

Healing Journeys

Taking a retreat — in the great outdoors or at a relaxing spa — can help you weather the trials of life with more ease and more peace.



REELING AND HEALING MIDWEST

Ruthanne Tietsort on a Reeling and Healing retreat, July 2006.

By LAUREL KALLENBACH

As Ruthanne Tietsort stood in her waders and fly-fishing gear in Michigan's Au Sable River, she watched a hawk soaring overhead. "My fishing line unfurled over the water like a ballet dancer, and I could hear laughter carrying over the river," she says, recalling a three-day cancer-survivor retreat she took with Reeling and Healing Midwest, a nonprofit that offers fly-fishing getaways for women living with the disease. "I felt so connected to nature and the other women."

Tietsort, 66, a retired collections manager from Muskegon, Mich., didn't always feel so connected. "Before the retreat, I didn't want to talk about my cancer, but other women's candidness helped me open up," she says. She embarked on her first retreat in 1998, two years after her breast cancer diagnosis, even though she'd never fly-fished before. She now owns her own gear and attends the retreats four times a year.

"I liken the Reeling and Healing Midwest experience to a rose blooming," Tietsort says. "At first, you're a tightly closed rosebud, but over the weekend, you gradually open until you're a beautiful, full rose."

Illness or injury, the loss of a loved one, a period of great stress, or a relationship transition can leave you feeling less than whole. But a healing retreat like Tietsort's may offer the respite you need for personal reflection and for learning to understand and accept the challenges you've been handed. While making time to summon the energy necessary for recovering from life changes can be challenging, it may be just what you need to prevail.

"Going on a retreat takes courage," Tietsort acknowledges. "I marvel at women who come fly-fishing right after their cancer treatment. Some who are physically tired or unsure of their footing sit on plastic chairs in the river — but everybody fishes and everybody talks."

Your Rite of Passage

The range of retreat experiences has expanded substantially in recent years — from solo vision quests in the wilderness to healing weekends at secluded spas. All of these getaways provide some separation from your daily routine and surroundings, and they get you to a place — ideally an outdoor one — where you commune with nature and reflect on your life, says Michael Bodkin, executive director of Rites of Passage, a Santa Rosa, Calif.-based firm that offers a variety of self-exploration experiences.

"We all experience life transitions, such as the change from childhood to adulthood, recuperation after an illness or the decision to become a parent," says Bodkin, a marriage and family therapist.

Retreat Planner

"It's important to mark life transitions with a rite of passage — a ceremony or ritual in which we recognize and claim changes within ourselves. If we don't consciously embrace the meaning of a life passage, we can end up feeling damaged by it."

Each rite of passage is a symbolic death and rebirth in which you leave one way of life and move to the next, Bodkin explains, and a retreat can help you make sense of that transition. "Many people come on a vision quest after a divorce, illness or injury, or because they're struggling with core beliefs about their life's purpose," he says.

During a Rites of Passage vision quest, for instance, a group of 10 people backpacks into the Southern California high desert for nine days. Together, participants learn wilderness skills and identify individual goals for their vision quest; they then spend three days and nights alone, fasting in the wilderness. Afterward, the group reassembles, and each person shares his or her vision-quest story and prepares to reenter life with a new perspective or mission.

"Many different kinds of healing happen," says Bodkin. "Some people break out of their alienation or let go of old wounds. Some feel they can go home and have deeper relationships. Many discover the ability to open their hearts in the presence of others, and most people discover the life spirit within themselves."

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Even people with limited physical and outdoors skills usually discover that being in nature on a vision quest deepens their understanding of themselves. "Being in the wilderness gives people a sense of connection and wholeness, and nature helps them realize their place in the larger scheme of things," says Bodkin. "As they learn to pay attention to the weather, rocks, plants and animals, they also begin noticing what's natural in their soul." (For more on the benefits of time in nature, see "Nature Quest" and "Wilderness Lessons" in the June 2006 and July/August 2007 archives, respectively, at experiencelifemag.com.)

Learning to Listen

The measure of a healing retreat isn't how far from civilization you travel, but how well the experience helps you address your situation and clears your path to healing. A rite of passage at a retreat center or quiet spa can be just as powerful as an excursion in the great outdoors.

Mitchell and Palma Eisner of Staten Island, N.Y., for example, overcame the pain of past divorces and embarked on a future together after a relationship workshop at the →



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Ask yourself these questions to determine what kind of healing retreat is right for you.

1

ARE YOU CALLED TO CHANGE? Many people are compelled toward a healing retreat without understanding why. Ask yourself honestly what your soul craves. If you need to be alone, plan a weekend away at a local campground, monastery or retreat center where you can hear your own thoughts. Or, sign up for a week with an organized experiential retreat that will blend solo time with group time. Sharing your experiences with others — even strangers — can be therapeutic.

2

WHAT DOES YOUR BODY NEED? Some people clear their heads best after galloping on a horse; for others, the healing process exhausts their physical energy and they need time to be still. If you're recuperating from an illness or injury, consult with your physician and check with retreat organizers about what kinds of physical activities or environments are appropriate for you.

3

WHAT DOES YOUR HEART DESIRE? Sleeping under the stars may call your soul; if so, search the Web for wilderness experiences. If a soft bed, pampering bodywork and gourmet meals are more your style, look into a remote spa or retreat center (see "Moving On," page 70).

4

WHERE SHOULD YOU GO? Nature is a great healer, so choose someplace serene with an appealing outdoor element. One basic idea of a healing retreat is that changing environments gives you fresh perspective.



KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA & HEALTH

Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health. Located in western Massachusetts's Berkshire Mountains, the Center offered them modest accommodations in serene surroundings. When they weren't in workshops, they could hike, canoe, do yoga or just sit peacefully by the lake.

"We both came from long marriages that disintegrated, mainly due to poor communication, so we were hesitant to get involved in another relationship," says Palma, a grade-school teacher in the New York City public schools. "The workshop taught us to evaluate the past to explain why we react the way we do today."

The couple practiced new communication skills that rebuilt their confidence. "By the end of the workshop, I was able to commit to Palma and say, 'Yes, I'm willing to overcome my fears;



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HOLLYHOCK



KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA & HEALTH

let's make a life with each other," says Mitchell, a social worker and psychiatric hospital administrator. They married soon after and now help facilitate similar Kripalu workshops.

The Eisners emphasize that choosing a safe, relaxing place for a healing retreat is important, especially if your intent is improving a relationship with a parent, child or spouse. "Couples go on retreats to escape and ponder what they mean to each other," says Mitchell. "At home, people commonly lack time to work on their relationship or personal growth, but at a retreat center, you have the opportunity to reprioritize your goals with the relationship in mind."

The ultimate goal of a healing retreat — regardless of where it takes place — is returning home with a sense of acceptance and clarity and, perhaps, some useful life skills. And when the road gets rocky, recalling your retreat experience can be a touchstone. Mitchell Eisner says remembering to practice communication skills when life gets hectic is challenging, so he and Palma try to return to Kripalu annually. "It's like getting a car tune-up," he says. "Only it's a spiritual renewal instead." ●

Writer Laurel Kallenbach retreated alone to a Colorado mountain cabin while writing this article.

Moving ON

These retreat centers can help you get past the circumstances and feelings that have been holding you back.

ESALEN INSTITUTE A retreat center in Big Sur, Calif., devoted to the exploration of human potential; offers educational and personal-growth programs. 831-667-3000; www.esalen.org

HOLLYHOCK An "educational retreat center" on a remote island in British Columbia that offers healing workshops and outdoor adventures. 800-933-6339; www.hollyhock.ca

KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA AND HEALTH Classes and spiritual retreats in the Massachusetts Berkshires. Yoga not required. 866-200-5203; www.kripalu.org

MIRAVAL LIFE IN BALANCE A holistic, luxury resort in Arizona with indoor and outdoor activities, including a workshop called "Grief, Loss and Letting Go." 800-825-4000; www.miravalresort.com

REELING AND HEALING MIDWEST Fly-fishing retreats for women living with cancer. No fishing or swimming experience necessary. 866-237-5725; www.reelingandhealingmidwest.org

REEL RECOVERY Fly-fishing retreats for men recovering from life-threatening cancer. No fishing or swimming experience necessary. 800-699-4490; www.reelrecovery.org

rites of passage Vision quests and weekend personal-growth workshops in California; involves moderate physical activities, like hiking. 707-537-1927; www.ritesofpassagevisionquest.org