat and enjoyed exchanging glances with them and raising our hands in mutual silent greeting when seeing them from a distance during my daily walks. In my journal I wrote, "there's something extraordinary about being here, being held by the nuns, being in their "place of peace." I feel it. I like them, even love them." I was alone in the hermitage but I also knew that the nuns were nearby if I needed them, and I also felt that they cared for me, even though they did not know me. I felt as if I were alone, but *alone with others* – others who were on a similar though quite different journey, seeking some mode of living outside the norms of mainstream society and the bounds of normative femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. There was a mutual unspoken trust between us – they allowed me to live on their property without knowing anything about me and without taking any form of payment from me,⁵³

⁵³ I paid them at the end of my retreat, and this payment was based on a suggested donation only. This was yet another form of support that was extremely helpful to me and indeed enabled me to enter solitude as I did, since my funds were very limited and I would not have been able to afford to stay at a retreat center

and I trusted them to leave me be (e.g., to not try to convert me to their faith, to not intrude on my solitude, etc.). In my journal I noted,

I like that the convent trusts me enough to not check on me, to leave me alone, and to not even collect my money before the retreat started. I was afraid there would be interruptions, questions, someone making sure that all is well. But no. Trust.

At the same time that I appreciated their non-intrusiveness, however, I also rested comfortably in the knowledge that they would be there for me if I needed them. I knew that if I did not re-emerge from my solitary cocoon on the appointed day, someone would ultimately come looking for me.

That someone was watching over and was invested in her safety during her solitude was exactly what Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) came to learn during her solitude as well, much to her surprise. Of all the women in this study, Alice Koller seemingly had the least amount of human support going into her solitude, carried out during a winter on the island of Nantucket – a place where she had not previously been and knew no one. Only a few of her friends knew about her retreat plans, and none of them seemed to understand Koller’s intentions nor regard her retreat as a particularly wise idea. As she was renting her cottage based on an advertisement in a newspaper and therefore did not know the owner, she also lacked a physical sense of containment by familiar people. The physical island of Nantucket and its limited wintertime inhabitants, however, provided her with a very basic sense of community, even though she did not

which charged standard overnight fees. A beloved family member also gave me some money to cover the main expenses for one of my other retreats. It is important to note that many of the women’s solitudes were at least partially funded by other people or institutions – such as Joan Anderson’s (*A Year by the Sea*) partial funding from her husband (he paid for the utilities and cottage repairs while she had to cover the rest of the expenses) and Karen Karper’s (*Where God Begins to Be*) ability to live primarily on anonymous donations which seemed to arrive during her most desperate moments of need and after sustained bouts of prayer.

spend any significant amount of time actually engaging with anyone.⁵⁴ This subtle sense of communal containment was somewhat off-putting or at least strange to her at first, as she felt generally alienated from other people upon first entering her solitude. As Koller was going to be a few days late arriving to Nantucket at the start of her retreat, she had phoned ahead to ask the postmaster to hold on to her mail until she arrived. Upon arrival she picked up her mail and was somewhat jolted by something the postmaster said to her. She wrote,

“We were beginning to wonder when you’d get here,” he calls after me as I open the door. Outside, flicking through the stack of mail, I hear his words: “We were beginning to wonder.” No friend of mine was concerned at my coming here: one more wild and dramatic thing I was doing. But all the while, ever since I wrote from New York to ask the postmaster here to hold my mail until I arrived, someone I didn’t know was watching for me. I’m suddenly ill at ease to be treated as though I’m part of the world of human interconnectedness. (p. 23)

Though his comments caused her a touch of discomfort, his watchfulness no doubt served a containing function of sorts throughout her time on the island. We see his presence a few times throughout her narrative as he was one of the only persons she communicated with. Toward the end of her solitude she learned that he, along with others on the island, had taken notice of her presence and had become worried at one point when he had not seen her for a few weeks. He told her that he even stopped by her house during that time to make sure she was okay. This shook Koller to the core – not because she experienced the thought of his visitation as an intrusion but because she realized that if she had

⁵⁴ Significantly, a few of the women wrote about how retreating in a small rural or physically isolated town was supportive to their solitudes, since given the small size the residents knew each other and looked after each other but also allowed each other their space. Retreating in her home in rural Maine, Doris Grumbach, for example, noted that, “It is easy to live apart among these known, named persons. Our lives impinge upon each other at tangential points of necessity. Yet it was hard to feel part of a community when I lived in New York or Washington” (p. 83). Similarly, May Sarton, retreating in her home in rural New Hampshire wrote, “the furnace suddenly went off; so I built a big fire in the cozy room to keep Punch, the parrot, warm, then called for help. The men were here in an hour. I shall never get used to this joy of living in the country – when help is needed, it is there” (p. 74).

committed suicide during that stretch of time (an act she had contemplated carrying out), he would have discovered her dead body. She wrote,

The phone rings...the strangeness strikes me. I pick up the receiver, almost daring not to say hello. "Dr. Koller, is that you?" A New England voice, an older man, familiar somehow. "Yes. Who is this?" "Mr. Morris, at the post office. We've been worried about you. No one has seen you walking with your dog since before Christmas, and we thought maybe something happened to you." Then people do see me here. "I went off the island right after Christmas, Mr. Morris. I knew you'd save my mail, and so I didn't bother to tell you I was going." "Well, I've been calling you every day. My wife said you might have gone away for the holidays, but I just wanted to be sure. I even went over to your house last week to see whether you might be there in some sort of trouble." I hold the phone away and look at it. He would have found me if I had closed myself into the garage. "That was very thoughtful of you. You're very kind, and I appreciate your thinking of me. I do thank you." The words say exactly what I mean, and yet they are such formulas that he'll think I'm being only polite. ... Some vagrant thought about my connection with this community stays just out of reach. It's so novel an idea that I have to let it escape me now, for lack of the proper net to snare it in. (p. 204)

Though Koller had only a vague sense of containment at the start of her solitary journey, that sense grew stronger throughout. Indeed, we see a subtle but definite transition in Koller toward a sense of herself as part of something larger than herself over the course of her narrative. Although as we will see in the next section, Koller's main sense of containment appeared to come from her relationship with her companion animal rather than from other people, there were small but significant threads of human containment that ran throughout her solitude as well.

In the presence of those who came before

The women's retreats were not only threaded with engagements involving persons and institutions involved in their immediate life; they were also threaded with the "presence" of people who came before them – those who had walked a similar solitary

path, those who had inhabited the same structure (in which they retreated) some time earlier, and others who had been part of their lives but had died. Famous solitaries such as Thoreau and Thomas Merton helped to contain the women's solitudes, for example, by serving as examples of fruitful solitude. Indeed, many of the women made mention of these men and their influence upon them throughout their journals. I certainly felt their implicit presence during my retreats and turned to their first-person accounts quite frequently for inspiration, but also to feel closer to them and to feel myself part of a longstanding American tradition. As my hermitage during my first retreat, Greccio, contained a guest book in the desk drawer in which prior retreatants could write about their experience, I also felt the presence of those retreatants along with me on the journey as well. I read all of the entries, dating back many years, and found myself in tears reading about their experiences and their thankfulness to the nuns and to Greccio itself. After reading their entries the cabin felt infused with a new energy; it felt more alive and even *more* like sacred space.

I also brought the journals of the women in this study with me during my first two retreats. Their presence throughout my retreats was palpable and served as a powerful source of encouragement and excitement in the sense of discovering a largely unacknowledged tradition of American female solitude. The knowledge that these women thrived in their solitudes (for the most part, at least) encouraged me to carry on through periods of doubt about the usefulness of retreat as well as nagging twinges of selfishness or guilt that would periodically rear their heads. I spent time with a different woman each day, devoting one day per book (except while undergoing the two-day reading "fast" during my second retreat). One woman, each day, was present with me to

a lesser or greater extent while making breakfast, during my walks, and when sitting quietly on the front porch looking at the landscape. I cried and laughed with the women through their experiences and often found myself comparing my own experiences to theirs. I felt admiration and I also felt jealousy, feeling myself coming up short when compared to, for example Jane Dobisz' apparent level of spiritual development or Annie Dillard's intelligence and literary talent. Though the reading of the women's journals (along with the writings of famous solitaries such as Thomas Merton and the writings of Greccio's prior guests) may have served as a method of escape from the demand of being present to my immediate environment and my felt experience – whisking me away into the comfort of virtual reality – it felt great for my solitude to be “peopled” and virtualized in these ways.

Just as I experienced the presence of those who had previously retreated in Greccio via their writings in the guest book, Doris Grumbach (*Fifty Days of Solitude*) also experienced the presence of those who had previously lived in the structure in which she retreated (which was her own home). She experienced these presences as hauntings:

One long, very dark night, I found myself fantasizing about the vague sounds I heard in the attic above my head. . . . Quiet houses are hospitable to ghosts. They flourish there. I know this because, one night when the power failed, so that all the appliances were silenced, no car moved along the road, and I lay upstairs in bed. . . . I thought I heard Ella Byard, who built this house before she married Captain Willis White, moving about in the hall downstairs. Then my fantasy grew. I thought of her walking to the porch to sit in the sunlight of a cool August afternoon with her women friends and relatives. . . . In my fantasy they are thus unexpectedly reunited, but this time on my porch, populating my quiet, almost empty house with their ancient shadows, satisfying my sudden need for people. (p. 50-53)

It is important to note that this fantasy seemed to parallel the quieting down of Grumbach's inner voice. As we discussed in the last chapter, it seems that as

Grumbach's mental landscape quieted down, she became better able to intuit "the presence of absence," and this appears to include the presence of the dead. We see this later on in her solitude, as well, as her thoughts began turning to a young male friend of hers, Jude Bartlett, who had recently died of AIDS: "Jude Bartlett, the handsome young dancer who died of AIDS this winter, a few miles away in Brooklin, continued to haunt my solitude" (p. 101). Later she described how he not only haunted her solitude throughout the day but also appeared in her dreams:

Often in the late night I dreamed of Jude Bartlett... He inhabited my dreams in odd ways, sometimes on his toes in a ballet I could not identify, sometimes holding my hand, once laughing at something I had said. He had been dead some months, but he was often present in my quiet house when I slept, out of his bed and once, curiously, lying beside me in mine. (p. 101)

The images of Ella Byard and Jude Bartlett brought Grumbach a sense of company, albeit eerily so, and her meditation on these figures most likely fostered, or at least were reflective of, her painful struggle in solitude to come to terms with her own mortality. These presences therefore seemed to aid her on her solitary journey, "peopling" it but also fostering her reflection on troubling areas of her psychic life – a course of reflection which resulted in a greater degree of acceptance around death and a more emphatic embrace of the life she had left to live.

Other women

Other women played a significant role in a few of the women's solitudes. Though men certainly played various roles in the women's retreats, their influence seemed negligible compared to the impact of other women. These women figures served as occasional companions during the women's retreats but, even more importantly, they

served as guides, mentors, and initiators into a new mode of existence. The significance of women figures is seen most prominently in the solitudes of Karen Karper, Joan Anderson, and in the case of my third retreat in the desert.

Karen Karper's (*Where God Begins to Be*) existence as a hermit living long-term in poverty in a shack in the Appalachian mountains was threaded with connection to human others. These connections included monthly visits to her sisters at the monastery where she used to live, occasional visits from family members who sometimes helped her with various maintenance tasks, interactions with a handful of eccentric neighbors, and financial gifts sent to her from an anonymous donor named "St. Francis." The most prominent connections she had, however, were with two women named Jeanne and Jane, fellow nuns in the Franciscan tradition who had made their homes in the area of Colt Run holler before Karper arrived there to set up her hermitage. Jeanne and Jane championed Karper's solitude from the start, provided her with a tangible example of how it could be done, and shepherded her through the process of learning how to live alone on very little means in a rural area. Karper saw these women frequently upon first arriving, given all of the help she needed to set up her home and learn the basics of day-to-day survival. After the initial period of settling in, however, Karper only saw them for dinner once a week and on an as-needed or as-desired basis. The role that these women played in Karper's solitude cannot be overestimated, especially given that Karper was learning to live alone for the first time in her life, having lived in the safe confines of the monastery for the past thirty years. Since Karper's financial means were extremely limited, Jeanne and Jane's help and accessibility was especially crucial, as Karper could not afford to make too many costly mistakes and was aided by the simple knowledge that the women

were there to catch her if she needed their assistance. Though images of women helping other women pervade Karper's journal, these connections did not seem to detract in any way from her solitary process, nor would they lead one reading her journal to question whether her solitude was indeed a solitude. Karper's solitude was peopled to an extent that worked for her, given her particular circumstances. The help, guidance, and company she received from Jeanne and Jane appeared to only augment Karper's solitude and even made it possible in the first place.

Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) provides us with another example of the powerful role that other women played in the women's solitudes. One day, approximately half way through her year-long solitary retreat, Anderson heard a foghorn in the distance and decided to heed its call, leaving the warmth of her cottage and walking out toward the sea, "following the sound as if it were a mother calling her children home, the depth of her howl guiding even the most hopelessly lost back to safety" (p. 98). Indeed, at this point in her retreat, Anderson felt lost, having reached an emotional low point in the wake of having bravely faced many of the psychological "demons" she had been living in fear of for so many years but not knowing how to move forward from there. In this liminal state, she followed the call of the horn and walked out onto a jetty in the fog. Once there she encountered an elderly woman: "Utterly alone...I began to relish my solitary adventure, when suddenly I am startled by the chiseled profile of an aged woman standing tall, a black cape flowing behind her" (p. 99). This woman was Joan Erikson, the wife of the late psychologist Erik Erikson, and she turned out to be a vital muse and companion to Anderson throughout the remainder of her solitude: "It is as if I've been kissed by a muse – not of the Prince Charming variety, but rather, a

ninety-two-year-old lady who spins out her wisdom, expecting me to catch the vibrations” (p. 105). Joan Erikson’s mode of living was playful, eccentric, adventurous, sensual, present-moment-oriented, and infused with a fierce degree of self-love and self-care, without taking herself too seriously at the same time. Anderson viewed Erickson as a mentor and noted that,

Every woman should have a mentor – not her mother, but someone who doesn’t have a stake in how she turns out, who encourages her to risk, who picks her up when she falls flat on her face. Joan prods, pokes, and coaxes me each time we’re together, like a mother trying to waken her sleepy child to get her off to school in time. Her phone calls come early, during the twilight state between dreaming and waking. “Hi dear,” she says, her voice as soothing as warm maple syrup. “Want to get into some trouble today?” (p. 106)

Though fifty years old, Anderson described herself as like a child vis-à-vis the maternal figure of Erikson. Erikson encouraged her to play, feel and express the full range of her emotions, and also reconnect to the non-human natural world, which seemed to be Erikson’s greatest gift to Anderson. Indeed, Anderson described Erikson as a “seal-woman” who had lived knowledge of both the human and animal worlds:

It occurs to me that she is a native of these elements – familiar with them in some intimate way. Just now her manner reminds me of the seals. They hear what others cannot, have knowledge of what is underneath, are energized by the wild. Is that who Joan is, after all: a seal woman who traverses the world of humans and animals alike? In any case, her antics never fail to strip away adulthood and reduce me to childishness. Suddenly there is playfulness and light. (p. 110)

In the same way that she credited her encounters with the seals for helping her “reclaim [her] basic existence” (p. 171), Anderson described Erikson as helping her become a “real” person: “After a while Joan comes to me, taking hold of my hand without asking, and we stand facing the sea with all the vastness it offers. We are helping each other be real people” (p. 112). Just as the women found what they needed in terms of written messages which helped effect powerful breakthroughs (e.g., the letter I decoded from the

father to his daughters during my first retreat), it seemed that Anderson found and received Erikson at exactly the right time: *When the student is ready, the teacher will appear*. Though Erikson was Anderson's teacher and spent a significant amount of time with her, she did not appear to intrude upon or detract from Anderson's solitude in any way. Like Karen Karper's fellow nuns, Joan Erikson's presence seemed only to augment the process that Anderson underwent in her solitude. Anderson also seemed to augment Joan Erickson's life as well, providing her with a mentee and a companion. It seems their relationship was mutually supportive and that they were able to be together without becoming overly dependent upon each other or overly involved in each other's lives.

Finally, my third retreat, in the Galisteo Basin in north-central New Mexico, was contained in crucial ways by the presence, both explicit and implicit, of other women. Though I saw no other person during my four day, four night vision fast in the desert, I was by no means alone on my journey. I embarked on my quest alongside six other female participants, with four "initiated" women as our guides. The School of Lost Borders, a non-profit organization which has led wilderness rites of passage for the past 35 years, was our official host. The entire experience lasted 11 days total, with four days of preparation, four days of solitary questing, and the three days of "re-integration." We were together as a group for the first four and the final three days, and during the quest we were located within approximately ½ mile from each other. The solitude of the participants was contained by the four guides, who not only prepared us for the quest through instruction and ceremony but also remained at base camp while we underwent our solitary processes. The other participants also supported my solitude – not only in an emotional or psychological sense but also in terms of physical safety and protection.

Each participant was partnered with another woman who was questing nearby, and in the morning one partner would walk to a pre-established spot, located approximately half way between the two women's sites, and leave a sign indicating her well-being while the other member would travel to the site in the afternoon/evening to leave a sign. In my case, my partner and I chose a clearing on top of a steep (it seemed VERY steep after not eating for four days!) rocky hill where we had created a cross using two heavy pieces of wood. In each quadrant of the cross we left a large stone – I left mine before the sun reached mid-sky and she left hers while the sun was making its descent on the horizon. In this way, we knew the other was safe, and we agreed to go out in search of the other if we discovered a missing stone. I watched over her solitude, and she watched over mine. My solitude was my own, but I also had a responsibility to her; our solitudes were thus a communal effort. I also knew that the four guides were waiting back at base camp should I need them; I knew they were praying for us and keeping the home fires lit in our absence. I also knew that should I need to return to them prematurely, I would be regarded as invisible but would still be attended to, as the rule was that once a participant leaves the blessing circle on the first morning and sets off toward her sacred spot, that woman is considered to exist in a separate realm and is therefore “invisible” to the guides. In this way the women were given permission to be apart from the eyes of others, allowed to be whatever they needed to be, look however they wished to look, behave in whatever ways they needed to behave during their process. If a participant was to return to base camp in the middle of the quest, she would need to write down her message, communicating her need on a piece of paper, and her wish would be granted without the guides acknowledging her physical presence. If she wished to return to base camp for

good, she indicated as much and was then welcomed back into the human world via the blessing circle, where she was smudged with burning sage and blessed by the guides. If all she simply needed was a piece of food or some paper to draw or write on, however, she was given these items and then hiked back to her sacred spot to continue on her quest. In this way, she was cared for and attended to without being intruded upon, questioned, or judged in any way. Like Winnicott's child, the women were essentially alone in their processes in the desert, but their aloneness was contained by the presence of many others.

The greatest memories of my time in the desert, apart from the actual experience of receiving the vision, involved times when I was with the women after the quest was over. I have very fond memories of celebrating with them upon first returning from the quest, with tears streaming down our gaunt dirty faces, smiling and laughing and eating but not speaking, at least not yet.⁵⁵ The most memorable experience upon return was not sharing food with the women, however, but eventually sharing the stories from our quests. One or two days after returning from the quest, each woman took an hour or so to describe her experience to the group. After describing her experience, the guides told a story about the experience, weaving together all the bits of information the woman provided. Telling the story of my solitude and having it mirrored back to me, having it made sense of so sensitively, poetically, powerfully, and indeed *perfectly* by the guides was a life-altering experience for me. The way in which the lead guide (a wise, genuine, irreverent woman named Emerald) put my story together for me – no, *with* me – resonated deeply. Emerald did so much more than simply construct a useful narrative of

⁵⁵ We were discouraged from speaking about our experience with the other women (or anyone else) for approximately 24 hours, in the interest of allowing us to keep our experience to ourselves and letting us sit with the fullness, strangeness, and the ineffability of it, without trying to impose order on it or make sense of it prematurely.

my experience; her words sang my truth and resonated with my soul. I wept then (and I weep now as I type this) and will be forever grateful for her gift. She wove the tapestry of my story together from a number of sources – e.g., dream images of my grandmother I experienced while on retreat, the vision I received on the final night, the fact that the candle which sat in the middle of the circle of women as I told my story refused to blow out throughout the entire hour of sharing despite the blowing wind and despite the candle having blown out within the first minute of the other women sharing their experiences⁵⁶ – and it was a story which was truly *my own story*, yet it was also *hers*, and it was all of the others women’s at the same time. Through my solitude in the high desert, I indeed felt least alone.

Theme 2: *Animal engagements*

The women’s engagements with other people during retreat clearly served to contain and support their solitudes. Engagements with animals – both wild and domesticated – played a powerful role in the women’s retreats as well. Encounters with wild animals – from potentially dangerous run-ins with bears to simply watching birds at the kitchen window – were threaded throughout each of the women’s solitudes. These animals were real, significant presences during the retreats, and by tuning in to and even joining in their “conversations,” the women felt accompanied on their solitary journeys by these animal others. Even Doris Grumbach, the retreatant who spent the most time indoors and seemingly the least time “conversing” with animals observed, “Befriended in this way – by crows and ducks and black flies – how could I feel lonely or alone in this

⁵⁶ Though I will not reveal the details of my vision, it seems important to at least share that the primary image was that of a life-path dedicated to “keeping the fire lit” for other women.

place?” (p. 35). Similarly, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) wrote of how she came to feel closer to other species in the absence of her own kind: “It seemed to me, separated from my own species, that I was nearer to others” (p. 42). We will now take a brief look at the impact that engagements with wild animals had on the women and will then shift to a more in-depth exploration of the profound effect that domesticated animal companions had on a few of the women’s solitary processes.

Becoming animal, recovering wildness

The women’s engagements with wild animals not only provided stimulation and increased a sense of inter-species intimacy; their connections to wild animals enabled some of the women to reclaim and reconnect to their own wildness. Through their encounters with wild animals, many of the women in this study recovered their capacity for sensual pleasure (and indeed recovered their basic ability *to deeply sense*, having lived for so long in a state of bodily numbness), their child-like sense of wonder, their playfulness, and their instinctual spontaneity. Joan Anderson’s relationship with seals, which she credited with helping her “reclaim [her] basic existence” (p. 171), is an excellent example of this. The seals served as a guide and a reminder of some realm of her own being which had become blocked and inaccessible. She first encountered them at the start of her solitude, and that initial powerful encounter served as a wake-up call of sorts and set her on a path of recovery. Her initial encounter with the seals served as a reminder of that which she had lost touch with and deeply longed for but did not know she had been missing until she met their gaze on that day and something in her was deeply stirred. Anderson encountered the seals again, at the end of her retreat, which she

marked by undertaking a 24 hour vision quest on a small deserted island off the coast of Cape Cod. She was walking down the beach and suddenly felt as though something or someone was watching and following her. She soon realized it was a group of seals in the water nearby and recognized in that moment the effect that their presence had had on her time alone:

I plow on, sensing that something is following me... I hear weird noises, even feel some vibrations, and after a few minutes see what I already felt, not on land but in the water. A parade of seals, temporarily washed off their sandbar, have taken to the water as their daily exercise, swimming beside me as I walk, playing hide-and-seeK until just now, when one makes eye contact with me, and I stop to hold its gaze. "Hi there," ... "You guys have gotten me to do all kinds of crazy things since the first time we met," I say. "I've actually become a little mad." With that, they all dive, then surface some 50 yards away, looking back at me as if to say, "C'mon." I pick up my pace, fully engaged with their company, now honored by it, and find myself skipping, moving in sync with their arching dives, responding to their raw impulses. ... No doubt the seals touched me back in October, urging me with their antics to be more playful, vulnerable, and free, insisting that I begin to look at what was missing in my life. Just now I am overcome by the reality that they did set me on a new path, that they have made a difference. Tears stain my cheeks, further reminding me how keenly alive I am just now. (p. 164-165)

Through her encounters with these animals (in tandem with other relationships, such as the one with her "seal-woman" mentor, Joan Erikson) she herself, in a sense, experienced a process of *becoming animal*. Through her solitude she came to remember her *more immediate, pre-reflective animal nature*, and in so doing came to feel more at home in her body and in the larger world. We might even assert that, in becoming animal, she reclaimed lost aspects of herself and thus, in the process, became more fully human.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ David Abram (2010) echoes this in writing that the process of "becoming animal," as he uses this phrase in his book by the same name, might be understood not in the sense of a loss of one's humanity but, rather, in the sense of "becoming more deeply human by acknowledging, affirming, and growing into our animality" (p. 10).

“A safe beginning”: Accepting the vulnerability of loving and loss

All of the women, to lesser or greater extents, were moved by engagements with wild animals. A few of the women’s solitudes were also contained and “peopled” by the presence of companion animals with whom they cohabitated as well. Four of the women (Sarton, Karper, Koller, and Dillard) lived with animals during at least part of their solitary retreats. Sarton lived with her parrot, Punch; Dillard with her goldfish, Ellery; Karper with her cat, Merton; and Koller with her dog, Logos. The consistent presence of these animals granted the women companionship and the opportunity to give and receive love, without seeming to compromise the integrity of their solitudes. Even if one made the case that, given their relationships with these animals, these women’s retreats weren’t “truly” solitary, it would be difficult to argue that the overall psycho-spiritual gains from their retreats were not enhanced by the presence of these animal companions.

Perhaps the most significant effect that these companion animals had on the women’s solitudes was through offering two of the women – Karen Karper and Alice Koller – the opportunity to cultivate their ability to give and receive love. Though their lives were not completely loveless prior to solitude, Karper and Koller’s ability to care for and show physical affection to others had become compromised. It was through the relationships they developed in solitude with their animal companions, Merton and Logos, that they worked to heal their woundedness in this regard. We will first explore the experience of Karen Karper, a nun who, at the age of 47 took up life as a hermit in rural West Virginia after living for the past thirty years in a monastery with other women. Soon after embarking on her solitary journey, Karper adopted a white male kitten, Tom Merton, named after the solitary Trappist monk. Merton’s presence quickly worked to

restructure her sense of time, language, and embodiment; her days became fitted to his temporal rhythms – “How much better to be wakened thus than by some heartless alarm! I don’t understand how Merton knows it is 5:30 am, but he’s as punctual as any clock radio and definitely more personal” (p. 49) – she learned to decipher the nuances of his communications – e.g., “I’m slowly learning Cat, a language that is rather simple but capable of extraordinary nuances of feeling” (p. 50) – and her body became habituated to and came to crave contact with his – e.g., “I began to appreciate the value of physical contact. ... I loved his soft, silky fur and found, when I had to be away for a couple of days, that I missed our petting time, possibly more than he did” (p. 56).

Karper learned to open her heart to another being through her relationship with Merton. Her powerful feelings for Merton helped her realize just how hungry she was to give and receive love:

I had thought I knew what to expect living with a cat. ... What I hadn’t been prepared for was the storm of emotions this kitten precipitated in my heart. Suddenly I had someone to care for, someone who needed me, someone to come home to. The solitude of my hermitage was taken over by a lovable presence that laid claims on me I could not ignore. I had not known I was lonely for love until Merton began to fill up some of the empty space in my heart. (p. 51-52)

Karper indicated that her many years of living in the monastery taught her to guard herself from attachments and that she unlearned this defensive posture through her relationship with Merton:

My many years in a cloister had taught me to guard my heart against “too much attachment to things of this world.” I was not encouraged to give or receive overt forms of affection. It was a lesson I found difficult to unlearn. But a certain white cat burrowed under my fence and took up residence, ignoring that it was “posted” territory. (p. 56)

Karper understood her relationship with Merton to be a “safe beginning” by helping prepare her to open her heart to other people and accept the possibility of rejection and devastating loss:

Letting myself love, becoming vulnerable to worry, fear of loss, and need for the loved one...in a word, becoming defenseless in the soft paws of a purring cat began to pry my heart open to loving others in my life with more genuine affection. ... Loving a little animal was a safe beginning for me. Rejection was not likely if food and fondling were provided in adequate measure. It was a good place for me to start removing the brick wall that years of fear and distrust had erected. (p. 56-57)

Indeed, loving Merton “recreated” Karper and caused her to look at the world through a more loving lens:

Being entrusted with someone⁵⁸ to love and being loved in return has literally recreated me. An abiding loneliness has been erased, not just because a cat lives with me but because through accepting the vulnerability of loving, I have found the whole world a friendlier place. (p. 56)

Karper’s relationship with Merton not only provided her with companionship but also helped her restructure a defensive and constricted way of being in the world and practice opening her heart and her life to others.

Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) also learned a profound lesson in loving and vulnerability through her relationship with her companion animal, a puppy named Logos. She adopted him just prior to beginning her retreat mainly for the sense of physical protection he could offer her; like Karper, she had no idea upon adopting him the emotionally evocative effect he would have on her life. At first, Koller looked at Logos

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Karper frequently uses the term “someone” when referring to Merton. The use of this term indicates the degree of significance and respect she accorded him. Though she framed her relationship with him in some ways as a “starter” relationship toward the larger goal of connecting more intimately with people, it seems that their relationship was much more than simply an easier, trial version of human relating. It was a unique, worthy relationship in and of itself, and it is important to note that it enriched Karper’s life in ways that a relationship with another person very well might not have.

as a potential source of protection and regarded him mainly along economic lines, measuring his value in terms of how much time and money he will require and what he had to offer her in exchange:

The wind is so monstrous this morning that Logos refuses to move from the doorway when I want to let him out. I fume at the wind for interfering with my plans for housebreaking him, and we go back inside. Twice before noon he tries to go out into the heavy wind. Twice I clean up after him. He does take time. I think of what his food bill will be, and how large he'll grow, and what a problem he may become wherever I may live later. But he gives me my freedom: I'm not afraid to be here alone at night. That has to cost something. (p. 25)

Within a few weeks, however, she began to develop loving feelings for him; the first major sign of this shift from utilitarian considerations to true care occurred on Thanksgiving, a day which was painful for Koller as it brought back memories of many loveless and unsatisfying holidays and put a spotlight on her aloneness. On this day, she discovered that Logos destroyed her new fur boots by chewing on them; you see her softening here from anger to loving regard and understanding:

“Bad dog. Look what you did.” I thrust his face into a boot. “And did you swallow the fur, too? You’ll be sick and I’ll have to spend money for a vet. Bad dog.” Logos squirms loose and runs into the living room to escape me, then returns to the kitchen doorway. He seems so confused that I stop raging and sit at the kitchen table. Quietly he comes to me and I stroke the top of his head lightly. It is the merest outline of a gesture noting his presence. . . . instantly his paws are on my lap, and he licks my face, making his little cries. I catch my breath, and then let it go. “Okay, I’ll tell you what. Today we’ll go all the way out to the lighthouse. On the sand. I’ll even take some water for you in a jar, so you can run and run and run and not have to come home because you’re thirsty.” The beautiful face looks up into mine as if he understands every word. We’ll have a holiday in our own way. (p. 57)

During their long holiday walk, Koller and Logos stopped to rest on a bench, and while resting there Koller reflected on her newfound loving feelings for her animal companion and noticed the beginnings of vulnerability to loss that her love for him elicited:

My eye travels over every inch of the side of his body, watching until his breathing begins to steady itself and deepen. I have fallen in love with him, no question about it. Suddenly I realize I didn't think beyond Nantucket when I bought him. Did I imagine that I'd use him for company here on Nantucket and then hand him over to someone when I pick up a life in a city somewhere, where dogs are an inconvenience? I didn't plan anything at all with him. I certainly didn't plan to love him. My thoughts stumble across the knowledge that my life will be longer than his. (p. 58)

This vulnerability to loss grew as her love for Logos grew. A couple of weeks later, Koller experienced a moment of intense fear when Logos failed to respond to her calls after she let him out in the yard in the morning. This experience served to turn her “inside out”:

Logos is not on the doorstep when I go to let him in before breakfast. I call him, expecting him to come to me out of the tall grass. I run outside to the front lawn and shout his name, loudly, then again, and stand, shivering, looking toward the water tower. Emptiness and silence. My heart pounds abruptly, and I am immediately turned inside out. (p. 86-87)

Her care and concern for Logos slowly began to soften her hardened emotional boundaries, which previously kept others at a distance. Indeed, this newfound ability to be turned “inside out” – taken outside of herself – can be clearly contrasted with an image of Koller as she and Logos were driving to catch the boat to take them to Nantucket at the very start of her retreat. She had just adopted Logos, and he was highly agitated by being in the car: “Next to me Logos implores the trip to end. I touch his head lightly. I am closed off into myself and no one but me can help me get out” (p. 11). Indeed, the development of a loving relationship with Logos played a significant role in Koller's growing ability to “get out” of herself and risk opening herself and her life to others.

Her connection to Logos developed to such a degree that she considered herself closer to him than to any person in her life:

I'm connected to him as I am to no human being. He lets me touch him, hold him, play with him. He makes me laugh. He puts up with my taking care of him, brushing his hair, examining his paws or his ears, giving him medicine. He gives me a creature to care for. (p. 209)

Koller learned from Logos the profound lesson that taking care of another can lead to feelings of love for that other, rather than it necessarily working the other way around. She first realized this after tending to Logos's health when he became sick after eating a dead bird in the yard. She wrote,

Downstairs, Logos' breathing is quiet and steady. I lower myself carefully to the floor. I keep my hands to myself, although I long to touch him. Before this afternoon he was my beautiful puppy, funny, playing, outguessing me, too smart for his own good. But separate from me. Like a toy that had the unusual ability to breathe and move. But now he's mine in a way he hasn't been before. I make him mine by caring. So loving is caring-for? Taking-care-of turns into caring-for, being concerned about? As Dewey said. I saw it with my own eyes this very day. (p. 130)

Logos's presence during Koller's retreat made possible the cultivation of her ability to care for another. She herself felt deprived of that kind of care from a young age and wondered how her life would have been different if she had experienced it as a child. Though prior to solitude Koller could never understand the love that mothers have for their children, she began to grasp the felt sense of that experience through her relationship to Logos:

But now, through Logos, I begin to understand. I can't sort out all the things that make up my loving him, but that I love him is certain. The whole thing sets me to wondering how different my life would have been if, as a child, I had sensed from my mother the feeling I now have for him. Perhaps loving something is the only starting place there is for making your life your own. ... You want the creature to flourish because you love him, not because it profits you something. I love Logos for his own sake. (p. 209)

From looking at Logos through an economic lens at the start of her solitude – looking at him as an object (a “toy”) and calculating his worth based on what he can do for her – to

loving him “for his own sake” at the very end, Koller experienced profound growth in her capacity to love. But though she loved him for his own sake, he also, in a sense, *became a part of her*. By letting him into her heart, she allowed her very sense of self to expand to include him. As her circle of care expanded, so did her very self. We will look more closely at this phenomenon in the next section.

Expanding one’s sense of self to include the non-human other

Through loving Logos, Koller came to integrate his being into her sense of self. This development seemed to parallel the self-deconstructive process that Koller underwent throughout her retreat: *As she cleared out, he moved in*. Koller spent large portions of her days rigorously examining her life (via self-reflection and self-reflective writing) in the attempt to figure out why she was perpetually unhappy, failed to build lasting authentic relationships, and felt a pervasive sense of discomfort in her own skin. This analysis resulted in a painful deconstruction of her own identity, as she had to face the fact that she had largely been living a lie – that she had built a life based on trying to please others and was constantly performing her way through her days, like an actress on a stage. This deconstructive process, through which she came face-to-face with her false self, reduced her to a “small shuddering self”⁵⁹:

I failed because the things I set myself to do weren’t things I *chose* to do. There was no real “I” to do the choosing. That hollow creature led by a child’s heart, fighting rearguard actions all over the place to prevent anyone from noticing: I’ve torn it all away. And look what’s left: this small shuddering self. (p. 211)

⁵⁹ Thomas Merton echoes this effect of routing out the false self in solitude in asserting that, “Contrary to all that is said about it, I do not see how the really solitary life can tolerate illusion or self-deception. It seems to me that solitude rips off all the masks and all the disguises. It tolerates no lies” (as quoted in Hall, 2007, p. 94-95). Similarly, Sister Jeremy Hall (2007) describes the solitary conversion process thusly: “In the process of letting solitude do that work I come, as I did with silence, to an identity not mindlessly projected on me and mindlessly accepted, but a deeper, inward self where I follow no crowd but start to become an authentic center of being, a living out of the mystery of human personhood” (p. 94).

Being reduced to this small shuddering self, finding herself in this painful psychological desert, Koller wondered whether it was worth it to continue living. She contemplated suicide but ultimately decided against it. When asked by her friend at the end of her narrative what kept her alive, she indicated that she went on living because of Logos: ““What made you decide to live?” Logos swings around in front of us to take the lead. I nod my head toward him. “He did” (p. 236-237). Koller realized that if she were to die Logos would not have anyone to care for him; she also realized that to end her life would mean she would have to give up loving Logos: “He’s part of my life. To give up my life is to give him up” (p. 209).

In this radical state of emptiness, on the edge of possible suicide, Koller realized what indeed she *did* have: she had Logos, and she came to understand that her love of Logos (as well as her intense love of the ocean) *comprised her very self*. Her sense of self shifted from being Alice Koller – the persona she lived out in the world with others – toward being a lover of Logos and a lover of the ocean, the only two things which she knew for sure about herself:

I’ve torn it all away. And look what’s left: this small shuddering self. And yet I know some few things. I love Logos: I must have him with me. I can’t think of myself without him. This ocean matters to me: my free access to it, the silence and the beauty, the vastness of the view. Suppose I start with these things. And with the idea that other things may join with these. I don’t know what they’ll be. Or when they’ll come to me. Or whether there will be anything else at all. But I start with these. They are all the self I have. But they are mine. (p. 211)

The progressive breakdown of Koller’s self-as-persona occurred in tandem with her growing ability to love Logos; as she deconstructed her personal self, she became open to welcoming him into her heart and circle of care. In the last chapter on language we explored how silence, in the context of solitude, appears to effect a “clearing” in the

retreatant. Here we see how the conversion process that Koller underwent in solitude helped her make room within herself for Logos. Indeed, Sister Jeremy Hall (2007), an elderly Benedictine nun who lived in solitude for 20 years, explains that far from being an anti-social phenomenon, solitude is a process that helps one make room for the other:

Solitude is not antisocial. The person who embraces true solitude, either at certain times or as a way of life, is not running away from, not rejecting, anyone. Rather such a person is making room within, is preparing to welcome someone – God, others, self. It is a positive choice, appropriate to a social being, and it is for a positive goal. (p. 86)

In Koller's case, that "someone" whom she became capable of welcoming within was a puppy named Logos.

On a very different note, Annie Dillard's narrative (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) provides us with another example of how engagements with animals in solitude may enable one to expand one's sense of self to include the other. Her route to this self-expansion initially involved the cultivation of intellectual knowledge about animals and other non-human life forms. It is through the accumulation of knowledge about natural phenomena that Dillard was able to take the first step toward adding "their dim awareness to [her] human consciousness" (p. 95) and in so doing "set up a buzz" (p. 96) between herself and the environment. In the following passage, we see Dillard sitting on the grass by Tinker Creek and contemplating the reality of all of the beings existing beneath her body in that moment. She developed an initial awareness of this invisible world through the intellectual activities of reading and studying. By first learning of their existence and then giving sustained thought to them, she admitted them into her consciousness and came to vibrate in unison with them:

I am sitting under a sycamore tree by Tinker Creek. I am really here, alive on the intricate earth under trees. But under me, directly under the weight of my body

on the grass, are other creatures, just as real, for whom also this moment, this tree, is “it.” Take just the top inch of soil, the world squirming right under my palms. In the top inch of forest soil, biologists found “an average of 1,356 living creatures present in each square foot, including 865 mites, 265 spring tails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles and various numbers of 12 other forms. . . . Had an estimate also been made of the microscopic population, it might have ranged up to two billion bacteria and many millions of fungi, protozoa and algae – in a mere *teaspoon* of soil.” The chrysalids of butterflies linger here too, folded, rigid, and dreamless. I might as well include these creatures in this moment, as best I can. My ignoring them won’t strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine, might add their dim awareness to my human consciousness, such as it is, and set up a buzz, a vibration like the beating ripples a submerged muskrat makes on the water, from this particular moment, this tree. (p. 95-96)

Dillard also went about this project of admitting creatures into her consciousness by looking directly at them under the microscope in her home. She procured a cup of duck pond water and examined it, one drop at a time. She didn’t enjoy this exercise (“I don’t really look forward to these microscopic forays” (p. 122)) but carried it out for ethical reasons: “I do it as a moral exercise; the microscope at my forehead is...a constant reminder of the facts of creation that I would just as soon forget” (p. 122). Dillard carried out these microscopic forays in order to remind herself of the reality of these invisible others: “These are real creatures with real organs leading real lives, one by one. I can’t pretend they’re not there. If I have life, sense, energy, will, so does a rotifer” (p. 122-123). She forced herself to look at their reality because once she looked, she knew that it was then her responsibility to “deal with it, take it into account” (p. 123). Though her method of looking at the creatures in the pond water appears objectifying at first blush – as she isolated them from their environmental context and gazed at them through a technoscientific lens – her mode of seeing is infused with a sense of wonder, appreciation, and respect, and she carried out her seeing with the intention of expanding her consciousness and shifting her focus from her human concerns onto those of the non-

human natural world. In so doing, she opened herself to the possibility of being truly moved by a vital, meaningful world:

What I aim to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep myself open to their meanings, which is to try to impress myself at all times with the fullest force of their very reality. (p. 139)

In contrast to those who gaze at the non-human natural world with a desire to dissect, exploit, and control, Dillard's microscopic adventures were fueled by a desire for contact, encounter, and resonance.

It was via that same knowledgeable gaze that Dillard regarded her animal companion, Ellery the goldfish, named after William Ellery Channing, the Transcendentalist poet and close friend of Thoreau. Though she did not study Ellery under her microscope, Dillard's engagements with him were informed by an earlier experience of having observed an etherized goldfish under a dissecting microscope. Here she describes the red blood cells that ran throughout the etherized fish's tail:

The red blood cells in the goldfish's tail streamed and coursed through narrow channels save for glistening threads of thickness in the general translucency. They never wavered or slowed or ceased flowing, like the creek itself; they streamed redly around, up and on, one by one, more, and more, without end. ... Those red blood cells are coursing in Ellery's tail now, too, in just that way, and through his mouth and eyes as well, and through mine. I've never forgotten the sight of those cells; I think of it when I see the fish in his bowl; I think of it lying in bed at night, imagining that if I concentrate enough I might be able to feel in my fingers' capillaries the same knocking and flow of those circular dots, like a string of beads drawn through my hand. (p. 126)

Here, the blood cells in the etherized fish's tail share the same flow as the creek as well as the cells in Ellery's body and in Dillard's own – pointing to *the same basic animating force* running through all phenomena. Though she only paid 25 cents for Ellery at the pet store, she understood him to be not very different from herself:

This fish, two bits' worth, has a coiled gut, a spine radiating fine bones, and a brain. Just before I sprinkle his food flakes into his bowl, I rap three times on the bowl's edge; now he is conditioned, and swims to the surface when I rap. And, he has a heart. (p. 125)

Her observations of, and meditations on, Ellery (as well as the microscopic creatures from the duck pond water) inside her hermitage only served to deepen her sense of belonging to the natural world that existed outside her door and to widen the circle of her attention and care.

Theme 3: *Solitude and community*

For this final theme, we will explore the idea that the practice of individual solitude may ultimately support the health of the larger community. We have already seen how an individual's solitude is supported by the larger community, but it is perhaps more difficult to imagine how one might defend the reverse claim – that solitude can support the community. It is easy to dispute this claim since to choose solitude is to choose to take physical leave from community; this is a fact, no matter how successfully one might make the case that solitude is threaded with human engagements. But although solitude is solitary, this does not mean that it is altogether non-participatory. Though the women did not *directly* participate with others (for the most part at least), one could argue that they were involved in relationship building and the nurturing of community life in some capacity nonetheless. Indeed, a close look at solitude reveals that the processes that solitary retreatants undergo may indeed have a positive, significant impact on the quality of their relationships outside of solitude as well as the health of the community at large.

Individual recovery work supports the health of the larger body politic

Throughout this project we have continually characterized solitude as a practice which supports a process of recovering, reclaiming, and reconnecting to aspects of one's experience which remained outside of awareness prior to solitude. The simplicity and silence and slowness of solitude, along with ample contact with the more-than-human world, seems to create the conditions for a stripped-down existence wherein a person can begin to reclaim spatial relationships, temporal rhythms, and bodily experiences that she had lost awareness of on the path to becoming an adult – experiences that we might call “pre-reflective,” following the existential-phenomenological tradition. By turning off the clock, stashing away the mirror, and maintaining a practice of silence, the women became better able to reconnect with their lived experience and revitalize a sense of belonging in and to the non-human natural world, thus working to heal a longstanding sense of alienation from their own bodily experience and the sensuous, animate landscape. If this was indeed what was happening during the women's retreats, we must understand this process of reclamation to be very important healing work. When a retreatant such as Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) can assert that she *reclaimed her basic existence* through solitude, this is an assertion worth listening closely to.

Existential reclamation not only benefits the individual, however; this reclamation can also benefit the larger human and non-human communities in which the individual is embedded. A person who is in greater contact with her own “basic existence” and is attuned to a felt-sense of her place within the larger ecosystem in which she lives – and brings her human intelligence to bear on this revitalization of her being – is poised to be able to articulate and defend the rights and needs of her animal brethren and the larger

ecosystem. Individuals who have experienced a deepened level of contact with the natural world and a heightened ability to discern its cries can more easily take action to defend that world against the everyday technoscientific objectification, violation, and exploitation that it faces. When one has been initiated by and into the wild, one can speak (with some degree of authority) *from* and *for* the wild.

David Abram (2010) also suggests that the awakening of individuals via solitude “to citizenship in the broader commonwealth” of the natural world is prerequisite to the development of “genuine democracy” in human society (p. 9). In the introduction to *Becoming Animal*, Abram defends the fact that his work highlights individual solitary experiences at the expense of discussing larger sociopolitical issues surrounding the alienation of human beings from the natural world. He argues that the individual solitary experiences he focuses on in his writings indeed have powerful social and political ramifications. He writes,

Some might claim that this is a book of solitudes. For I’ve chosen to concentrate upon those moments in a day or a life when one slips provisionally beneath the societal surge of forces, those occasions (often unverballed and hence overlooked) when one comes more directly into felt relation with the wider, more-than-human community of beings that surrounds and sustains the human hub-bub. Awakening to citizenship in this broader commonwealth, however, has real ramifications for how we humans get along with one another. It carries substantial consequences for the way a genuine democracy shapes itself – for the way that our body politic *breathes*. Why, then, is so little attention paid to the social or political spheres within these pages? Because there’s a necessary work of recuperation to be accomplished (or at least opened and gotten well underway) before those spheres can be disclosed afresh, and this book is engaged in that work of recuperation. (p. 9)

Like Abram’s work, the women’s work during solitude was very much about the recuperation of foundational aspects of their experience – the recovery and renewal and strengthening of a foundation that a healthy form of participation in the collective human

sphere rests upon. If the foundations of individual citizens are unstable, how can the health of the collective fail to reflect that? If more persons worked to reconnect to their foundations, what kind of society might we have? And what would this mean to the living earth and the non-human others that reside there alongside us?

Becoming the still axis at the center of the wheel

Another way of thinking about the relationship between solitude and community is to consider the effect of an individual's solitude on her role within the smaller, more immediate community – family, friends, etc. – in which she lives. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) argued that women tend to live in a perpetual state of frenzy and distraction in which they are torn between conflicting responsibilities to other people and are alienated from their own vital center, their own individual “core.” As discussed in the chapter on space, Lindbergh prescribes simplicity, carried out in the context of solitude, to help women cultivate their “inner inviolable core, the single eye” (p. 28). She argued that simplicity and solitude are not ends in themselves, however, but are instead techniques or roads to grace. Grace is found in the ability to “still the soul”:

Solitude alone is not the answer...it is only a step toward it, a mechanical aid, like the “room of one's own” demanded for women, before they could make their place in the world. The problem is not entirely in finding a room of one's own, the time alone, difficult and necessary as this is. The problem is more how to still the soul in the midst of its activities. (p. 50)

In Lindbergh's view, however, the ability to still the soul benefits more than the individual woman. She framed the need to still the soul via solitude in terms of its positive effects on the woman's relationships after she returns from her retreat. She conceptualized woman as being, *by nature*, the center of a web of human relationships;

by spending time in solitude a woman can shore up her center, thus strengthening the larger relational web. She wrote,

Certain springs are tapped only when we are alone. The artist knows he must be alone to create; the writer, to work out his thoughts; the musician, to compose; the saint, to pray. But women need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves: that firm strand which will be the indispensable center of a whole web of human relationships. She must find that inner stillness which Charles Morgan describes as “the stilling of the soul within the activities of the mind and body so that it might be still as the axis of a revolving wheel is still.” This beautiful image is to my mind the one that women could hold before their eyes. This is an end toward which we could strive – to be the still axis within the revolving wheel of relationships, obligations, and activities. (p. 49-50)

To Lindbergh, a valid reason for a woman to seek solitude is not necessarily for her own pleasure or in the interest of her individual creative or spiritual aims, but, rather, to become better at her role as caretaker for others and central axis in the family system. Thus solitude is conceptualized here as being more so for the benefit of others and the larger collective rather than as a practice yielding individual rewards.

Lindbergh’s *Gift from the Sea* was published in 1955. Seen through contemporary eyes, her conceptualizations of women seem essentialized and outdated and certainly appear to support the commonplace reduction of women to their relationality at the expense of other ways of measuring their worth. To claim that women’s “true essence” involves, for the most part, the direct caretaking of others is certainly problematic and feeds into the larger stigma against women who choose lifestyles that fall outside of the heterosexual, family-oriented norm.⁶⁰ Nonetheless,

⁶⁰ It is important to note, however, that Lindbergh was writing during a time, prior to the second wave of feminism, when solitude was probably more taboo for women than it is today and the feminine mystique (with its archetypal image of woman as selfless caregiver) was at its height in mainstream American culture. Lindbergh was trying to sell the value of female solitude to a culture which had so many reasons to reject it. By highlighting the ways that a woman’s solitude can benefit the larger family system, Lindbergh’s work could resonate with a large audience and her rather radical ideas could appear less threatening to the status quo than they actually were. Indeed, Lindbergh’s work (in this volume and

Lindbergh's overarching message here is an important one to consider. When scholars of solitude highlight the experience of "returning to the self"⁶¹ in solitude, what they often seem to be referring to is just this – the cultivation of the "inviolable inner core, the single eye," the felt experience of stilling the soul such that one feels oneself to be in one piece, grounded in oneself, self-contained, whole.⁶² Lindbergh described this sensation of self-contained wholeness cultivated through solitude as the development of an "island quality" (p. 57). A person develops this island quality though practicing simplicity and solitude:

The past and the future are cut off: only the present remains. Existence in the present gives island living an extreme vividness and purity. One lives like a child or a saint in the immediacy of here and now. . . . People, too, become like islands in such an atmosphere. Self-contained, whole and serene; respecting other people's solitude, not intruding on their shores, standing back in reverence before the miracle of another individual. "No man is an island," said John Donne. I feel we are all islands – in a common sea. (p. 40)

This island-quality, this self-containment is not just for the sake of one's own enrichment and well-being, however; for Lindbergh, it was also for the sake of larger human

otherwise) is known to have helped set the groundwork for both the second-wave feminist movement and the environmental movement – two very radical movements in the history of the United States.

⁶¹ Indeed, perhaps the most well-known and well-regarded contemporary book on solitude is aptly titled, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* by Anthony Storr.

⁶² In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992) echoes this connection between the practice of solitude and the cultivation of "wholeness." She discusses the need of women to seek solitude in order to regain a sense of wholeness after being psycho-spiritually amputated by the larger patriarchal, technoscientific society in which they live. In order to regain their wholeness, women must *reclaim their wildness* by re-learning how to "converse with the wild feminine": "In order to converse with the wild feminine, a woman must temporarily leave the world and inhabit a state of aloneness in the oldest state of the word. Long ago the word alone was treated as two words, all one. To be all one meant to be wholly one, to be in oneness, either essentially or temporarily. *That is precisely the goal of solitude, to be all one.* It is the cure for the frazzled state so common to modern women, the one that makes her, as the old saying goes, "leap onto her horse and ride off in all directions" (p. 292-293, italics mine).

community. Speaking to a moon shell that she contemplated in her solitude and planned to bring back home with her as a reminder of this island quality, she wrote,

You will say to me “solitude.” You will remind me that I must try to be alone for part of each year, even a week or a few days; and for part of each day, even for an hour or a few minutes in order to keep my core, my center, my island-quality. You will remind me that unless I keep the island-quality intact somewhere within me, I will have little to give my husband, my children, my friends or the world at large. You will remind me that woman must be still as the axis of a wheel in the midst of her activities; that she must be the pioneer in achieving this stillness, not only for her own salvation, but for the salvation of family life, of society, perhaps even of our civilization. (p. 57)

One need not subscribe to the belief that a woman’s worth is exclusively tied to her responsibilities as a caretaker of others and a family member to appreciate the value of Lindbergh’s message here. The benefits of returning to one’s “core” in solitude are shared by both the individual and the community. Frenzied, distracted, scattered, inauthentic, performative persons, whether female or male, do not tend to make solid, healthy contributions to society. The development of greater individual self-containment, as Lindbergh conceptualizes the term, might actually be a recipe for a healthier body politic, as paradoxical as that might seem.

Nothing human is alien to me: Reconnecting to a strong sense of kinship through solitude

A further way of thinking about the link between solitude and community is to consider how solitude helps us cultivate compassion for and solidarity with other people in their absence. A powerful sense of solidarity with other people, especially with the suffering of other people, can be found across the women’s journals, and many found this a surprising development, given the solitary context in which it developed. We see this

palpable sense of solidarity arising when the women carried out difficult physical labor in the interest of procuring basic living essentials like water and wood. For example, while splitting logs which she burned for heat, Jane Dobisz (*One Hundred Days of Solitude*) noted the sense of solidarity she felt with others who had done the same thing throughout history and into the present day:

Picking up the next log, I feel a strong connection to everyone else who has ever cut wood, and to the people who still do to make their fires every day to cook and to stay warm. The past and the present come together as it splits in two. (p. 46)

Similarly, Karen Karper's (*Where God Begins to Be*) experience of having to walk a quarter mile daily to procure water sparked a strong sense of kinship with women throughout time who had to procure water in much the same way. She wrote,

Sweating under the summer sun or slogging through mud puddles, I realized that I was doing what had been women's work from time immemorial. Even today, I reflected, nearly two-thirds of the world's population are dependent on water fetched by women, sometimes from incredible distances. ... I began to feel a kinship with my sisters who through patient and unremitting toil supplied their families with this most basic necessity. I felt part of an endless procession reaching back into the dim beginnings of human life on earth. With this new sense of connectedness, my impatience with my daily trek diminished. ... This experience of poverty, this lack of conveniences I had once taken for granted, added a new dimension to my prayer life. I felt a deeper solidarity with all those who struggled for the bare necessities of life. (p. 83)

By stripping down their existence to the point where they had to work for basic necessities, these women gained humility and a sense of compassion for and solidarity with others in similar circumstances. Through their own physical struggles, they came to feel closer to other people.

The women came to feel a greater kinship with others not only through their physical toil; they also came to feel greater kinship with others via the reconnection to their own felt experience and to their own "core" selves. Moving out of self-

estrangement led them into deeper communion with other people. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) noted that just as she felt closer to other species during her time alone, she also felt closer to other people: “I felt closer to my fellow men too, even in my solitude” (p. 43). She theorized that this greater sense of closeness with other people was due to being in better touch with her own “core.” As she became progressively connected with her own core, she moved out of “spiritual isolation” and into spiritual communion with others. She wrote,

For it is not physical isolation that actually separates one from other men, not physical isolation, but spiritual isolation. . . . When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too. If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others. . . . *Only when one is connected to one’s own core is one connected to others*, I am beginning to discover. And, for me, the core, the inner spring, can best be refound through solitude. (p. 43, italics mine)

For Lindbergh, becoming closer to herself – to her “core” – in solitude ultimately drew her closer to other people.

Karen Karper also discovered that she felt progressively more connected to other people throughout her years living as a hermit. She wrote, “The longer I dwell in solitude, the more united I feel with others” (p. 68). Over time during her solitude, she found herself growing increasingly sensitive to news of suffering in the world, which she received via letters or by occasionally listening to the news on the radio. For example, when she heard news of bombings during the Persian Gulf War, she experienced those bombs as dropping on her as well:

Had bombs been falling in Colt Run holler? Indeed they had, for I knew in the deepest fiber of my being that bombs falling on any part of the world were also falling on me. The Persian Gulf conflict had been but one more vivid reminder of the truth which a contemplative experiences with keen awareness – that the human family is but one body. What harms any member harms the whole. (p. 67-68)

Karper felt the weight of others' suffering more acutely in solitude. Although she felt called to a solitary life, she knew that her vocation was ultimately to be of service to others by working to discern their cries through prayer and caring deeply for their welfare:

My life is not meant to be lived for myself alone, however isolated I might be physically. Perhaps I am to live surrounded by silence so that I might more clearly discern the cries of others? Perhaps there need to be listening hearts in our noisy world, persons whose contribution to peace and tranquility – yes, possibly to sanity itself – is simply to hear and to care? (p. 68)

Karper underwent her own personal transformation in solitude, wrestling with and eventually coming to better terms with her own mental, emotional, and spiritual “demons.” She described this process as “embarking on a sea journey at night in a leaky rowboat without oars or tiller” (p. 74). On this night journey she recognized her many losses, accepted her grief, and felt into the depths of her sadness, anger, and loneliness. This process helped her get in touch with many aspects of her experience which had remained dormant or were deemed “unacceptable” during her thirty years of living as a cloistered nun. By getting in touch with these aspects of herself she became better able to join with the suffering of others and practice true compassion for them. Christian writer Henri Nouwen (1981) argues that compassion is a very difficult practice but one that can be cultivated during the night journey of solitude:

Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. ... It is in solitude that this compassionate solidarity grows. In solitude we realize that nothing human is alien to us, that the roots of all conflict, war, injustice, cruelty, hatred, jealousy, and envy are deeply anchored in our own heart. (p. 34)

Karper's individual struggle in solitude seemed to enable her to better discern the cries of others and join them in their suffering. By delving into her own dark corners and facing the "demons" residing there, she worked to clear a space into which the pain of others could flow; by bravely feeling into her own pain and weakness and vulnerabilities, she worked to expand the boundaries of her self and the boundaries of her care.

The journal as gift to the community

In this final section, I wish to acknowledge the significance of the journals themselves and the role that they played, and continue to play, in the community-oriented work carried out through solitude. It is unclear as to whether the women intended for their journals to be read by others when they initially set out to write them. For a couple of the women, it seems certain that they documented their solitude with an intended audience in mind. May Sarton (*Journal of a Solitude*), for example, decided to keep a journal of her year in solitude in order to reveal the more realistic details of her solitary lifestyle to readers who had read the sunnier portrayal of her life as depicted in her earlier autobiographical book, *Plant Dreaming Deep*, and had come away with an inaccurate impression of her solitude. Sarton wrote *Journal of a Solitude* in order to set the record straight by painting a fuller portrait of her experience living alone. On the other hand, Alice Koller (*An Unknown Woman*) and Joan Anderson (*A Year by the Sea*) gave no indication of having an initial intention to write about their solitary experience for an audience (though that may indeed be what they had in mind). There was a wide variation in the women's stated intentions in this regard. But regardless of whether each individual

woman intended to share her writings with others or not, the journals can be understood to be a gift to the individual woman as well as a gift to her community of readers.

The journal was a gift to the individual woman since it gave her an outlet through which to clarify her thoughts and feelings, perform a life review, and record her daily experiences and observations. It also provided her with a concrete task to carry out, in the sometimes very open-ended context of solitude, and a sense of purpose while on retreat. It also seems that the initial writing as well as the later re-writing and editing of the journal helped the woman to more fully process what had transpired in her aloneness and create a more cohesive narrative about her experience; indeed, in some sense, it seems the experience of writing, editing, and publishing their first-person accounts may have helped *complete* the women's solitary journeys.⁶³ But the women's writings were a gift to the larger community as well, and the giving of this gift entailed a significant amount of risk. By writing openly about their very private experiences, the women took the risk of exposing their personal weaknesses and failings, their soft emotional underbellies, and the potentially embarrassing interpersonal struggles that brought some of them to solitude in the first place (e.g., Anderson's failing marriage and Koller's longstanding failure to create lasting relationships). Most of the women in the study did not have a well-known public persona prior to publishing their journals; with the exception perhaps of May Sarton, the women's journals served to introduce the women's private lives to the world and this placed them in a particularly vulnerable position.

⁶³ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that the writing and *especially* the publishing of their journals may have actually taken something away from the women's experience. By sharing themselves in the way that they did, by revealing themselves and disclosing their sacred processes to the world, the women may in fact have felt as though the integrity of their solitudes had been violated. Though there is no evidence of this in the published accounts, we should at least consider this to be a possibility.

Writing *about* solitude from a theoretical perspective is enough of a challenge for scholars of the phenomenon; writing *from* the lived experience of solitude – revealing one’s solitary experience in a culture that tends to distrust and condemn the solitary individual, especially the solitary woman, takes a certain degree of courage and strength in the face of potential backlash. A quick glance at online reviews for the women’s journals yields a slew of fierce criticism for a few of the journals, including an abundance of adjectives such as narcissistic, immature, spoiled, selfish, self-absorbed, trivial, and pathetic. One Amazon.com reviewer (Powell, 2009) of Joan Anderson’s book, for example, wrote at the end of her or his scathing review: “Anyone want my book? Free? I’d like to burn it.” Of course, anyone publishing a book faces this kind of potential criticism; it comes with the territory. But criticisms such as this, however valid they may be in terms of the readers’ reactions and however they may point to weaknesses in the written narrative, seem indicative of the negative associations that many people continue to hold of women and solitude and the anger people often feel in response to portrayals of women’s liberation and personal growth.⁶⁴

By writing and publishing their journals, the women represented the experience of other solitary women and provided inspiration for uninitiated women contemplating a similar leap into the unknown. These journals also help create community *amongst* solitaires. May Sarton wrote the following of the power of the communal potential of her journal: “From my isolation to the isolation of someone somewhere who will find my work there exists a true communion” (p. 67). Indeed, Sarton viewed her solitary vocation, in part, as being a “lighthouse keeper” for other women, and this image, this

⁶⁴ The word “burn” is particularly loaded, and perhaps telling, in a review of a book about women’s solitude. I am referring here to the association of female solitude with witchcraft and the fact that most of the women burned during the witch hunts were solitaires (Koch, 1994, p. 253).

knowledge of the potential power that her representation of a particular lifestyle can have on other people, motivated her to keep going through periods of loneliness and emotional pain during her year alone:

The fact that a middle-aged single woman, without any vestige of family left, lives in this house in a silent village and is responsible only to her own soul means something. The fact that she is a writer and can tell where she is and what it is like on the pilgrimage inward can be of comfort. It is comforting to know there are lighthouse keepers on rocky islands along the coast. Sometimes, when I have been for a walk after dark and see my house lighted up, looking so alive, I feel that my presence here is worth all the Hell. (p. 40)

Sarton considered herself privileged to be able to live alone and use her time in the way that she did, and she believed that with this privilege came responsibility:

I have time to think. That is the great, the greatest luxury. I have time to be. Therefore my responsibility is huge. To use time well and to be all that I can in whatever years are left to me. This does not dismay. The dismay comes when I lose the sense of my life as connected (as if by an aerial) to many, many other lives whom I do not even know and cannot ever know. The signals go out and come in all the time. (p. 40)

Though Sarton was “responsible only to her own soul” in her solitude, she clearly understood this to be a responsibility to others as well.

By sharing their experience with the larger community via their journals, the women offered a gift from their solitudes. It is interesting to note that the initial choice *to not share*, by going into solitude and refusing social intercourse, ultimately resulted in such a generous degree of sharing. The image of sustained solitude ultimately leading to an authentic sharing of story with community is a powerful one. The image of solitude leading to more authentic, loving relationships with others is even *more* powerful, however. My hope is that high-quality, meaningful solitary experiences lead to high-quality, meaningful encounters with other people – *that doing aloneness well leads to doing relationships well*. Given the limited scope of this study, it is difficult to assess the

veracity of this claim. Doris Grumbach certainly seemed to believe it to be true, however: “I found this to be true. What others regard as retreat from them or rejection of them is not those things at all but instead a breeding ground for greater friendship, a culture for deeper involvement, eventually, with them” (p. 112). There are in fact an abundance of statements to this same effect sprinkled throughout the women’s journals. Though it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the effects of solitude on one’s relationships post-retreat, the limited data seems promising at the very least. But even if this particular claim does not ultimately bear out, given the powerful positive effects of solitude on the women’s individual lives in this study, it seems that one can at the very least confidently champion solitude as a practice carried out in moderation, for certain individuals, *in the context of a balanced life* – one which rhythmically flows between quality aloneness and quality togetherness, from deep solitude to rich interpersonal communion. Anne Morrow Lindbergh (*Gift from the Sea*) described this image of balance, as it pertained to her own life situation and individual proclivities, nicely:

Total retirement is not possible. I cannot shed my responsibilities. I cannot permanently inhabit a desert island. . . . The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere, or an alternating rhythm between these two extremes; a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and communion, between retreat and return. (p. 29)

The image of balance certainly seems right to me, in the context of my own life. But what a healthy “balance” between solitude and communion looks like is surely something which each individual needs to determine for herself, in the context of her own unique life circumstances.

In summary

This chapter explored the co-existential dimension of solitude. Though earlier in this study we highlighted the importance of the women's non-human relationships – with the things, natural forms, elements, landscape, wild animals, etc. – we had not yet looked explicitly at the role that relationships with other people played in the women's retreats. In this final chapter, we brought the discussion back to the interpersonal world and examined how the women's pre-existing relationships with others, as well as the relationships they developed during their solitudes, served the purpose of containing, supporting, and peopling their retreats as well as helping to initiate them into different modes of existence.

For the first theme of this chapter, we looked closely at the many *invisible hands* that played a role in the women's retreats – friends, family, religious institutions, etc. – and painted a portrait of solitude as a practice that, while carried out by an individual, is cradled within an *intricate web of human relationships*. We discussed Winnicott's theory that the development of our ability to be alone as a child transpires in the presence of the other and extended that image to the women's time on retreat; though the women may have been physically alone, their solitudes were *contained by other people*, both living and dead. Two groups of others played a special role in the women's solitudes. *Other women* were one group that made a significant impact on the women's solitary experiences. Other women served as helpmates and guides in the case of Karen Karper; mentors and initiators into a wilder and "realer" existence in the case of Joan Anderson; and protectors and fellow seekers in the case of my retreat in the desert. Women aiding,

guarding, and journeying alongside other women was an image that was threaded throughout the journals.

Animal companions also played a powerful role in a few of the women's solitudes. For the second theme of this chapter, we looked closely at the central role that these animals played. We examined how Karen Karper's relationship with her cat, Merton, and Alice Koller's relationship with her dog, Logos, served as a "*safe beginning*" in terms of helping them learn to give and receive affection and *accept the vulnerability of loving and loss*. As they cultivated their love for these animal others, the women came to *integrate them into their very senses of self*, thus expanding their identities and their circles of concern and care. In this section, we also looked at how Annie Dillard worked to expand her sense of self and circle of care via the cultivation of intellectual knowledge of natural phenomena, via her microscopic gaze, and via her meditations on the existence of beings which she came to know through her studies and microscopic forays. In so doing, she came to *admit these beings into her consciousness* and "set up a buzz" between herself and her environment, tapping into an *invisible connective force* that runs through all natural phenomena.

In the final section of this chapter we looked more closely at the ethical implications of solitude, examining how an individual's solitary practice might potentially have a positive, healthy impact on the larger human and non-human communities in which that individual is embedded. We discussed how by working to recover awareness of one's own wildness and pre-reflective bodily experience, one may become more *capable of tending to the suffering* of the more-than-human world. We discussed how the recuperation of one's lived experience can have a *positive impact on*

the human sociopolitical sphere as well. We then shifted our focus to examine the positive impact that solitude can have on one's immediate family unit, utilizing insights from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*. Lindbergh helped us understand how solitude might help a woman become a "*still axis at the center of a wheel*" such that she can cultivate and maintain a felt sense of her "core" being in the midst of the many competing demands and responsibilities to others that comprise her life outside of solitude. We then examined how, by progressively reconnecting to their "core" beings and by bravely encountering their psychological "demons," the women developed a *greater sense of solidarity with others* in their suffering. In moving closer to their own experience, they came to feel closer to others.

And finally, we asserted that by writing their journals and sharing their stories with the larger community in the way that they did, the women were *helping to build a literary tradition of female solitude*, to *represent the practice* of female solitude in a world that tends to distrust and invalidate it, and to *cultivate a sense of community* amongst solitaries. Though solitude is a practice that involves the keeping of one's experience to oneself, the women completed their solitary experience by sharing it with others, via the generous and brave gift of their journals. Finally, we closed this chapter on a hopeful note – hope that solitude leads to *higher quality forms of interpersonal engagement* once an individual re-emerges from her solitary cocoon. Given the limited scope of this study, however, we were unable to determine whether this claim actually holds up. We nonetheless affirmed that even if the women's aloneness did not result in the betterment of their interpersonal lives post-retreat, solitary retreat is a practice *still worth championing*, at least in moderation and at least in the context of a balanced life – a

balance that each individual must determine for herself and then have the courage, resolve, and, of course, good fortune to bring to fruition.

Chapter 9: Solitude and the Recovery of the True Self:

Bringing it all Together

We opened this project with the following quote from Thomas Merton, and it seems a fitting place to return:

Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his true self his life is always miserable and exhausting. . . . If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. (1999, p. 167)

In the introduction to this project, we noted that Merton's insistence on the concept of the "true self" may seem outdated, given postmodern problematizing of both the notion of "truth" and reified images of the self.⁶⁵ Despite the various critiques of the "true self" that exist, the concept nonetheless seems relevant to our quest to comprehend the lived experience of the women in this study. Merton's words, however old-fashioned, are well worth paying attention to.

Working through the false self, clearing a space

All of the women in this study, to a lesser or greater extent, did indeed recover what seems appropriate to call "true self experience" through their solitudes. What do I mean by this? A discussion of what this "true self" territory is *not* – that which psychoanalytic and contemplative writers have called the domain of the "false self" – seems a good place to begin answering this question. The false self is a socially-adaptive

⁶⁵ See, for example, psychoanalyst Stephen A. Mitchell's *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (1995, p. 95-155) for an excellent critique of the concept of the true self.

mode of being in the world that a person develops in the attempt to meet the needs and expectations of others. It is a compulsive tendency to manage impressions – to, in the words of poet T.S. Eliot in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1998), “prepare a face to meet the faces” (p. 2) – and live at a distance from the felt truth of one’s personal impulses, desires, and perceptions as they arise in various social and environmental contexts. This false self experience keeps one locked into a narrow image of who she is and stuck in a pre-programmed mode of acting in the world, as she takes her cues from a script that is not of her own making. We have seen throughout this study that solitude granted the women an opportunity to take a good hard look at this false mode of being and shake up its foundations such that they began to clear a space for something new.

Let’s listen to Benedictine nun, octogenarian, and former hermit, Sister Jeremy Hall, one more time, as she explains her understanding of solitude’s transformative effect on the self:

What of the impact of solitude on the self? Some people might be tempted to sum it up in one word: “selfish.” But anyone who has spent considerable time in the real life of solitude knows otherwise. If what one seeks is self-satisfaction, the last place to go is the hermitage... The question is this: “Which self?” Do I mean the self that is created by societal expectations, worldly ambitions, the clichés and fashions of my culture...and the masks I put on to be accepted? ... There is no place for those selves in the hermitage; there is nothing to nourish them and I find them antithetical to my very being. They get stripped away when solitude does its work, when they are not constantly fed and manipulated by shallow social contacts. In the process of letting solitude do the work I come...to an identity not mindlessly projected onto me and mindlessly accepted, but a deeper, inward self where I follow no crowd but start to become an authentic center of being, a living out of the mystery of human personhood. ... Thus I begin to be in communion with my true self. (p. 93-94)

According to Sister Jeremy, moving into communion with one’s true self involves a process of “stripping away” the false self. This process can be very painful, but it is a struggle that many deem essential to the practice of solitude. Simply put, in the words of

Christian contemplative Henri Nouwen, at the heart of the discipline of solitude is “the struggle to die to the false self” (1981, p. 28).

Alice Koller is an excellent example of a person who was identified with a false self-structure prior to her solitude and found a way to strip away that false mode of living over the course of her three-month retreat on Nantucket. Koller’s structure of suffering associated with the false self involved an attachment to an image of herself as a beautiful, seductive, brilliant philosopher and a compulsive search for recognition and approval in the eyes of others. In the silence and simplicity of her retreat, she worked hard to break down that image and disrupt her habitual defensive strategies and in so doing cleared a space for different modes of thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving, and desiring to arise in their stead. Similarly, though perhaps not as intensely, many of the other women in this study also worked to deconstruct, or at least call into question their false modes of being, and these processes constituted a central focus in their solitudes. For example, Karen Karper expanded her sense of self and experiential range beyond her identity as a pious, compliant nun and dutiful daughter of God; Joan Anderson stepped outside of the tight frame of being the “good” wife and mother and perpetual giver; and Doris Grumbach released her attachment to being a sophisticated intellectual and bravely entered a barren “interior” landscape in which she discovered a newfound sense of completeness and serenity. Each woman had some amount of deconstructive work to do in her solitude, and through this self-stripping was granted the opportunity to live outside of her narrow self-conceptualizations and habitual modes of being which no longer served her and kept her from living her fuller truth.

It is important to note that while each woman's struggle with the false self was unique, the women in this study shared an overarching false self predicament shared by women in this culture. Each woman had the opportunity to call into question and (at least temporarily) put to rest certain false modes of being associated with the performance of femininity. Though each woman no doubt had a different historical experience of the feminine masquerade, all the women by virtue of living as women in this culture struggled to some extent with false self-images and false modes of being that women are initiated into from a young age and rewarded for (and punished, if they don't comply) throughout the life course. In their aloneness, the women had the precious opportunity to cleanse themselves of habitual practices associated with the feminine masquerade that served to restrict their vitality and freedom. We explored a number of examples of this which appeared across the women's journals such as a decrease in carrying out certain feminine disciplinary practices (e.g., wearing make-up, shaving, dressing in a "becoming" way); an increased tendency to use the body instrumentally in the interest of self-protection and self-reliance; fewer opportunities to experience sexual objectification in the absence of a particular kind of gaze, allowing the women to lose sight of their bodies as objects and enter the realm of "lived bodiliness"; and a softening of the pernicious practice of self-objectification that so many women in this culture are plagued with.

Overall, the women had the opportunity to *go off-stage* for a while and live outside the rules, regulations, and expectations associated with the performance of femininity. In so doing, they came to feel more comfortable in their own skin and (intermittently) forget about themselves as gendered beings through what we earlier

conceptualized as a subtle process of *un-becoming woman* and to, instead, in the words of Alice Koller, “become that third gender: a human person” (1990, p. 23). To be clear, the women did not come to deny their fundamental femaleness or come to identify more so with men; they came to partially let go of the performance of femininity and strip away modes of being that were restricting their ability to feel at home in themselves and in the world.

Unbinding and standing open

Alice Koller characterized the process of deconstructing her false self on Nantucket as a process of “unbinding” (1990, p. 1). She described how she came to “unbind” herself from a narrow self-definition, from the dictates of her culture, and from the desires of others. She argues that this process of unbinding serves as the first “station” of solitude that one must stop in, in order to move on to the next station, which she refers to as “standing open.” Koller contends that one can only enter the doorway to this second station if one is the “right size,” alluding to *Alice in Wonderland* in arguing that,

Like Alice’s doorway, you cannot enter it until you are the right size. In the moment you cast off your last fastening, you will be here: standing open, viewing the world and everything in it as though for the first time, each moment presenting itself as an occasion to be freshly sensed, perceived, conceived. (1990, p. 12)

Koller found that she needed to first reduce her sense of self – from a reified identity and a rather grandiose sense of self-importance to the experience of a “small shuddering self” (1981, p. 211) – in order to finally stand open to a world beyond ego-centric and

exclusively human-centric concerns. In reducing her self in this way, she became ready to *more fully participate* in a world beyond social performance and self-reflection.

The different existential dimensions of solitude fostered this process of unbinding which many of the women underwent, allowing them to soften their performativity and *open out* to the more-than-human world more fully and intensely. For example, the spatial dimension of their solitudes – e.g., the rustic, technologically-simplistic, scaled-down size of their hermitages – appeared to discourage grandiosity and foster humility, and the womb-like quality of the women’s cabins enabled them to feel a sense of external structure and safety such that they could let themselves become unintegrated for a time. The temporality of their retreats encouraged the women to shift out of externally constructed clock-time and linear time and enter into a slower, more cyclical, more nature-based, and more bodily-based rhythm and cultivate greater present-moment consciousness, allowing them to attend more closely to their bodily experience as it arose and attend more fully to their immediate environment. Leaving social mirrors as well as actual mirrors behind helped the women reconnect with their multi-sensorial bodily experiencing, rather than direct their attention onto the surface of their bodies-as-objects, and carry out their intentions in the world in a more fluid way. The practice of silence helped the women quiet their noisy “inner voices” and freed them up to attend to the larger conversation taking place in the more-than-human world as well detect the “presence of absence” of the Divine. And, finally, in the co-existentiality chapter we explored how the women’s retreat from the social world allowed them to take a rest from their roles as human caregivers and cultivate forms of relating outside of the exclusively human sphere – e.g., developing intimate, loving relationships with wild and

domesticated animals – and become more receptive to the gifts offered by the human relationships they developed over the course of their retreats as well.

In the co-existentiality chapter we also explored the possibility of conceptualizing the women’s solitary retreats as Winnicottian zones of contained aloneness, akin to those experienced by children in the unobtrusive presence of the mother en route to developing the capacity to be alone. This sense of containment – provided by the implicit presence of other people, animal others, trees that stood guard nearby, the watchful moon, and the body of the earth at large – helped the women reconnect with the stream of their experiencing and their authentic, genuine responses to things. It was through this containment – *through these relationships* – that the women became able to enter the territory of the true self.

Entering true self territory, recovering trust in the body-world connection

I am conceptualizing the overarching shift in the women’s experience from associating themselves with a narrow, reified image of the self and a mode of living characterized by excessive self-consciousness, posturing, and self-arranging to “standing open” as a shift from the realm of the false self to that of the true self. In entering true self territory, we must be clear that we are not pointing to a shift toward a different “version” of self *as reified thing or fixed image*; instead, we are thematizing a shift toward the recovery of a particular mode of being in the world. Indeed, D.W. Winnicott, the best known advocate of the concept of the true self in the psychoanalytic literature, asserts that the “true self” cannot really be understood as a definable thing; instead, it can be best defined by pointing to what it is not: the false self. The false self hides the true

self. By removing the obstacles associated with the false self, we enter true self territory.

This territory, according to Winnicott, is characterized primarily by *sensorimotor*

aliveness:

The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues... There is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness. ... The true self... means little more than the summation of sensori-motor aliveness. (p. 148-149)

This passage sheds significant light on the women's overarching project in solitude, and it helps us reframe the concept of the true self from that of a thing with a secret storehouse of fixed contents to that of a form of *bodily experiencing*. By confronting their false self-images and shaking up their habitual modes of being in the context of the undetermined space, slow time, and silence of their solitudes, the women recovered, not a hidden secret self, but their sensorimotor aliveness. This sensorimotor aliveness was their gateway to the larger sensuous world, the gateway to the possibility of being moved by the world. The women worked to recover their perceptive capacities – namely their ability to *see* and to *listen* to the more-than-human world in novel ways – and attend to the nuances of their bodily experiencing as it arose in a more acute way. As they moved out of the social, human-centered, linguistically delineated territory in which they previously dwelled, they came to inhabit a new world: the world of the real. Indeed, by undertaking solitude in the way that they did, *the women were undertaking a reality project*.

In *Stations of Solitude*, a book about solitude which she wrote many years after her retreat, Alice Koller characterized this recovery of her sensorimotor aliveness as a recovery of her *spontaneity* – her ability to respond fluidly to the world's solicitations

based on authentic modes of desiring. Reflecting on the aftermath of her retreat, she wrote,

The journey from there to here was short, all but instantaneous, once I removed the constraints on my spontaneity. To like is to incline naturally toward, to bend naturally toward. Some object or person inclines you to itself, bends you toward it, without promptings of any sort from any other person, from any “should,” from any rule. You want something whenever you, trusting your own spontaneity, find yourself moving toward the thing, smiling. Liking, wanting, are pure, plain, direct, when you’ve unbound yourself from ancient longings. ... I found myself saying, thinking, noticing, hearing, looking for, being drawn to: doing, being, without forethought. Nothing in me constrained me, restrained me. Having discarded all previous guides, I let myself be unguided. Having divested myself of familiar ways of behaving, I had no option but to be myself, whoever that would turn out to be. I was no longer behind the scenes manipulating the doll I, before Nantucket, had tried to make everyone believe I was. No one was behind the scenes at all, neither manipulating, nor feeding lines, nor applauding. There was only me: one, undivided. (1990, p. 9-10)

Though a seemingly mundane accomplishment, Koller’s ability to find herself “moving toward the thing, smiling” was a gain of great significance as it pointed to her heightened ability to *trust in the body-world connection* and move through the world far more seamlessly and un-self-consciously. This is a recovery of pre-reflective contact with the world. *This is true self territory*. Indeed, Winnicott (1960) asserts that this recovery of spontaneity is the hallmark of what he calls the true self, noting that, “I have here linked the idea of the True Self with the spontaneous gesture” (p. 145) and later asserting that “the spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action” (p. 148).

Koller makes clear that this spontaneity, however experienced by herself as an individual, is not a *thing* she possesses but, rather, an un-programmed mode of being, acting, feeling, and responding in the world:

I should not say ‘your spontaneity.’ The possessive pronoun with the noun misleads you into thinking it is a thing belonging to you, some part of you that you have somehow not discovered: a mind’s eye, an inner ear, a still small voice. It is none of these, but this: being yourself, acting and responding without

planning in advance what you'll say or do, without considering whether or how you will or ought to act or respond but simply being as your newly freed inclination moves you. It is doing, seeking, feeling, liking, wanting, without a prepared exterior, varnished and perfect, between you and any person, any circumstance. It is you being a certain way: spontaneous, yourself. 'You being spontaneous' is the proper grammatical phrase. (1990, p. 11)

Koller's being-spontaneous pointed to the recovery of her ever-elusive *desire* which, rather than being directed by her thinking "I," flowed from a different, more basic, primordial, embodied form of intelligence. Instead of wanting to move toward the world based on her ideas about the world or what the end result of such a movement might be, she simply *found* herself moving toward things, and in so doing practiced a far more receptive mode of being in the world:

Just there is the mark of being open: nothing intervened between me and doing, feeling speaking. I *found* myself doing some new thing without having considered in advance the doing of it. I *found* myself being angry, interested, apprehensive in circumstances in which no one had told me that I ought to be angry, interested, apprehensive. I *found* myself affecting someone, affected by someone, without deciding in advance that he or she or I would respond to one another in just that way. I *found* myself speaking words I had not in advance planned to speak. (1990, p. 10)

This finding of herself already engaged with, *already caught up in the world*, amounts to the recovery of the body-world connection, or, to borrow the words of retreatant Joan Anderson, the recovery of one's "basic existence" (p. 171).

Experiencing the poetry of life

We will close this piece with the words of architect Ann Cline, from her book *A Hut of One's Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture*, in which she describes the history of her longings for a hut of her own – her "hut dreams" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 31) – the history of hut dwelling around the world, and her experience of designing, building,

and dwelling in a hut of her own in her backyard in California. She describes experiencing intense “moments of immediacy” (p. 33) during her hut retreats:

These moments of immediacy made me shiver. I was unprepared for them. Even tent camping didn't approximate the hut's combination of fragile but permanent shelter, its amazing yet normally overlooked phenomena. The house whose backyard surrounded my hut, cocooned me from these perceptions. Only by placing my life in the midst of my backyard did I discover its poetry. (p. 35-36)

These moments of immediacy that constitute our very sense of aliveness are exceedingly rare in today's fast-paced, hyper-mediated world. We are wrapped up in ideas about ourselves and the world and alienated from our present-moment experiencing, and in turn we miss out on the actual experience of being alive. As Annie Dillard writes of city dwelling,

Self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies. It is the glimpse of oneself in a storefront window, the unbidden awareness of reactions on the faces of other people – the novelist's world, not the poet's. I've lived there. ... I remember how you bide your time in the city, and think...“next year...I'll start living; next year...I'll start my life.” Innocence is a better world. Innocence sees that this is it, and finds it world enough. (p. 82-83)

It is through these innocent moments of immediacy that we can begin to “actually be alive” (Dobisz, p. 116) and work to heal our alienation from the larger sensuous world – a critical enterprise in an age of radical environmental devastation. Poet Stanley Diamond asserts that, “In order to understand ourselves and heal ourselves in this age of abstract horror, we must regain the sense of the totality and the immediacy of human experience” (as quoted in Fisher, 2002, p. 51). In order to protect and revive ourselves in this hyper-technoscientific age, we need to cultivate practices that foster greater degrees of immediacy. Cline asks, “How...do we regain a world that is *directly lived*?” (p. 95) and her answer, stemming from her own lived experience, is to enter the hut.

According to Cline, the hut experience “touch[es] something deep in the needs and memory of people, something that refuses to be dismissed yet is fully alive only in the hut” (p. 128). This “something” is precisely what this project has attempted to flesh out. We need to protect, advocate for, practice, and continue to inquire into this “something” if we are to keep alive the poetic impulse that dwells within these huts.

Let’s listen to Ann Cline one more time:

Virginia Woolf once advised any woman who wished to write poetry...that nothing was more requisite to her goal than a *room of one’s own*. In that room, insulated from masculine sophistication and control, a woman could find her own voice, her own imagination. Nowadays, the woman – or man – who wishes to *experience* the poetry of life (even before the issue of writing comes up) might be similarly advised to have a hut of her – or his – own. Here, isolated from the wasteland and its new world saviors, a person might gain perspective on life and the forces that threaten to smother it. Only in a hut of one’s own can a person follow his or her own desires – a rigorous discipline, and one that poet Gary Snyder calls the hardest of all... Even if this hut is only one’s normal abode inhabited in a different way, here in a hut of one’s own, a person may find one’s very own self, the source of humanity’s song. (p. 131-132)

To find “one’s very own self” is nothing other than “to experience the poetry of life.”

For the women in this study, the reclamation of *a self of their own* was a reclamation of their *aliveness* – of a more poetic, spontaneous, sensual, receptive, and reverential mode of living. A mode of living that, according to Joan Anderson, “favors experience over analysis” (p. 164) and allows for the perpetually *unfinished* quality of the self – a self always in flux, yet centered in the home base of the body and held in the cradle of the sensuous, living world.

Chapter 10: Limitations and Contributions of the Study

For this final chapter, I will briefly outline what I consider to be the main limitations and contributions of this study, though the reader will no doubt perceive her or his own.

Limitations

A lack of diversity amongst the women

Though there was significant diversity amongst the women in this study in terms of sexual identity, age, spiritual orientation, and life experience, there was an undeniable lack of diversity in terms of their racial/ethnic, class, and educational backgrounds. All of the women were Caucasian and of European-American descent, and most of the women were middle-class and well-educated. Though I searched for first-person narratives from non-white, non-middle-class women which fit the general criteria I set for this study, I was unable to find any. This is most likely reflective of the fact that solitary retreat is a practice that only certain people, with a certain degree of privilege, have access to. It also may reflect the positive bias that certain sectors of the white, middle-class American populace have toward solitary retreat (especially nature-based, low-tech, longer-term retreat), as well as the negative bias that many non-white, non-middle-class Americans may have toward the practice. Though solitary retreat may be very challenging on various levels, it is a luxurious practice that many people lack access to and/or simply have no interest in, given their personal proclivities as well as their cultural values and customs; therefore it understandably attracts a small subset of the population.

In addition, while it seems safe to assert that solitary retreat is generally more physically dangerous for women than for men, we may hypothesize that it presents non-white, non-middle-class women with additional dangers, given the everyday racism they face as well as the potentially unsafe retreat conditions that their limited socio-economic circumstances may permit. And finally, we may hypothesize that although there may very well be a plethora of women from minority backgrounds who engage in solitary retreat, and even write about it, their voices may be excluded from the public conversation due to cultural and institutional forms of marginalization.

It seems there are many potential explanations for the absence of first-person solitary accounts from American women of minority backgrounds. I believe it would have made this a richer study if those lines of diversity were better represented. I do not, however, believe that the lack of diversity amongst the women negates this study's overarching findings; it merely points to the limits of our ability to make universalizing statements about female solitude. I have never striven to make universalizing statements about the experience of solitude for all women. Though I have often referred to "women" as a group throughout this study, I have never labored under the belief that women are a homogenous group. And even if I had worked with a more ethnically and racially diverse set of women for this study, universalizing statements about the experience of solitude for all women would still not be warranted – given the small number of women in the study, the fact that they are all from the United States, etc. In carrying out this study, I was aiming to better understand the existential dimensions of solitude, as they were lived by the women in this study in the hope of better understanding what solitude offered those particular women, and by extension what it

may offer other women living under similar circumstances. It is my hope that the reader can hold two seemingly opposing perspectives at once while engaging with this study: that this study does not aim to represent “women’s experience of solitude” in a universalizing way, but that the portrait of female solitude that this study paints may indeed shed some valuable light on the experience of solitude for many contemporary Western women (and many men as well). To contend that the experience of white, middle-class women is necessarily irrelevant to the lives of non-white, non-middle-class women is, I believe, insulting to minority and non-minority women alike. White, middle-class women’s experiences do not represent the experiences of non-middle-class women of color, but they might intersect with them in key ways and/or serve to illuminate them, and vice-versa.

If we were to have studied women from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, we would have a better understanding of the impact of race and class on the experience of solitary retreat. How might, for example, an urban, working-class, 30-something Latina have experienced fifty days of solitude? Might her solitude, instead of taking place in her own house in Maine (like Doris Grumbach’s fifty day retreat), take place in a small apartment in the city and include weekly visits with her young children? Might her solitude be riddled with a sense of worry, guilt, and discomfort to an extent that the women in this study were not afflicted with? Or, might her solitude be experienced as an even greater source of freedom than the solitude of the women in this study? Additionally, how might her particular cultural and religious practices have affected her experience of solitude? Similarly, how might an elderly African-American woman have experienced a four-day vision quest in the desert of New Mexico? How

might her experience of the land, the elements, and her body have been different from my own, given her personal, cultural, and ancestral history? It would be fascinating to read these kinds of first-person accounts; I hope to see more of them in the future. They would no doubt help us gain a much more complex understanding of the phenomenon of solitude and the value of solitary retreat in the lives of a wider cross-section of contemporary Western women.

The polished quality of the first-person narratives

This findings in this study relied, in large part, on the women's published narratives (with the exception of my own handwritten, unedited journal). These eight narratives were edited, polished, and stylized for the sake of publication. This colors the data in key ways. One can imagine that the creation of these published narratives involved some degree of conscious and/or unconscious impression management, as the women sought to portray a certain image to their readers – of their individual character and/or of the events which took place during solitude – even if their original goal was to articulate their solitary experiences as transparently as possible. Also, the published accounts were no doubt manipulated to some extent by editors and colored by feedback from other readers, thus removing us further from the immediate experience of the retreatant. In addition, most of the published accounts contained some information about other people in the retreatant's life – e.g., her partner, parents, friends; one can imagine that this information may have been carefully presented so as to protect the privacy of the parties involved. All in all, the data in the women's narratives was likely less “raw” and reflective of their lived experience than it might have been if we used unedited,

unpublished first-person accounts, and also if these accounts were anonymous, thereby freeing the women to speak more honestly and openly about their experiences.

Despite these limitations, there seem to be a few clear benefits to using the published accounts. First of all, I believe that the polished, well-written nature of their accounts enabled me to easily follow along with the narratives, grasp the writers' central points, and remain successfully focused on the narratives for extended periods of time. Also, although unexpurgated journals would have no doubt captured more spontaneous reflections and observations, the published journals had the benefit of hindsight. By the time of the published accounts – over the course of writing and re-writing – the women had sat with their experience for some time, allowing it to speak to them more fully and helping them make better sense of what had happened during their time alone. This could be construed as a benefit but also as a limitation in that over time the women overlaid a conceptual filter on their more immediate experience, tainting the ability of their narratives to capture the lived qualities of their time alone. Nonetheless, the polished narratives did allow for a relative ease of interpretation, and I believe the women's skill at articulating the richness and subtlety of their solitary experiences – a practice which no doubt took a significant amount of time and many revisions – aided our understanding of the phenomenon.

A pre-existing positive bias toward solitude

Another potential limitation to this study revolves around my own pre-existing positive bias toward solitude. As discussed in the introduction to this study, I have been a lover of solitude since I was a young girl, believe I have a high capacity for solitude, and

wanted to conduct this research, at least in part, out of a desire to represent and highlight the benefits of solitude in an academic context that I believe too often degrades or ignores its potential value, and in the midst of a high-tech, hyper-connected postmodern society which has endangered its practice and potential. But although I never claimed to maintain a stance of neutrality on the issue of solitude, I strove to see the data in the women's journals as clearly and objectively as I could throughout the process; I believe I was successful in this mission overall.

It is important to note that the other women in this study also appeared to have a relatively strong pre-existing bias toward, and capacity for, solitude upon setting out on their retreats. This of course played a role in how they experienced solitude and the light they cast the phenomenon in. One could easily imagine that the data would have been quite different if the participants in this study had a negative prior experience with solitude or lacked a basic capacity for, or inclination toward it. How many solitary retreats have gone badly – with, for example, the retreatant leaving prematurely once difficult affective material began to rear its head, or if the retreatant's dependence upon noise, high-tech engagements, or stimulation from other people left her unable to tolerate the silence and remain in solitude for more than 24 hours? Furthermore, how many people have entered dangerous psychotic territory during solitary retreats and have been unable to recover a basic sense of personal cohesion and psychological equilibrium? Those persons did not get a chance to represent solitude for this study. Those who did get that chance had the capacity to endure, and indeed thrive in solitude (albeit via some degree of emotional, spiritual, and physical difficulty). This necessarily paints a

particular image of solitude – an image that no doubt highlights the practice’s benefits and potentially minimizes its difficulties.

Because I set out on this project to better understand what can happen – e.g., what shifts in space, time, embodiment, etc. can happen – in the context of an extended solitary retreat for women, I needed to study a group of women who could endure in the conditions long enough to describe those shifts, and who also had enough passion for the topic to write about them at length. Indeed, I believe it is a benefit that the women of this study and I feel so passionately about solitude. It is difficult to write about anything at length – to stay with it so faithfully – especially a phenomenon in which there is so little overtly going on. (Though, of course, we have learned is that there is in fact *so much going on*, and that it takes the practice of removing the noise, distractions, and busyness of our lives lived in the world with others to reveal all of that richness.) It was indeed our passion for the subject that helped bring it to light and reveal its many contours.

Contributions

Revalues solitude, silence, and simplicity

The most straightforward contribution of this study, as I see it, is to help us reconsider the value of solitude, along with its sister practices of silence and simplicity. The findings of this study support the notion that solitude, carried out in certain ways by certain individuals, can yield significant benefits. The shifts in spatiality, temporality, embodiment, language use and appreciation, and co-existentiality via extended periods of solitary retreat resulted in both subtle and profound shifts in the general direction of health for the women in this study – whether these shifts are understood to amount to a

process of growth or recovery, or both. The practice of solitude also involved profound struggle for most of the women. This study provides us with an intimate view of that struggle which, in its different forms, is an integral part of the experience of solitude for so many. This study helps us understand the process through which practices emphasizing a stripping away or a letting go of certain familiar comforts and modes of being – e.g., solitude, silence, simplicity – can result in significant gains, albeit by way of a certain amount of pain. This portrait of the painful, pleasurable, and mundane aspects of retreat provides us with an intimate view into the texture and unfolding of solitary experience.

Contributes to our understanding of women's psychological and spiritual health

This study helps us to better understand the role of solitude in psycho-spiritual development. By taking a deep dive into the existential dimensions of solitary experience, we came to a better understanding of the power that often overlooked variables such as the space of the cabin in which we retreat, the animal beings that we encounter during our time alone, and the power of leaving clock time can exert on our processes of reconnecting to our own experience, to nature, and to the Divine. By focusing specifically on the experience of women for this study, we developed a better understanding of the value of solitude for persons facing specific challenges and forms of oppression and practicing certain habitual modes of being in the world due largely to their gender role and gender identity. In so doing, we came to a better understanding of the conditions through which psychological and spiritual growth for some women can transpire. And interestingly, by studying women's experience in solitude, we also

deepened our awareness of how gender tends to be lived in social contexts. In their aloneness, the women were able to reflect on the power of the performance of femininity in their lives and how that performance may be interfering with their psycho-spiritual development. They had the luxury to temporarily put to rest a certain degree of feminine performativity and experience themselves outside of strictly delineated gender roles. By studying this experience, we gained insight into the detrimental power of feminine performativity in social contexts on women's psycho-spiritual health.

Contributes to the debate regarding the role of pre-reflective experience in psycho-spiritual development

This study also contributes to the ongoing debate in the transpersonal psychological literature regarding the role of pre-personal or pre-reflective experience in psycho-spiritual development. In this project, I have largely focused on the ways in which the practice of solitude helps to reveal the pre-reflective dimension of our lived bodily experience, and I have framed this revelation as contributing to the women's psycho-spiritual development. In an earlier footnote (see note 42 in the chapter on language), I mentioned the debate in the transpersonal psychology literature fueled by what Ken Wilber (1983) calls the "pre/trans fallacy" wherein experience which is pre-reflective or pre-personal is often mistaken for and wrongly conflated with experience which is transpersonal, or spiritual in nature. Though I did not take a clear-cut stand on this, and will not do so at this juncture, as I believe it is too complicated an issue to do justice to in this context, I will simply state that, in the context of this study, the line between experiences which appeared to be pre-personal/pre-reflective and transpersonal

– along with the lines between the realms of the psychological, the sensorimotor, and the spiritual – were very blurry. In the interest of simplicity and brevity, it makes more sense to think of the women’s overarching experience in solitude as helping them to shift their centers of gravity from the general territory *of the personal to the non-personal (or more-than-personal)* – while acknowledging that the women’s non-personal experiences ranged widely in intensity and character and were either born out of varying degrees of sustained practice (e.g., Buddhist meditation, Christian prayer, Transcendentalist nature-based practices, etc.) or were more spontaneous in nature. This shift in gravity from the personal to the non-personal – whether this movement seemed to be more pre-personal or transpersonal in nature – appeared to contribute to the women’s overall well-being and development. I believe that a worthwhile future project would be to develop this pre-personal vs. transpersonal inquiry further, delving more deeply into this issue in light of the data from the women’s journals.

Rethinks the value of gender separatism for contemporary women

As this was a study of solitude, it obviously focused on the value of separating from other people in general. It is important to consider, however, the specific value for the women in this study of separating from men during their solitary retreats. Though it seems that gender separatism in this third-wave feminist era is generally thought of as old-fashioned, unnecessary, or even regressive, this study highlights the specific benefits that can come from taking a leave from direct interactions with men as a woman living in contemporary American society. For example, we have explored some of the effects of retreating from the male gaze during solitude, as well as the effects of easing up on

various feminine disciplinary practices during one's time alone. Of course, a woman can ease up on these practices in the presence of men, but having some literal space from the male gaze can make letting go of a certain degree of feminine performativity that much easier and can allow a woman access to a different kind of experience of herself and the world that may be difficult for her to access in the presence of men. Whether a woman in this culture identifies as heterosexual, queer, transgender, etc., she has no doubt been socialized to some degree to behave in certain ways in the presence of men and often feels on guard in particular ways in their presence, whether consciously or unconsciously. Having the luxury to let down their guard yielded surprising benefits for the women in this study and offered them space in which to reflect on their relations to the men in their lives and on their experience of being a woman in general.

I am a believer in the value of gender specific spaces (including men's spaces) to the development of individuals, at least in the context of our contemporary society, which is so rife with objectification, exploitation (of both females and males), and sexism, however subtle its forms may be. Yet when one considers the spaces that are deemed "women's spaces" in mainstream American culture, one cannot help but notice that they usually revolve around practices women carry out in order to be found attractive by men (e.g., beauty parlors, clothing stores, and non-material "spaces" such as "women's magazines"). I believe women can benefit from having access to safe, gynocentric zones – spaces of their own, in which to return to themselves and cultivate themselves outside of the pressures and influence of men; this was one of the primary functions of solitary retreat for the women in this study, in my view. This study highlighted the value of not merely solitary but *explicitly female havens* in which the women recovered aspects of

their being that were lost, repressed, or dampened down in the process of becoming a woman in a culture that too often fails to support women's ability to thrive. I believe it is important to acknowledge the value of gender separatism for the women in this study so as to champion the value of women's-only spaces, at least at certain times, in the context of certain women's lives.

Broadens our notion of healthy relationality

This study revealed that many forms of relationship became more accessible to the women in the absence of direct relations with other people. For example, we examined the rich, life-giving relationships the women cultivated with things, plants, animals, the landscape, and even the moon. These relationships obviously differed in quality to the women's interpersonal relationships, and were not an equivalent substitute for such relationships, but the complex nature of these relationships came into greater relief during solitude and served to enrich the women's lives in surprising ways. These neglected relationships helped the women thrive in their aloneness and helped them put the role of interpersonal communion into greater perspective; overall, it seemed to help the women prioritize their relationships differently.

Ecopsychologist Andy Fisher (2002) argues that we need both high-quality interpersonal relationships as well as high-quality relationships with the wider, non-human world in order to become fully human. He contends that

A human being is a servant of nature, a plain member in the community of all life. ... As a psychotherapist I know that all people need to love and be loved... As an ecopsychologist, I can now say with equal confidence that all people need to experience themselves as part of the natural world, need to understand their own naturalness. (p. 193)

Cultivating relationships with plants, animals, elements, and landscapes – even with inorganic things – in the context of solitude can help us experience ourselves as part of the natural world. By delving deeply into the experience of people who intentionally left human relationships and remained present to what arose in their absence, the significance of the more-than-human relationships that are threaded throughout our everyday lives revealed themselves more fully. These neglected relationships called for our attention, and we listened. Mainstream psychology, and most especially the field of clinical psychology, needs to pay greater attention to these relationships in order to better understand what helps people live deeply meaningful lives.

Provides support to the view of solitary retreat as an alternative or supplement to psychotherapy

This study lends support to the view that solitary retreat might be considered a viable alternative to classical psychotherapeutic practices, amongst the many alternatives that are widely available in our contemporary society. This is not to argue that solitary retreat should be considered a replacement for psychotherapy, as the two modalities operate in very different ways and offer different benefits and risks. Psychotherapy no doubt has its place. But extended solitary retreat may be more beneficial to address mental health concerns amongst people who already have a solid degree of development along egoic/personal/identity-related lines and are seeking to call the self that they believe themselves to be in question and cultivate a stronger sense of connection to the more-than-human world and the Divine. Solitary retreat also operates, for the most part, outside of the capitalist exchange that psychotherapy remains so thoroughly wrapped up

in, as well as the medical model that serves to diagnose and potentially stigmatize the client and unnecessarily pathologize human suffering. Indeed, to my mind, solitary retreat may be thought of as a valuable remedy for many of the ills brought on by an alienating capitalist system and a deeply-entrenched technoscientific worldview in the midst of a culture which generally denigrates slowness, simplicity, and silence. Classical psychotherapy offers us an opportunity to talk differently, and this is potentially very healing, but it still amounts to talk, as well as financial exchange based on a legal agreement in the larger context of a mental health system colored by a technoscientific view of the psyche and human suffering. Again, this is not to indict the practice of psychotherapy altogether, but rather to point out the ways in which solitary retreat offers an alternative to certain potentially problematic aspects of the mainstream psychotherapeutic enterprise as well as the opportunity for certain individuals to work on certain issues during certain stages of their psycho-spiritual development.

Creates a new research method

To my knowledge, this is the first time that this particular form of existential-hermeneutic research has been carried out. As discussed in the research methods chapter, I was primarily inspired by and roughly modeled this unique, qualitative approach on the work of Eva Simms (2008) in her book, *The Child in the World: Embodiment, Time, and Language in Early Childhood*. Dr. Simms is also the director of this dissertation, and together we devised a systematic way of analyzing the women's journals along the key existential dimensions while allowing for an interdisciplinary interpretation of the findings. I believe the end result is both intellectually rigorous and creative as well as

quietly passionate; this was indeed my hope upon setting out on this project. The additional autoethnographic component to this research method allowed me to use my personal voice and enter the phenomenon more fully. This added to my enjoyment of the work and my investment in the study. I certainly hope that reflections on my personal experience throughout were understood by my readers to add valuable material and a welcome personal touch to the project. I believe I was able to strike a decent balance between being personally involved in the material and maintaining a responsible degree of objectivity.

Suggests certain long-term, post-solitude benefits

Though it was beyond the purview of this study to analyze the benefits of solitude post-retreat, we can still speculate on those benefits. I invite the reader to imagine how the experience of solitude might play out in day-to-day life after one leaves the hermitage and returns to the social world. We can imagine how the shifts in space, time, embodiment, etc. that transpired in solitude, having developed over a stretch of time in a mindful way, and having been made sense of via journaling and/or speaking to others about such experiences, might come to be integrated to some extent into one's psycho-corporeal schema. We can, for example, imagine that the women came to integrate the containment of the hermitage such that they became able to rest more comfortably in their flesh – feeling more “at home” there – and practice healthier boundaries with others post-solitude. We might imagine that, having experienced more sacred and nuanced connections with things and non-human beings while in solitude, they carried this newfound sense of reverence for and attention to previously overlooked aspects of the

material world into their regular lives, causing them to shift their priorities, values, and daily activities accordingly – for example, spending more time in the woods on a regular basis and bringing into their living space only things and life-forms that really spoke to them, and then “conversing” with these things and beings more frequently and consciously. We might imagine that the women brought more compassion and silence into their interpersonal relations, listening more closely to others and using language to communicate their intentions rather than to merely fill the time. We might also imagine that the women spent more time alone on a regular basis post-retreat, having prioritized solitude to a greater extent and using these periods of aloneness, however brief, to reconnect with that which they found during their longer retreats. Conversely, we might imagine that the women spent *less* time alone post-retreat, as they came to carry their solitude with them while amongst others and in the context of noisy, urban, high-tech environments, having less need for actual retreat in order to contact that sense of containment and receptivity they developed in solitude. Indeed, it seems that this might be the case if solitary retreat was taken up as a practice in the women’s lives over time, enabling them to progressively build that sense of “interior” solitude such that they had access to the felt-experience of solitude at all times. This does not in any way negate the positive benefits one can gain from undertaking a single solitary retreat; it simply points to the potential power of returning to that place over time in order to effect a deeper-seated shift in one’s experience of self and modes of being in the world.

Revalues female solitaries

The final contribution that I understand this study to offer is, to my mind, the most important. This study helps us better understand and value women who choose to practice solitude. It supports a new, and yet very old archetype – see the “virgin” Greek and Roman goddesses Hestia and Vesta, for two ancient examples – for women. “The woman alone” deserves better press and perhaps even valorization in a cultural context in which her image has too often been tarnished, relegated to the shadows, and left to carry the weight of negative cultural projections. Women who voluntarily choose to practice solitude – whether temporarily or longer-term – need greater representation and understanding. The more we listen to their voices, the more we can grasp the diversity and complexity that exists with the overarching category of “the woman alone” in the same way that we understand the diversity and complexity inherent in another far more culturally acceptable and heralded female archetype – that which revolves around the maternal. Indeed, we need female images that balance out the heavy cultural emphasis on both the maternal archetype and the archetype of the woman as sexual object – i.e., the woman as a body for others. We need more options. We need to see more of the woman alone so that we, as women, can become less afraid of her and by extension less afraid of our own aloneness, and so that men can become less threatened by women’s self-sovereignty.

We need to see more of the woman alone (without invading her privacy, of course!) in order to understand what, exactly, she is doing in that cabin, or hut, of her own. Why does the old woman living alone on the edge of the village sometimes talk to trees? Is she insane? Is she merely a lonely social reject who can only find solace in her

fantasy life? Perhaps. But perhaps there is a different answer – one which is a bit more complicated and which contains a missing ingredient that might add life-giving flavor to more “socially acceptable” women’s lives. Maybe that old woman’s lived experience can offer us something of value. This project was an exploration of that possibility.

This project investigated marginalized practices carried out by a marginalized group of people, however economically privileged they may have been. We witnessed how the women of this study resuscitated modes of being that run counter to those fitting neatly within a culturally-acceptable portrait of adulthood – a portrait characterized by a denial of death, a denial of our inherent animality and co-extensiveness with the natural world, a conflation of our true selves with our personas, and an exhaustive striving toward a bigger and better future that seems perpetually out of our grasp. The women were alone, self-reliant, non-productive (in an economic sense), non-consumeristic, low-tech, slow, and present-moment-oriented. Their retreats to the forest, desert, and ocean amounted to acts of civil disobedience; these acts revealed glimpses of something that serves to threaten the capitalist, technoscientific status quo. In the simplicity and silence of their solitudes, they revealed contours of a world and of a self that asked for little in terms of “progress”; they caught glimpses of the fact that they *already had enough*, and that they *already were enough*. They intuited that the body, in its inherent reciprocity with the world, has the ability to converse with and be deeply moved by that world, and they came to understand this truth to be foundational to the good life. Indeed, in some sense this project was an inquiry into the age-old question of what it means to live the good life. It was an inquiry into which aspects of our being tend to be closeted in the context of this hyper-modern social world – a world with its meaningful forms of

connection and pleasure, but a world in which essential parts of the human story are too frequently neglected or actively suppressed. Until we identify those lost aspects of our being, the good life will always be out of reach.

This dissertation attempted to catch glimpses of those lost aspects. By entering the hut and sharing their solitary experiences with others, the women in this study served as lightkeepers in this quest. While they should not be protected from criticism, I believe the women of this study are to be applauded for their courage and vulnerability. They are to be acknowledged for attempting to live outside of socially-prescribed definitions of womanhood and modern Western adulthood, especially when there is so little social or economic incentive to do so. I applaud them, and I also applaud the men who, in attempting to reconnect with a fuller spectrum of their humanity, choose to enter the hut. We need to champion “hut dreams” and the dreamers – whether female or male – who dream them.

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