

40 Days: The Productivity of Retreat by Paul Kingsnorth

"In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion." Albert Camus

When I was a child, I wanted to be a hermit. I can remember in particular a strange background desire I had for some years to live alone in a pine forest. Why a pine forest? I have no real idea. I have never spent much time at all in a real pine forest (as opposed to the serried ranks of plantation pines which layer the hills of the north of England.) But that was where I wanted to be. I could imagine myself dwelling in the dark, dank heart of a pinewood. Life there, I knew, would be more intense, more magical, than life at home.

For a time, as a romantic and imaginative child, I entertained the idea that my desire to be surrounded by pines was due to my having been a Viking in a previous life. I was fascinated by the Vikings: their gods and their runes and the dark magic in their cold fjord culture. Looking back now, I suspect that the root cause was more likely to be an overdose of Tolkien, followed later by Stephen Donaldson and Ursula Le Guin. There were a lot of wizards in my childhood.

But beyond the Viking theme, there was something else in here: something about being alone. Why should a young child, and later an early teenage boy, want to be a hermit? Isn't this the opposite of what teenagers are supposed to want: company, parties, crowds? I don't think I ever really knew what teenagers were supposed to want, but I didn't want any of those things. I wanted to be like Ursula Le Guin's Sparrowhawk, living alone in a small hut in the hills, divining the mysteries of the world beyond sight. Life as a Gontish goatherd still seems pretty Elysian to me.

My late father helped propel me in this direction, entirely against his will or intent. I spent my childhood years trekking across the lonely moors and mountains of England and Wales, following the routes of long-distance paths. My dad was the opposite of a romantic dreamer, but he was an obsessive walker, and I had no choice but to join in. I'm glad. It sank deep into me. I am still an obsessive walker and a lover of those wild open spaces, but I think perhaps their loneliness sank into me too. Not loneliness in the negative sense in which that word is so often used in our culture - a culture in which individuals are perhaps more isolated than at any time in history, and which seems to compensate for this by mocking or belittling the idea of chosen solitude.

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It wasn't that kind of loneliness. Rather, it was the loneliness of which John Muir or

Edward Abbey wrote when they in turn retreated to open, empty places, places which were not created, bounded or defined by Man. 'The mountains are calling and I must go,' wrote Muir. 'Wilderness is not a luxury,' wrote Abbey, 'but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread.' What Muir found in the mountains, and Abbey found in the deserts, I found on the moors and fells of England, and later in ancient forests and on open plains in other parts of the world. Wild loneliness, ringing like a bell. A sense of connection to something far greater than me in a place which is not controlled by my kind and is not in thrall to us. A sense of smallness, from which can come greatness.

I still have that connection. Conditioned by those wild walks, by that time in the silence of the Cheviots and the Pennines, and perhaps also by Tolkien and Le Guin, I have spent much of my adult life fighting, in both word and deed, to protect the natural world which gave me so much as a child. I am as passionate as I ever was about protecting the nonhuman world from the increasingly violent excesses of our civilisation. But the environmental movement I once considered myself to be part of has in many ways moved in directions I don't feel comfortable with. Technocratic, staid, too afraid to challenge narratives of technological progress and economic development, and too willing to buy into a notion of 'sustainable development' that often looks like business as usual with fewer carbon emissions, the mainstream green movement looks to me like it has veered off course.

Three years ago, I tried to explain my feelings about this in a long essay entitled 'Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist.' The essay was published in the first annual anthology produced by the Dark Mountain Project, a network of writers, artists, and thinkers that I had co-founded the year before in an attempt to create a space for new ways of thinking and seeing in a rapidly changing world.

That essay has probably been my most talked about piece of short writing in twenty years as a writer and journalist. At the time, it was also one of the most controversial. One of the passages that really jumped out at people, and made them either joyful or furious, was this one. It came at the end of the essay, as you might be able to infer:

... I withdraw, you see. I withdraw from the campaigning and the marching, I withdraw from the arguing and the talked-up necessity and all of the false assumptions. I withdraw from the words. I am leaving. I am going to go out walking.

I am leaving on a pilgrimage to find what I left behind in the jungles and by the cold campfires and in the parts of my head and my heart that I have been skirting around because I have been busy fragmenting the world in order to save it; busy believing it is mine to save. I am going to listen to the wind and see what it tells me, or whether it tells me anything at all.

Many people wrote to me - and still write to me - telling me how much they liked this essay; how it had connected with them, even put their own feelings into words. But others were, shall we say, unimpressed. I wasn't quite prepared for the barrage which this extract brought upon me from activists and campaigners, though perhaps I should have been. I was condemned as a burnout, a doomer, a nihilist making matters worse by running up the white flag. If I wanted to 'withdraw', I was told, that was fine: I could go off and be depressed in the corner, but I had no right to tell other people about it. I needed to shut up and let the activists get on with their work of Saving The World.

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yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you.”

Looking back on this, I can see their point. If I were still deep in campaigning mode, perhaps I would feel the same if somebody else who had stopped doing it told me I was wasting my time. Yet something about this niggled at me. The main point I was making, when I talked about withdrawal, was not about walking away from engagement with the world. To me, in fact, it seemed almost the opposite. I dwelled on this for some time, and then came back to it last year in a kind of sequel to my first essay, which I called ‘Dark Ecology.’ It was another exploration of what a post-environmentalist world looked like, and of what still seemed to make sense to me, personally, in a situation in which none of the answers I had previously believed in were working any more.

At the end of the essay, which appeared in the third Dark Mountain book, I laid out five courses of action which seemed appropriate to me in a world in which climate change, population overshoot, economic collapse and mass extinction were not future problems to be prevented but realities we were already living through. First on my list was withdrawal, of which I wrote:

Withdraw not with cynicism, but with a questing mind. Withdraw so that you can allow yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you. Withdraw because refusing to help the machine advance—refusing to tighten the ratchet further—is a deeply moral position. Withdraw because action is not always more effective than inaction. Withdraw to examine your worldview: the cosmology, the paradigm, the assumptions, the direction of travel. All real change starts with withdrawal.

This time around, perhaps I had explained myself better, or perhaps the world had moved on, or both, but the reaction was far less furious, though it was sometimes still bemused. Certainly, people with a political or an activist mindset still regarded this as self-indulgent nonsense. But there were other reactions too, from different kinds of people. This time around, more people got it. More to the point, I was beginning to get it too.

For the first twenty years of my adult life, I forgot about my childhood fantasy of the hermitage and the pine woods and solitude. I threw myself into everything I was doing. I attended protests and occupations and meetings, worked for NGOs, set up my own NGOs, edited green magazines and worked hard to write things, from books to pieces of journalism, which I hoped would be read by a lot of people, because I thought that was the best way to change things and because I wanted to be noticed.

As I get older – I’m 40 now, and I have young children – I not only have less desire to be noticed, but I seem to understand my childhood desires better than I have done at any time since I experienced them. And I begin to see that my odd childhood dreams of withdrawal from the modern world were my call from the desert. Something I needed, and then ignored for a very long time, had been speaking to me. Now I can hear it speaking to me again.

Physical withdrawal is hard for me these days: I have a family to support, and too many commitments that I cannot and do not want to run away from. Forty days in the desert is not an option right now. But in my fortieth year I can feel the need for that withdrawal growing stronger with each passing month. There will be weekends this year when I will be able to be alone on the moors, and in November I will be attending a five-day Zen meditation retreat in an unheated cottage in the Welsh hills: the first time I have done

anything like this. I can't wait. But my moments of withdrawal can be much shorter than that. Sometimes I go running on the Lake District fells, which I'm lucky enough to live near now. Sometimes I just walk the dog down the green lanes and fields near my house, and on a good evening these can be acts of meditative withdrawal in themselves.

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What am I running from, people have asked me occasionally in the past? It doesn't seem like the right question to ask. I'm not necessarily running from anything; rather I feel drawn towards something. Not just that old connection with the wild spirit of the world which I once found and can still sometimes find in the green open places, but also a search for a place in which my mind can be still, and there is nothing in my head. Activism, journalism, even family life: all of these require you to play a role, to take positions, to stake claims, and all of those things in turn can scream at you, use you up, ossify you. Old, rigid trees are the ones that come down when great storms blow; it's the flexible saplings that survive. All great artists, Bob Dylan once said, must be in a permanent state of becoming. I like this phrase. Becoming is not achieved amongst the everyday, or not only there. Becoming needs withdrawal. Something has to be sought, and found.

There is something out there, beyond the rational mind, beyond the everyday commitments, beyond the cities in the valleys and the cities in our heads, which we need and have needed for much longer than we would care to admit. Every spiritual code, every religion, every indigenous culture, every society, in fact, before the advent of modernity, has seen an act of withdrawal from the excesses and excrescences of the world as a spiritual necessity. The lives of the Christian Desert Fathers, the khalwa of the Sufis, the Dark Retreats of the Taoists, the exercises of St Ignatius: days, weeks, months of withdrawal were, still are, central to all major religions. The retreat to the desert or the forest, and the return with wisdom to the village or the town, runs like a silver brook through our folktales and fairytales, myths and legends. There is a reason for every story.

Sometimes you need to go, and sometimes you need to stay away for some time. The world we have created is terrifying in its complexity and power and in its ability to destroy the small, the precious, the immeasurable and the meaningful, inside you and in the places around you. Perhaps to a political activist, sitting by a stream in a forest seems like self-indulgence in the face of mass extinction and climate change, but it is the opposite. If you don't know why that stream matters, you are not equipped to protect it. If you have forgotten how to listen to it, you may end up on the wrong side, as so many have before you.

If you don't go out seeking, if you don't retreat, if you don't put yourself into the wilderness with nothing to carry you, you will never see what you need to shed or what you need to gain. You will never change. And if you never change, neither will anything else.