The Way is Learned by Living

Christmas 2011

the hermitage

David and Naomi Wenger
Co-Directors

Dear Friends,

We are celebrating our tenth anniversary as co-directors of The Hermitage!

As we look back over these short years, we feel immensely enriched by our contacts with you. We have been changed through serving God here. We have shared life with many of you. You have become part of our daily awareness as we hold you before the God who "hears our prayers before we speak, yet welcomes our praying."

In these ten years, we have extended a welcome to over 6,000 guests, affirming each one as "the bearer of God's infinite life." We have served countless meals, baked hundreds of loaves of bread, and mowed acres and acres of grass. We have sung and chanted, listened and consoled, laughed and cried. We have heard leaves fall after the first frost, deer snorting in the dark, and, though we hate to say it, mice in the walls. We have walked leagues on the few miles of trail covering these sixty-two acres of rolling hills. We have watched the seasons change, marveling at how God moves the earth for each one of us.

This Christmas season, we share with you a retrospective of these years. Naomi will begin by giving you a glimpse of the inner journey we have taken. David will take you through some of the activities we have participated in. Your prayers and support are why we are still doing what we do. Your presence animates our days. As you read these reflections, will you consider how you can support The Hermitage for the coming year? Thank you.

Peace to you,

David and Naomi Wenger

"It is good that you are there."

Learning the Hermitage Way

-Naomi R Wenger

In the fall of 2001, after working with Gene and Mary Herr for five months, soaking in how to run a retreat center, they were ready to move to Kansas and leave David and me to direct The Hermitage without their wisdom and experience to guide us. At one meeting, near the end of our training time, I remember expressing my frustration. We had come to The Hermitage with fifteen years of experience in running a small business. I felt we were well prepared to run the business of The Hermitage. It was the spiritual leadership for which I felt overwhelmingly underprepared. Gene kindly listened to my litany of what I thought we should know before they left then said, "Those things are better caught than taught."

I spent the next two years learning the truth of that statement and the ensuing eight appropriating each lesson, as I was ready to take it in. The journey of learning the Hermitage Way has not been easy. The first years were what we called the years of "unknowing." All that we thought we knew about ourselves, about God, about serving, or leading had to be unlearned. The way of the Hermitage is not about assessing a situation and responding, but about waiting, watching, listening, and noticing what the Spirit unfolds in front of us. Seeing life not as a series of problems to be solved but as unfolding mystery has changed both my perception and my actions.

We not only unlearned what we knew about living and contributing to the lives of others, we were literally unknown by anyone connected to The Hermitage. We were accustomed to being recognized as leaders in our church, school community, and the publishing industry. Our former neighbors knew our children and us well. Here, we couldn't see our neighbors' houses, no one in the larger community seemed to know where or what The Hermitage was, no one was demanding our gifts. The frustration of this way of life became the next big shift in my way of living. The

"better caught than taught"

Hermitage is not here to meet my needs (or the needs of anyone, for that matter). But **God** meets me, and many others, here. What the Holy Spirit does here is *not about me*. I don't get credit for that work. But, Spirit-work is the most important, though often invisible, thing that happens. Learning to do a task that no one will notice and not feel the desire to be recognized for my work is what the Hermitage is teaching me.

The key to a life of waiting and quietly responding to God's leading has been to *receive*. We are so schooled in making things happen and working for what we have that the lesson of receiving what God has already provided is practically heretical. And yet, Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "do not worry about anything, your heavenly Father knows what you need," are for us today. Repeatedly, we have seen that *what is provided is what is needed* and not the other way around. The guests who come are the people that God has provided for us to serve. And we receive them as gifts from God; we strive to see Christ in each one. The resources that come our way, money, volunteer help, gifts in kind; each is a provision. The hard lesson in this is that what I think we need, we often do not receive. What I think we already have in abundance, we sometimes receive again. God's sufficiency sometimes looks foolish and sometimes feels like scarcity. What I must address in each situation is my own expectations and the dangerous desire to get personal credit for God's work.

As I wait, this Advent season for the appearance of Jesus, both the babe and the king, I am challenged with the thought that it is enough that I am simply here. Everything else is pure gift from God. I have been encouraged by a meditation on the child of Bethlehem (at right) from Klaus Hemmerle, once a bishop of Aachen, Germany. May you find much to ponder in it; may you be "simply there."

He is simply there –
that is all
that he does
or that he can do.
But, by being there,
powerless yet radiant,
it is God himself
who is there.
God is there for us.
What, then, does this being God
in the child of Bethlehem
say to us?
It says to me and to you
and to every human being:
it is good that you are there.

-Klaus Hemmerle

Living the Hermitage Way

-David Wenger

The "lean too," just off the red trail, has been dressed up with "new" siding from old barn boards, a beautiful improvement to the chewed up siding it previously wore. The outhouse for Thoreau cabin is also "newly" sided with recycled wood from the barn project.

A recent volunteer likened The Hermitage to a dairy farm. He said the rhythm here is as steady as a farmer's milking schedule and the work is never done. He asked the question we hear repeatedly, "How do you do it all?" Of course, the answer is, "We don't do it all." But still, we do plenty. So when pressed further we go on to say, "We begin each day in the chapel with Morning Prayer, we stop our work and eat at regular intervals, we take a walk, we sit still, we finish our work at 5:30 and leave what is undone for another day. We take a weekly Sabbath, we sometimes leave our work for others to tend and go on retreat and vacation." It often feels like an unsatisfactory answer. How can any of these practices contribute to getting things done?

The Hermitage Affirmation prayer liturgy refers to this rhythm of being as a "framework to live our discipleship." The framework provides an order in which to move through our days; it is the liturgy of *ora et labora*, prayer and work. Whether our morning liturgy (meaning "work of the people") is in a barn with cows or a chapel with candles and scripture, there is a comfort to rhythm that quells the troubling thought, that illuminates the unknown way, that quiets the excess of demands. The familiar framework holds us so we don't need to hold on to our work. We simply do it.

As we review the doings at the Hermitage over the past ten years we see movement in three areas, organization, facility and program.

Organization

From an organizational perspective, the most significant shift has been the purchase of the property from founders, Gene and Mary Herr in December 2003. We are pleased to report that through monthly payments and occasional balloon payments the Hermitage debt decreased from $176,000 in 2003 to $70,000 at the end of 2011. We wish to acknowledge with gratitude the work of the

Hermitage Board in providing the structure (framework) for the organization to fulfill its mission. Some of this work has been to identify ten core values which we now use to inform our decision making process. We are grateful for a thoughtful and prayerful board. Our meeting pattern is to meet on Friday evening and again on Saturday morning. There is almost always some issue we are discussing that we hold in prayer during our sleeping hours and it's amazing to see where each of us are on the issue the following day. Thank you Hermitage Board for tending with us.

Ten Core Values

The Hermitage:

- Seeks to be a place and a way of prayer
- Orients toward experiential awareness of God's presence
- Extends hospitality
- Is a community
- Finds the basis of understanding the Mystery in the Word of God
- Works for reconciliation
- Receives what is offered in exchange for services provided
- Takes seriously God's invitation to steward the earth
- Supports the work of God in the world by encouraging the Body of Christ
- Provides the service of Spiritual Direction to guests

Volunteers are always a welcome gift to us and to those who retreat here. Some come for a day to do the laundry, clean the buildings or do grounds work, others come for a weekend to prepare and serve meals. Please don't hesitate to ask if there is anything that you can do to help. There is always a task to fit your ability and availability.

Facility

There have been major improvements to the facility especially during the past two years when substantial giving made it possible to do larger projects: new roofs on Nazareth, St. Joseph's Barn and Caryll House, the re-siding of St. Joseph's Barn, a kitchen make-over, and an expanded parking lot. The most recent improvement that we are eager to report is the completion of an apartment in Ken Hanby Center. After a long time dreaming about it, we began work nearly two years ago. In October this year, the space was finished; it is lovely and is being used regularly already. We have named the new apartment Teresa to represent the Carmelite influences of Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux. Teresa apartment will be used for short and/or long term resident volunteers as well as overflow guest space.

With stewardship of the earth being one of the Hermitage core values, we have been recycling old boards from St. Joseph's Barn in creative ways this year. Barn boards were used as wainscoting and trim for the Teresa apartment. (See pictures at left.)

Program

People often ask, "What is the program of The Hermitage?" We have grown in ease with describing the primary program of the Hermitage as silence and solitude. A decade of watching the transformation that happens when people are simply in the

presence of Spirit without having to produce anything, fix anything or be anything for anyone has reinforced the impact of such a simple program. We hear appreciation from guests for the "unstructured structure" of the Hermitage. Daily Morning Prayer, monthly Taizé Evensong, Spiritual Direction, Advent and Lent guided retreats, the annual Feast of Transfiguration retreat and Hermitage Jam workday all provide a framework for being held in silence and solitude.

Recently a guest at The Hermitage looked at me intently and with deep sincerity said, "thank you for holding this space." Her gratitude was certainly heart-felt and deeply moving, however I was most taken by the simplicity with which she described our purpose at The Hermitage, holding this space. We are holders of space that invites silence, solitude, attention, intention, rest, peace, love, gratitude and more. We are blessed to hold this space. We are blessed by those who hold this space with us. We are blessed in being transformed by the continuous tending of The Hermitage these ten years.

Can you help "hold this space" for attentiveness to God by making a year-end contribution to The Hermitage? Charitable giving comprises one-third of the annual Hermitage budget. We gratefully receive what you are able to give. All donations are tax deductible.

This large mural, a reproduction of a 12th century miniature from an Armenian Gospel manuscript, hangs on the wall of the Chapel of the Transfiguration. It is on loan from Dan and Patrice Maljanian.

I am
here on this
earth to be a link
between the Word and
the world, a mentor and
message that brokenness
offered to God can be a
source of blessing to
oneself and the
cosmos.

-Kent Ira Groff, *Facing East, Praying West*