

CONVERSATION PIECES

*contributed by some of those who have before now
been part of conversation groups at Retreat House Chester*

After this first fortnight of national 'stay-at-home', four reflections are offered here on the invitation RHC has always made to '**Find a time of stillness and silence**', and what that might mean in our own experience now that we find ourselves living differently.

Take time with what is said here. Maybe print these out and add your own notes in the spaces. What do you find for yourself in this? Maybe share responses with someone you can talk with.

How are things different for me just now? What am I finding? In the midst of so much suffering I am almost ashamed to say that I have a sense of peace because I do not have to move quickly on to the next thing. I notice this in the garden. Instead of rushing out to cut the grass in the few allocated minutes, I go into the garden to dig and rake and plant. I love the feel of the soil. I love digging things up to put them in a place where they can grow properly. I love planting the small plants and watering them with care each day. I am outside because I want to stay there as long as possible and I read the Scriptures with an enhanced feeling:

*"He is like a tree that is planted
by water streams
yielding its fruit in due season
its leaves never fading" (Psalm 1v3)*

or

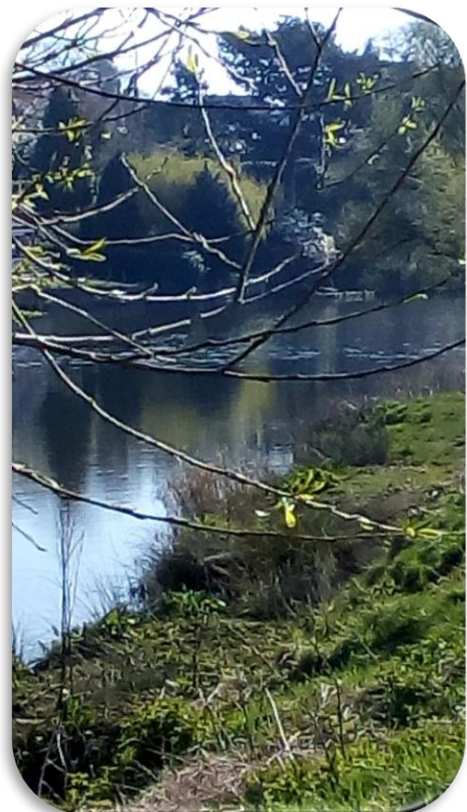
*"You make springs gush forth in the valleys
They flow between the hills" (Psalm 104v10)*

or the life-giving water described by Ezekiel 47v9:
*"Wherever the river flows all creatures teeming in it
will live"*

And finally John describing Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well:

*"the spring of water gushing up to eternal life"
(John 4v4)*

tree coming into bud by the River Dee, Chester Meadows



"Nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness" Meister Eckhart

How is finding a time of stillness and silence part of life right now? It's how we begin our day – with a practice of yoga, leading into such a time, stilling the mind, a ritual of preparing through stretching and breath control. A time of stillness and silence feels really important, calming, helping us to detach from what's happening. It puts us in touch with something timeless, creating space inside and beyond the self. Like an anchor, it's about rootedness – stopping me drifting.



How have we learnt about these things so that they can be part of life now? We began with Lent and using the book "Sensing God" by Laurence Freeman (Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation). It's been good doing this together – companionship has become part of the routine. And the advice on meditation – to not be judgemental about our meditation times - is especially helpful: just to be participating is being faithful.

How then can the good things of retreat be part of our living now? It's an invitation to reflect on how we are living, and on the spiritual practices that help, such as our times of meditation. It reminds me that retreat is not a solitary thing, just as these times are not solitary times. Just this reflection right now puts me in touch with conversations at RHC; the space; the companionship; doing it alongside other people; keeping in touch. And somehow a sense of retreat helps us to recognise that the discipline imposed of staying at home can be accepted as a gift.

"God help us to live slowly, to move simply, to look softly, to allow emptiness, to let the heart create for us." Michael Leunig

the sun reflected in the clear still waters of the River Dee, by the Meadows in Chester

Many of us have said, "Stop the world, I want to get off," or "I wish there were a few more hours in a day," or "I wish I could just find the time!" Well, guess what!

Initially I thought how will I fill my new found time, but being an adaptable creature, I found myself yesterday thinking, "What happened to the time today? I didn't find enough time to do all the things I planned to do."

As I sit quietly reflecting on the word "find" I think, "What am I looking for? And what might I find?"

When my days were busy and full I used to think my retreat times were about finding a sense of contentment with circumstances that I found myself in at the time. Content in my heart, mind, soul and spirit.

The circumstances have changed somewhat but I think my aim is still the same. As Paul says,

"Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content."
1 Tim 6v6-8

The thing I was always searching for was always there, always within reach but it was always a choice and it still is. Now that I find myself self-isolating, contentment is to be the thing I seek because it will bring great gain.



finding simplicity – on local pilgrimage route The Two Saints Way

In a world of online and media overload of suggestions for this time of isolation, three have stayed with me.

The first is that 'solitude' may be a more helpful and positive word than 'isolation'. I don't feel I can turn all my feelings of isolation into the positive experience of solitude: I am missing people, I'm anxious, I'm concerned about the hugely difficult impact of all this on so many lives here and across the world. But, nonetheless, I am glad to be reminded that 'solitude' is different – a positive experience of being alone. I like seeing in the word 'alone' a suggestion of 'all-one'; and I do believe that when we are alone in a positive way, in solitude, we can sometimes feel deeply connected to something beyond ourselves – 'all-one'. I like too the hint of 'soul' in the word 'solitude'.

The second is the wisdom of giving shape to each day – a balance and a rhythm. It's something monasteries know well, with times each day for prayer, study, work and leisure, alone and together – and something I've experienced on retreat. For me, now, this tells me it would be good to have a similar rhythm in my day – and also in this family household where we would all benefit from a household rhythm. It's become clear to me that even in this time of isolation one part of my day needs to be for deliberate solitude – some stillness, silence, alone – soul time. And other times for deliberate companionship, too – a different kind of soul time.

And third, the sage advice to take this slowly. Adapt slowly. Plunged into this new situation, and barraged by suggestions and information, it takes time to filter out the noise of this new way of living, and listen – slowly.

Solitude, daily rhythm and recognising that slow is good: these three have been worth finding.



one of the snails going slowly at Retreat House Chester