

# My Memory of Self-Isolation

Back in the nineteen-nineties I went on holiday to northern Sweden. I had my canoe on the roof and my mountain bike in the back of my old Fiat, and with the back seat down I had just enough space between all my toys to lie flat to sleep as I journeyed towards a cabin I had rented in the middle of nowhere.

I can't remember many details, I just remember the isolation. For three weeks I saw no-one and spoke to no-one. By the cabin there was firewood for the stove that kept me warm and on which I cooked, I took water from the stream, and I had brought with me a lot of dried food.

Apart from the wind it was silent and still – no radio, no nothing. For me this was a dream come true. When I arrived I was so excited, and even though it was midnight and the light was failing, I wanted to go for a bike ride. This was a big mistake as I had a nasty accident, sufficiently bad for both me and the bike that it stopped all cycling that holiday. And with no rivers or lakes nearby the canoe lay idle, so my activity was just the short walks I could manage with my injuries. All the things I had brought to keep me busy suddenly lost their value.

So I set up a daily routine: Light the fire to warm the cabin; make coffee; do my reading... etc.

It must have been ten-days-in that I first noticed it: I got up in the morning and instead of thinking, "I want a coffee" I thought "Coffee – desire". Slowly over the next few days the idea of turning thoughts into language seemed so odd. It is hard to recall the sensation now as I am surrounded by so many words and voices, but I know I let go of the nonsense of grammar and touched my thoughts in a different way.

For us priests words are meant to be our thing, but I also remember sitting there with my word-rich prayer book and leaving it shut; I placed my hand on it and held just raw thoughts. Yet in this two way encounter I also felt something... What? – I am not completely sure, but something beyond words.

Those three weeks changed my life.

I came back via my Mum and Dad's house and I did wonder how much of their relationship of fifty-plus years was based on words and how much had gone beyond words.

And now self-isolation is here and my heart leapt at the thought of regaining just a little of that wordlessness I once touched... but no; I am 'Zooming' around chased by endless e-mails full of words.

One day, when this odd time is over, I will do my real 'self-isolation' again. This time for thirty days! That will be my post-corona treat to myself.