

A Guide to Retreat Where You Are



People go on retreats for many reasons—to rest, to heal, to learn, to grow—individually and communally. We all need the kinds of spiritual renewal, emotional regulation, and quiet intellectual stimulation cultivated by gifted retreat leaders. In the midst of our current pandemic, it is difficult (if not impossible) to participate in facilitated or guided retreats at retreat centers. Yet time apart in beautiful, welcoming landscapes is as needful as ever. Experiencing solitude; taking time to meditate, pray, and write; connecting to nature; and, being present to life in its many forms can happen at home or wherever you are.

Mount Olivet Conference & Retreat Center has been welcoming groups and facilitating retreats for over forty years. We want to support persons, families, and organizations who need the gifts of retreating right now. This guide and the many resources on [this site](#) are intended for just that purpose. We recognize that some people may have time to create their own extended at-home retreats. Others may have snippets of time – five minutes here and there – throughout each day. And some may have particular challenges exacerbated by shelter-in-place orders. This guide, therefore, is meant to be adapted to distinct life circumstances and ages, remembering that young kids, teenagers, and adults all need rest, solitude, play, and growth.

Quieting Your Soul

Prepare for your retreat by finding a comfortable place to spend time in reflection. You might choose to be indoors or outdoors. Eliminate distractions. Silence your cell phone and other devices. Take time to meditate on a short scripture verse or stanza from a poem. Recite it to yourself slowly a number of times. Here are some suggestions:

Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

This is the time to be slow. (John O'Donohue)

Enough. These few words are enough. If not these words, this breath. If not this breath, this sitting here. (David Whyte)

Breathe deeply and intentionally for as long as you need, but at least for two minutes.

Setting Your Intentions

Set an intention for your retreat. Remember, this time is a gift; it is a way to care for your own soul. Ask yourself one of these questions, whichever resonates most with you:

What do I most need during this retreat?

What am I longing for?

What question(s) am I living with right now?

Crafting Your Schedule

Consider how much time you'd like to set aside to retreat and when. Maybe you will choose to spend 5-10 minutes three times throughout the day in order to retreat. Maybe you will choose a half-hour, an hour, a half-day, or more. Designate that timeframe for yourself. Consider entering it in your calendar or setting a timer on your phone. Solicit support from others so that you can hold your intention. Maybe a family member can watch your kids. Maybe a friend can follow-up and ask about your personal retreat. Maybe you can write down your hopes for the retreat and post those somewhere prominent. Find a way that helps you to remember and keep this promise to yourself.

Choosing Retreat Activities

We recommend that you include a variety of activities during your retreat that, taken together, will cultivate wisdom and nurture your wellbeing. Wisdom enables us to live well in connection with God, others, and the earth. It comes from a lifetime of listening to God (the Divine), wise mentors, other creatures, the earth, and ourselves. It can be strengthened by practices such as worship, prayer, contemplation, meditation, silence, journaling, music, and art, to name a few. Our "[retreat resources](#)" page includes guided prayers, meditations, mindfulness practices, music, poetry, and nature videos to assist you cultivating wisdom and nurturing wellbeing. Choose among these and other practices by pondering these questions:

What are my most significant needs right now?

What practices/activities will contribute to my spiritual needs? Emotional needs? Intellectual needs? Physical needs? Relational needs?

What I am drawn to do and learn on this retreat?

After you choose your retreat activities, gather any materials that you may need for these. Think of yourself as a hospitable retreat center staff preparing the way so that you can simply show up when it's time to retreat.

Sample Half-Day Retreat

8:00-8:15am Opening Ritual

Begin your retreat by marking the time and place as sacred. Light a candle, play some meditative music, chant a Taize song, or sing a favorite hymn. Then sit in the stillness and quiet. Remind yourself of your intentions. Notice if any new intentions emerge for you.

8:15-8:45am Listening to the Wisdom of Your Own Heart

Take some time to write in a journal or to draw in a sketchbook. Begin by focusing on your intentions. Consider one of the questions below as a prompt for your writing or drawing. Listen to whatever comes to the surface. Notice your thoughts and feelings without judgment. If your mind wanders to your daily to-do list or chronic worries, gently bring your attention back to this moment.

Why have I decided to retreat?

How am I feeling right now in this moment? In the midst of this pandemic? In this phase of my life?

What am I needing in this moment? In the midst of this pandemic? In this phase of my life?

What do I long for in my connections to God, others, nature, and myself?

What questions am I holding in relation to my life (my sense of purpose or vocation, my hopes and dreams, my losses and griefs); in relation to friends, family or colleagues; in relation to the larger global community; in relation to the earth?

8:45-9:30am Listening to the Wisdom of Others

Choose a short, written piece to read slowly and digest. It might be a poem, a chapter in an inspiring book, the [lectionary readings for the day](#), a group of psalms, or something else. If you prefer, choose a teaching, sermon, musical selection, or inspiring podcast to listen to and/or watch. Pay attention to your reactions as you read, listen, or watch: *What are you feeling? What questions arise for you? What do you find compelling, and why? How are you challenged, encouraged, uplifted, inspired, or moved to act?* Take time to jot down your responses.

9:30-10:00am Integrating Wisdom, Breathing and Noticing Sensations

Complete a simple mindful breathing practice, body scan, or five senses exercises. Take time to observe your thoughts, reactions, feelings. Slow down and intentionally use your senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste) to stay grounded in the present moment. Leave ten minutes to reflect on what you learned or received during this exercise.

10:00-10:45am Listening to Divine Wisdom

Complete a guided prayer or meditation. Some options include centering prayer, contemplative prayer, blessing prayer, breath prayer, prayer of presence, lectio divina, visio divina, and the finger labyrinth.

10:45-11:45am Integrating Wisdom, Moving Your Body

Take an extended amount of time to listen to your body as you move through a guided activity. If possible, complete the activity outside so that you can be nourished by the beauty of nature. Choose one or two of the following activities that best fit your physical needs and abilities as well as the geography around you:

Yoga

[*Eight-Form Moving Meditation*](#)

[*Walking Meditation*](#)

Nature Walk

11:45-12:00pm Closing Ritual

Close your retreat by remembering this time and place as sacred. Light your candle, play some peaceful instrumental music, or sing a favorite hymn again. Call to mind the many gifts of this retreat. Take time to thank God and appreciate the fact that you chose to devote this time to retreat.