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Take a sabbatical in nature

Carol Meyer | Jan. 17, 2011 Eco Catholic

I know I?m talking to a select audience here, as most people are tied to jobs and family and would find it hard to get away for a sabbatical. But for some of you, it could be arranged if you really wanted to do it. And for the rest of you, maybe I can convince you to at least take your next vacation in nature.

This whole idea is no abstract theory for me. My passion for recommending this is based on my experience of a two-month sabbatical in 1997 at Shantivanam, a nature-based retreat/prayer center near Kansas City, Mo. Guests stay in small cabins in the woods, and join the staff for contemplative prayer and meals in the main building (a barn in another life), and otherwise amuse themselves with silence and the bounty of the natural world.

Once I discovered this little treasure hidden away in the back hills and farmlands of Kansas, I was hooked. For years, I would take a day or weekend to spend at Shantivanam when I felt my soul could no longer bear city life. Then, lo and behold, the director announced they were offering a working sabbatical. Since I was between jobs, I surmised that the Spirit had arranged this exclusively for my benefit, since I couldn?t have afforded it otherwise.

I was thrilled to have 60 whole days just to BE, with no agenda and nothing to accomplish, in a place I loved. Besides a few hours of leisurely work in the mornings, I spent my time outdoors as much as possible. Their dog Sandy and I, soon to be best pals, tromped about everywhere on their 120 acres and in neighboring farmland. I also sat and contemplated, sating myself with the simple beauty of sky, forest, and field. I mostly did nothing, and it was wonderful.

An amazing thing began to happen. I started feeling happy all the time for no particular reason. I was in a different, higher state of consciousness, tangible and peaceful. I felt physically lighter and healthier, almost as if I were floating effortlessly through my days. I would never have known this constant ?natural high? was possible had I not had this experience at Shantivanam. I had the realization that this was how the universe meant for us to feel all the time --this harmony, balance, and oneness with it.

Most professionals who take a sabbatical think it has to be for study, but the mind can only take us so far. It just might be a better use of precious time to do what I did and let humble, mute nature be your teacher and rejuvenator. The same goes for vacations. Most people travel, sightsee, and scurry with scarcely a reduction of stress, falsely fearing that a simpler time in nature would be boring. But hopefully I?ve planted a seed that whispers, ?Things are not always what they appear to be.? I invite you to rethink your priorities and make time for extended immersion in nature. And I know Shantivanam would welcome and grace you should you decide to stay there. Their web site is www.shantivanam.com.
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