

PENDLE HILL

Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

MEMORANDUM:

TO: Anne, Chel, Denny,
Irene', Liz, Margaret

DATE: November 18, 1996

FROM: Dan

CC:

SUBJECT: Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth

Attached for your perusal is the file memo I prepared growing out of my experience at the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth. I am keeping these notes as part of my program of comparing other retreat centers to Pendle Hill.

I realize that there is more here than any one of you might be interested in. I have put the main questions or thoughts the experienced raised in my mind in italicized type so that they can be found easily. Anyone particularly interested in the data which elicited any particular concern can read the material immediately preceding.

I hope this is helpful.

PENDLE HILL

Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

MEMORANDUM:

TO: Files **DATE:** November 4, 1996
FROM: Dan Seeger **CC:**
SUBJECT: Directed Prayer Retreat at the Jesuit Center
for Spiritual Growth, Wernersville, PA

My attention was first drawn to the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth when, in connection with the challenge to Pendle Hill's tax exempt status by the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District, we researched the situation of nearby religious retreat centers with regard to school taxes. All the retreat centers in our immediate vicinity -- mainly Delaware and Chester counties -- were absent from school tax roles. However, when we enlarged the research radius we found that the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth in Wernersville, a short distance from Reading, Pennsylvania (Perkiomen County, I believe) does pay school taxes.

However my signing up for a spiritual retreat there was really not related to this concern but was part of my very minimalist program of self-development through which, about once a year, I spend a weekend in a program of spiritual renewal while at the same time scoping-out how another retreat center functions. (See my earlier memoranda about Woodbrooke, Kripalu, and St. Meinrad's Archabbey.)

Preliminaries

The program or catalog for the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth is neat but quite modest. Unlike Kripalu, the Open Center, or Omega, there is no magazine-like format and no riveting photo portraits of retreat leaders. Descriptions of retreats for prayer, for marriage enrichment, for priests, for dealing with anger and guilt, for lay spirituality in the post-Vatican church, and for enneagram workshops, are described fairly tersely, followed by lists of dates, (most programs are offered several times during the year), and the cost. The only photographs in the brochure are on the front cover where the entrance gate is shown, and one on the inside, a portrait of Father George Aschenbrenner S.J., who is the Center director. Their recruitment literature certainly represents an instance where a high church institution is more simple than Pendle Hill's low

church style.

The cost of a Friday supper through Sunday lunch directed prayer retreat is \$115, although there are some other weekend retreats in the catalog which cost \$130. (This compares with Pendle Hill's present rate of \$150 - \$250 for an Extension weekend.) When filling out the registration form, one is informed at the bottom of the application that "The actual cost of each program is approximately twenty percent higher than the price listed. For those who can pay the actual cost, we would appreciate this. For those who cannot afford the cost listed, limited assistance may be available." Since we estimate the actual cost of providing our own weekends to be about double the fee, their efficiency, compared to ours, looks very good. However, short of pouring over their books in detail, it is difficult to know how they add up their costs and income.

Interestingly, the Center requests about forty percent of the fee at the time of registration as a deposit which is not refundable. The Center's brochure says "Inquiries and arrangements for all programs and retreats are best made through the mail. No registrations are concluded by telephone." However, on the same page, contradicting this, a telephone number "for registrations" is given with the hours Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and from 1:15 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

The cost for staying at the Center as a sojourner is \$40 per overnight, which I assume includes three meals. Pendle Hill's fee is \$58.

In addition to weekend programs on a variety of topics there are one-day programs, also on a variety of topics. There are eight-day programs similar to what we would call short courses which run usually from a Tuesday through a Wednesday eight days later. Eighteen such programs are scheduled in twelve months. They are all of one type -- an extended version of the directed prayer retreat that I participated in for the weekend.

Upon registering by mail I promptly received a postcard acknowledgment.

About a week before the retreat I received in the mail "General Notes and Information" on two pages, four sides. The material describes the facilities available (coin-operated washer and dryer, tennis courts, outdoor pool, 250 acres of grounds), advises you to dress casually, and suggests what to bring. Once again, the material cautions you that, although a secretary takes telephone calls during business hours, registration should be written and sent through the mail. The materials also say "other messages can be left on our Code - A - Phone." I did not have any opportunity to try this communication system to see how it works and how it might compare with Pendle Hill's new voice mail.

The material also gives travel directions. They expect people coming from distant points to find their way to Reading by air. The material then simply states that Wernersville is located nine miles west of Reading and "the Center is generally unable to provide transportation from West Reading to Wernersville." Rather, you are instructed to find Reading Metro Taxi (a phone number is given)

which charges about \$10-\$12 for a trip to the Center (as of November 5, 1992). They also inform you that a public bus travels from Reading to Wernersville during the day on weekdays but that there is no local taxi service in Wernersville, implying that if you use your initiative enough to use mass transit to get as far as Wernersville, you will still be out of luck because they are not going to pick you up.

There are detailed instructions for getting to the Center by car, and good regional and local maps are provided. Essentially, no matter where you come from, you are expected to arrive at the front door of the Jesuit Center under your own steam and at your own expense. Moreover, you are expected so to arrange things that you arrive within a defined window of time on late Friday afternoon.

Although the literature was written as if people might possibly come to the Jesuit Center from all over, given the fact that Roman Catholic retreat centers probably exist in most geographic areas, I would be inclined to assume that most of those who come to Wernersville come from within a convenient driving radius and arrive much the same way as I did -- by automobile. Route 422 follows the Schuylkill river from the Philadelphia area to the environs of Reading, PA. The main highway bypasses downtown Reading. About nine miles West of Reading one comes to the town of Wernersville and at the appropriate point one makes a right turn. After a short drive through a suburban-type neighborhood, one comes to the imposing gateway of the Jesuit Center. A long, winding uphill drive between an avenue of magnificent trees leads one to the summit of a hill and to the very large, somewhat Georgian-style building erected in the late 1920's.

Preliminary materials instruct you regarding the hours they are prepared to greet you, and suggest that if you cannot arrange to arrive at the designated time you should make special arrangements with them by mail in advance. I arrived on time and entered the Retreat Center's imposing main door and was greeted by Sister Susan Bower, a member of the Retreat Center's staff. When she found that I was there for the first time, she gave me a few minutes of her undivided attention, walking me down a long hallway to show me where the chapel and dining room were, and which stairways to take to the auditorium and to my room. She invited me to proceed to supper once I had gotten my things into my room, and told me that the first meeting of the retreat would be at 7:30 p.m. in the auditorium.

Question for Pendle Hill: The Jesuit Center is simple and direct regarding what services they can and cannot provide for you by way of registration, transportation and welcome and then, after making this quite clear, they do what they promise to do very well. Ought we be giving more thought to simplifying our procedures, strategies and responsibilities, and then concentrate on doing what we promise in the most excellent way possible? Is there a danger that we are being fragmented and torn by trying to do too much in a way which does not let us do anything really well? I raise this question especially with the proposed short courses in view, which will increase the number of people who are coming to and going from Pendle Hill considerably. I believe our problems are a little different from the Jesuit Center's in that we attract a nationwide, or even world-wide,

constituency, and it might not be reasonable to expect people coming from such a wide radius to be self-sufficient in getting themselves to our front door once they reach the locality of Wallingford or the airport.

Accurately comparing fees and operating costs of different retreat centers remains an elusive project. Kripalu charges more than Pendle Hill, but claims the fees cover all but 8% of the costs. The Jesuit Center charges substantially less than Pendle Hill, and claims that fees fall short of costs by 20%. We figure our fees for Extension Programs cover about 50% of our costs. However, little can be securely concluded from all this short of a much closer examination of the accounts of different institutions than we have thus far been able to carry out.

The Facility

The Jesuit Center building was erected to serve as a novitiate, but that function is now completely closed down. About a quarter of the building is used as a residence for elderly and retired or semi-retired Jesuit priests and brothers. Visitors are asked not to enter the section of the building used for their living quarters, but these elderly Jesuits do eat in the common dining room.

The building is comprised of three very long, parallel wings which are joined at their mid-sections by a fourth transverse wing. There is a ground floor level which functions as a kind of basement, above which are the first, second and third floors with the main entrance leading to the first floor. The middle wing of the three that run parallel to each other contains the basic services: the dining room, the auditorium and the chapel. As is the case with Kripalu, which functions in a now-defunct Jesuit novitiate, the building itself reminds you that Catholicism is very large indeed compared to Quakerism. There were very many very long corridors, and to a first-timer finding one's way about the building from the inside was very confusing.

My room was on the third floor of the east wing. It was actually a suite of two very small rooms. They were adjacent to each other and connected by an interior door opening, but each room also had its own door to the corridor. One served as a bedroom and the other as a study. The study had an ample but very simple wooden desk with a chair, plus a bookcase and an upholstered recliner. The bedroom had a large armoire, a night stand, a very small chest of drawers and a simple bed. It is conceivable that in the days of the novitiate the rooms were separate, but one alone would have made for very tight quarters, and I was grateful to have two. The sweeping view from the windows was one of picture postcard loveliness -- rolling hills, with a village here and there. It looked like everyone's imagined ideal of America.

The furnishings were clean but threadbare, very plain, and even ugly. This offered a contrast both to Kripalu and to St. Meinrad's Archabbey.

The Center has an outdoor swimming pool, tennis courts, handball courts, a music room for listening to compact disks, a smoking room, a bookstore, and a game room with pool tables and various other devices I did not examine closely.

There are also scattered about many smallish parlors which can be used for individual prayer or for one-on-one meetings, and various mid-sized and larger lounges and meeting rooms. The Retreat Center maintains two "Katie-like" sources of twenty-four-hours-a-day refreshment, one on the first floor and one in the basement. The bookstore is extremely modest by Kripalu, Pendle Hill or St. Meinrad standards and was only open for a half-hour a day on the weekend I was there. Of course, there was a good deal of literature by Jesuits on spiritual subjects generally, and about Jesuit spirituality and the Jesuit movement. There seemed to be a fairly strong feminist section, given the general scale of the bookstore, although I was not familiar enough with the titles to know the sort of feminist perspective which was being advanced. In fact I saw very few familiar titles. Henry Nouwen was represented, as was Scott Peck.

The Center sits on 250 acres of property (!) most of which is cleared. There are lovely trees, but far fewer of them per acre than we have at Pendle Hill. One photograph I saw of the Center when it was first opened up gave me the impression that although the plot is hilly it may have once been farmland and quite bare of trees. Perhaps those that now exist were all planted by the Jesuits themselves. The "chapel" is a good-sized church, although not as cathedral-like as St. Meinrad's. While the left-over Jesuit chapel at Kripalu was in a modern style, the church at Wernersville imitates high Renaissance, although it is not so ornate as some of the Jesuit churches in New York City.

There was a folder in my room which contained the following items:

1. An orientation to the rules and regulations and facilities of the Jesuit Retreat Center: parking, messages, pool, bookstore, meal schedule, and a plan of the building. All corridors above the basement and all bathrooms (there are no private bathrooms) are intended to be silent spaces. There is a "two-tier" dining schedule so that those on retreat can eat in silence. Because of past mishaps, candles and incense are not permitted in rooms. This material was on three 8½ x 11 sheets of paper, printed on both sides. It included instructions on making one's bed for the next person with fresh linen provided, and instructions on resetting your place at the table after you finished eating.

2. A booklet about the life of St. Ignatius Loyola, sixteen pages.

3. A booklet about Jesuit Spirituality, twelve pages.

4. An article by the Retreat Center's Director, George Ashenbrenner S.J., on the practice of "consciousness examen," thirty-one pages.

5. A booklet entitled *Prayer -- A Personal Response to God's Presence*, thirteen pages.

6. A placemat-sized map of the 250 acres grounds.

7. An essay covering two sides of an 8 ½ x 11 sheet, single-spaced, headed "Attitudes which will help during a directed retreat."

All these items were labeled "Do not remove from Room 309," so it was necessary, if one was concerned, to read all the material during the retreat period.

Using the building plan they provided as a guide, I tried to assess the number of spaces similar to my own which might be available for program participants and concluded that, if all the accommodations were analogous to the ones shown to me, and if the space for the elderly Jesuits and the various common spaces and common facilities were subtracted out, there would be space for approximately one-hundred "customers." Later I discovered on a bulletin board a posting of the events going on that weekend. Thirty-nine people were expected for the Directed Prayer Retreat that I was in, eighteen people were expected for a Marriage Enrichment Program, twenty-eight people were expected for some sort of Parish Retreat Conference, and there was a seven-member group, the name of which did not mean anything to me. The lists of all the people in these groups and the rooms to which they were assigned were posted. Conceivably there could have been some individual sojourners who were not posted.

The registration material indicated that the programs are almost always full and that it is very important if you are canceling out to give as much notice as possible so someone else can be admitted.

When you enter the main entrance of the building there is a sign which says "Silence, Retreat in Progress." In addition to running their own programs, most of which are silent directed prayer retreats such as the one I was on, the Jesuit Center also takes on what we at Pendle Hill call "rentals." Holy Name Societies, parish councils or other Catholic groups will come for their own programs or retreats using the lodging and dining facilities and meeting rooms. These tend to be more chatty affairs, and the Center seeks to keep them on the ground floor or basement level for their activities, and to educate them on the need for silence above the basement level. They also organize the eating in shifts so that talkers eat at one time and silent people eat at another. My experience on this one weekend is that all these strategies are quite successful in that I did truly have a silent weekend. The atmosphere in this very large facility remained silent throughout. People nodded and smiled to each other when they passed in the hallways but there was no chit-chat. The same was true for the outdoor grounds.

At Kripalu there was a much more animated atmosphere in the facility, with a lot of talking in the public spaces. But at Kripalu, as mentioned in my several memoranda about that experience, there were ample facilities in which to withdraw for silence -- several lounges which were always silent, and a silent dining room as an ever-present option, in addition to one's own quarters. At the Jesuit Center in Wernersville the atmosphere was much more sedate and subdued, and the silence much more pervasive.

The page of "Attitudes which will help during a directed retreat" includes the following statement: "Keeping yourself in retreat composure applies also with respect to others at the retreat center. Aside from meetings with your director, there is really very little to be said to anyone else. You might even find it a relief not to have to make small talk with people, answering the same questions (Who

are you? Where do you live? What do you do?)."

Question for Pendle Hill: Should we be doing more at Pendle Hill to ensure that those seeking an experience of silence can indeed get it? There may be nothing more we need to do in this regard. I simply want to raise the question. I do not really have a clear idea of exactly what a person coming to Pendle Hill wishing for quiet time might actually experience.

The Program

As indicated above, weekend and eight-day versions of the directed silent prayer retreat seem to be the Center's main field of specialization.

After dinner, the thirty-nine people in the retreat gathered in the auditorium. Sister Susan Bower, who had greeted me in such an excellent way at the beginning, led a very brief program, which consisted mainly of introductions and a few instructions. First the Center's staff introduced themselves. I was a little surprised at the relatively large number of staff present, but I later caught on to why this was so. They were indeed all going to be working with us on the retreat weekend. After the staff introduced themselves, we the participants were invited to introduce ourselves by giving our name, saying where we were from, and giving a prayer intention if we had any.

All the introductions were very brief but they said enough to give me a few interesting impressions. As I suspected, most of the people were from somewhere within a fairly convenient driving radius, including a lot from Philadelphia. Women outnumbered men by about three to one. There were a few people, perhaps three or four, from really far off places. Again and again people spoke glowingly about how happy they were to be returning to the Center and, as was the case with Kripalu, indicated that they had been coming regularly for the last eight or twelve or fifteen years.

Observation for Pendle Hill: The fact that Kripalu and Wernersville attract so many recidivists for whom the spiritual experience they gain there is very important should, it seems to me, be kept in mind as we plan programming for Pendle Hill's future. The sort of "drop-out-of-life" long term Resident Program which we run, beautiful and valuable though it is, is definitely not the only way to offer a program of profound and enduring value to the people one serves.

I was clearly the only non-Catholic and I kept a low profile in this regard, introducing myself only as being "from Wallingford" and not mentioning Pendle Hill. I had, of course, indicated my Quaker background on my registration form.

Finally, the other thing the introductions disclosed was that about half the people present were members of Roman Catholic religious orders, and almost all of them were conducting what I would call front line ministries: work in inner cities, work with HIV people, work with immigrants, work with the unemployed. So, while Wernersville was a place apart from the world and its woes, it seemed definitely to be serving people who were fully immersed in the grittier aspects of

reality. I might mention here that during mass on Sunday, which was celebrated by Father Ashenbrenner, the Director of the Center, the celebrant laid heavy emphasis on how we should remain conscious throughout the celebration of the refugees in Zaire, as well as the people in half a dozen other troubled circumstances which he enumerated.

At this initial orientation meeting they did ask for a show of hands of people who were at the Jesuit Center for the first time. I believe only six or seven of us out of the thirty-nine were new.

At the end of this orientation session we were invited to remain in the auditorium for as long as we liked for a period of silent reflection, prayer and meditation, and then when each of us individually felt it timely to do so, to leave the auditorium in the spirit of silence which would prevail for the rest of the weekend. The only other thing which was to happen that evening was our first one-on-one meeting with our director for the weekend. The reason for the large number of staff members, as it turned out, was that the program consisted entirely of private individual prayer under the guidance of a director with whom you met on Friday night, once on Saturday and once on Sunday. These were three, one-hour meetings. Looking over the list I noted that each staff member met with or directed three retreatants, so it involved nine hours of meetings over the weekend for each staff member.

My spiritual director for the weekend was Father Bill Gaven, who serves as Rector of the resident Jesuit community there. Basically, the weekend consisted of the retreatants being given prayer exercises or assignments by the director going off and doing them during periods of solitude, then meeting with the director to discuss the experience, getting more prayer assignments, carrying them out, and then reporting back in a concluding conference. One also attended Holy Mass and a Eucharistic celebration each day. The prayer exercises took their point of departure from assigned scriptures using an Ignatian strategy of "exercising" the imagination in reflecting upon the passages, and allowing through a certain free-floating consciousness to see what the experience brought to mind in the way of one's own life experiences or spiritual states, and trying to understand their significance and meaning for your progress on the spiritual path. The exercises were strenuous and could easily take an hour each. One could not keep it up constantly and needed respites. Interestingly, the situation was set up so that you literally had nothing to do during the respites (you were instructed not to bring books other than the Bible and not to bring work). You therefore had periods of somewhat enforced leisure in which it was recommended that you keep the mind and spirit engaged only very lightly.

As was the case with the Yoga exercises at Kripalu, I found the experience enormously valuable in unanticipated ways. This was partly due to the loveliness of the setting and the sacred quality of the space, partly due to the Ignatian exercise, which for me was novel and broadening, and certainly, in no small measure, it was due to the wisdom and sensitivity of Father Gaven, who was experienced and dedicated to the work, and broad-gauged enough to be able to work creatively with what must have seemed to him like religious un-orthodoxy

from Mars.

The details of my prayer experience are probably of not much use to Pendle Hill. What is interesting, I do believe, is the staffing pattern: how can they afford to have one resource person for each three retreatants? Nine hours of work on the weekend is not heavy-duty, and since most or all of the directors were Retreat Center staff members, they conceivably could have been working on other duties between consultations.

While, on the one hand, the program in which I participated seemed very labor intensive in terms of the number of resource persons per participant required, on another level it was very efficient. In effect, the Jesuit Center seems to "mass produce" these programs, in that they run them over and over again, and there is no reason why those who come back habitually cannot get something valuable from each repeated experience. Attached is a copy of the scripturally based prayer-exercise assignments I was given. I do not know if everyone on that weekend's program was using the same "menu" or not. What is interesting is that a fairly large number of these readings could be developed and used again and again with different people. All the Center would seem to have to do is be certain that the same person did not get them same assignment sheet twice, although even that would hardly destroy the value of the exercise. Although the resource persons were introduced as Center staff, there is no reason, it seems to me, why any priest, nun or lay person with sufficient interest in Ignatian spirituality and prayer and some basic experience could not be co-opted to serve for the weekend.

Question for Pendle Hill: Although we could probably never mass produce or repeat programs the same way the Jesuit Center does, the fact that they attract a substantial clientele on the basis of programming which looks the same year in and year out does raise the question of the balance between the familiar and the novel which we ought to include in our programming. Something novel which only appears once cannot build a clientele in quite the same way as something which reappears and gains a reputation. The turnover of courses in our Resident Program is fairly modest, with many offerings appearing again and again. Kripalu catalogs contain many familiar offerings issue after issue, as does Kirkridge's. We seem to feel under more pressure to be fresh and novel in Extension offerings, and, perhaps, also with respect to the upcoming short courses. I see programs focussed on clerking, pastoral care, religious education in meetings, meeting house maintenance, silence, and basic Quakerism as our version of repeat programs which should draw a constant stream of "recidivists." Someone may not take clerking twice, but they might come back again and again in order to experience many different aspects of this basic Quaker menu.

The only other observation I think it useful to make before concluding is that the thirty-nine retreatants related to each other only by eating silently together in a common dining room, and smiling and nodding when passing each other in the incredibly long halls or on the grounds. That does not mean there was not a feeling of community, of common purpose and common endeavor, but it was quite a different kind of feeling of community than one based on chit-chat and on camaraderie derived from searching out conversationally people with

personal and chemical affinities to oneself. I and one or two other staff members of Pendle Hill spoke about this kind of community feeling at the staff retreat on the theme of community we held on several years ago.

The final meal was non-silent, and two of the retreatants took the opportunity to introduce themselves to me and inquire about me at that final meal, based on their recollection of the introductory session. One was a woman whose last name was O'Brien and whose first name, I believe I recall correctly, was Dorothy. She spoke to me because she remembered that I had said I was from Wallingford and she too lives in Wallingford somewhere near the WaWa. When I told her I worked at Pendle Hill she was quite delighted because she has been to one Meeting for Worship here and knows Pauline Allen, the Chaplain at Swarthmore College. I want to make note of her name because she may be contacting me. The other person who introduced himself to me had the first name of Tom and a last name I cannot remember. He described himself as a church bureaucrat and works in the Archdiocesan Office next door to the Cathedral in downtown Philadelphia. He had remembered that I had said that I was there for the first time (he had been back many times) and invited me to have lunch with him. He, too, might be in touch some time in the future.

In summary, I found the weekend Directed Prayer Retreat at the Wernersville Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth to be enormously useful both personally and as a stimulus to thought about the way we operate at Pendle Hill. I especially think we should reflect at Pendle Hill about their neat and uncomplicated way of registering and receiving guests while opting-out of transportation responsibilities, their success in managing to maintain an atmosphere of silence, and their apparent success in attracting a faithful clientele for short courses and weekends which have a certain sameness about them from year to year.

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November 12, 1996