



# *views from the hermitage*

*Creating an environment of attentiveness to God*



**At the Feast of the Transfiguration** celebration on August 7, I observed all the friends who gathered that day. For some, their ties extend back when The Hermitage was only a vision while others have known The Hermitage for a few years. I looked over these caring friends and felt a deep sense of gratitude.

**Thank you** for heeding the call to come away and rest a while. **Thank you** for offering one another the gift of silence. **Thank you** for rebuilding the Hut deck. **Thank you** for mowing our grass. **Thank you** for sharing your first-time anxiety about coming on retreat. **Thank you** for joining us in morning prayer. **Thank you** for serving on our board. **Thank you** for leaving notes about your retreat experience. **Thank you** for reading and heeding our guest instructions. **Thank you** for letting me know when a light isn't working. **Thank you** for coming to host for a weekend or a week so that the staff can have a break. **Thank you** for being attentive to God's movement in your life. **Thank you** for putting up with our occasional messiness. **Thank you** for sharing your delight in this place. **Thank you** for remaking your bed for the next guest. **Thank you** for your financial support. **Thank you** for your notes of appreciation. **Thank you** for helping build the new staff residence. **Thank you** for spreading the word about The Hermitage. **Thank you** for sharing in our life together.

There are times when I feel the weight of The Hermitage on my shoulders as if I alone hold this place. But then I raise my eyes to see this great cloud of witnesses who love and tend The Hermitage in so many ways. And I raise my eyes to our caring God who holds all of this in God's loving hands. And I am filled with gratitude. The Hermitage Community is vast, beautiful, and abundant. **Thank you** to each one of you for helping hold the ministry of The Hermitage.

*—Kevin Driedger*



## Building a House Built of Sky - Progress Report, August 2021

### *The spirituality of plastering*

*By David Wenger*

In early May, our son-in-law, Dan Truesdale gave us a lesson in natural plastering. Dan has built several houses using natural plaster for the walls, and we were eager to learn from him. Naomi and our daughter, Margaret, mixed several batches of plaster using sand, clay, hydrated lime, cut straw and enough water to hold it all together. Dan and I started troweling it onto the lath framing. Soon Dan stepped back and watched my attempts at mimicking his techniques, then added a few more helpful hints and classified me a certified plasterer.

### **Getting it done vs. doing the work**

As the afternoon tutorial ended, I looked at the small bit of wall we covered, calculated the people hours worked and immediately tried to determine when we might be done with the entire job. I asked Dan, "What do you think, how long is it going to take us to finish the interior and exterior walls, a month, two months?" Dan replied thoughtfully something to the effect, "That's not really a way that I think, 'when will the job be done?'" Of course, there are so many variables to consider that predicting a finish date based on one afternoon of effort was impossible. However, what I heard Dan saying is that he tries to approach work with the focus on **doing the task**, more than **getting it done**. This doesn't mean that the job is never finished, it only changes the focus from getting it done to doing the work that is before you each day. It reminds me of a saying from the Talmud, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

### **Begin to slow down**

Plastering is in the realm of "the hurrieder I go, the behinder I get." If I try to apply too much plaster at a time, it can fall off the trowel or fall off the lath. If I move my trowel too quickly or erratically the same thing can happen. Plastering is slow work; patient work; rhythmic work. These months of plastering have provided loads of practice in moving at a pace that supports my well-being.

### **Every move counts**

When smoothing plaster, it is essential that you hold the trowel at a 15-degree angle from the wall. If the trowel is not angled, it can easily get stuck to the plaster. At that point, if you quickly pull the trowel off the plaster you pull the plaster off with it and you are back to where you started. Rather you want to slowly slide the trowel to an unfinished edge before lifting it off and most times you can save your work. Every move counts. And, so it is with living and loving. Be mindful of each move so that you might avoid getting stuck. When you do get stuck, move gently and carefully to the nearest point of release.

The task of plastering the house built of sky has been daunting and exhausting. It has also been enjoyable and satisfying. At the end of the day, I stand back to admire the beauty of a wall created from gifts of Earth and Sky and feel grateful for good work to do.

*(Progress Report, continued)*

## *A House Built of Sky?*

*By Naomi Wenger*

I often wonder what folks think when Jay Budde (chair of the Property Committee for the Board of Directors), says boldly, “Welcome to the House Built of Sky,” at the beginning of a workday. It is a name we used from the fundraising phase of this project, borrowed from the natural building community. It sounds rather grandiose for a house really built of wood and earth and a little bit of human ingenuity. So, what is a house built of sky? It starts with sky. The sky is the container for all that sits on the surface of Earth. It contains clouds, air, flying things and is bounded by a horizon. It is also a lens for the Sun’s energy to be turned into life on Earth.

### **A place for seeing**

But more metaphorically, a sky is a place where we can see what is going on around us. Even in the forested mountainside, where the sky gets limited to what is peeking between leaves of the trees clinging to the steep side of a hollow, it is the sky that allows one to see what lies along the ground. The sky delivers light to us in great packets of daylight or in small pinpricks of the stars at night. And by the light, we see. So, what we hope for in this house is that those who will live here will become better seers. That as they walk in the Light they bring Light to another’s path. That they will see what God has made, every moment of each day, and give thanks.

### **A place of dreams**

A sky is not only a place for seeing, it is also a place for dreams. D. H. Lawrence once said, “If you build castles in the air, it is wise to put foundations under them.” This house is, in part, a castle in the air - it is realizing a dream to build a house that will help us reduce our dependence on oil and other fossil fuels. We began building this house from clay and straw. This method has been used by people around the globe to create strong, warm houses for thousands of years: straw mixed with clay soil to provide a filling for a timber structure. The walls are finished with natural plasters. In this method, a “house built of sky” sequesters carbon and uses Earth products before they have been overly processed, thus reducing our overall carbon footprint. The foundation of this dream is earth, air, sky, trees and a lot of sweat.

### **A place called “home”**

We are not yet done building the foundation under our dream, but the house has taken shape and we are on the last phase of applying the finishes that will make it a home: heat, kitchen cabinets, upstairs flooring, finish plaster and paint, bathroom fixtures, lights, and landscaping. And making a home has been the goal all along. Like Rivendell in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, we want this to be “the last homely house,” and a place of rest for those tending to the guests, the facilities, and the land of The Hermitage. The comforts of home go beyond the walls and fittings of a house. In a home, there is nourishment, rest, love, and belonging. We are working to build systems into this house that will aid in achieving those qualities.

### **A place of blessing**

As we labor to this end, we are aware that a house built of sky is also a place of blessing. Over the months of building, we have used several blessings to spur us on in our work. Lately, I’ve been singing a blessing at church each Sunday that seems like it was made for this project. Only, I’d change the words a little bit to: “Come, my friends, in grace, beneath the blessed sky. When you’re here, God is here, beneath the blessed sky.”



### House Volunteers

As we work on this House Built of Sky, we are not working alone. A “Big Sky” thank you to these folks who have helped us over the Summer to plaster inside and outside, cut and hang metal lath, prepare the “subfloor,” build the stairs, and dig some rain diversion trenches:

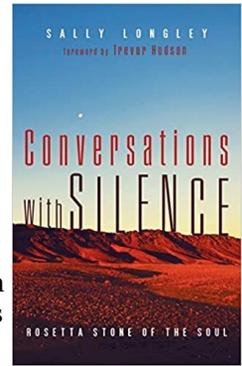
- Jay Budde
- Dennis Gable
- Jane Stoltzfus Buller
- Mary Asmonga-Knapp
- Jackson Bement
- Benjamin, Eli, Wyatt, Ezra, Nora, and Seth Tennant
- Tim Lind
- AMBS Explore! group: Teresa, Marcos, and 4 students
- Alfred Momodu
- Monica Lackman
- Andrew Hudson
- Jerry & Jan Warstler
- John Baer
- Fred Schaufele
- Dan Truesdale
- Margaret Wenger
- Mike Topash



### Book Review

By Naomi Wenger

*Conversations with Silence: Rosetta Stone of the Soul* by Sally Longley, (Cascade Books, 2020), 156 pp.



Riding on a coach across the desert in Upper Egypt at sunrise, the enormous sun dominates the landscape, in fact, is the only moving object above the horizon. But what captures the attention *is* the horizon—the unmoving immenseness of sand. When the coach stops at the temple Abu Simbel, and we emerge into the fresh, cool morning air, where we are the first visitors to arrive, it is absolutely still. In this immensity, in this stillness, one can begin to imagine sheer silence.

In her book on silence, Dr. Sally Longley captures that feeling. Sally Longley and I shared this journey in Egypt. We connected over our shared practice of offering spiritual direction. Sally has a spiritual direction and retreat facilitation practice in Sydney, Australia and has studied theology in London, South Africa, and USA. Her many experiences with silence create doorways and window glimpses into the great abyss of Divine Silence. This is a book for initiating practice. As she writes in the introduction,

There is much more to the experience of silence [than peace], and we may need to be undone first by the work of the Spirit who uses varied silences as the vocabulary of God to call us into a different way of being.

Her contribution to the spiritual literature on silence is a refreshing read. Though only about 150 pages long, it invites a long, slow perusal. Each of the seven chapters inspires the reader to access their own silent depths and the silence of God. She leads us by personal experience and by imagination into various realms of silence.

Longley uses silence as that which both unlocks the inner mysteries of the soul’s culture and forms the language of communication with God. While the idea that silence is the meeting place of the human soul and Divine reality is not new, she gives silence both personality and story.

Each chapter also utilizes what Longley calls, “Interpretive Lenses.” We are invited to examine the narrative of each chapter through the wisdom of teachers from the past, by using social analysis, and with the aid of artists. In its brevity, this book manages to open the experience of silence to many learning styles. It is both narratively engaging and analytically astute.

I recommend this book to those who are ready for an immersive experience and a challenge to confront their own silence and the Silence of God.



At the Feast of the Transfiguration Willard Roth, lifelong friend of Hermitage founder Eugene (Gene) Herr, shared stories of their friendship and how it shaped their individual faiths. Roth also spoke of the dream of a place like The Hermitage and of making the vision into reality.



### Deepest Thanks

The Hermitage thrives due to the generous help of our volunteers. If you sense God's nudging to volunteer, please contact Kevin to offer your time and skills: [Kevin@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:Kevin@hermitagecommunity.org)

We are grateful to:

**Ned Arnold** - bookkeeping and creating financial reports;

**The Bierma Family** - guest hosting;

**Andrew Hudson** - redoing the Hut deck;

**Larry and Judy Somers** - making sure we are always stocked with water and granola; mowing grass;

**The Tennant Family** - guest hosting;

**Abby Willis** - weekend guest hosting;

Lastly, and continuously, we are grateful for **all the board members** who carry many tasks for The Hermitage year-round.

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## Creating an environment of attentiveness to God

### Retreating at The Hermitage

As Jesus was revitalized for begin 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 companionship are cultivated elements of retreat.
- To provide a guesthouse away from the 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.

If you would like to join us for retreat of any length, contact us by phone: 269-244-8696, email: [contact@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:contact@hermitagecommunity.org), or find us on the web: [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org). We provide silence, solitude, spiritual direction, guided group retreats, space for groups to meet, community morning prayer, simple healthful food, walking trails, and a gentle atmosphere. You provide the willing spirit.

### Board of Directors

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