



Views from

the hermitage

Creating an environment of attentiveness to God

The Golden Key & Prayer

In George MacDonald's fairy tale, *The Golden Key*, a young boy, Mossy, hears about a golden key from his great-aunt. Being naturally curious, he would often ask her, "And what is the key for? What is it the key of? What will it open?"

"That nobody knows," his aunt would reply. "He has to find that out."

"I suppose, being gold," the boy once said, thoughtfully, "that I could get a good deal of money for it if I sold it."

"Better never find it than sell it," returned his aunt.

Mossy's curiosity sends him on a journey in which he soon and easily finds the key, but then discovers that it is not enough to have the key, he must find the key-hole. The journey to find the key-hole is life-forming. And as we come to the end of the story, we see that it has been life-consuming, too. For when Mossy finds the key-hole, his life comes to an end.

As in any good fairy tale, the story is not wholly contained in the plot but expands into the reader's life, sometimes teaching, sometimes affecting change, always drawing the reader in.

The search for the key and then the key-hole provides many parallel insights into the life of prayer. First, the key is mysterious and essentially instrumental. That is, it cannot be fully understood by those who use it. Also, it is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Prayer is something, like a key, that we can carry with us, use often, and is necessary for getting us to our destination, but it is neither the vehicle nor the power for our journey. Then, having the key in one's possession requires use and the constant vigilant search for the key-hole that it opens. The key-hole is the goal of our prayer—communion with God. The key is needed to find out what is *beyond*, or in C.S. Lewis' fine phrase, what is "further up and further in."

We might think knowing how to pray, in one way or another, is good enough. Or that once we learn a method, we can teach others and "market" our findings. "Better never find it," cautions Mossy's great-aunt, "than sell it." Prayer is for our use. That means that we must find out what it will lead us to discover about ourselves and

about God. We find the value of prayer when we *use* prayer. There is nothing valuable in a key that does not have a corresponding lock. The key *opens* the lock so that the treasure or room or mystery on the other side of the lock may be accessed. What is of value is beyond the key, beyond the lock, and within or beyond.

This may be underselling the key a bit. After all, it is a *golden* key, encrusted with sapphires, one that causes all who notice the key in Mossy's hand to give him aid, safe passage, or special attention. And so with prayer, it is a necessary part of our spiritual awakening, precious in itself, precisely because by prayer we acknowledge that we are not alone, we do not function as spiritual beings without reference to an Ultimate Spiritual Being. But the reference can sometimes get lost in the details of life. At times, Mossy wonders why he still has the key since it is just something to carry on a weary journey in which he seems to have become lost. "What is that key for, do you think?" asks the Old Man of the Sea.

"For a keyhole somewhere. But I don't know why I keep it. I never could find the keyhole. And I have lived a good while, I believe," said Mossy, sadly. "I'm not sure that I'm not old. I know my feet ache."

Just so, the foot-aches of life crowd prayer into an unacknowledged and unused trifle.

So, how do we keep our prayer-life fresh? One way might be to keep looking at the key, keep asking Mossy's questions about purpose. We might keep asking what our prayer is for. Why do we pray? When do we pray? What is the fruit of our prayer? I'm sure that these questions will keep prayer fresh for each of us. For the answers are varied and interesting. They are answers that change the course of our lives and keep us more aware of the journey than of our tired feet.

Another way might be to focus on the quest itself. What are we seeking? The key-hole, of course, and having set our way on this course, the key becomes not a burden but a delightful reminder of what lies ahead. We have the hope of constant communion with God to coax us onward and inward on our journey.

Mossy's own journey ends with wondrous colors and strains of heavenly music at the key-hole.

The light came from the moon, but it did not look like moon light, for it gleamed through those seven pillars in the middle, and filled the place with all colours. And now Mossy saw that there was a pillar beside the red one, which he had not observed before. And it was of the same new colour that he had seen in the rainbow when he saw it first in the fairy forest. And on it he saw a sparkle of blue. It was the sapphires round the keyhole.

He took his key. It turned in the lock to the sounds of Aeolian music. A door opened upon slow hinges, and disclosed a winding stair within. The key vanished from his fingers.... Mossy [went up]. The door closed behind [him]. [He] climbed out of the earth; and, still climbing, rose above it. [He was] in the rainbow. Far abroad, over ocean and land, [he] could see through its transparent walls the earth beneath [his] feet. Stairs beside stairs wound up together, and beautiful beings of all ages climbed along with [him].
-Naomi Wenger

("The Golden Key" is the story of two children of which Mossy's tale is the simplest. Tangle's tale is deeper and also instructive for the deeper life. The full public domain text of this story can be found at: www.mrena.com/misc/GoldKey.shtml.)

Feast of the Transfiguration

Each year we observe the Feast of the Transfiguration at the Hermitage on the Saturday nearest August 6 (the official feast day). Why do we keep this particular feast?

First, we keep this feast because it reminds us of our mission. We are here to provide a place and a way to pray. Jesus took his disciples to a particular place where they had an encounter with the Holy. The particularity of place and the experience of God are reflected in our mission statement and in the testimonies of those who come to the Hermitage and meet God in some way.

Second, we keep the feast because it most clearly represents our intention to be followers of Christ. The Transfiguration experienced by the three disciples was like looking through the keyhole (see earlier article on prayer). They caught a glimpse of God in glory. Though these sightings may be rare now, they are what we are eventually intended for in eternity. Celebrating our awareness now of the presence (glory) of God in all of life and encouraging each other in this awareness is why we gather for this feast.
-Naomi Wenger

Hermitage Jam

We were delighted with the first Hermitage Jam held in conjunction with the Feast of the Transfiguration. Several people of all ages gathered on Friday before the

feast to pick our blackberry crop and to make jam. Given the drought and heat, the berry canes were woefully short of berries so the small number of people gathered to pick seemed just right. We were surprised by God's providence, picking more than we thought possible and making 16 jars of jam for use during the winter. Though our intention had been to make enough to sell, we made what we could use. We are, however, going to be selling jam from a local supplier until next harvest. Look for the jars for sale at your next visit. Below are the reflections of two of the participants.



The task seemed daunting until I got to know the berry patch. There were two players. Berry canes with berries on them and those without any fruit. They were easy to distinguish for the ones that had born fruit died in their effort. The canes were dark and the leaves withered and brown. But these were the canes that provided the fruit for the Hermitage Jam. Because of the lack of rain, the fruit was sparse and scattered throughout the patch.

What a great experience of the gospel. There were far more green canes, holding promise for a more abundant harvest in future years. These canes played a role too. They were the guardians of the fruit. For in order for us to reach the harvest we had to cut or step on the green canes. As in all of life, each played a role in the whole. Thanks be to God for the lessons of the berry patch.
-Alan Martling



I found it ironic that when we determined to harvest the wild blackberries with more intention this year, there were fewer berries than any other summer I can recall. In the weeks leading up to Hermitage Jam I checked the vines periodically, always coming away with the same sinking feeling-I don't think we will have any berries to pick. The one or two berries I did see were likely to be eaten by the birds, fall to the ground or shrivel up in the heat before we got to them.

So when it came time to brave the merciless berry canes and gather what fruit we could, I had very low expectations. I wasn't surprised that the kerplink, kerplunk of berries hitting the bottom of my bucket continued for the first half hour of effort. I was surprised, however, by the hilarity I experienced whenever I came upon a cluster of ripened berries. Moving ever deeper into the thicket, I stomped down empty canes and peered under leaf cover to find the treasure I sought, and when it appeared, I broke out in laughter.

I've named this experience "the hilarity of scarcity". I didn't expect much from the mostly barren berry canes, so that what I did find seemed like abundance, causing a well of gratitude to fill up inside me and spill over into laughter and joy.
-David Wenger

Divine Comedy Retreat, Part 2

Following the *Divine Comedy* retreat this past spring, participants indicated an interest in deepening their study and experience of Dante's classic. The purpose of the initial retreat was opening up the literary and spiritual work for participants to explore their own journey of personal transformation; thus the program content was general, providing an overview or survey. The November retreat will focus and travel deeper into particular dimensions of the work. One need not have attended the April retreat to participate in the November event.

The *Divine Comedy* retreat, November 2-4, will begin with supper on Friday and conclude with lunch on Sunday. The cost is \$185, which covers lodging, meals, and materials. A registration deposit of \$25 must be received by October 20 in order to reserve your place. Please make checks payable to The Hermitage, writing "*Divine Comedy* retreat" on the memo line, and mail to 11321 Dutch Settlement Road, Three Rivers, MI 49093.

Advent Quiet Days

The tradition of setting aside several days of quiet preparation for during Advent will continue this year on Wednesday, November 28, Friday, December 7 and Saturday, December 8. The theme for this year's guided retreat is "Desert Dance." We will meet each day from 8 am–3 pm, beginning with Morning Prayer in the Chapel. Cost, \$45. To register, contact us: thehermitage@juno.com or 269-244-8696.

Reflections on Retreat

We often receive heart-formed comments from guests about their stay here. They encourage us. Here is a small sampling of the thoughts, prayers and observations left by guests.

- *In a place of spiritual oasis God provides and delights—all the flowers and grasses, the deer, the butterflies, the music of the crickets...*
- *Thank you for a place to experience complete rest, relaxation and solitude. I've experienced God's greatness and glory. I came with dryness and thirst. I leave with my soul magnifying the Lord!*
- *Coming to the Hermitage is like coming home.*
- *...a feast of silence*
- *To come home to self is very important to me. It is here that I remember who I am, a beloved child of God.*
- *Here I have been found and given life which now sustains and energizes me for all that is to come, all that will forever be!*
- *We are made from love and to love we shall return.*
- *Somewhere between "shipwrecked" and "secure" I was led here...to "be still and know that I am."*

The Hermitage Calendar

- Oct 14 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
- Nov 2-4 Divine Comedy Retreat
(Part 2)
- Nov 11 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
Nov 28 Advent Quiet Day, 8—3
- Dec 7 Advent Quiet Day, 8—3
Dec 8 Advent Quiet Day, 8—3
Dec 9 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
- Jan 13 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
- Feb 10 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
- Mar 9 Taizé Evensong, 7:00
- Apr 13 Taizé Evensong, 7:00

- *I believe again that God is good.*
 - *I saw trees sway and entire valleys swept up with Christ's whispers—and I remember who I am.*
 - *Holy Ground, Holy Space, Holy Time, Holy.*
 - *An active reminder to keep breathing the breath of God.*
 - *Such food is a form of contemplative prayer! Thank you.*
- And finally, a poem:

(with apologies to e. e. cummings)

*i thank You God for this most amazing week:
yes, here are the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and yes for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes.*

*yes to God's presence, yes to God's power,
yes to God's Eternal "yes"
blessing and honor and glory to him
who sits on the throne and unto the Lamb.*

*yes to community, formed in silence, wrought in
wonder*

*yes to the two who make it all new
and three who came here to be
and yes to all who come to be, too.*

yes, yes, yes.

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*



the hermitage

11321 Dutch Settlement

Three Rivers, MI 49093

269-244-8696 ° Fax 269-244-5856

thehermitage@juno.com

www.hermitagecommunity.org

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Taizé Services: Second Sundays at Seven, Chapel of the Transfiguration

The Word Alone

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will
be with you;
And through rivers, they shall not
overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire you shall
not be burned,
And the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
Because you are precious in my eyes,
And honored, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
Peoples in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you.

Isaiah 43:1b-3a, 4-5a

the hermitage **Mission**

As Jesus was revitalized for being about his Father's business by periodic withdrawal to retreat and prayer, so The Hermitage seeks in its mission:

- *To be a prayer community, available as a place of spiritual formation where scripture, silence, nature, group experiences, and personal companioning are cultivated elements of retreat.*
- *To provide a guesthouse away from daily tasks where pastors and other pilgrims can deepen their call and relationship with God, be refreshed in their whole person and be revitalized by the presence and promise of Christ.*

(from The Hermitage Rule)

Resident Community: David & Naomi Wenger,
co-directors, Anthony Franchina

Board of Directors: Mary Asmonga-Knapp,
Robert Charles, Allan Martling, Natala Mohl,
Larry Terlow (chair), David Wenger, Naomi
Wenger