

Speaker 1 ([00:10](#)):

Greetings. This is Ron Barnett, the host of All Things Contemplative. Before we go to the episode today, I wanted to mention three things. First off, the topic today is on contemplative retreats and due to the Covid pandemic, many retreat centers have closed their doors. Some of them are offering online retreats, so if you're interested in attending a retreat, you might want to consider the online option for the moment. Second, the audio quality of our guest is a little less than ideal. We had some technical issues with the recording, but I think you'll be able to understand her just fine. Finally, at the end of the episode, there's reference to an election. We recorded this episode on election day, November the third in the United States. So with that, on to the episode and Pat Johnson, our guest today is Pat Johnson from Carbondale in the Colorado Mountains, and we'll turn to Pat in a moment.

([01:21](#)):

But before I do, I wanted to mention a couple things by way of invitation. First off, if you have a person or a topic that you would like to see covered on the podcast, would invite you to let me know and we'll see what we can do with getting that person or the topic on. Also, if you have any comments or questions on the podcast today, on the podcast blog, there's a place underneath the episode itself where you can leave your comments, lead any questions you might have. So with that today, as I say, we have Pat Johnson with us. And by way of introduction, in 1982, pat moved to the Lama Foundation in New Mexico as a resident. Two months later, she met Thomas Keating there. Thomas is a trap monk and a Roman Catholic priest, and she was with, I should say, the llama liaison for two intensive centering prayer retreats that he led at Llama in 1983, and then again in 1984.

([02:37](#)):

In 1984. Then she served an experimental nine week retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. And this really began the Snowmass retreats that came to be co-authored by St. Benedict's and Contemplative outreach of Colorado from 1984 until 2018, pat served and administered the group retreats there. Pat has also served several terms as a board member and was his overall interim administrator for contemplative outreach. So as we go along in this episode, we'll have more to say about who Thomas Keating was, about the retreats that are held at Snowmass. And with that, pat, welcome. So I think a good place to begin with some words from our mutual friend Thomas Keating, who once said about contemplation and all things contemplative, that what it is really can't be said, but you have to say something he would say with a sub vocal chuckle. I think one of the things that I always try to ask each guest when they come on at the beginning of our time together is what do you understand by the word contemplation or what makes something a contemplative activity?

Speaker 2 ([04:09](#)):

Well, my understanding of contemplation, Ron, is the still point that we sometimes hit through a contemplative practice where nothing is separate. We're not separate from that God of ours. We're not separate from other people. We're not separate from the universe. Anything that is contemplative practice that takes us to that still point is contemplative. Frequently, it's a meditative practice, but often for many people it's a walk in nature. It's laying underneath the stars at night and catching hold of planets. There's so many different contemplative practices that have taken our retreatants to that still point, and I've been honored and privileged to sat and sit and talks with them where I've found that out. So I think sometimes just listening is a worthy, worthy,

Speaker 1 ([05:47](#)):

In other words, just listening to someone or just listening to whatever can be. Would you say a contemplative practice when you bring your whole awareness? Absolutely. And attention. In my

introduction of you, I'd mentioned how the retreats began, and maybe you could amplify on that a little bit more by what was the impetus in the beginning for these retreats? Why, for example, did Thomas Keating want to try out something like this, which was, as I understand it, very novel in a Christian context, at least in other traditions, it's more common. I'm thinking of a Zen shashin retreats, but what was it to the extent you can share with us and the listener, what was it that kind of motivated him to start these retreats that ended up for so many decades taking place at Snowmass at the monastery and continues? Although of course, COVID has put a little bit of a crimp in things as it has most things, but I understand you're going to be starting up next year with those retreats, but say a word about kind of in the beginning, what was the impetus or the inspiration for the retreats?

Speaker 2 ([07:23](#)):

Well, Thomas became totally inspired by trying out as an experiment, the first two that he did at Lama, and he did them for 11 people plus himself. There were 12 cells at Llama to hold people, and he did three hours. And what he discovered to his absolute, I think amazement, was that three hours of sitting had almost the same effect as the sheen that he had had going on at St. Joseph's monastery where they were sitting for eight hours. So this inspired retreats for laypeople. And the other thing that inspired him was at Llama Foundation, he could only do one retreat per summer because Llama was committed to ecumenism and so was doing retreats for every tradition. And he got the bright idea if he could find lay staff that could serve the retreats up at St. Benedict's, he could serve more retreats than one a year.

([09:01](#)):

So brilliantly, he asked me and a couple other people from that first retreat, David Fernette and Bob Bartel, whether we would be interested in moving up by the monastery and serving these retreats. And I talked it over with my husband, and of course we still had two children at home. And the very end of September of 84, we moved up very close to the monastery along with David Fernette and Bob Bartel and planned on three retreats for that first year, they were only for eight people because the Abbot, Abbot, Joseph gifted us with the ranch house for 10 days and the other days of the retreat guests of the monastery. So at any rate, we did three retreats that year, and

Speaker 1 ([10:24](#)):

That was in, that was in 1984, I think,

Speaker 2 ([10:29](#)):

That was, and 85

Speaker 1 ([10:32](#)):

And

Speaker 2 ([10:32](#)):

85. 84 and 85,

([10:35](#)):

Yeah. So we did a retreat in October. We did one in May, and we did one in June of that year. And like I said, we did them for only eight people, but they were very, very successful and the rent was extremely inexpensive back to the bunks for that ranch house. And anyone who's ever worked with me for any period of time will hear two mantras that come out of my mouth. One is need determines function, and the other one is we are not separate. And that first year, the need was determining the function of

needing to have more housing so that we could house more guests and needing to have more retreats in order to serve the need. So the following year, we rented from the monks rooms and gatehouse and the barn rooms were right next door to the barn and had two beds in it. The gate house had three beds in it, and the ranch house had eight beds in it. So that increased our capacity and we also increased the number of retreats to five.

Speaker 1 ([12:12](#)):

So it sounds like in those very early years, pat, it was kind of rough going in terms of lodging and maybe the facilities, but I know eventually you ended up building a very lovely retreat center with a variety of hermitages behind it. I forgot how many there are, I think 10 or 11. How did that whole project evolve?

Speaker 2 ([12:39](#)):

Well, it's interesting, the formation of both the staff and lodgings from the first 10 years where we personally got formed lodging, there were three beds to a room in an old ranch house that was the family home of the ranchers, and then became the home of the monks when they built the monastery. And our meditation room in the ranch house was where the monks held mass every day when they lived there and were building the monastery, the barn rooms were attached to a barn. You had lambs being born in the window outside the prayer room, and it was perfect. It was absolutely perfect because those first 10 years, everything was earthy.

([13:58](#)):

The barn was earthy, the birthings were earthy. The retreats there first 10 years to 12 a year, we were doing one every single month. Thomas, in the early years, I believe 87, had broken his neck in three places. And this was in December. We had a full retreat in January. And when I visited him in the hospital, we didn't know whether to cancel the retreat or it was obvious Thomas was not going to be coming down to do teaching. He was not coming down to do all of the soul friending with people. When I met with him in the hospital, he said, well, there were videos made a couple months ago. You could try using them, and the staff can take my place with soul friending that, oh, happy fault of Thomas, breaking his neck led us to realizing that people did not mind the videos. And this made it possible for us to have 12 retreats a year instead of five retreats a year, and really have the opportunity to serve the needs of the population that wanted to come on retreat. By doing these 12 retreats a year, it became obvious to the Abbot that we were overusing the house. This house was a hundred year old house. We used two electric stoves. There were two bathrooms. It was an old house and it was being overused. So he went on retreat, and when he came down from the retreat, he had made the decision that much as he hated raising money, he was going to go on a fundraising to build a retreat center. And that he did indeed do, he built this incredibly gorgeous, gorgeous retreat center.

Speaker 1 ([16:36](#)):

And this was Thomas Keating, correct?

Speaker 2 ([16:37](#)):

Joseph.

Speaker 1 ([16:39](#)):

Oh, Joseph the Abbot. Okay.

Speaker 2 ([16:42](#)):

It didn't have the intimacy that had been created in the ranch house where you were, but cheek to cheek. You were hand washing dishes. There was no dishwasher. So it created the intimacy that can only be created when you're that close and you're sharing beds in a bedroom. It's a family.

([17:16](#)):

When we moved up to the retreat center, people could escape to their own rooms. However, I got used to it real quick and figured it out that it would probably take me 10 years of floating around the heavens up there where I too could look out the dining room window and see eagles flying and look at the mountains to make the balance between the earth plane of the ranch house and the barn rooms and the gatehouse and the new retreat center. And indeed, there was a balance made. And of course, we've now continued in the retreat center for 95 to 20, so quite a few years.

Speaker 1 ([18:15](#)):

And having been on those retreats and having been on those retreats, I know that there is great group solidarity. I don't know if I would call it a family feeling, but certainly even though you don't have the natural organic qualities from when the retreats were at the farmhouse with lambs being born and the smell I'm sure of horses and other livestock doing dishes together, etcetera, there is a, when people spend time in silence, days upon end, there is, even though there's no talking, there's clearly a cohesion that develops an a unity among the retreatants, wouldn't you say?

Speaker 2 ([19:09](#)):

What we found out, Ron, is that the silence creates powerful, powerful intimacy and bonding. And we got to the place at the retreat center where once again need determined the function and the function became that we were offering more and more 10 days silent retreats with no input at all, because that's what the need was as people continued to come back year after year. And so our teaching retreats went from 10 a year to four a year, and our completely silent retreat went from one a year to about seven a year. And those retreats were so incredibly, incredibly powerful in their intimacy. And there were times where people didn't even know the names of the people that they were sitting with because you were sitting with 20 other people.

Speaker 1 ([20:36](#)):

I've talked to people about silent retreats where as you said, you were actually having these for 10 days, no conceptual input, no videos, just a centering prayer practice about three hours a day, people say, oh, I could never do that. I could never go a day without talking. Can you say a little bit about what the role of silence is on your retreats?

Speaker 2 ([21:13](#)):

The idea of being silent is not to shut you up. The idea of being silent is to make it possible to have a very, very lively discussion with this God of ours. And I personally, because I served 12 retreats a year and sometimes more, it was necessary for me to sit a 10 day retreat yearly. And every time I would sit a retreat, I would find parts of myself that had been hidden parts of myself sometimes that I didn't even want to see. And I was given the opportunity by a gracious universe ultimate reality to my true self, more and more of my false self. The value is pretty obvious that if we take that time to do nothing, which is a very hard thing to do, doing nothing is difficult. It's not easy. And when we intentionally set the time to do that, amazing magic happens and it happens consistently over and over and over again. And I've heard it from so many people that I don't doubt the authenticity of that.

Speaker 1 ([23:25](#)):

So on retreat, Pat, how do you, I don't want to say get people to be silent. I don't think that you do that, but how are things set up such that it's supported, let me put it that way. How is on retreat, how is silence and the doing of no thing, but consenting and centering prayer, at least consenting to God's presence and action within, how do you support that as a retreat staff?

Speaker 2 ([24:04](#)):

Well, the very first thing is that on opening night, we issue each person the invitation to give not only themselves the gift of silence, but to give everyone else the gift of silence. And it's amazing how for newcomers to silence, that's a real scary thing, the idea of being silent. And yet, when they accept that invitation, it becomes really apparent that no superficial conversation has to take place. It's a release. And once people start experiencing that silence, there's no problem with them being silent. So sometimes you have people who absolutely just can't help but break the silence. So the staff maintains a real gentleness when they start speaking to just invite them to come outside the door and speak with the staff if they need to, but to not break the silence in the common space.

Speaker 1 ([25:49](#)):

Having been on a few of those retreats, I can say that the staff themselves model the silence, the practice of silence very well, as do the other retreatants who are moving deeply into silence. And so there's sort of a group collective modeling of what it means. And I've a venture to say that for people who might've been afraid or scared of silence, that as time goes on, those are ungrounded concerns. They turn out not to be the case. In fact, just the opposite, where there's a great deal of acceptance and nonjudgmental that takes place. So Pat, you've said that some of the retreats over the decades have conceptual input through videotapes of Thomas Keating talking about the spiritual journey, different aspects of it, but then you also have retreats for more experienced, if we could say individuals, where there is no conceptual input. One of the things that I found unique about the retreats that you've put on at Snowmass is you don't tell people not to read books, but you encourage them to, I think, try not to read books. Most retreats, people take a load of books with them. This is a very different kind of, I think, retreat that you've put on there. Why don't you want people, well, let me just put it this way, why do you not want people to read too much?

Speaker 2 ([27:59](#)):

Well, the reading like movies, and it doesn't matter what you're reading, it's a distraction. I from the silence, for instance, you can take long walks on those mountain paths and be in nature and be in silence. And it would be like being in prayer, being part of another sitting practice, adding your argument of extraction. My husband's, whose practice is Zen, would do an Advent retreat yearly up at Snowmass, and he would always take all these books and one time, not me who was staffing the retreat, but another staff person suggested to him that he not do any reading. And I'll tell you, it just blew his mind what happened, that retreat, by taking her advice and not doing any reading.

Speaker 1 ([29:27](#)):

So your husband has a Zen practice, he went on a centering prayer retreat, is that right? And he did his in practice there?

Speaker 2 ([29:37](#)):

Yeah, he would go every year.

Speaker 1 ([29:39](#)):

He does it every year.

Speaker 2 ([29:40](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([29:43](#)):

You talked a bit about in the very early days at Lama Pat that it was concluded that three hours of sitting practice would, I mean to put it in these terms, would get you as much as eight hours that the monks would do. So that sort of suggested how many hours a day, how has it determined how many days? Because I know in some traditions they have like 30 day retreats or even 90 day retreats. I think the standard is that you've had at Snowmass is 10 days. How was that established? It

Speaker 2 ([30:33](#)):

Was basically established by how many days amongst felt they couldn't let us have the space. But the other thing is, is that it takes physiologically, I believe it takes 10 days for the blood to turn over. And I think that I at least took note of that and realized that year after year retreat after retreat, I could almost predict that on the third or fourth day of the retreat, after doing three hours, you would get into a much deeper place of prayer, and then you had to really allow that work to happen. So for me, it was really important to have the 10 days. And since then, that old need determines function. Mantra of mine plagued into the fact that some of our retreats became eight day retreat because it meant people only had two weeks off work for the 10 days, and some of our retreats had more sitting than three, had four and a half hours of sitting because people asked for it.

([32:33](#)):

Listen, listen, listen the retreat, and know better than the staff. When we ask them for advice, take it. We follow it, we function. We want even more sitting. Can't you do one retreat a year that's supposed post intensive? Well, we added another hour. So again, it began organically with us listening, paying attention. It's continued to be organic with us listening, paying attention for youth. We added a retreat for anyone involved in prison ministry, and there's constant listening to, we added a retreat for vets with post-traumatic stress syndrome. Very, very, very powerful. That one we did almost no sitting on. They were lucky to do 30 minutes three times a day, and some of them couldn't even do that. That particular retreat had trips to the pool, to the hot springs pool. So it's need determines function.

Speaker 1 ([34:13](#)):

Which requires a great deal of listening, it sounds like.

Speaker 2 ([34:23](#)):

Yes, yes. Yeah. Real listening, real listening, real paying attention.

Speaker 1 ([34:33](#)):

What do you mean by real listening

Speaker 2 ([34:37](#)):

Is not having any of your own commentary being there in spirit with the person doing the talking. And when that happens, somehow you become a listening person.

Speaker 1 ([35:01](#)):

In other words, you're not sort of laying your agenda on the person or the people. It's being open to what they're communicating without imposing your own whatever. I want us to turn a moment. We've mentioned Thomas Keating a lot. I'd like to return to the question, who was Thomas Keating? But before I do, is there anything else about retreats, any aspect of it that you would like to touch on?

Speaker 2 ([35:45](#)):

Of course, I love retreats. I love serving them, and I have not only served them, but been served by them. The main thing about retreats is the incredible relationship that happens between people on retreat and between. Lifelong friendships occur not only between the retreatants, but between the staff and retreatants that is so intimate and so precious, and it's just incredible.

Speaker 1 ([36:39](#)):

And who would've thought it, given that not a lot of verbal communication talking is exchanged on these retreats, it even makes it more amazing, I think, in miraculous even.

Speaker 2 ([36:52](#)):

Yes,

Speaker 1 ([36:54](#)):

I know there's one of your retreatants who I won't, excuse me, one of your staff persons who I won't name, but who lives in New Mexico. And even though I have minimal day-to-day, week to week, even year to year contact with her because of those experiences on the retreat and being with her, there was a deep bond that formed. And I mentioned this to you the other day when we were preparing for this podcast episode. So it's very, very real and substantial. Thomas Keating, maybe we could get your thoughts. You've known him as people. Some people who are listening have never heard of Thomas Keating. So some people have, for those who do not know or have not heard the name, he passed away at age 94 a couple years ago. Pat, you knew him intimately. Who was Thomas Keating?

Speaker 2 ([38:08](#)):

Thomas Keating was, and remains just a great, great, great human being. And he was this gentle, gentle giant of a man. I mean, Thomas was way, way over six feet. He modeled different things to me that I took in just by osmosis at First Lama retreat for 16 days, that completely, completely blew me out of the water. I mean, he was doing two conferences a day. He was sole friending with all 11 people on retreat. He was coming back at night to do question and answer, and he did this daily for all 16 days. And those circumstances were primitive. I mean, the cells were where you lived, where just a small bed, a wash basin, a kerosene lamp.

([39:39](#)):

There was no electricity, no running water. There was outhouses. We sat on the floor for both our meals and for the question and answer in the evening. He was completely, completely available and from different, and he also did the mass every day. And it was really obvious to me in listening to the very short, succinct, but powerful homilies that he gave every day in his mass, that the homilies contained

messages for the people he had listened to the day before in the soul friending. And that really, really, really impressed me because here was this man giving more than I thought any human being was capable of giving. And this continued with Thomas throughout the entire time that I knew him, the giving, even when I visited him before he died in July of the last year of his life at St. Joseph's, and even being there in the room and just sitting there and holding his hand and talking to him.

[\(41:22\)](#):

And pretty soon it was like, it was like, oh, did you get this latest writing yet? And then he'd say, over there in a box on the floor on the other side of my bed, you go grab one of those, Thomas, almost those last years was he'd be looking down here and saying, oh, well, there's a pocket up here in my shirt. Let me see. What can I take out and give to you from here? Oh, here's another pocket. Oh, here's something else I can do. And then there'd be two pockets in his pants. Oh, here's something else I can give you.

[\(42:16\)](#):

It's like he was giving every inch of himself away to all of us, and that's what he did until the moment he died. So it just, oh my goodness, my goodness. No, he was like the big brother I never had because the oldest in my family by 18 minutes since I'm a twin. And he modeled such generosity, such goodness to me that I guess also going to into my transparent life, with that being part of my cellular being that I took in from Thomas, he also modeled incredible vulnerability. The ability, the ability to have hurt feelings, to feel betrayed by people he loved. And that, again, was really just so such a wonderful teaching for me that he would share those moments with me and make a trip down from the monastery to sit on my couch. So it's like having your heart cracked wide, wide open, and recognizing that when you're at that place of vulnerability, you know what it feels like to be completely unprotected and to recognize that you simply, you don't want to go back to protecting yourself anymore. It's covering up too much of the good. So he was quite a figure in my life.

Speaker 1 [\(44:49\)](#):

Yeah, sounds like it. And I know you still hold him dearly to your heart, and

Speaker 2 [\(44:57\)](#):

Yes. Yeah,

Speaker 1 [\(45:00\)](#):

As do many, many, many people. Well, pat, I want to thank you even in the light of some technological challenges today. We pulled it off. Thank you. Anything you want to leave us with before we end? Not that there needs to be, but wanted to provide the space if there was.

Speaker 2 [\(45:34\)](#):

Well, in these times, particularly with everything that is going on in our world and this day being a very auspicious day of the election, I just would like to offer the message that even though it's difficult and hard, I think we need to remember that we are not separate. And that was a beautiful thing about Llama Foundation because above their kitchen, they had a huge banner that said, remember, and you didn't walk into the kitchen without looking at that sign. Yes, let's us remember and act upon the fact that we are not separate.

Speaker 1 [\(46:47\)](#):

Sounds good. Pat, thank you very much for coming on all things contemplative. We can now go watch the election returns, I suppose. And with that, this episode of All Things Contemplative comes to a close. I hope you found it interesting and informative and will join me for the next episode piece.