

# ∞ Retreat: Coming Home to Yourself ∞

## By Lori E. Opal, MFT

I have just returned from my third annual silent retreat. As a professional therapist, and mother of two, I have found it challenging to build the needed level of self-care and time for rejuvenation into my already over-stretched schedule. After my first retreat, I viscerally understood that this special time for myself was not in fact a luxury, but a deep necessity for my own sacred balance. I have discovered that taking time away from the usual focus on frantic doing allows me to come back to my very full life with love, humor, joy and a more realistic perspective.

While the content of each year's experience varies, the commonality is that each year I come back from retreat lighter, yet more fully engaged in the flow of my life. With each dip into the vastness of silence, I observe an overarching deepening occurring inside myself.

I now know it is quite natural that before a retreat profound fear arises within me, as my psyche knows intimately that surrender will be required. In mindfully witnessing my internal landscape, it becomes apparent just how potent my thoughts are in shaping and coloring the quality of my experiences. In this retreat, where the combination of a known setting, a familiar sangha (spiritual community), deep prayerful intentions, and a willingness to turn towards whatever is arising ~ all created a deep and spacious container capable of holding the wholeness, and intensity of all present experiences.

I have noticed that my ability to trust this process has grown exponentially, as this year, my surrender was beyond anything I could have ever imagined. Of course I prefer joy and bliss but the secret alchemy is that the measure of

joy I will experience equals my ability to hold the tough stuff. In turning to embrace fully the dark and shadow realms, I have found the hidden "wormhole" that can pop me through to the other side where there is no need to resist any part of human experience.

This retreat was set amidst the rolling green hills of Petaluma, at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). It is auspicious to note Edgar Mitchell experienced a spiritual epiphany while witnessing an *Earthrise* from space, in which: "He knew that the beautiful blue world to which he was returning is a part of a living system, harmonious and whole . . . 'a universe of consciousness'." Mitchell was recognizing what Thich Nhat Hanh calls *Interbeing*, or a friend has dubbed "FIOAT" the *fundamental interconnectedness of all things*.



### Walking a Labyrinth

IONS retreat center has its own labyrinth, nestled beautifully in the hills. I offer the labyrinth image as a wonderful metaphor for the retreat process. The labyrinth is found

throughout history in all religious traditions. It can be considered an archetype, or a mystical tool that can be used for spiritual growth.

The labyrinth, unlike the maze, has only one path in and out, so there is no worry of getting lost. There is the metaphoric possibility that in traveling this winding path externally, we can travel internally into our own heart of hearts. It can open us to the fullness of our human experience, touching into our deepest sorrows and joys. It is important to walk the labyrinth with an open mind and heart.

Traditionally there are three stages to walking the labyrinth:

### First Stage

Walking In: Releasing (Purgation) ~ This is the time of letting go, or shedding that which is no longer serving us. We walk in mindfully or meditatively, perhaps even prayerfully. A goal might be to arrive in the center emptied of all our thoughts and concerns.

While it may not always be a linear process, the first few days of a retreat can represent our walking into the center of the labyrinth. It is interesting to notice how identities are shed, so that slowly, (this one called Lori) is no longer mother, wife, therapist, supervisor, friend, yogini, poet, shopper, planner, cook, writer, cleaner or even a spiritual seeker. What is left is simply a human being as consciousness, open to witness what moves through when presence, silence and spaciousness are all that remain.

It was in this stage that I offered this poem as a prayer:

*Please continue reading on the next page.*

# Retreat: Coming Home to Yourself

## *To Come Home To Yourself*

*May all that is unforgiven in you  
Be released.*

*May your fears yield  
Their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is un-lived in you  
Blossom into a future  
Graced with love.*

~ John O'Donohue

## **Second Stage**

Centering: Receiving (Illumination) ~ If the walk in has emptied us, then time in the center offers us the possibility of receiving what could be called *divine inspiration*. Receptivity is best served by an open, prayerful and meditative state. Sometimes insights and clarity can come quickly; other times sitting in silence can create the space for illumination.

It was in this middle phase that four questions were offered to focus our internal inquiry:

- ❖ What wants or needs to soak in Silence?
- ❖ What wants to come out of hiding?
- ❖ What wants to burn in the fire of truth?
- ❖ What wants to be expressed?

These questions point us towards what wants to move from within. They offer a deep invitation welcoming everything and anything to be witnessed by love. At some point we may experience clear seeing into the self, and an awakening or an epiphany can arise when our connection to our deepest self or the divine becomes deeply felt truth. The curious paradox is that anything deeply witnessed will ultimately be found to be transparent, or in Buddhist terms empty.

Here, during this stage of openness, I suddenly experienced an intense coughing fit, and simultaneously the experience of coughing up a “ball of shame,” which once fully felt and held, seemed to suddenly pop like a soap bubble.

## **Third Stage**

Walking Out: Returning (Union) ~ This is the important path of walking our gifts or insights back out into our daily lives, where our connection with the divine becomes integrated more fully into our lives.

Then our walking out truly becomes how we are able to walk in the truth. Adyashanti is known to say, “The real retreat begins as we leave the formal retreat.” The actuality of whether we are able to walk our talk is tested by real life where circumstances are not always optimal. Will we be able to respond more often from our highest most loving selves?

If you find yourself called to try a structured retreat, know that there are many wonderful options available. (Please see my resources for some suggestions.) Lengthy silent retreats may not suit every seeker. Know that you can create your own mini retreat anytime and anywhere, it simply takes dropping in and witnessing what moves through you. Here in the Bay Area there is the option of visiting any of the many public labyrinths, the most well know being Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

This is an invitation to explore your own awareness, and discover what helps you to come home to your deep authentic self. We each need to uncover what facilitates this process within. It seems clear, that if you can cultivate some curiosity and

foster the space and time to drop into the silence within, there is an internal compass that can lead you to your own unique “true north”. Retreat, no matter how long or short, can be a form of self-care, a sacred time and space where you can empty out in order to fill up on what is truly essential.

Put down your endless list  
Of things to do,  
Be here in this moment.  
For this is the *only* moment.  
Arriving here and now,  
Warmly welcome yourself home.

~Lori Opal

May we all find the capacity to open to the presence of this most holy moment!

## **Resources:**

- [www.adyashanti.org](http://www.adyashanti.org)
- [www.dorothyhunt.org](http://www.dorothyhunt.org)
- [www.gracecathedral.org](http://www.gracecathedral.org)
- [www.noetic.org](http://www.noetic.org)
- [www.veriditas.org](http://www.veriditas.org)

**Lori Opal, MFT** has both San Francisco and Emeryville locations where she offers psychotherapy (for individuals and couples), supervision and consultation. Lori enjoys facilitating and creating custom rituals, personal retreats (for one person), and private retreats (for 2 or more people) designed to fit your unique needs, half day or full day options available. Lori can be reached at **(415) 503-0522** or at [www.loriopal.com](http://www.loriopal.com).