



# The Sound of Silence

Check out from the busyness of daily life by checking into a spiritual retreat BY ROSEMARY ZURLO-CUVA

**SOMETIMES WE NEED NOT SO MUCH** a vacation as a retreat, a few days to rest and reconnect with our innermost selves, to reestablish our connection to spirit, however we interpret that notion. Just across Highway M from the north shore of Lake Mendota, Holy Wisdom Monastery, run by the Benedictine Women of Madison, offers the space and sustenance to make a healthy break from the noise and busyness of our daily lives.

On 138 acres of restored prairie, oak savannah and woods, with a glacial kettle lake and Indian mounds, the Benedictine Women have created a buffer from the pace of constantly juggling our jobs and families, our finances and, especially lately, our politics. The monastery building, green-built and newly dedicated in 2009, is a wonder of open space and light wood, windowed everywhere so that we never have to lose our sense of the world outdoors. The Retreat and Guest House

provides simple, comfortable rooms with private baths, a kitchenette and a communal breakfast room for those staying overnight.

There is a rhythm to monastic life, a series of repetitions that are in themselves peace-giving and restorative. Personal

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retreatants are invited (but not required) to participate to whatever extent they wish in the daily rituals of meditation and prayer at appointed hours throughout the day. Daily worship at Holy Wisdom is ecumenical and inclusive, a balance of silent meditation with music and readings from the Gospels and Psalms.

In between, while the sisters work, retreatants are at leisure to read or journal or sleep. Visit the monastery library to check the daily paper if you must—or better yet, walk the prairie and woods. Well-marked trails circle and cross the grounds, and the land abounds with plants and wildlife. On a dewy summer morning, watch cranes feed on the mown field west of the Guest House while a water mammal of one kind or another swims back and forth in the lake. In fall, kick up flurries of fallen oak leaves on your way through the woods to the golden prairie, sprinkled with purple asters. In winter, find fox and deer tracks to follow in the hush of a winter snow. The sisters say they've even seen a gray wolf.

Silence is a valuable commodity in modern life. It can be a sort of bliss. And then, communal meals in the monastery building turn out to be the perfect counterpoint to hours spent without speaking a word. Delicious, simple and beautifully prepared lunches and dinners are comprised as much as possible from vegetables grown in Holy Wisdom's community garden. The Benedictine women and whichever of their staff or

**QUIET TIME:** Walking, sleeping, reading and praying are all ways to renew on a personal retreat at Holy Wisdom Monastery.

volunteers are in residence join with retreatants for meals. They make the sort of easy and unpretentious conversation that speaks volumes to the hospitality, listening and respect for others the Benedictine women commit themselves to, so that you leave a meal refreshed not only in body, but in mind and heart, ready to head off for a few more hours of healing rest and quiet.

Personal retreats can be scheduled for day use (\$36) or overnight (\$55 single, \$90 double per night) by calling (608) 831-9304. A continental breakfast is provided as part of the overnight retreat fee and taken on your own. You may bring your own food for lunch and dinner at no cost, or choose to eat prepared meals in the communal dining room (\$10 lunch, \$13 dinner). If you'd like to do more directed work on retreat, spiritual guidance sessions with one of the sisters are available (\$50 per session, with a sliding scale available as needed). Everything you need to know can be found on their excellent website, [benedictinewomen.org](http://benedictinewomen.org).

ROSEMARY ZURLO-CUVA is a Madison-based writer.

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