

Hermit Hour

This year of grace 2020 has called for a lot of staying indoors, hasn't it?

For many, it's been one long season of comfy pants, questioning existence, snacks on snacks, and hovering by the window to surveil the neighborhood like a vigilant dowager. In truth, that's not all that different from my non-global meltdown routine.

Others have had to constantly be out there during extremely disorienting times, and for that I say *thank you* to each and every essential worker there is. Most everyone now has had to deal with an enforced sense of reclusiveness, whether physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or in a mishmash of all of those ways.

It's had me thinking of the Hermit. Yes, that Hermit. Black robes, milky knee-length beard, walking stick, lantern, cave, doing away with society and its superficialities. The unsociable warlock who'd rather occupy a hovel in the earth than entertain small talk and shallow minds.

Funny notions come to mind, sort of mean-spirited ones. For many, the word "hermit" sounds synonymous with a squatter who hates mankind, skins rats alive, and talks to bones. And who's probably a creepy religious zealot too.

It may have to do with Western culture's subtle aversion to introversion. Those who prefer a withdrawn life and keep little to no company must have something weird going on. You should be out there making friends, hooking up, settling down, buying stuff, buying more stuff, and plastering it all over social media to escape dying alone. Whoah, sorry, hahah.

All stereotypes aside, to me, the Hermit's life is not freakish, or some outcome to be avoided at all costs. It's a life of introspection, finding a sense of high living from simpler means, and making dazzling inner discoveries in the absence of quite so many stimuli. With things changing *out there* and more time spent ruminating inside our heads, on some level, like it or not, we can all relate.

So let's perhaps view the Hermit in a kindlier light. There's no need for any of us to abandon our cities or circles of acquaintances for shelters hewn of living rock. Though there's plenty to learn from the Hermit's ability to just sit alone and heal from within, without blaming or holding expectations of others.

But first, some exploits from hermiticism's surprisingly colorful past.

Ever since bands of people began banding together, I suspect there were those happier on the fringes of the group. The archetypes of the wise, rustic man or woman, the witchdoctor or

herbalist in their secluded hut, the faraway guru, the stranger, the outcast, the odd duck; all are common threads running through lots of cultures.

It's said in ancient China Lao-Tzu grew despondent and fled the vanities of the emperor's court over the mountains, taking a belief that society impairs individual development and the tenets of Taoism with him.

The Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes lived as a threadbare, obnoxious outsider in a large tub on the streets of Athens for some time during the 4th Century BCE. Some describe it as a wine barrel or a big clay pot. It's he who said, "It is the privilege of the gods to want nothing, and of godlike men to want little," and "I am a citizen of the world." He also said, "In a rich man's house there is no place to spit but his face."

He had the energy of prosperity backwards, but he was and still is a respected thinker. Alexander the Great made a trip to see him, and was told to get out of the way and stop blocking the sun. And the artistic imagination has enjoyed creating epic history paintings starring him languishing nobly in his giant jar. Others thought he was nuts. I LOL'ed at an article on *Medium* in which author Mustapha Itani calls him Diogenes, the Philosopher Troll. His hobgoblin reputation stemmed from his sabotage of social customs and niceties, which he saw as phony illusions. He thought happiness came from meeting one's individual needs, that what is natural cannot be shameful or indecent, and that there shouldn't be any difference between private and public actions.

It's said he touched himself and defecated in the open, and sometimes lived among and studied dogs, even lifting his leg to urinate on those who mocked him by throwing bones. There are accounts of him muddying the fine carpets of fellow philosophers to stain their pride, and of him lighting a lantern in broad daylight, searching for one honest human being. He wasn't a total isolationist, but Diogenes sure had the "To thine own self be true" thing down.

There's a tale of a boy hermit named Anatolius, who lived in modern-day Bordeaux during the 6th Century CE. It's said he was released from an apprenticeship with a merchant at the age of twelve, and chose to take up a life of prayerful fasting in the local catacombs. There he stayed for years, eventually losing his mind to the notion that demons were attacking him from within and without. He busted up the crypts and the townsfolk dragged him out for a failed intervention.

Though apocryphal stories tell that Saint Paul of Thebes, the first Christian hermit saint, lived happily alone in the Egyptian desert from adolescence until the ripe age of 112 or 113, on the shade and sustenance provided by one palm tree, and a daily half-loaf of bread sent by God via a raven messenger.

Saint Jerome, who lived as a hermit for a time, wrote Paul's biography and those of a couple other notable recluses. Jerome is perhaps Western art history's all time favorite hermit to

depict, with his long, white beard and a human skull kept handy, often writing with a quill in an open book. And the ages have seen, no one can say quite how many if they lived and died alone, but *many* other, Christian hermits, Buddhist hermits, Hindu hermits, Taoist hermits, Sufi hermits, Hascidic hermits... hermits of most faiths and belief systems, really.

In terms of myth and legend, the Titan Prometheus, who stole the gift of fire from Zeus and gave it to humanity, is sometimes seen in a hermit-like light for the punishment he endured. He was immortal, and got chained to a remote rock for all eternity with his flesh exposed to an eagle that would fly in and eat his liver. And his liver regenerated each night to be pecked apart anew each day. Luckily, Hercules passed by years later and shot the eagle out of the sky with his bow. What Prometheus did after getting freed isn't clear, but seems pretty discreet.

King Arthur's buddy Merlin the Wizard has been named many things. One of them is definitely the Wild Man of the Wood, who fled a battlefield without his sanity for the peaceful Caledonian Forest and learned to tap into his magic and clairvoyance. And knights errant on the quest for the Holy Grail were always running into hermits full of advice on how to purify their worldly souls.

The modern era is not without its solitary sorts either. Some taken seriously, others not so much. In the seventeenth century, the French writer Jean de La Fontaine wrote a popular fable based on a story first adapted by Bocaccio, which took a humorous swipe at the virtue of the hermetic lifestyle. In de La Fontaine's version, a wealthy widower named Philippe was so transformed by grief upon the death of his young wife, that he left town and took his son to live a pure and sinless life in a nearby mountain cave.

They kept away until the boy turned eighteen, when his father decided the time was right to expose him to the outside world. In town, they crossed paths with a group of fashionable young ladies. When the boy asked what the beautiful creatures were, his father told him they were geese. "Oh, agreeable goose, sing that I might hear your voice!" cried the son in delight. "Father, I beg you, let us take one home with us."

In other cases, it was the fashionable ladies who wanted to bring the hermit home. No joke, during the Georgian era in the 18th Century, it was trendy among the English aristocracy to keep an ornamental hermit in the garden. Alongside the green lawns of their country houses, wealthy landowners would also construct fanciful architectural follies, often including hermitages in the form of enchanting little caves, grottoes, rockeries, and "contemplative gazebos." And you simply can't have a hermitage without a hermit.

Since real ones were hard to acquire, nobles would put out ads and often establish a contractual agreement with a man who could play the part. Here's an excerpt of one such contract: *(A hermit must) continue on the Hermitage seven years, where he shall be provided with a Bible, optical glasses, a mat for his feet, a hassock for his pillow, an hourglass for his timepiece, water for his beverage, and food from the house. He must wear a camlet robe, and*

never, under any circumstances, must he cut his hair, beard, or nails, stray beyond the limits of Mr. Hamilton's grounds, or exchange one word with the servant.

A kept hermit might have to come out of his shelter at appointed hours so his patrons could observe and admire him in his state of pleasing melancholy. (Melancholy reflected a penetrating, refined mind, a trait only the upper classes could be capable of, and was very much *à la mode* at the time.)

The hermit was often either barred from speaking to guests, or made to wait on them and answer their curious questions. But if he could last the full seven years, he would receive a princely sum of 600 to 700 pounds, enough to never have to hermit himself out again.

Across the pond the following century, Henry David Thoreau secluded himself in the wilderness near his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts for two years, two months, and two days. It was the famous sabbatical from civilization during which he lived on Walden Pond. Thoreau was a Transcendentalist. He saw the spirit and intelligence of God in every being and in all of nature, a mindset that just might resonate with you too. He went to the woods to live deliberately, to suck the marrow from the bones of life to be sure he hadn't missed something important when he reached death's door. Were secrets of existence revealed to him?

In his own words:

"I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him...and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

That's the green light from Thoreau to follow your heart. Your world both declutters and expands beyond the limits of others. You align with the one consciousness that pulses through all creation, revealing beauty instead of burdens. And your own principles, purpose, and the path forward come more clearly into view.

He only did a short stint compared to the lifetime commitment made by others, but Thoreau's reflections refer to the most valuable possession of the Hermit -- the home within. That place in your heart where no one else can truly go.

It's there we can practice a form of detachment that welcomes in the greater flow. It is the place that will never forget its innate connection to divine source. I know, it can be a dark,

cavernous place too. Though any turbulence within the home base of the heart is really presenting an opportunity to heal and know yourself better.

According to the overlord of modern tarot cards, Arthur Edward Waite, who wrote his book of interpretations in 1911, the Hermit is a quiet mentor. Living discreetly, the Hermit has reckoned with the many layers of himself and of reality, and stands ready to share his gifts of understanding with those who seek his wisdom, not necessarily to hide out of sight.

The Hermit is a guide offering a type of nomadic sanctuary, a placidity inside oneself, a deeply rooted connection to source, that can be carried wherever one goes. After all, his lantern does cast a glow for everyone to see.

So while human practice has been kind of iffy through the ages, in theory, the Hermit has chilled alone and done the inner work that allows him to greet all with love. He's learned to dwell peacefully in his own center, without a dependence on outer approval. He's learned that tending to the truth of one's own soul is a bold way to serve and honor all creation. His self-exploration and ego mastery has revealed more of this energetic universe to him, he has assumed his place as an equal piece of the whole, and he really has nothing left to prove, just to be.

Those who grew up as only children like me may have a slight advantage. Without time alone to keep my own counsel I turn into a total grinch. Though I know finding serenity in introspection doesn't come easily for everyone. The company of others can give us a real sense of purpose and can divert our buzzing minds. But true change and healing only comes from within, and that's what makes the Hermit so great, he shows us how to calmly wrangle with what's going on inside. To channel your inner hermit, you don't have to ghost everyone you know and love. But you do have to face yourself.

One of the best methods I know for finding deeper inner peace is a practice often called shadow work. Sounds spooky. But it's really quite illuminating. It just takes vulnerability.

In essence, you acknowledge the fact that we all have a darker streak within us. The light wouldn't look so light without the dark, they are two sides of the same coin. It's that piece of us that spits out fear and anger and succumbs to the criticisms of the ego mind, the piece we'd rather slick some veneer over and not fess up to. Definitely not what you'd fling out there on a first date. When dealt with lovingly, it's the piece of us that shows us how to free up our hearts.

I've uploaded a short hermit-themed, shadow work meditation to the Candid Sphinx website and Youtube channel, so do check that out. But here's the most straightforward way of trying it out yourself that I can think of. Next time you're feeling downright nasty for whatever reason, find a few moments in a quiet space and do three things.

One, ask yourself, what hurts right now?

Two, really feel and accept the hurt.

Three, then ask, what can I shift to heal this?

Identifying our feelings lets us do just that -- identify our feelings as feelings, not as our whole identity. We can then send love to our feelings, for being what makes us human and for trying to protect us. And we can take responsibility for how our reactions shape our reality, realizing we truly have control when we choose to let go of wounds and attitudes that do not serve us.

Do yourself the kindness of going gently within and asking your highest self to send love to your inner child when it pitches fits of outrage and jealousy. Embrace your crankiness and sadness when it flares up. Peel the layers of how you feel back from the great sum of what you are, and reveal the utterly unique form of divinity at your core. You'll find you've always been more than enough and will begin to more easily see the divinity behind the shortcomings of others as well.

No need to sequester yourself like a monk in a cell. Just to have the patience and courage to be honest with the half-buried parts of yourself that tend to lash out viciously. It's not necessarily pretty in the moment, I've sat there weeping on the bathroom floor too. But I can also swear by the mega release that accompanies deep cleanings of the heart space.

And if you need a helping hand, look to the Hermit. Not as some scraggly old grim reaper, but as a guide who can help us learn to operate from the stillness of self-acceptance. Such stillness may be earned in mindfulness and meditation, but it does not necessarily rob you of the excitement of life. It sort of opens up a new realm with less agitation and comparison, and more room to be filled up with what really inspires passion on a personal level. The beams of the Hermit's lamp raised against the night can put a spotlight on our inner treasures, and the knowledge that there are world-building forces within each and every one of us.

Emily Catrice
Founder and Director of Candid Sphinx

Bibliography

- Baetjer, Katharine. "Nicolas Lancret, Brother Philippe's Geese, Ca. 1736, Oil on Canvas, Catalogue Entry." *The Met Collection Online*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438727.
- Budanovic, Nikola. "The Life of a 19th Century 'Ornamental Hermit': One Broke His Contract, Snuck off to the Pub." *The Vintage News*, 13 Sept. 2017, www.thevintagenews.com/2017/09/13/the-life-of-a-19th-century-ornamental-hermit-one-broke-his-contract-snuck-off-to-the-pub/
- Campbell, Gordon. *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Cartwright, Mark. "Prometheus." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 20 Apr. 2013, www.ancient.eu/Prometheus/.
- France, Peter. *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude*. St. Martin's Griffin, 1998.
- Greene, Caitlin R. "Myrddin & Merlin: A Guide to the Early Evolution of the Merlin Legend." *Arthuriana*, 2009, www.arthuriana.co.uk/n&q/myrddin.htm.
- Grout, James. "Diogenes the Cynic." *Encyclopaedia Romana*, penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/hetairai/diogenes.html.
- Hansley, C. Keith. "The Sad Tale of the Child Hermit, Anatolius." *The Historian's Hut*, 28 July 2020, thehistorianshut.com/2020/07/28/the-sad-tale-of-the-child-hermit-anatolius/.
- "Henry David Thoreau." *The Walden Woods Project*, The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, www.walden.org/what-we-do/library/thoreau/.
- Itani, Mustapha. "Diogenes of Sinope, the Philosopher Troll." *Medium*, Medium, 18 June 2020, medium.com/@mustaphahitani/diogenes-of-sinope-the-philosopher-troll-a01e1fc4eb08.
- pt91. "Ornamental Hermits: an 18th Century 'Must-Have'." *News and Events*, University of Leicester, 19 Dec. 2013, www2.le.ac.uk/news/blog/2013/december/ornamental-hermits-an-18th-century-must-have.
- "Saint Jerome: The Lives of Three Hermits." *Citydesert Blog*, 31 Aug. 2014, citydesert.wordpress.com/2014/08/31/saint-jerome-the-lives-of-three-hermits/.
- "Saint Paul: The First Hermit Saint." *Saint Paul the Hermit at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, archive.artsmia.org/saint-paul-the-hermit/sculpture.html
- Sitwell, Edith. *English Eccentrics*. Pallas Athene, 2006.
- Thoreau, Henry David. "Walden, and On The Duty Of Civil Disobedience." *e-Book*, Project Gutenberg, 1 Jan. 1995, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/205.
- Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*. Dover Publications, 2005.