

A Time and Place for Life's Discernment

The Cloak, November 2022

John W. de Gruchy is Emeritus Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and he and his wife, Isobel, a talented writer in her own right, are very good friends of mine. I visited them in the spring of 2014 and we have remained in touch over the years. Isobel is a poet and artist – one of her paintings hangs in our front hallway – and John is author and editor of many books. Most recently, he authored *This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit & the Rule of Love* (Cascade Books, 2021).

John and Isobel live in Volmoud Community, a place of hospitality for conferences and retreats with accommodations for 60 guests who have come to Volmoud – about an hour's drive from Cape Town – over the years since its founding. Today there's a Chapel of Thanksgiving where weekly Eucharistic services are held which John usually leads, giving a weekly meditation that he is kind enough to send out to a mailing list of friends. The Volmoud Community was founded in the 1980s during all the turmoil surrounding Apartheid – a fight against injustice and oppression that John was very much a part of. As John wrote in the book's Prologue: "Everything depended on a shared commitment to Christ and the gospel, the wisdom of experience, and a desire to achieve its founding vision" of hope for the future.

In his new book, John draws the distinction between chronos time and kairos time. In terms of Biblical theology, chronos time is just everyday, normal time as we move through our days; kairos time is the breakthrough of God's Spirit or the interruption of chronos time with Transcendence. When kairos hits, that breakthrough gets your attention. John writes the following that I think is indeed thought-provoking and likely applies to the times you and I are immersed in at the moment: "... unlike chronos, marked by the daily rhythm of life or the regular sound of monastery bells calling us to prayer, kairos refers to moments in chronological time when all hell is breaking loose and we are called to change our ways before we are dragged into the abyss. Kairos is apocalyptic time, and it is here and now." (p. 7)

Last Friday I met with my own spiritual director, Fr. Peter Creed, and we talked about the times we are living through right now. And we also discussed the need for discernment, the need for taking time to retreat from the everyday and to take stock, and to consider God's Spirit as He breaks through to our lives, calling us to listen to what the Spirit is saying to each of us right now. As John points out, we are living with the Covid pandemic fallout, an environmental crisis, and injustice on a global scale. And so we need to take time and make space for discernment, for reflecting on our personal futures and on where we are all going in the days and months ahead. And to do that, we need a place for retreat. Once more, let's hear from John in his own words:

As we journey through life ... we need places that provide space to catch our breath, unpack our backpacks, drop our burdens, and open up hearts. We need time to reflect,

pray, and gather strength for the journey ahead. We need to regain hope. We need the rhythm of monastic chronos to cope with the kairos times in which we live. (p. 6)

Over the years of my adult life I have always managed to find a place for retreat. St. Meinrad's Monastery in southern Indiana, St. Vincents College and Seminary outside of Pittsburgh, Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Va., Shalom House near Ashland, Va., a cabin outside of Crozet, Va. – as well as other venues over the years. Most recently my retreats have been located at Wintergreen resort south of Charlottesville, Va. I feel the need now for such a break. But for complicated reasons, I haven't taken myself on retreat for a couple of years. But I'm working on it. In the meantime, as Pete and I discussed, instead of taking a "staycation" at home, I'm thinking about taking a "stay-retreat" at my own home – actually turning off my phone and computer (!) and setting aside a whole week for no appointments or major social events.

I'll let you know in a future Cloak how that's going!