

Retreating in Place: How I Made A Virtual Retreat A Real Retreat

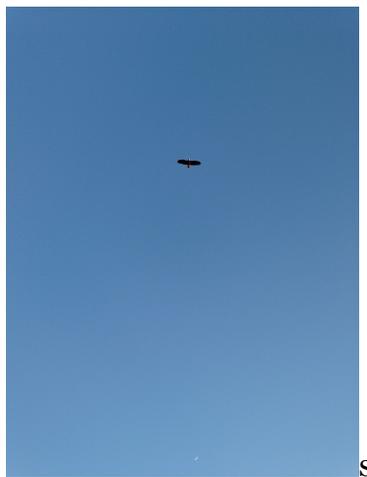
*My heart holds within it every form,
it contains a pasture for gazelles,
a monastery for Christian monks.
There is a temple for idol-worshippers,
a holy shrine for pilgrims;
There are the tablets of the Torah,
and the Book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love
and go whichever way God's camel leads me.
This is the true faith;
This is the true religion*.*

Preparation:

Beginning some weeks before the weekend retreat, I attempted to finish up any reading, journaling, note-making, and so on that was undone from the prior retreat so as to have an empty slate for new material. This also stimulated more integration of prior material and whet my appetite for what was to come.

I planned two days off before and after the retreat, as if I needed one day to pack and prepare to leave, and the second for travel. During these two days, I moved inwardly farther towards the retreat content by spending time with my immediate spiritual goals—what I hoped would happen at the retreat.

The first day off after the retreat was as if I needed it to travel home, and the second was to rest and re-surface gradually to the workaday world. More about this later.



Shortly before the retreat:

Chores: I did not have childcare or pet care to arrange, but I did make sure someone would water the vegetable garden if I didn't have the time or desire to do it. I caught up on

shopping, errands, and all household chores that I might feel compelled to do before, between, or after sessions. (I find it a terrible distraction to be in the middle of a session and notice a cobweb!)

The idea was to be free of *all* obligations during the weekend so I could go as deeply as possible into what were exploring together.

Meals: I prepared an enormous salad that could be most of my lunch for three days, and cooked some entrées and a bunch of fresh vegetables so all I'd need to do was assemble and heat meals, not plan them or do actual cooking.

A surprising amount of time is taken up by planning, shopping, and cooking meals, and cleaning up afterwards. One of the delights of a retreat is not having to even think about meal prep. Relieving myself of the bulk of that work made the weekend feel spacious and special. Next time I'll make it even easier: I'll buy some complete meals or cooked entrées, and arrange for take-out for the rest. I plan to treat myself to some special things I normally wouldn't buy.

Work: I told my clients I would be away and posted vacation messages on email and voicemail. I arranged to have a back-up person available to handle any emergencies. I checked on sick family members and friends and told them I would be on retreat but available in an emergency.

Support: I told my Care Committee[†] that this retreat was happening and requested their prayers. I found out who I could call if I needed more emotional support than the retreat participants, staff, and elders[‡] could provide remotely. My committee loves to offer support in any way they can. They would probably provide meals, too, if I requested it.

Change the environment: I prepared to be outside for some of our sessions. If I could have privacy, doing the videoconferencing in a screened outside "room" or tent would have been delightful. But the weather didn't cooperate.

So instead, I set up inside but in a different place from where I work and worship. The novelty of the view helped me feel a freshness to being online.

*We're not ahead, we're behind.
We're not above, we're below....
Like a brush in the painter's hand,
we have no idea where we are.*

During the retreat:

"Zoom fatigue": I removed the view of myself[§] from the screenful of participants. Somehow our brains are wired so that we can't keep from looking at ourselves frequently. This is not only visually distracting, but breaks one's concentration. It greatly reduces eyestrain to turn it off.

As a kindness to others, I turned it on briefly whenever I changed from standing to sitting or left and returned, to make sure that others aren't seeing only the top of my head, only your waist, or the like.

During presentations, I switched to "speaker view" to rest my eyes in a different way.

Support: I felt free to email or send a private videoconference chat message to either of

the facilitators (whoever was not presenting at the time, or during a break) with a question or for a brief discussion. After all, they would be available if we were somewhere in person, so why not this way? I was amazed that they each answered almost immediately!

I was close friends with one of the elders, and we spent time together by phone during breaks, as needed.

*With every breath I plant the seeds of devotion—
I am a farmer of the heart...*

*Every moment I shape my destiny with a chisel—
I am the carpenter of my own soul.*

Ongoing debriefing & socializing: Sometimes participants Zoomed together while eating meals. We talked informally about whatever had come up, and also just visited and enjoyed each other's company. It made an important break in the deep work we were doing during sessions. Nearly always, I chose to risk increased Zoom fatigue, and joined others for meals. The laughter and change of pace, the companionship of people fast becoming friends, made it worth it. This was as necessary for a successful retreat of this kind as the content of the sessions—as it would have been if we were together in person.

Each night I called or emailed others to talk about the retreat, wrote about the day in a journal, or both.

Physical and emotional de-stressing: My favorite way was to dance with other participants while Zooming, for about 10 minutes before a session began. It was surprisingly fun and cathartic. I turned off the view of myself and felt much freer.

During breaks I napped only if feeling extremely weary; better was to relieve my fatigue by walking, vigorous exercise, or any kind of time outside. This revived me better than napping.

I did not do chores or slip in a little work between sessions, nor did I check work email. When at an in-person retreat, I can do that—though I avoid it as much as possible—and quickly return my whole attention to the retreat because I'm immersed in it. But when I'm in my home environment, such distractions can quickly take over my thoughts and time.

*...You're on the journey home
and your donkey has fallen asleep
in the middle of the road!*

Knowing my limits: I skipped a session if I was too full to be able to absorb more at the moment. I felt free to be late to a session because joining late would not be an interruption. I set up my computer on a standing desk so I could alternate between sitting and standing during sessions. I snacked when I needed to, stopping the video feature if I wanted privacy to do that.



Ending each day: If we had evening worship together, I joined in. If not, I ritually closed the day and quieted my mind by praying before going to sleep.

After the retreat:

I think it's important not to have an abrupt change from a retreat back to "normal" life. It's an intense experience and I need to continue to integrate parts of it and to rest. There is no closure if I rush back into busy days with a myriad of responsibilities.

So the day we finished, and the next day (a second day off), I made an effort to remain in the atmosphere of the retreat. I did not use these days to catch up on mail, work, email, or chores. I did as little cooking as possible.

I did the work I had promised myself or others to do, such as following up on the content of particular sessions by reading hand-outs or finishing up session queries||, adding details to my notes so I'd understand them months later, sending whatever I had promised to others or to the whole group, ordering books or looking at websites I noted during sessions, reporting to my Care Committee, and reporting to financial supporters. Plus lots of napping!

*O seeker,
These thoughts have such power over you.
From nothing you become sad,
from nothing you become happy.*

*You are burning in the flames
but I will not let you out
until you are fully baked,
fully wise,
and fully yourself.*

Continuing the work:

Over the weeks after the retreat, I kept the impact of the it fresh by reviewing notes, re-reading hand-outs, and continuing to contemplate what happened and what felt unfinished. In other words, I continued to do the inner work. When I had gone as far as I could, I met with my spiritual director to talk about the retreat.

*Don't turn from the delight
that is so close at hand!
Don't find some lame excuse
to leave our gathering.
You were a lonely grape
and now you are sweet wine.
There is no use in trying to become a grape again.*

I wish you all the best!

* * * * *

Notes:

*The poem is by Rumi, translated by Jonathan Star in his book, *Rumi / In the Arms of the Beloved*. I have de-gendered one line and changed one word.

†A Quaker Care Committee is a small group of people who first help one discern if a particular course of action or leading is the right thing to do and if it's the right time for it. If one goes ahead with it, then one stays in touch with the Care Committee, which offers support as needed. Sometimes it's called a Care and Accountability Committee.

‡ A Quaker elder in this regard is someone who attends an event but doesn't participate in activities. Their function is to hold the group in prayer the whole time, and to notice if anyone is struggling emotionally or spiritually and, if so, to provide assistance.

§ "Hide self-view" is accessible if you click on the ellipsis (...) in the upper righthand corner of your Zoom box. Others will still see you, but you won't see yourself. This also allows you to see one additional participant.

To restore the view, click on "view" in the top righthand corner of your screen—not your box, the whole Zoom screen—then click on "show self view."

|| Quaker queries are a way of learning through asking questions.

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www.FeelingMuchBetter.org