

## Tablet - June 2011



The retreat was over and there were just a few of us left saying goodbye and heading for the cars. Here day and night change shifts without the ceremonies of twilight; between one goodbye and another it had become dark. There is a sweet sadness in separating from those you have been with after the bonding that happens during a silent retreat.

Something has happened between you that becomes more tangible as you part. By the end of the retreat people who are new to shared silence feel amazed at what has transpired among them - those who have not met before, hardly know each other and yet experience a depth of trust and affection as if they had shared intimately over a long friendship. Silence has many benefits for our mental and spiritual health. Friendship is one of the more surprising discoveries.

As we loaded our bags in the car the manager of the centre ran out towards us. I assumed he was saying another goodbye or that we had forgotten something. But he summoned us back inside. I couldn't follow his Spanish -something about women of the night, I thought. It seemed a bit tiresome to go back in the building; but we followed him and he led us into a small interior garden that I had not noticed before, a roofless secluded corner packed with tropical plants so fertile you could hear them growing.

A tall meandering plant with broad leaves became the focus of our attention. The manager pointed to three or four large flowers that were opening at the end of some stalks. They were white, multi-layered, and exuded a seductive fragrance that was both delicate and delicious. All the sensuousness of the tropics seemed present in their colour, form and scent.

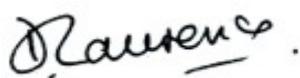
These were the 'ladies of the night' we were not allowed to leave without meeting. Their fatal attraction however was their rarity and brevity. The flowers bloom once a year for a single night. We listened to the description and intended to remember the information that made these flowers so special. Without it we could have walked past them unaware of their silent and singular presence. For some minutes we spoke about it and asked questions of the gardener for whom this was clearly an event of sacred moment. His reverence was contagious. Then we looked at them some more, in silence. We smelled them again. We talked about them in their presence. The flowers had become celebrities that are looked at but return nothing of the intense interest they receive from their admirers.

As happens around anything that excites us, we eventually felt a growing tension between the two kinds of time that form all experience, the kairos moments that pulsate and glow with the

kind of meaning that seems to make no difference - the most powerful and subtle form of meaning that changes all it brushes against. And the chronological time that reminds us that if we don't leave now, we'll never get home in time for the next thing and will have another late night we cannot afford. We made to leave. And then I remembered my camera and realised that these beautiful south american ladies would be a strong candidate for my annual WCCM calendar. I exited, got the camera and started to take shots - with and without flash, with different settings.

Later I flicked through the photos and formed a short list and finally chose the winning shot. Like most photography it is mostly luck but the effort we put into making it happen makes us feel more of a creator of the beauty than we probably deserve. The photos were safely stored, the memory imaged in seeming permanence, a humble enough defence against the relentless ephemerality of things and the shortness of memory. The camera that digitally remembered what would otherwise be forgotten was carefully wrapped among shirts and socks and packed in my bag. By the time the plane took off, the beautiful, all the more beautiful because so brief, visit of the ladies of the night had come and gone. I did not have to see their perfect forms curl and wrinkle or witness their captivating scent become bad.

As I lifted my bag from the baggage carrousel in Houston I noticed it was partially unzipped. I brushed aside the unkind thought that came to me. I had packed it safely, unlocked, many times. Soon, when I opened it, the implacable absence of my camera announced itself like a silent cry and I knew the worst. It was not the camera's loss at first, so much as the lost image of the flower, that hurt. Clearly the image was as short-lived as the original. Perhaps the loss is what makes it so memorable.



Laurence Freeman OSB

*The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? ([www.wccmmeditatio.org](http://www.wccmmeditatio.org))*

Tablet Newsletter

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