



FOOD FOR SOLITUDE

MENUS & MEDITATIONS
TO HEAL BODY, MIND & SOUL

•
Francine Schiff





FOOD FOR SOLITUDE

TRANSFORMING LONELINESS INTO CREATIVE SOLITUDE

In this eclectic collection of creative and spiritual ways of being alone, **Francine Schiff** emphasizes that the time has come for all of us to realize that solitude is not only respectable, but that it is an essential luxury we all deserve.

Francine shares solitude moments, recipes that are the perfect *gourmet food for one*, meditations, timeless sources, as well as interviews with an array of remarkable people including THE DALAI LAMA, JOSEPH CAMPBELL, FRANCES STELOFF, BUCKMINSTER FULLER, JOAN FONTAINE, GOPI KRISHNA, LEONARD NIMOY, DIANA VREELAND, BIBI ANDERSSON, IRA PROGOFF, DAVID SPANGLER, GLORIA VANDERBILT, LOUISE NEVELSON, BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST and JOHN CAGE.

Here is a sharing of creative solitude at its best – sometimes amusing, sometimes profound, and at all times most original and helpful.

Food For Solitude is an inspiring book that will give the reader the confidence to be alone, eat alone, play alone, work alone, and ultimately *be alone but not alone*.



A highly acclaimed TV producer and pioneer of Cable Television, **Francine Schiff** combines her remarkable talents as interviewer and journalist with her direct experience of contemplative life.

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FOOD FOR SOLITUDE

Menus and Meditations
to heal Body, Mind and Soul

Francine Schiff

*For Brother David,
my special solitude-mate.
Love you ♥
your "Baptism sister"
Francine*



E L E M E N T

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If You Want to Be A Hermit

Hermit time is a very special kind of solitude. It could mean taking a long journey to the other side of the earth, or just turning off your phone for the week and treating yourself to a monastic experience. This is a time to let go and just be. A quiet moment is extended into a few days, a few weeks, a few months and for some even longer. It is a moment of solitude stretched long enough for you to know it made a difference.

Of course there are many kinds of retreats and each person has their own particular purpose in mind for picking up and just getting away. But basically there's a difference between retreating and spending time in creative solitude. Everyone I talked with agreed that the main reason they needed to hermitize was to simply just be and do nothing without any expectations of creative results.

As Brother David Steindl-Rast said, "Being empty and doing nothing is the whole spirit of hermitizing." And the story he tells about Taoist poet Han Shan gives us a wonderful image of this kind of emptying: A hermit sits along the river all day and writes poetry on rocks and then throws them into the river. Where they flow makes no difference to him. Later on others find them and maybe make a book out of it. But for our Taoist friend, being with the river — just being empty — is enough.

Obviously, not everyone has this talent for 'doing nothing.' Some of us find it very easy and others constantly work at it. Sometimes the ceremonies suggest themselves, especially when we leave ourselves alone. Little rituals like walking along the same soothing stream, or making a fire, or listening to the leaves drop, and if we're lucky listening to our ego drop with it — all of this helps. It helps us to assume a new rhythm that allows us to be in tune with ourselves and at home in the universe. This is a delicate process of slowing down. It is coming back to the source of our innermost spirit, a secret and silent place that demands nothing of us except to be there.

If we are willing, the retreat teaches this way of emptying. It allows us to just be, to trust. And when the noise inside the head stops, the heart begins to listen.

A Conversation with Brother David Steindl-Rast

BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST is no ordinary monk. His perceptions about solitude come from the insight and practice of a true hermit who has spent years 'listening to the word of God.' He is as much at home in his Benedictine monastery, as he is meditating with Zen Buddhists. Like Thomas Merton whom he knew, Brother David studied Zen, and truly cares about the contemplative aspects of all religions. And unlike other recluses who prefer to shut themselves off from people, Brother David willingly comes out into the world to share his solitude.

Brother David truly understands and loves people, and wherever he goes he has a way of opening the hearts of everyone present. As you listen to him speak, you can't help but feel his passion and concern for planetary peace and universal love. His sense of spiritual/ecology crosses the borders between all religions, and no matter who he is addressing, the message always gets across.

Imagine meeting an Austrian accent with a California spirit wearing proper monastic attire. Imagine meeting beautiful eyes that hug you with just one glance! It's difficult to ascribe labels to Brother David because he is so complex, yet so simple. A catholic/zen/mystic, some would say, and I would just say that he emanates loving understanding. He is above all a compassionate holy man with a strong sense of solitude as well as a wonderful sense of humor.

He has the sort of intellect that probes beyond the chit-chat of normal academic thinking. His distinctions make us really stop to think and feel, and to laugh at ourselves, if we have the courage to do so. His insights will not let us get away with our ego and all its mischief... And that's exactly what we need.

Once when I shared a rare visit with him, he said something that will stay in my heart forever. He said, "There is a difference between self-surrender and self-abandonment. Self-surrender is done with dignity. You give up what you really have or what really belongs to you... Self-abandonment is when you give up that which really doesn't belong to you. You think you are giving up something, but you are not. It's giving up that which is lost... Self-surrender is giving up that which is found and that is how God comes to you." Need I say more!

Hermitizing with Brother David is like being part of a Zen story. For him the joy of being alone also has to do with the struggle. In the true Christian/Taoist spirit of being one with nature, we are brought into his personal experience of spending nine months on Bear Island...



In the following highlights from our conversation, Brother David speaks to the hermit in all of us. Here is our permission to be alone for all the right reasons. Here is a rare interview that could help you decide if you want to be a hermit!*

"The experience of hermitizing is often misunderstood. Why to do it, how to do it, where to do it and so on. First of all, let me say that a hermit must have a deep experience of communion with humanity. Without this, you cannot be a hermit, because you would only be lonely. You would not be really solitary. To be alone and be cut off from others would make you very unhappy, but to be alone, and to be deeply united with others, in deep communion, that is a possibility for which many people long. That is what I call solitude — over and against loneliness.

The human community always has two dimensions. There is a pull towards being together that everybody experiences in various degrees and the pull to be alone which everybody also experiences; some people more and some people less. Unless these two pulls are holding us in balance, nothing is possible, not even the human community.

Now each of us has to find where we fit in. If you have the particular psychological bent that makes you desire solitude at a specific time in your life, then that is what you are called for. You could say a person has an extraordinary need to be alone or you could say a person has an extraordinary talent to be alone. Somebody else who doesn't have this need, can't experience this. They don't need it, but they also can't do it. They get fidgety and nervous and could even have a nervous breakdown. Of course, the capacity for being alone to a certain extent is necessary for our psychological and spiritual well being.

But it means different things to different people. For some it may mean an hour, a day or less. For others it means many weeks or a year. I wouldn't want to streamline or idolize this need. It's just according to our particular nature and talents.

There is also the matter of the difference between spending time as a hermit and spending time in creative solitude. One can't make water-tight compartments out of the two, but one can distinguish between them, and then connect them. Although the

* Brother David besides being a great person, holds all kinds of academic degrees, including a PhD from the University of Vienna, where he studied child psychology. This, along with being a true child of solitude, has gone into the making of several books on the contemplative life. For your retreat I highly recommend these two: *A Listening Heart* (Crossroad) and *Gratefulness, The Heart Of Prayer* (Paulist Press).

two can coincide, a hermit's life is simply free space and not necessarily creative in the sense of producing something. While I may need some time for creative solitude, I first of all need that empty space... There is too much accumulating in me. I have a very rich imagination and very rich and full experiences. I meet thousands of people, and have thousands of experiences. I just need empty space for this to settle. As Lao Tzu says, leave muddy water alone and it will eventually settle and purify. This is primarily what I mean about spending time in the hermitage.

The whole idea of doing and being has a very old and venerable tradition. In the Chinese and Taoist tradition, Han-Shan, the so called author of the Cold Mountain Poems, writes about this union between doing and being. These poems are a good example of what it means to hermitize. The essence of it is to do nothing. The poet writes his poems on the rocks and lets them float away in the river. To me that expresses perfectly my idea of being a hermit, of empty space. It's such a beautiful metaphor. A person writes poems on rocks, not in books, and he lets them float down the river. Only later do others gather them and perhaps make a book of them.

By definition, one is a hermit if one lives alone. That makes me a part-time hermit. I spend as much time as I can being alone. For instance, I spent one whole winter from September until May on Bear Island in Maine where there was practically no one except myself. We were two brothers. He respected my silence and vice versa. No one else was there then, except a Coast Guard post of one man.

I guess one ought to be able to empty one's thoughts as C.S. Lewis suggests, into that 'abyss of great silence when you can no longer hear the echo,' no matter where you are, but the environment helps. It should be possible to be silent anywhere, but for me it's easier in a setting like Bear Island. Some people might feel trapped being alone on an island, and others would feel trapped not being there. I really love big empty spaces, with lots of sky or desert. I'm not very happy in a hermitage in the woods, yet this is considered one of the classical places for retreating. Again, it is just a matter of tastes and psychological bent.

There are, however, three things that are fairly constant in the process of retreating. The first is that when you finally get to a place where you have no immediate obligations, you just rest. And sometimes it can take a long time to rest, so you just sleep a lot. Monks who follow traditional practices say that it's okay to sleep all the time you're on retreat. If that is what you need, that's



it! It's part of the unwinding. You let your body do what it needs to do, and it knows what is best. Of course sleeping all the time is not ideal because you ought to be there long enough to do something after that. Still, if that is what you need, then you've done something.

After resting, there are two other things for me. I may do some writing or research as I did on Bear Island. In fact, the main thing that I wrote there was the entry on the 'Monastic Life' for the *Encyclopedia Americana*. But the third aspect of retreating, and most important for me, is the real hermit time. It's just walking in the woods, and listening to the woodpeckers and watching the sunset and watching the seals. It is listening to the wind and the sound of the surf and being out on the ocean. The setting on this little island of just a few acres and lots of ocean all around it, suggests this idea of open space and the free space with nothing in particular to do. For me this is ideal.

When it comes to the process of retreating, I don't believe there are neat stages that you should follow. Some of the great spiritual experiences that you expect to happen at the end of your fifty or sixty years in a monastery happen during the first three months, and nothing ever again for the rest of your life. The same thing is true when you go to an island knowing you can spend nine months there in solitude. The first two days you may not be sleeping. You're not resting at all. But you have the greatest experience of open space, of solitude, of a hermit's life. Then you get tired and you sleep, and then somewhere in between you wake up and do some creative work, and you fall asleep again. It doesn't go in stages. In my observation I would only say that those three elements are usually there — the open space, the resting and the creative solitude.

Some people may feel guilty about giving themselves permission to just be alone and 'do nothing,' but I don't feel that way... In fact, for me personally I feel that I deserve permission to have a lot more solitude than I get, so I never have any bad feelings at all. I only have a little self-pity that I don't get more... Of course I'm half joking, but I'm trying to ascertain for myself, what is God's will for me. If you think that this is what God wants for you, in other words if this is what you need (that's how you know what God's will is), then you try to get it.

One of the great insights that stands behind the whole concept of being a hermit comes from John Cage, and is expressed in this poem: "If you let it, it supports itself. You don't have to. Each something is the celebration of the nothing that supports it. If you remove the world from your shoulders you

notice that it doesn't drop. Where is the responsibility?" Now that's a real monk's poem. It's even a hermit's poem! This has been very important to me and other monks as well. In fact, a Buddhist monk once told me that this was one of his favorite passages. "Where is the responsibility?" It doesn't by any means say you have no responsibility, but it places the responsibility in the right place. And you remove it from your shoulders because the world does not collapse.

Hermitizing truly enhances my spirituality. That's why I need to retreat. After a while I feel more truly alive. I have more zest for living, more joy in living. Of course one can't really distinguish between being half dead and being a little more alive and aware and joyful in life. That runs down after a while when you're not doing what your particular make-up calls for. If you were geared towards social interaction and you were too much alone, you would lose your zest for life. In my case it's the opposite. If I'm too much with people, I lose my zest for life. I'm only half alive. I need solitude to revive myself. I've been very lucky in the kind of hermitages I found, very blessed. You choose it of course, and you look around for it. You could say that solitude chooses you rather than you choosing it. It all goes together.

If you really want to go deep while hermitizing, then the best and the worst will coincide. They are the kind of experiences that you can't really talk about. T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets* says we can only say there we have been, but we cannot say where, for that would place it in time. What happens in solitude is that you can't re-experience it. You can't even fully remember it because it is the opposite side of the kind of experience that we have now. To say there is a merging of loneliness into solitude or the dark into the light, is still only conceptual. What really happens is that somehow you flip over like a bug and you're lying on your back and all you see are little legs that are trying to grab for something that isn't there.

You watch these beautiful little bugs on the roses and the peonies. They're just like little jewels. But all of a sudden they fall down and lie on their back, and all you see are those little legs that move like French locomotives that have all their moving parts on the outside. Everything is turned upside down and everything becomes frightening and terrible. You can't even re-experience it. It's the opposite side of the weaving that we normally experience. That is both the most horrible and on the other hand, the best, because you expose yourself to that. *You have no alibi when you are in a hermitage!* You have no scapegoat either, you can't blame anybody else, it's just you...

A HERMIT'S SCHEDULE

One of the most appealing things for me about being on Bear Island was the opportunity to be able to make my own schedule. I could follow the schedule given by nature... The time before sunrise is most important. So typically, I would go down to the ocean before sunrise, see the sun rising, and wash myself in the ocean, even if it was very cold. You just do a little bit of it to be in touch with the water. Living with nature like this is wonderful. When it was night, I knew it was night. There were no electric lights to flip on. I had to live with the rhythm of nature and that's a beautiful way to be. And I had to fend a little bit for myself. I had to carry the water and get it out of the well, and pull it up in a bucket and break the ice. Sometimes it took a long time. I had to shovel myself out when it snowed. I had to sometimes go a long way to gather firewood to keep myself warm. That sort of thing was very enjoyable to me. All this is my food for solitude.

You watch the animals and you watch the birds, and you're just in touch with things that you're normally shielded from when you are in the city or other environments. Even the struggle is part of it. Once, the ocean was very wild and we couldn't get ashore. We had to wait many weeks before supplies arrived. We weren't even sure that we could get ashore with the coast guard boat. All these kind of experiences make it more interesting. They make you feel more alive. Struggle and all of it makes you really want to be there and away from the world. This is a very special sort of solitude. You feel like you've really earned your peace.

Of course living in touch with nature while you are on a retreat doesn't mean you become a sort of noble savage. There is always a sense of ceremony and meals are a part of that. Whether you eat once a day or twice a day or three times, it is always desirable to set the table. This is part of an ancient monastic tradition that goes back more than a thousand years in written tradition. Hermits ought to sit down, have a tablecloth, a candle and maybe a flower. They should not nibble as they go along. (This is always a danger.) The ritual of eating alone is just as important as waking up to the dawn."



The Hermit's Diet

If you want to be a hermit even for a week, then I'm sure you'll appreciate the following diet developed by Brother David and some of his Brother Benedictine Monks. They created it so they could 'go

off and be really alone.' Brother David said that once you decide upon the basic ingredients you like, you can create something new each time with just a few essentials and lots of imagination. As he says:

"This diet allows you to be very well fed and active. It gives you all the nourishment you need so you can do active physical work. Yet this diet does not need cooking and does not need refrigeration. It is one you can buy in bulk, so it's quite inexpensive. You can store it for many months. This allows the hermits to be alone without having to worry about going out for shopping. Its main staples are granola and peanut butter loaf which is made by mixing peanut butter with dry milk and honey. Then the nutritious values are brought out."

Here are some highlights from the original hermit diet, exactly as Brother David sent it from the Benedictine Monastery:

STAPLES

(can be mail-ordered wholesale through healthfood outlets or co-ops)

- Peanut Butter (*recommended brands: Deafsmith or Walnut Acres*)
- Granola (*some basic kind; you can spruce it up by your own additions*)
- Brewer's Yeast (*the open kind, that comes in bulk, is tastiest and least expensive*)
- Tamari soy sauce
- Raisins (*make sure your brand is not boycotted by the United Farm Workers Union*)
- Sunflower seed (*shelled*)
- Seeds for sprouting: alfalfa seed, lentils, mung beans, green peas, et al.
- Herb teas (*in most places you will be able to collect and dry your own*)
- Almonds (*we provide 3 almonds a day per person for good health*)
- Honey (*can be bought in bulk from bee keepers directly*)
- Instant nonfat dry milk ("Carnation" comes in 50qt. boxes)
- Blackstrap molasses (*Barbados molasses tastier, but more expensive*)

} no need
to buy these
3 items in a
special
health
food store

RECIPES

- **Peanut Butter Loaf:** Mix peanut butter with dry milk and add honey according to taste. Knead until it no longer sticks to your hands. Form into loaves.



- **Soup:** One large mug of hot water. Add 4 teaspoons of brewer's yeast and 2 teaspoons of tamari soy sauce. Stir well. Add salt to taste.
- **Hot drink:** One large mug of hot water. Add 3 heaping teaspoons of instant dried milk, one teaspoon of molasses, and honey to taste. Stir well.
- **Cold drink:** Add five teaspoons of honey to a quart of cold water (this gives quick energy). When left standing in a warm place for 2 or 3 days, this "mead" gets a kick, which some people like.

COMPOSING MENUS

A box with all staple items is placed in each cell and replenished according to individual needs. It turns out that one person often uses a great deal more of one item than another person does. Different people make different selections and create different menus. The range of possible diversities is surprising.

The secret lies in what painters call 'setting the palette.' If you use all your colors in every picture, or a little of everything on the list of staples in every meal, the result will be sheer monotony. But by adding raisins to your granola at one meal, sunflower seed at another, and eating it as it comes out of the box at a third meal, you can create variety. Similarly, you may add to your sprouts, honey, yogurt, raisins, sunflower seed or tamari sauce at different meals. By adding a greater variety of nuts and dried fruit to the list of staples, the possibilities for changing the menu from meal to meal could be greatly increased without basically changing the diet. Both short- and long-term residents at the Benedictine Grange have, however, found the list given above ample to provide the spice of life.

Raising our own food was not part of the original experiment but given the right setting, one could surely improve this diet by planting a small garden or by collecting wild-growing fruits and plants.

In a space ship you adjust your eating habits to your task. A hermit's task is to explore inner space. Yet there is more of a temptation in a hermitage than in a space ship to start 'playing house'.

A safe rule of thumb is this: if you can do without it, do without it! — Always keeping in mind that some of the most superfluous things are the ones we can least dispense with and remain human, e.g. putting a flower even on a hermit's table.

A REQUEST

Please do not ask for further information. (Too many people keep bombarding hermits with mail.) When in doubt try different possibilities. Basically, it is all a matter of making up your mind. If you like, add your favorite vitamins. (Some of us at the grange do.) If you distrust even the best diet, you'll get sick. Yet, the margin within which a diet will keep you healthy, as long as you think it's good for you, is broader than one might assume. Go ahead and experiment.



... So far we've gotten to nine months with Brother David's retreat, but what about nine years!...

If you were an anchorite in ancient times, then spending nine years in solitude would be nothing (just a drop in the ocean). There are famous tales about anchoresses in India who lived in caves, or on mountain tops in order to keep silence. They literally anchored themselves there for years and years, grounded in the devotion of their faith. Long, long journeys were made by many a pilgrim, who would travel endlessly, just to spend even a day in the presence of these special souls. These are the great mystic saints who by the very nature of sheer contemplation changed the consciousness of the world at large, by simply sitting still.

In *The Way of the White Clouds* by Lama Anagarika Govinda, we learn a great deal about pilgrim life in Tibet. One gets an excellent idea of what it means to become the type of devoted hermit called the *lung-gom-pa*, who might very well seem like a mythological character created especially to demonstrate super powers of endurance and solitude. In his tale about the hermit Abbot of Lachen, Govinda describes this extraordinary practice:

... After completion of his nine years' practice in uninterrupted seclusion and perfect silence, [the lung-gom-pa is allowed to go to his pilgrimage to] all the main shrines and sanctuaries of Central Tibet... After having performed this pilgrimage the lung-gom-pa finds a suitable retreat or hermitage of his own, where he spends the rest of his life, preaching, teaching, meditating, and pursuing his various religious duties. He will bless and inspire all those who come to him, heal the sick, and console those who are in distress. Healing is mainly done through the power of the spirit. (p. 91)



Lama Govinda then tells about the hermit Abbot of Lachen, who preferred to stay in his cave rather than go out into the world to preach as other spiritual leaders did, after all their solitary initiations:

One day a Western Scholar approached his cave and asked to be admitted as a chela (disciple). The hermit pointed to another cave in the vicinity and answered: 'Only if you will stay in that cave for three years without a break.'

The chela was none other than the famous French Orientalist and explorer Alexandra David-Neel, whose books on Tibet were so outstanding they were translated into all the major languages of the world. One of the main gains of her life in the solitude of those years

has been expressed by her in the following significant words: 'Mind and senses develop their sensibility in this contemplative life made up of continual observations and reflections. [Does one become a visionary or, rather, is it not that one has been blind until then?]' (p. 100)