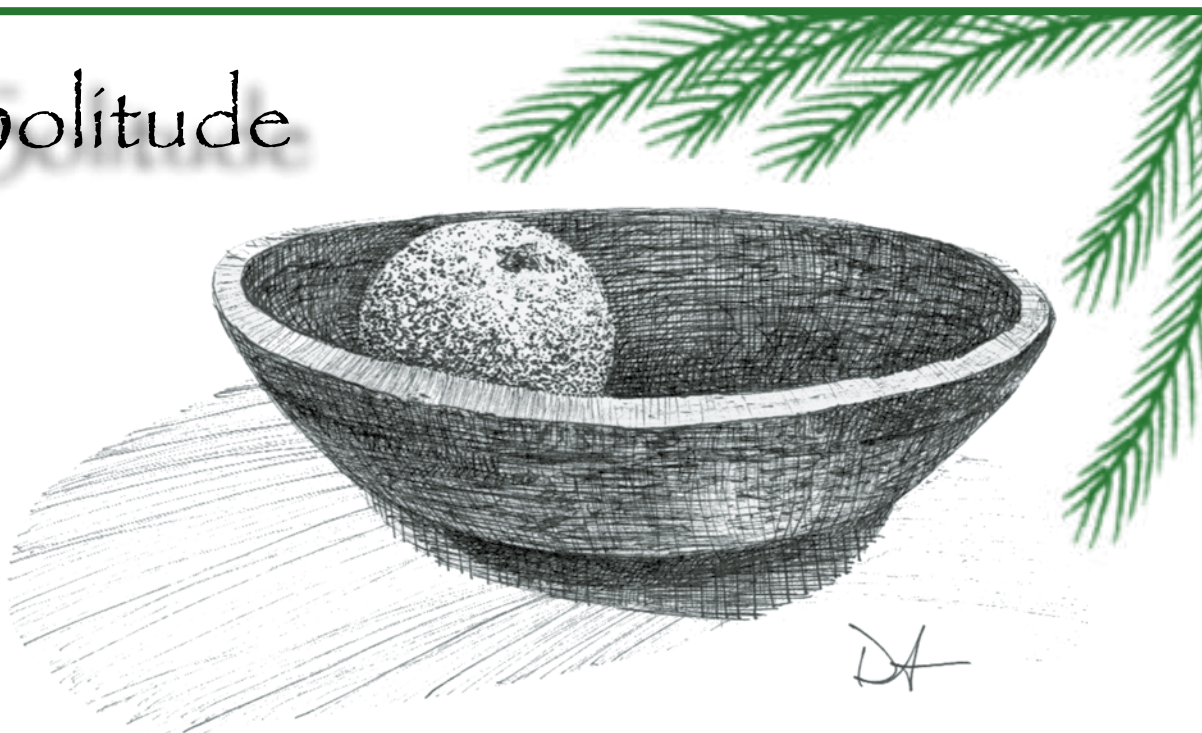


# A Winter's Solitude

By Diane Kimball  
Illustration by Dianne Austin



This morning's dull winter offers me an indulgent descent into a cavernous existence. I'll leave the curtains closed against the day until...

...until some new reality extends itself from outside into the house, acting like a bug-eyed giant reaching in to grab the innocent occupant.

How would he (naturally) get the captured damsel back out? Would he squeeze her small just for the fun of it?

"Cut with the thinking, would you!" She (Solitude, naturally) says.

"I saw you as gray this morning," I admit, "and I didn't think much about that. It's winter in Michigan."

"Correct. Then you sat down at the computer to start writing," She adds. "Let's see what comes out on the page." She's taunting me, I think.

Well, I can't help it. I *am* thinking. Solitude does that to me. Maybe I just want to hibernate and say, leave me alone! I'd take a serious *attitude cartusienne*, wearing a robe as monks do at *La Grande Chartreuse* monastery, deep in the French Alps, where people have chosen to isolate themselves so that nothing can trouble their connection with the Divine. I remember a one-time visit to the section of this French monastery that was now a museum. I walked alone down a shadowed corridor with cubicle-like portholes outside the cells into which meals were placed twice a day. From here the monk would retrieve his food. Oppressive stone walls, isolated cells and high-walled garden spaces. Why would anyone choose this? I longed for a retreat back out into the world.

Only a few years later I saw the film *Into Great Silence*, a two and a half hour display, without dialog or music, of life in this voluntary retreat into prayer. In silence I watched the winter sunlight change across the floor of a stark cell and then move to rest for a moment on an orange in a wooden bowl by the single window. In silence I looked directly into the faces of individual monks, some young and some old, who stood one by one in front of the camera. In silence I watched people seated in prayer, then standing in a kitchen preparing food. I could see that this condensed life was not hibernation, for it appeared to expand beyond the confines of thought or meaning. Did they understand something I didn't?

Help! Too much! Thinking. Solitude. Thinking about solitude. The nuances of seclusion lead to an unfrequented place, surely some wilderness. I could go live in a yurt in the Himalayas. Get away from the noise, the cacophony, of the man-made world. I feel like a clam closing tight to create the most luminous pearl...the soul, only, one. Can I get squeezed pure in solitude? Is there a voice I want to hear? Or none at all? I don't know. I'm just going to don my alpaca sweater, brew some tea, and take a look outside to see what winter really is.

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