

## The Need for Daily Sanctuary

*So as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land,  
so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy,  
but encompassed by all of the horrors of the half-lived life.*

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

“The greater perfection a soul aspires to, the more dependent it is upon grace.”

*The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence

Have you ever felt the need to just crawl into a little corner of the day to comfort yourself? Maybe the tensions of work suggest you push yourself away from it to soothe your aching mind. Maybe you would feel better about a recent argument with your spouse if you had just a little time and space alone to yourself. Maybe you just want to sit still — *very still* — by a window, in front of a personal altar, amongst some woods, or even in your garden. Perhaps a loved one or friend is in need of your comfort. Maybe you know someone who is dying and you want to help him or her create a beautiful death by enriching their home or room with items that celebrate the loveliness of life. Perhaps you need some time alone — by yourself, with friends, family, or a pet — in a setting that regenerates your weary or hurt spirit.

*Where do you go where you feel more yourself than any other place?*

*How often do you give yourself permission to go there?*

*What does sanctuary mean to you?*

We can all relate to experiences that seem to pull us inward. They don't ask us to find escape from the world, but to find room for renewal within it. Each day we need to give ourselves the grace to find those islands of time and space to reclaim an inner sense of peace or empowerment. We need daily ways to “recharge the batteries,” receive creative inspiration, engage in quiet reflection, or to offer comfort to another. In short, we need to value certain periods of time and places in our life as if they were sacred gifts we make for others and ourselves. The alternative is the feeling of living a “half-lived life.”

The one word that best describes what we are talking about is *Sanctuary*. On a personal level, sanctuary is an important tool for taking care of us. In fact, the care of our own sense of spirit — the loving care of our soul — is perhaps the most challenging aspect of living on Earth today. Each day should be about finding balance between our absorption with the world and our need to find relief amidst it. If we do not find this balance, we are apt to feel distraught. As wellness practitioners, we have heard dozens of individuals claim that the chaotic and often insensitive nature of life today provides few opportunities for finding solace. “Where is the time and space in my day,” people plead, “in which I can revitalize my spirit?” We submit that this is a cry of the soul in daily need of sanctuary.

For example, one woman we encountered was convinced that her day held little opportunity for solitude. A working mother, Susan consistently found herself coming home to engage in the “work of family,” as she called it, until she collapsed exhausted into bed late at night. She knew her family depended on her to get dinner ready among numerous other responsibilities. However, her unspoken desire before she had to do all this was simply to have some uninterrupted time and space to regenerate herself. And the place she wanted to do this most was in her garden, if only for a half hour or so to reflect upon the beauty and peacefulness of Nature she had loved her whole life.

When people are introduced to the concept of sanctuary and how it can empower their daily lives, it is like being reacquainted with an old familiar friend. You see, we all have used time and places in a special way that reconnects us with our inner spirit, even if we hadn't thought of it in terms of sanctuary.

I remember as a boy sitting in my backyard beneath a young birch tree as a means of escaping my family's conflicts. It was there I could collect my thoughts and feel a calm begin to salve my aching heart. I would often sit for an hour or so watching the play of nature around the yard. As I got older, this ritual included writing poems or stories, praying, or simply playing my guitar. This outdoor haven served me for over fifteen years, until I was old enough to leave home. There is no doubt in my mind that I was creating a personal sense of sanctuary that serves me well today.

Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, have certain common roots to sanctuary going back to childhood. Our bedrooms, for example, were like private refuges from the day — sanctuaries, in a sense, from the constant vigilance of an adult world full of rules, obligations, demands, and prying. How many of us remember that special sense of control we felt in our tree house or a fort made out of cardboard boxes? Our daughter, Sonji, had a special fondness for creating such havens right in the middle of the living room by draping blankets over a few chairs. I even remember my first day in kindergarten where, frightened by the immensity of the classroom and number of students, I erected a shelter out of large blocks wherein I hid feeling more secure.

These memories are valuable in reassuring us that sanctuary has always had a role in our life. Yet as children, even before we begin to understand the value of a bedroom as necessary privacy, we are introduced to the basic premise of sanctuary as a safe haven in the arms of our parents. This initial matrix of unconditional love and acceptance, from the womb to the familial embrace of our mother or father, is one of the purest forms of sanctuary imaginable. In our search as adults for the sacredness of time and place, we might do well to model our intent after those first few years of life where we lived on an isle of grace. Of course, this may not have been the case with all infants, for many adults today suffer from the wounds of unwarranted child abuse or emotional abandonment in which their sacredness of being has been deeply affected. Nonetheless, there is not one of us who can deny the powerful feeling of comfort we experience being held in the arms of our partner, lover, friend, caretaker, or parent. A true Tahiti amidst the oceanic swells of the world!

## MODERN CONCEPTS OF SANCTUARY

Most people probably have an intuitive sense of what sanctuary means to them. Frequently sanctuary is associated with a special place outside oneself, as in a haven or refuge. However, our intent in helping people to create sanctuary in their daily life has been to demystify the sense that sanctuary is a remote place infrequently visited. As you will see throughout this book, the great power of sanctuary is in personalizing it as a human need that must and can be met regularly.

It has been quite interesting to observe how the concept of sanctuary has evolved since 1995. One indicator has been our latest cultural icon for communication and commerce — the Internet. In November 1995, when we put up our first website for the Cortesia Sanctuary Project, the Internet was yet a babbling infant. A search for the word *sanctuary* yielded a surprisingly limited number of websites. A historian at the time would have noted two major distinctions. First, those sites that were clearly spiritual, most often promoting the physical sanctuary setting at a Catholic church. Secondly, those sites promoting animal or marine sanctuaries as protective geographic locations. All in all, there were only twenty-one sites devoted in some way to sanctuary.

Perhaps our educational website about sanctuary had something to do with it, it is hard to say, but a year later (1996) the same search yielded hundreds of sanctuary sites, with broader interpretations. Now there were sanctuary sites promoting new age mysticism, drugs, a refuge for brain-dead writers, a new kind of Christian rock music called “sanctuary music,” and even a site for web surfers tired of surfing. The number of spiritual and nature-oriented sites had also skyrocketed.

Anticipating the 1998 release of our new book, *The Sanctuary Garden: Creating a Place of Refuge in Your Yard and Garden*, we rebuilt and greatly expanded our own website. Newer software allowed websites to be more visually attractive, and sophisticated Internet indexing, via search engines, increased both search and promotion capabilities. Add to this the good fortune to have a few articles published in major magazines about our ideas on creating sanctuary gardens, and we were positioned for an interesting phenomenon: dozens of websites suddenly popped up promoting gardens as sanctuaries.

Today, at least on the Internet, there are numerous creative interpretations of the concept of sanctuary among thousands of sites. And it has been rewarding to know that we were part of the raising of this consciousness, if only in some small way. But the Internet has been but one part of the promotion of sanctuary. By late 1996, we had also noticed how the media had begun to use the message of sanctuary in advertising. On television, one sat in the comfortable “interior sanctuary” of a luxury car listening to beautiful classical music while driving down a country road. A golf course promoted its setting as the “perfect Saturday sanctuary.” American Airlines, in a two-page display in *Forbes* magazine, depicted a lush park setting with stately maples and a half-hidden bench. Their message: “Your own private place. Away from the pressures of the day. A brief respite. A time to recharge. To regroup. And face the world ready.” A major retailer of bath and bedroom items advertised a bedroom suite of sheets and comforter called “The Sanctuary.” In each instance, the public was given yet another view into the necessity of sanctuary in daily life.

In many ways, the contemporary interpretation of sanctuary reflects its use throughout history, for it demonstrates a constant in life for which everyone must find practical use. Basically, sanctuary can be characterized in three ways:

- A *haven* for Nature, animals, plants, sick or diseased people, outcasts or refugees
- A *special place or experience* we may withdraw into for safety, comfort, peace, solace, and regeneration of body, mind, and spirit
- A *feeling or need for personal space and time* within the comfort of ourselves, others, or a religious belief or deity

These characterizations suggest that sanctuary is *physical*, *psychological*, and even *spiritual* in scope. Sanctuary alludes to a special place but it also incorporates the elements of an experience that satisfies human needs for *solitude*, *safety*, *comfort*, *peace*, and *regeneration*. Furthermore it has emotional power that both incorporates time and transcends it, allowing communion with Nature, animals, other humans, our own inner self, or God.

## SECULAR AND SACRED QUALITIES OF SANCTUARY

The above three descriptions of sanctuary have what can be called *secular* and *sacred* qualities. Let’s briefly explore these characteristics.

The *secular* or profane quality of sanctuary embraces the idea of worldliness: a safe haven, often characterized by enclosed boundaries. This may be a garden, building, room, piece of land, or other natural location, such as a tract of forest, wilderness, or an isolated estuary. Some Occidental mysticisms suggest that the Garden of Eden is humanity’s first paradisiacal sanctuary, and every human has the inherent longing to return to both this psychological and physical place of beauty, peace, and safety. Perhaps the sustained human interest in gardens over the course of history speaks to the deep subconscious need of sanctuary. The first gardens 2400 years ago in Persia, for example, were fenced to

protect crops and livestock from invading marauders. Increased security allowed the integration of water features, sitting areas, flowers, and the creation of garden rooms. In fact, the word *paradise* comes from the similar ancient Persian word meaning “beautiful fenced-in garden.”

Sanctuary can also be identified with a place of refuge (which may embody both secular and sacred aspects). For example, a human or animal whose life is at risk may find harbor in a setting removed from harm or unneeded attention. History denotes this common use of sanctuary, as in the special cases of colonies for lepers, fugitives, endangered species, or special tracts of Nature such as a forest, wetland, park, or even one’s backyard garden. Through the efforts of such organizations as the Audubon Society, Wilderness Society, and our own Cortesia Sanctuary Project, thousands of people have been guided in how to create backyard nature sanctuaries, bird sanctuaries, wildflower sanctuaries, and the like. Similarly, many communities have created special shelters for women or children suffering from familial abuse.

These pure intentions to provide safety and comfort to others and Nature are wonderful, but we would be remiss not to point out that each of us can personalize the gesture of sanctuary even more. Many of us know first hand what this means when we have offered momentary sanctuary to an animal (perhaps a wounded bird or sick pet) in the palm of our hands or the stroke of our touch, or to a friend or family member who has needed the comfort of our compassionate caring, listening, or holding.

The more *sacred* or spiritual side of sanctuary embraces the dance between humans, Nature, and the Divine. Here we find natural places of power (mountains, forests, springs, rivers, etc.) and architectural structures such as temples, shrines, memorials, cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, and the like. The Greeks, for example, often built healing centers near the juncture of two rivers. Springs have often been sacralized at their source with a grotto sheltering the perceived holy waters so that pilgrims may partake of the liquid blessings. Native cultures have rich legacies associated with natural landscapes that create an elevated spiritual relationship with both the land and a deity. The question always remains as to how natural geography seems to elicit such elevated energy. Some theorists suggest that there are energy grids (ley lines, for example) of intense electrical energy at such locations. Others offer mystical possibilities, that certain places are the havens or homes of ancient deities. And still more theorists suggest that the frequent honoring of a place by humans with intense reverence and devotion intensifies its surrounding life force or ether. Undoubtedly, each of these points of view has merit.

Inspired by Nature and a desire to know God, humans have also created architectural religious monuments in which people may worship, pray, or meditate. In fact, the main room or building for such activities is often called the sanctuary. The examples of both natural and human made places of profound energy, as recognized places of sanctuary within a culture, are boundless and beyond the scope of this book. In every instance, however, such locations promote the basic interpretation of sanctuary to be a special place that elevates the feelings of peace and safety, internal comfort, regeneration of body, mind, and spirit, and the presence of an overarching force of which most people recognize as God or Great Spirit.

## **WORLDLY FORCES AFFECTING THE NEED FOR SANCTUARY**

There is no question about it: the world each and everyday is thrust squarely into our face, or at the least, in our retreat, is perceived to be nipping at our heels. The media from all angles bludgeons us, and massive doses of information, via sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing, are stuffed into our overloaded senses. Worse still is the perception that time, in spite of technology, is not really working for us, but in fact is pointing us more and more down undesirable highways of stress, anger, rage, greed, over consumption, overwork, and overload. In short, technology and the media appear to have shrink-wrapped our world around us. From each day’s waking moments to our falling exhausted back into bed at night, our life seems neatly packaged. There appears too little time in the day to fulfill all the things

we want or need to do. And our personal sense of space, be it at home, work, or in the community, seems constantly constrained by having to share it shoulder to shoulder with others.

As stated earlier, we have heard dozens of people claim that the chaotic, harried, and hurried state of life today provides few opportunities or skills for finding solace. Most of these people even claim they need a vacation from their annual vacations! What we are suggesting is that each day should be about finding balance — between our absorption with the world and our need to find relief amidst it. Clear and simple, if we cannot find this balance, our spirit crumbles and our soul suffers.

But let's not stop with the issues about technology, time, and the media. People are also affected by their relationships with each other. For example, most households today are fractured and broken places where the idea of home as a safe haven for a family is about as foreign as old Ozzie and Harriet reruns. In the United States, only 24% of all households have both parents living together with their children. In our workshops, women often express their desire to find more peace and equanimity in their relationship with their spouse, and they begin to see how the concept of sanctuary can level the playing field. Yet, we have noticed that very often the male partner does not attend the workshop and has little interest in exploring ways to create a safe environment at home for basic human needs such as solace and intimacy in special places or at special times. Society today is also full of sexism, racism, and homophobia that makes it difficult for people to feel safe and comfortable. Workers, whether male or female, often feel manipulated or exploited by insensitive employers. They fear for their jobs and careers and take these fears home for the night. Lastly, children, the underprivileged, elderly, and even the disabled (I hate using that term!) each suffers to some degree in a society that is impersonal and insensitive.

You can begin to get a handle on your need for sanctuary by considering that there are several powerful forces afoot in society that may affect your daily peace of mind. When we discuss the following forces in our workshops, we immediately notice a visceral response from the participants. Each of us can easily identify with the ongoing struggle we have faced with each.

### **The Force of Technology, Media, and the Marketplace**

Stop for a moment and consider the impact of technology, media, and the marketplace in your life. Do you find that there is this constant urging to consume? Do you find yourself absorbed with reading ads or watching commercials? How much is your life dependent upon tools, gadgets, conveniences, machines, and the like? Because you are incessantly urged to sustain a producer-consumer lifestyle, you may find yourself powerless to do otherwise. If you are always looking for buys, always willing to use credit to spend beyond your means, you may be succumbing to this powerful force.

Now, are you aware that your life does not have to be at the mercy of Madison Avenue or Hollywood? In most cases you *do* have a choice whether to live on the treadmill of another's design or set off on your own path. Most often the choice is as simple as deciding to limit your dependence upon technology, the media, or advertising to fulfill your most heartfelt needs. When you think about it, this collective societal force strangely clutters your life because it clutters your mind with so many messages and compulsions. Challenge yourself to test this out: don't watch television for one or more days and at the same time don't read the newspaper; try not to buy anything for a couple of days; make a list of convenience gadgets in your house and identify which ones are very underused and which ones you can live without. Do several of these things in a particular week and I am sure life will begin to feel simpler and your mind more at ease.

It has been estimated that in the course of a day we engage in about 60,000 thoughts. Most of these thoughts may be in response to messages aimed at questioning our sense of esteem, whether we like our life or not, or how to increase our lot in life. In fact, the combined societal forces of technology, the media, and the marketplace incorporate into their messages the factors of obsolescence and boredom with the very things we purchase, use, or hear! I am sure you know exactly what this means.

You *can* decide, however, to use your time more wisely in search of experiences that elevate your spirit and enhance the well being of others and the natural environment. This type of lifestyle is in

keeping with the concept of simple living, where you are willing to draw limits on your dependency of technology, the media, and consumption without sacrificing life's comforts. By its very nature, sanctuary imposes simplicity. Think about this for a moment or two and see if you agree. If you are unsure, then this book may help you pin this collective societal force to the ground for the count.

### **The Force of a “Mean Spirit”**

Look around you. Listen to the news. Watch a little television. Catch what others talk about. The world seems to be going through a chaotic period. There is upheaval, violence, oppression, and insensitivity, not only around the globe, but very likely close to home: in your community, neighborhood, family, or partnership. It could be said that some sort of *mean spirit* is afoot. Undoubtedly, not a day goes by in which you don't notice some type of inhumane treatment of others, animals, or nature.

Of course, the media does its lion's share of drawing our attention to such conditions. It also exploits events or trivializes them. But it is not necessary to yield to the idea that you must live inside such dark images or be exposed to them unnecessarily through the media. The concept of sanctuary, even if just a glimmer of hope gained from momentary perspective, can help you find refuge in the *goodness* of the world. It seems natural, therefore, that you would seek and create safe and peaceful places and experiences to spend time when you decide to honor more positive ways of thinking and acting.

### **The Force of Powerlessness and Despair**

We all know the feeling of a total sense of powerlessness or despair - that our efforts and hope seem miniscule when compared to some more dominant figure, corporation, or even a personal addiction. Many people today suffer from this overwhelming fear of a force that appears much stronger than themselves, something that seems to be controlling their lives. Fear of loss of job, income, prestige, self-esteem, dignity, pride, freedom, independence, security, family, cultural heritage, property, food, safety, shelter, health, and life — each one of these appears to be a tenuous lifeline to our comfort and safety today. When feeling the force of powerlessness or hopelessness, it is our natural human tendency to seek refuge, solitude, or even compassionate help. Once again, sanctuary can be an empowering counterweight to such personal trauma.

As you are probably beginning to see, sanctuary helps to gain perspective on life. When we give ourselves permission to step away from worldly forces, even if for small periods of time each day, we are re-empowering our soul. But the truth is, most of us do not have a sense of what it means to just *be*. This need for pure and simple *being* — being still, being quiet, being alone; being content within our thoughts while relishing the peacefulness of a special place; being peaceful ourselves; being kind and generous in our thoughts and actions; being filled with gratitude and being simple in our desires — this need for being a tad farther from the world for just a little while is sorely lacking in life today. The greatest force we can muster is not what society dictates to us. It is the forces of our own heart's will, our human capacity to love, forgive, honor, and respect. And all it may take is just a visit now and then to our personal isle of grace, our very personal sense of sanctuary amidst the oceanic energy of the world.

Are you prepared to land on the shores of your own “insular Tahiti,” to bask in the modest light of tranquility and peace of your own making? We want to assist you throughout this book. And an initial step is to understand those needs that bring you to a desire for refuge within your daily activities. The following chapters look at what we call *The Four Needs of Sanctuary*. These needs are:

1. The Need to Relieve the Weight of the World (world-weariness and everyday life)
2. The Need for Relief from Life's Discomforts (woundedness, inner turmoil, stress, trauma, illness, grief)

3. The Need for Solitude and Self-renewal (psychological, physical, and spiritual)
4. The Need for Celebration of and Communion with Life (deepening and sustaining the soul, relationships, and the connection with Nature)

All essays are excerpts from Dr. C. Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell's book-in-progress:  
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