

Solitude Retreat at LodeStar
by Ruth Garrison
January 29 – 30, 2010

Driving from Tallahassee out Meridian, I wind through rolling countryside under canopied trees. The gray asphalt highway is almost deserted. A symphony plays on the XM station, and I feel that I'm journeying into a quieter, more peaceful time and space.

This late January afternoon in north Florida and south Georgia is cool and overcast; the sky, fields, and trees create a pallet of beige and taupe. All is stillness. As I cross the Ochlockonee River, I notice that the water remains high, but the past week's turbulent, roiling flooding has abated.

Turning onto Hadley Ferry Road, I pass a spot where once stood a cabin, the birthplace of former baseball hero, Jackie Robinson. The historical marker and the lonely bricks of the chimney are reminders of the brevity of life, even the most glamorous. To find LodeStar Farm, however, I turn onto another smaller, narrow and curving backcountry road, moving ever deeper into the woods. I expect to see deer, quail and wild turkeys, but even the animals are reclusive. I pass a cemetery, yet another reminder of where we are all heading, and I reach the Lower Hawthorne Trail and LodeStar Farm, my destination now, here.

A car is waiting outside the gate, the driver hesitant to turn in. She wonders, I suppose, if this small farmstead can be the site of our Solitude Retreat. She follows me up the drive, and we park under a massive live oak tree, four hundred years old, we are told later. "Is this the retreat?" the young woman asks. I have been here before and assure her that she is in the right place. We walk toward the sprawling two-story brick house noting its wrap-around-screened porches and rustic metal roof.

Our retreat leaders, Elizabeth Barbour and GERALYN Russell, greet us warmly and assist with unloading our bags, books and bundles. We enter a large gathering room set up with a circle of floor chairs around a central altar that holds unlit candles. My new acquaintance is taken to an upstairs bedroom to unpack, and I am led to a downstairs corner room.

After a bit of settling in, I am invited again into the gathering room for a private welcoming ceremony. I stand with GERALYN and Elizabeth in front

of windows framing the porch and a pasture. Under these windows a second, larger altar has been created. This one is appointed with natural objects from the surrounding grounds, incense, flowers, and candles. I gaze out on dun-colored fields where cows and sheep calmly graze. Elizabeth wafts sweet sage around me and sounds a glass chiming bowl while Geralyn asks me to repeat after her:

“ I am here now at the Solitude Retreat.
There’s nothing to do, nothing to think, nowhere to go.
This is my time to breathe, to relax, to enjoy my solitude retreat.”

She instructs me to look down at my feet and say:

“I am here now.”

Geralyn continues: “As you move forward from this moment, consciously become aware that step by step, moment by moment, this is your time.”

“Welcome to the Solitude Retreat.”

I go into my little room, which opens onto the wide porch and has ceiling -to-floor windows on two walls. The twin beds are covered with pink patterned quilts. There is a vanity with a mirror and a sink, towels at hand. The only other furniture is a cupboard, a floor lamp, and tiny stools for bedside tables. On the wall is a wooden bar holding a few clothes hangers, some hooks, and a couple of pictures. One of the pictures looks very much like my little dog, Puddles, with her fuzzy, sweet face and lively black eyes. I feel at home.

Other women have drifted in, but melding with the late afternoon stillness around us, we are quiet, scattered, tuning our inner rhythms to the soft cello music playing and the hushed voices of our hostesses. Most are unpacking or having tea; I am writing; I can hear other individual welcoming ceremonies taking place: “This is your time”... “I am here now.” Looking out the windows, I see Elizabeth quietly talking with someone on the porch. Someone else is walking about the grounds, and my eyes again sweep the open pastures, fences, outbuildings, and huge live oaks. The fields slope to a pond and bordering woods. Cows huddle near a haystack and sheep group together as if preparing for the coming dark and cold evening.

In the gathering room, hot tea and snacks are available for us, and cotton checked napkins and colorful earthenware dishes are stacked in readiness for supper. I take a cup of tea back to my room, already my haven, now that my clothes and books are in place. I truly have nothing to do, nowhere to go – quite the opposite of the day I left behind me.

At home, I had been inundated with the silent pleas of undone tasks vying for attention – “Me, first!” “No, me!” “No, me!” “When will *I* get done?” “Will you ever get around to *me*?” Knowing that I truly have nothing I *have* to do here at Lodestar is so strange that it almost makes me nervous. I am actually uncomfortable. I decide to write – I must have something **TO DO!** I have been too busy this past week even to respond to the questions we were given as preparation for the retreat. With thirty minutes before we assemble, it seems a good time to sit down, think about these questions and write in my journal.

Elizabeth and Geralyn have asked us to consider the following: How can I begin to slow down **NOW** and create a space for reflection for myself before the retreat begins? (-- did not slow down at all – just added more chores preparing to come here--). Am I willing to create a space of time to regroup before I arrive...so that when I do arrive I am present, mindful, and open to the energy of the experience? (--guess not--). What are my intentions for this retreat experience for myself? What do I hope to gain? They add: Look inside, see what your heart’s desire is, what your body is saying to you now, and what you most want and crave. Create an intention. What one thing do you want to receive from this retreat?

I take up my journal in an attempt to answer the last three questions – it’s definitely a little late for the first two—and to formulate an intention. Closing my eyes and breathing deeply, I try to look inside, listen to my body and get in touch with my feelings. This is what I write:

I want to **REST** away from the “should dos,” “need to dos,” and even the “want to dos” – away from all doing.

I just want to be and breathe—set my own rhythm and follow my own body’s needs for rest and food and movement.

Softly emerging, an intention comes to me:
I’d like to find a way to create a few minutes in every hour, an hour in every day, a day in every week (little Sabbaths), times that become my life rafts,

my pausing places, my interfaces between the “doings” – times when I can regroup, reconsider what I’m doing, for whom, and most of all, why?

I leave my room with a sense of calmness, peace and presence. *I am here now* at the Solitude Retreat.

The group assembles for the first time at seven, around the central altar with its unlit candles and topaz and gold roses. When we introduce ourselves, each woman shows and talks about a treasured object she has brought. This activity helps us to feel at ease. Thus, we speak of our lives and our intentions, and we light our candles and place them together on the community altar.

Our retreat leaders tell of us about some of the planned activities: Geralyn will lead yoga and meditation –seated and walking the labyrinth; Elizabeth who is a life coach, will guide our journaling and creating of vision boards. They remind us that all activities are optional; that we are free to read, nap, walk, or just *be* at any time – it is OUR Solitude Retreat. Both from Tallahassee, Florida, these women began the Solitude Retreats in 2009 at St. George Island, Florida. Encouraged by the response to the first retreat, this winter Lodestar weekend was planned, and since then, in April, a group has met with them in the Appalachian Mountains.

Participants come from across the United States. They are women of various ages, occupations, and interests. Their common goal is that they seek the gift of solitude and hope to learn how to find more peace in the turmoil of their lives.

Our present circle includes the following:

Adelle is the person whom I first met when we parked our cars earlier today. She is a young businesswoman and mother of a seventeen-year-old daughter; I have a sense that there is a recent loss in her life – a separation or pending divorce? We do not ask questions. A person is never pressed to reveal anything she wishes to keep private. Adelle weeps as she shows us a picture of herself with her now deceased grandmother and talks about how much she misses her. Adelle reminds me of my own granddaughter: I immediately feel a sense of connection to her.

Sheryle, the youngest of the group, is mother to five-month-old Anna ,who is still nursing. In fact, we learned that Sheryle had to make a trip home after supper to retrieve a forgotten piece for her breast pump. Sara places a flying angel ornament on our altar and tells us that she is seeking to become more graceful.

Geralyn's two sisters are here –Jan, the oldest, plays the role of “big sister” in many ways. For example, she is the one to help those of us who fumble with the gas candle lighter. Jan is from St. Petersburg, Florida, and runs her own successful business. This is her second retreat; she tells us of the life-changing experience of her first at St. George Island.

Janelle, Geralyn's younger sister, is from Seattle, Washington, and is much like Geralyn in mannerisms and voice. Janelle is a nature lover, an outdoor person who stays busy with work, family and home; she is now taking time to be with her sisters at this special retreat reunion for the three of them.

June is another businesswoman—the closest in the group to my age, I think. Like me, she lives in Tallahassee, Florida, but she also works a seven-day week generating computer newsletters for a major firm. June dresses in beautiful, loose garments; she makes wise and caring observations as we talk.

And last, I am Ruth. I will be seventy-one this year and am still trying to find out what I want to be when I grow up. My object is a small golden Buddha that usually lives on my home altar and was given to me by a dear friend and teacher.

Thus eight women become a perfect infinity – two circles joined. We begin connecting with each other and the earth in this very quiet open farmland with its docile animals. Our combined lighted candles glow on the altar, and our personal objects help us to feel the strength of the individual hearts and spirits gathered here.

In the background, but very much contributors to our comfort are Lodestar's owner, Loretta Bussierre, and her sister, Jeanette Reed. Loretta manages the farm and the business end of the center. In addition, she is a holistic breathwork facilitator. Jeanette is a gifted cook and gardener. Her passion is growing organic foods that she prepares and serves to guests. Tonight's bounteous buffet offers eggplant Parmesan, spaghetti, and for dessert, a

scuppernong pie –tart, deep red berries in the crispiest crust I have ever tasted. During dinner we watch the full moon sliding among clouds as we eat outside on the screened porch.

Afterwards, Loretta talks a bit about housekeeping logistics – accessing the phone if needed, recycling, keeping the gates closed (the cows got into the yard, causing a clean up job just before we arrived!), and using our bedside flashlights in case of power outages. Elizabeth goes over our very loose, flexible and optional schedule. Some opportunities for the weekend include practicing yoga, journaling, having massages, collaging, breath walking, drumming, and walking the labyrinth. We are encouraged to keep “Noble Silence” which is not talking in the mornings until after breakfast.

Next, we go outside to walk the labyrinth. In the front yard and through a farm gate, Geralyn has outlined a circling path on the ground under one of the giant oak trees. It is very dark now, so we can only see the path with small flashlights. Even though some of us have visited the labyrinth in the daylight, it is quite different in the dark. I carefully make my way around, and stand for a few moments in what I think is the center. After stepping out of the circle, I watch the other women, slowly finding their ways, carrying their tiny lights. I wonder if this wandering in the dark is a metaphor for our lives –each alone, trying to see the way, trying to find the center, searching for meaning, retreating here at Lodestar to find – what?

Back at the house, we prepare for bed- -some make pallets on the floor near the altar; others actually get into their beds, leaving their doors open so they can hear Geralyn’s voice as she leads us through the practice of Yoga Nidra. Yoga Nidra is a yogic sleep—a deeply relaxing practice that enables body and mind to relax, to let go. Geralyn’s melodic voice and the trance-like state her words and the music induce prepare us for deep and restful sleep. It rains during the night, and the wind causes the wind chimes on the porch outside my room to sing. I sleep the sleep of a child in this peaceful place.

Saturday, we rise to our own inner clocks, keeping Noble Silence as we move slowly into morning. The rain has stopped. I get coffee and go to the porch. The heavy rains that came in the night have left puddles on one side of the extensive porch, but I find a dry side and a comfortable rocker and sit to meditate. Six sheep are standing just outside the fence in front of me – they look like statues facing north, their backs to the wind. They, too, seem gathered for meditation. In my white furry bathrobe, I feel very much a part

of the group. The animals are as quiet and still as the surrounding landscape. Sometimes, their mouths move slowly as if chewing their thoughts. When the sheep and cows, who are farther away near the woods, do move, they glide in slow motion as if not to disturb the peace and seem one with it.

One by one, the other women come down to breakfast. It is a luxury to have food prepared for us – our only tasks are to fill our plates, rinse them out and put them in the dishwasher after eating. Jeanette’s menu includes a variety of cereals, fruits and breads. Best is a casserole of warm cinnamon French toast and turkey sausage balls. With sweet grapefruit slices, it is the perfect beginning to the day, especially eaten on the porch where, so far, in spite of January temperatures and rain, we have been able to have our meals.

Around nine a.m., GERALYN places yoga mats blankets and blocks in a circle and leads us through a gentle hatha yoga session. We stretch our muscles and bones and breathe deeply, creating interior spaciousness. As we close by bowing and saying “Namaste,” we look into each other’s eyes and deepen the bonding, which began at the lighting of candles and sharing last evening. We then draw Angel Cards. Again, we speak briefly of what our card choice could mean and how it might fit into our retreat intentions. There are several coincidences – Sheryle, who wants to be “graceful,” draws a card which suggests flexibility and shows a picture of angels floating through the air. The image on her card is almost identical to the ornament she placed on the altar. Her angels are gracefully flying on a trapeze.

After yoga, Elizabeth leads us in a journal exercise to help us discover a “theme” for our coming year. It is late in January, but we are still sensing the “newness” of the year and turning our thoughts and faces to the future. Rather than setting rigid New Year’s resolutions for ourselves, Elizabeth suggests that we weave a theme through the coming days. She gives the example of someone’s choosing a theme of “Caribbean Vacation.” Whether or not one can realize a dream trip to the Caribbean, one can eat native foods, listen to reggae, read articles and books about the area, wear island clothing, or use colorful accessories to create a Caribbean atmosphere--wherever home is. Elizabeth gives us questions to stimulate our creative thinking. Some prompts include: What are your hobbies; what do you do for fun? What are your career goals? How do you take care of yourself?

We separate to exchange ideas with a partner, then rejoin the group to discuss possible themes. The young mother, Sheryle, chooses the theme “Close to Home;” Janelle, who is getting ready to retire, thinks hers might be “Sailing into Retirement.” Finding a thread is difficult for me. I seem to repeat the same goals every year – lose weight, get healthier, walk, practice piano more – do more yoga, carve out more “me” time. Yet I find myself in the same spinning vortexes of housework and shopping and hosting friends and family. I applaud the creativity of the others, but I don’t contribute anything of my own to the discussion. I plan to huddle with my journal later in the day to write down some tentative answers to the prompts and search deeper for my “theme.” I love this idea, however. It is freeing and fun!

After a beautiful lunch of hearty soups, salmon cakes, and macaroni and cheese, Elizabeth introduces us to the vision board activity. She tells us to look for images that resonate with us—images that portray “a truth about me”—images that fit our themes and goals for the coming year. During the afternoon, people thumb through magazines, selecting and cutting out pictures and words. These visuals are then pasted onto poster board or placed around and inside a cardboard “treasure” box. This activity not only appeals to the little girl in each of us but also gives our right brains a chance to contribute to our discoveries.

Some of us, myself included, drift away, to stroll to the pond or walk the labyrinth alone, to nap or read. I take a nap and walk the pasture to the pond, then come back to listen to the stories of synchronicities and to admire the vision boards and boxes. They remind me of “Peep Boxes” – miniature scenes in shoebox bottoms covered with colored plastic paper—that I made in Vacation Bible School as a child. These collages of pictures, drawings and inspiring words help us to view our lives and ourselves as we would most desire them to be.

The afternoon has seemed endless – plenty of time for everything. That evening’s dinner is a Mexican medley. Again, we women love having someone cook for us, especially such delicious, nourishing, meals. The food itself becomes a magical part of our learning to nurture and care for ourselves. Once more, we walk the labyrinth – this time at dusk-- so we are able to see where we wandered from the path the evening before. My “center” was not the actual center of the circling paths at all. Walking the labyrinth is a meditation, purposefully placing one foot in front of the other,

keeping one's attention focused on going inward, spiraling our way to center. Once there, we pause and attempt to release worldly concerns, turning them over to a higher power. The return or retracing from center back to the beginning symbolizes a coming back to one's life, refreshed, renewed, re-strengthened.

Saturday evening, we circle our altar once more to draw Goddess Cards – yet another clue from the Universe to guide us. Mine is “Green Tara” – the goddess who represents “delegating.” I decide to take her to my room that night; she may hold a key to finding my theme. A basket of musical instruments, drums and rattles is brought out, and accompanied by drumming CD's, we drum and shake and tap our percussion instruments. We hum and dance, releasing inhibitions. We hug the warmth of movement and laughter to our hearts as we go happily to bed for another long, winter's night sleep.

Somehow in the night –did I dream it or did my journal writing take me to answers? --my theme begins to come to me. Mysteriously, a clearing appears, and I see what is needed in my life and how to bring that about. If I delegate most of the mundane chores, perhaps I can find time to focus on what I really want to do. I will be healthier, stronger, and happier. I imagine making a diorama of things that I already have. Each represents an important aspect of my life that I have short-changed with the “doing” and the “busyness.”

Sunday morning, before parting, our circle gathers for the last time to share what we have discovered during the retreat. Some read poetry or journal notes; some share their vision boards or boxes. I set up my diorama: the picture of the little dog, my walking shoes, a book entitled **WHAT MATTERS MOST**, my journal, a rose, a candle, a yoga mat, a blue glass bowl filled with water, a perfect apple, a little frog percussion instrument, and my small gold Buddha. I talk about getting healthier through wiser eating and exercise (the bowl of water represents our swimming pool), writing more; practicing music, yoga, and meditation. I will carve out the time by delegating housework and yard work. I will rearrange my priorities to put “what matters most” first.

The collage of the weekend is complete. The gentle, graceful leadership, the yoga and meditative walks, the caring companionship of other women, the rest, journaling and visioning, the nourishing food, playing and music,

laughter and silence, and the beautiful peaceful surroundings of Lodestar have all worked their magic. The word “Lodestar” means “guiding star,” especially the North Star. We have had two stars, Elizabeth and Geralyn have brought us to this special place for inspiration, and helped us to find what we needed by guiding us to seek our own inner wisdom.

When I leave Lodestar, I travel the same empty road home, noticing the same lovely scenery, but inside, I carry a sense of quiet and peace as well as anticipation and joy about returning to begin my new path. At home, I place several of the gems from my “what matters most” diorama in my kitchen window – an ever-present reminder of my own personal lodestar. Each time I look at the rose, the Buddha, the journal, I remember this precious retreat time, and I am grateful for our gracious hostesses, our gifted leaders, a new circle of friends, and to myself for taking the time for a Solitude Retreat.