

LIBERATION

# The Joys of Decoupling

A WEEKLONG RETREAT BEYOND WORDS AND EVEN SNUGLING

**DAY 0:** My husband and I chat amiably on our drive to a radical new experience for us both: a weeklong silent meditation retreat. We impulsively committed to this almost a year ago, thinking it would be a great way to support each other's quest for deepening awareness while basking in the majestic beauty of Lake Tahoe. Our conversation ultimately reveals, however, that we've both been avoiding one basic precept: we must allow ourselves to decouple for the duration of the retreat.

We, along with 300 other participants, have agreed not to engage verbally or even energetically with other participants, including each other. No hand signaling, note writing, eye contact, or touching. This extends to the staff who provide us food and clear our plates: no "please" and "thank you," or even gratuities. Electronic devices are prohibited, as are books. The only technology allowed is a journal and pen. Everything has been impeccably crafted so that we have no excuses as we indulge in one of the most angst-producing privileges of our modern age: sitting and doing nothing.

Admittedly, my husband and I are among the most connected couples I know. We both work at home, share meals, check in multiple times daily, and are each other's first choice for almost every activity. We are poster material for the joys of coupling. After much consideration, we strike what seems a thoughtful bargain for how we will proceed at the retreat: we will not talk or touch. We will, however, leave carefully placed pebbles on our king-size bed each day to mark our intent. One pebble means "I agree to five minutes of silent eye-gazing before dinner"; no pebble signals "not today." This creative solution appeals to my conscientious yet rebellious nature. Internally, my Romantic winks at my Spiritual Warrior.

**DAY 1:** We listen to a talk that lays out the structure, practice, and profound purpose for the week: an opportunity to experience the truth of our being without distractions. On our way to dinner, which marks our last chance for conversation, my husband leans over and whispers to me, "I've changed my mind. I want to let go of our eye-gazing option." My Romantic's heart sinks for a moment, but then I feel a wave of gratitude, intuiting the wisdom of his choice.

**DAY 2:** I am sitting in the back of the large meditation hall. As I look toward the dais, waiting for our teacher to arrive, I catch a brief glimpse of my guy sitting in the second row. I observe my mind weighing the pros and cons of stalking my husband and charting his whereabouts during the week. I resolve to keep my attention on myself.

*She Tea*  
Timothy Karpinski »



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**DAY 3:** I am humbly aware of how my mind is scrambling for a job to do. It desperately wants to judge, discern, deliberate—on *anything*. It would have turned over our eye-gazing pebble option a dozen times today, debating its virtues. In fact, it already has, wondering how it *might* have felt to eye-gaze with my beloved, who is somewhere out there in the seemingly placid sea of humble humans doing their best to sit still and listen to the silence.

**DAY 4:** I cannot help myself. In the predawn light, we have a rare overlap of sitting in bed sipping tea at the same time. I have brought back two small muffins from yesterday's breakfast. As I look away from my husband and out the window, my left hand impulsively reaches over and hands him one. He takes it, and we savor our muffins back in our own personal bubbles. My mind begs me to turn and look for signs of approval or disapproval of my gift of food, but I ignore it.

**DAY 5:** Back in our room after our morning meditations, I find a small cedar branch lying on the counter where we (separately) make tea. I ponder whether this is his way of telling me he *does* want to eye-gaze after all. I come back to the room before dinner to find out; he never shows. I realize I never really checked in with myself about *my* desire to connect. When I do, I find the answer is no.

**DAY 6:** My compulsion to share muffins returns, this time with a man I share a table with on one of our breaks. But instead I chew on my obvious identification of caring for others without their asking, with feeding the masculine, with "being generous."

**DAY 7:** I slip out of bed at 4 a.m. and make my way down the forest path to the meditation hall. I pause to breathe in the autumn air and revel at the magnificent night sky. This week has found me following my own rhythms and exploring deep terrain, inside and outside myself. The absence of small talk has been a huge relief. I am not looking forward to its resuming after our last session today.

Talk aside, there is a more primal language my husband and I have never gone this long without: touch. Our bodies have always heartily bonded in a way that our very different minds often don't. I have fantasized several times this week about stretching out my leg to touch his in bed, yet respectfully refrained. Our agreement aside, I find I am relishing the nourishment of my own sphere of awareness.

As everyone exits the hall after our last sit, I stay to savor the exquisite, timeless silence for a few last moments. When I finally leave, my husband is waiting for me. He makes his way through the crowd with single-minded devotion, his gaze intent. When he reaches me, his embrace is firm, his heart open to receive me. Inside me, time and timelessness converge in our sweet moment of reunion. I shed tears of joy, relishing them both.

Our retreat taught us the profound support for liberation that structure can provide. We have since given ourselves mini-retreats at home, both separately and in tandem. In temporarily letting go of our habits of caring and communing with each other, we experience a deeper conscious appreciation for the ephemeral gift of life we share.

—JOY HOSEY



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