

Advent and retreat

By [Debra Bendis](#)

December 14, 2011

I found myself

staring at the wall. I'd done two- and three-day retreats, but this was four days alone in a cottage, and the stretch of time was unnerving. I had to go outside to get cell phone reception and (horrors!) walk a quarter of a mile if I wanted to get online. At first the disconnection was deafening.

I had wanted to

get away. I was moving through family changes and needed to rest and react to them. I was moving through congregational work and not feeling engaged, and I needed to step back from that. And it was Advent; in other years I've found that I can blink and miss the season altogether. So I retreated.

The challenges

of the retreat were waiting for me. As I walked, sat, prepared and ate meals, read and prayed, my mind began wandering freely. I replayed recent events, from meetings to personal conversations to some very dusty, unvisited memories. There were moments of unexpected grief from sadnesses usually kept in place, from fears felt more keenly than usual. I struggled with some challenges.

Then I picked up

Esther de Waal's book, *Living with Contradiction*, left by another retreatant in the hermitage, and was reminded of the purpose of solitude.

Those

who live closely together know that too much sharing, too much togetherness is destructive, not only of the individual but of the community.

De Waal quotes

Benedictine monk and author David Steindl-Rast. While Steindl-Rast's experience is the Benedictine community, his words seemed to apply to my faith community and relationships lived in faith:

Togetherhness

without solitude is not truly togetherhness but side-by-sideness. To live merely side by side is alienation. We need time and space to be alone . . .One [also] needs strong roots in togetherhness to be solitary rather than lonely when one is alone . . .Solitude is aloneness supported by togetherhness.

If this is so

important for Christians in community--if we need, say, even 25 percent of solitude for 75 percent authentic togetherhness--why do we resist solitude so effectively? If the reason is that we will be confronted with our weaknesses, our griefs and our fears, how can we help each other with this?

On the second

day of retreating, I began to lose my sense of time and experience sweet "spaces of rest." I'd stare out at newly stripped maples and oaks and feel as if my small window on creation were all I needed. I'd pray, and feel God's peace and comfort wrestle out my other emotions and preoccupations. When I finally got in the car and reconnected with my world, I felt more at ease in the noise of obligations, relationships and community, and ready to see less of me and more of God in all of it.