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LIFE | TURNING POINTS

A New Retreat for These Times

More people are attending programs to reflect and discuss; one gathering tackles how to listen differently



Retreats help people step away from pressures of everyday life and learn about communicating better with others.

ILLUSTRATION: JON KRAUSE



By CLARE ANSBERRY

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Alex Gilchrist needed a break from the pressures of life. An economist with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. in New York City, he commutes four hours a day from Wappingers Falls, N.Y. He teaches classes one night a week. He is married and has three grown children. “There is a lot going on,” he says.

He also needed a break from talking or hearing about politics, saying dialogue had become “toxic.”

Mr. Gilchrist checked the retreat offerings at nearby Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, N.Y. One stood out: “Agents of Peace in a Time of Fear” led by Masud Ibn Syedullah and Garrett Mettler, both Episcopal priests. It promised to “create safe and constructive dialogue among those who have not had much positive conversation with each other regarding race, politics, class or religion.”

“I thought it was pretty relevant,” says Mr. Gilchrist, 54.

Retreat centers, which traditionally focus on timeless themes of contemplation, mindfulness and spirituality, are responding to current anxieties.

“We have a profound duty to meet people where they are at this moment,” says Andrew Zolli, chair of the Garrison Institute, which develops and hosts contemplative retreats in a renovated former Capuchin monastery on the banks of the Hudson River in New York.

Attendance is up 20% at Garrison programs such as “Mindfulness and Compassion Practices that Release the Trance of Fear,” since the election last November, he says. With many programs filled, the Institute is going to offer in coming months a special program off campus called “(Mis)Information Overload: Living in Truth in a Post-Truth Age” presented by a psychologist, a data scientist, a journalist, and a contemplative teacher. Garrison also plans to offer special retreats for refugees and the people caring for them.



The Garrison Institute is located in Garrison, N.Y., in a former Capuchin monastery overlooking the Hudson River. Attendance has gone up 20% at some of its programs since last November's election. PHOTO: KRIS KRUG

Anne Luther, a professor of spiritual direction who conducts retreats in South Bend, Ind., says retreats have traditionally been a time and place to step away from the world and its problems. But now people want a safe place to talk about them, without being judged, and figure out a good way to respond, says Dr. Luther. Her annual Lenten retreat will focus on: "What are the present day world challenges and opportunities that require our response and participation as 'citizens' of a wounded world?"



Rev. Masud Ibn Syedullah leads a session of the retreat "Agents of Peace in a Time of Fear." Attendees did exercises that helped them listen and have empathy for other points of view. PHOTO: BR. BERNARD, OHC

Rev. Syedullah and Rev. Mettler came up with the idea of "Agents of Peace" last summer after a string of shootings in the U.S. It evolved as the year progressed and public discourse grew polarized. They will be giving the same retreat this summer at the Taconic Retreat Center, in Milan, N.Y.

One of their main goals is to "help people establish a sense of empathy and understanding even if people hold a radically different position," says Rev. Syedullah.

That appealed to Mr. Gilchrist, who found himself and others getting wound up when people had different political or ideological stands. After he read the retreat description, he recalls thinking: "Holy cow! It would be nice to dial it down and encourage other people to dial it down. How do you do that?"

One way is by listening, a skill he thought he had developed well.

He and others at the retreat were presented with five categories and opposing preferences for each: City living versus country; foreign cars versus domestic; public schools versus private; Homeownership versus rental; and dogs versus cats.

Each person was directed to listen for two minutes, without interrupting, to someone with a different opinion on a subject and then present that person's opinion to others in the group. "Don't start to form your own argument and say 'Yeah, but,' and don't tolerate what they say and wait until they are done to make your point," advised Rev.

 TIPS FOR BEING A BETTER LISTENER:

- **Focus on the person**, not their opinions.
- **Be attentive.** Don't look around, check your phone or sigh.
- **Suspend your own judgment** and analysis until the other person is finished.
- **Don't interrupt.**
- **Don't form rebuttals in your head** while the other person is talking.
- **Summarize objectively** what the other person said.

Mettler, who says they deliberately avoided more emotionally charged subjects.

Mr. Gilchrist favored private schools, saying they aren't as constrained by budgets, which allows them to do

“crazy wonderful things.” His partner said public schools serve her and her family well and offered more diversity and better reflected the community.

“It was a turning-point experience,” says Mr. Gilchrist. He realized that something as basic and seemingly simple as listening had turned needlessly difficult. Our attention spans seem shorter and our desire to voice our own opinions is greater, especially in these heated times, he says, making listening secondary.

“We are waiting for the person to pause because we want to make our point, which of course is better than theirs,” says Mr. Gilchrist. “We need to listen without an agenda.” Most of his friends don't go on retreats. “I mention these things periodically and get quizzical looks,” says Mr. Gilchrist, who went to a retreat a year ago at Holy Cross Monastery on silence and contemplation has gone to other retreats over the years with his church.

Sarah Witmer, a 21 year old Columbia University student, didn't fully realize until the retreat how often we listen with the intention of changing the other person's mind. “We're just hearing their words but thinking of how to convince them to think another way.”

On the last day, being the economist that he is, Mr. Gilchrist organized his thoughts, drawing a rough diagram with circles and arrows showing who—the Trump administration, people and institutions—were acting on whom and how that influences us and how we interact with each other.

“I had to get those things on paper,” says Mr. Gilchrist.

He thinks he is a better listener now. “The way I approach things and think about things has absolutely changed. I know how to detach myself and get into a listening mode and try to understand the other person,” he says. “I don't have to combat it, accept it, reject or judge. It takes a lot of stress out of it.”

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