Susan Abadian, a fellow at MIT’s Dalai Lama Center for Ethics, has traveled as far as the Amazon River and the mountainous peaks of Peru seeking spiritual growth. “My most powerful retreats,” she reports, “have been those I’ve done in the natural world, sometimes in my own backyard, where I have basically sat for hours at a time, sometimes days.”

These meditations, practiced alone or with a group, have helped quiet her “inner dramas” and her active academic mind. (Abadian, A.M. ’87, M.P.A. ’88, Ph.D. ’99, focuses on the impact of collective trauma on indigenous peoples; see “Trail of Tears, and Hope,” March-April 2008, page 39.) “When we are so busy in daily life, we are not conscious of the other messages we get, particularly from our hearts and souls and bodies,” she asserts. “Retreats allow us to access and strengthen subtle capacities and to hear ourselves and others on a different level.”

As Abadian has discovered, one need not travel to exotic locales to turn inward. For individuals who want some time and space to reflect, away from the hubbub, New England offers a surprisingly wide array of sanctuaries and retreats, from those run by Buddhists and Sufis and traditional Western religious groups to others representing different kinds of spiritual or ethical organizations, such as Sirius, a regional offshoot of the Scottish Findhorn Foundation.

Most promote spiritual learning through quietude in a natural setting. Visitors are generally expected to respect an atmosphere focused on reflection, prayer, and worship, or even maintain strict silence. The degree of religious adherence varies; some retreats emphasize scriptural teachings and private consultation with spiritual advisers, while others focus on devotional practices related to meditation, ecological communion, yoga, or other mind-body exercises.

In the Buddhist tradition, retreats are considered “deeper practice” that help us to reconfigure our sense of self and ourselves in relation to the world,” says Boston psychotherapist Christopher Germer, a clinical instructor in psychology in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a practicing Buddhist.

A founding member of the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy (www.meditationandpsychotherapy.org), Germer has attended countless retreats and now leads them for fellow psychotherapists through both the institute and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (www.dharma.org/bcbs), in western Massachusetts. (He and Ronald D. Siegal, assistant clinical professor of psychology at HMS, have co-edited Wisdom and Compassion in Psychotherapy: Deepening Mindfulness in Clinical Practice, forthcoming from Guilford Press, which was inspired by a 2009 HMS
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There is a stable and gentle atmosphere are entering a retreat to feel better,” Germ-
are interested in my welfare.”
ery says. In his estimation, every retreat, regardless of its spiritual orientation, prob-
ably alters our sense of self—whether in relation to a specific struggle or source of
grief, to the universe, to God, or as a means of loving and living more compassionately
with others. “Just like spokes on a wheel,

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Gonzaga Eastern Point Retreat House, run by Jesuits in an old stone
mansion on the ocean in Gloucester, Massachusetts, “is known for its sacred
silence,” says its director, Father John P. Murray. “And most people would say
that it is in the silence they meet God.”

Retreats lasting from four to 30 days
follow the Spiritual Exercises drawn up by
Saint Ignatius of Loyola (founder of the
Jesuits) in the early 1500s, based on his
own conversion experience. Retreatants
meet daily with a spiritual director, at-
tend communal worship and mass, and
are free to pray in a chapel or to find
comfortable nooks throughout the
beautiful, very large house. “The whole
key to the Spiritual Exercises is freedom,”
Murray says. “The interior freedom...
may include the use of music (through
headphones) and books and art. So we
provide a spiritual library. We have three

Find solace
Visit harvardmag.com/extras for a list
of more New England sanctuaries.
we all end up in the same hub; ultimately everyone gets to the same place through a committed practice,” he explains. “The question that may arise is: What is the best path? And the answer is: The path you are most committed to.”

Spiritual retreats are not spa vacations. They do not typically involve fluffy-towel pampering and pedicures, much less personal computers or electronic communications; many even prohibit books and music. Germer says silent retreats in particular raise the essential question: How do I abide my own mind? “As writer Anne Lamont says, ‘My mind is a neighborhood I try not to go into alone.’”

Entering into silence or quietude for even a few days, Abadian notes, shuts off the usual avenues of distraction: family and job duties, the Internet, household chores. She has spent formative time at The Abode, a Sufi retreat center in New Lebanon, New York, walking trails and sitting in silent meditation. “When you get rid of all your outer distractions,” she explains, “your in-

chapels where the Blessed Sacrament is observed. The dining room faces the ocean and also has many places for people to sit quietly and write.”

Meals are communal and accompanied by classical music. Guests are housed in single rooms (there are more than 50 bedrooms), so there is adequate privacy, even though bathrooms are shared. In good weather, many questers take walks or scramble along the rocky shoreline in search of a place to sit and read or pray. “It’s very simple and comfortable, and people like it,” reports Murray. “We are crowded all the time, although the quieter months are February and March. We have a waiting list and reservations should be made six months in advance.”

Gonzaga Eastern Point Retreat House

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The Society of St. John the Evangelist

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The Society of St. John the Evangelist, a small monastic community of the Episcopal Church, has two locations with open chapels and retreat accommodations. One is the Colonial-era Emery House (with more modern guest cottages down the hill) on nearly 150 acres of forests and rolling fields along the Merrimack River in West Newbury, Massachusetts. The other monastery is along Memorial Drive in Cambridge (on land originally donated to the society by Isabella Stewart Gardner): a Romanesque-looking, 1920s stone structure facing the Charles River that recently underwent an $11-million renovation. Twelve guest rooms are available there, with simple furnishings and access to a communal kitchen for snacks and drinks and to a living room with comfortable chairs and plenty of books.

In both places, silence is observed even during meals (which are shared with the monks), although classical music is played and, in Cambridge, one brother recently read aloud from a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during dinner.

Retreats are welcome Tuesday through Sunday during every month but August; most stay three or four days at a time, and many return annually. “People come here for all sorts of reasons: we’ve had believers and non-believers, Jewish people, and all stripes of Christians,” says James Koester, the senior brother at Emery House, who has lived there for 20 years. He does the cooking and the chores necessary to run the property (like feeding the chickens, mowing the fields, and tending the beehives) along with two other brothers. “What we’re offering is an opportunity to share our life of community and prayers,” he explains. “The way to commune with God here is through nature.”

Even those visitors underprepared to spend their days in silence have left with a deep appreciation of how that practice slows them down and accentuates the sounds of the birds, the wind, the rushing river—often sounds they have never really listened to before, Koester reports. “The gift of silence allows people to start to listen to God speaking and to experience being in the world in a different way,” he adds. “Sometimes people sit silently and just watch the light on the landscape change throughout the day.” Daily mass, prayers, and Eucharist are optional for guests, as is arranging private counsel with the brothers.

The atmosphere at both of the society’s retreats is peaceful and open as long as guests are respectful of life there. Artists can paint, for example. And when asked if alcohol is permitted, Koester smiles. “We don’t look through people’s luggage. If a little toddy at the end of the day is something they find helpful, that’s fine,” he says. “I know I do.”
New England Regional Section

The Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center
http://isabellafreedman.org
860-824-5991

The Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut, offers year-round programs, is home to a six-acre organic farm, and promotes “community and pluralism and ecological consciousness,” according to program manager Adam “Segulah” Sher.

A popular annual meditative retreat, “The Gift of Silence,” runs from Christmas Day to New Year’s Day, and another one is planned for the summer. Other kinds of group religious retreats, as well as educational classes and workshops, are offered throughout the year.

There is a glass-walled synagogue overlooking a lake and the Berkshire foothills. Shabbat and prayer services are offered at specific retreats. The kitchen and dining room are glatt kosher, but the retreat is flexible about Shabbat and other religious practices. “If you want to use your cell phone on a Saturday,” Sher notes, “nobody will question that.”

There is also plenty of opportunity to rest and relax in this camp-like environment. Most of the visitors live in cities and enjoy coming to learn about organic farming practices—the center grows its own vegetables, raises animals, and produces dairy products—and experience the natural beauty. The campus has numerous walking and hiking trails, and people swim and boat on the lake. “It’s so dark at night you can see the stars,” Sher says. “We build a fire in winter and people sit quietly. People feel they can create their own retreat experience.”

Welcome to Harvard Magazine
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The Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center

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“cultivate wise, caring attention in life. I am able to stay present with what is happening and not be swept under by the waves of emotion and reactivity. Mindfulness creates a space that allows us to make more skillful and compassionate choices as we move through the world and interact with others. The process is about discovering how to use this one life well.”

The Abode of the Message
www.theabode.net
518-794-8090

The Abode of the Message is a Sufi retreat center located just over the Massachusetts border, in New Lebanon, New York. Built in 1785 as the Mount Lebanon South Family Shaker Village, The Abode is now a community of the Sufi Order International. Many original structures and furnishings are still in use and the campus sits on 400 acres that include an organic farm, a pond, and hilly trails into the Berkshires. “There are many ways to be here depending on what you are looking for,” notes programs manager Amalae McCloud. There are individual silent retreats, done alone or with experienced Sufi guides (many of whom live at The Abode), that last anywhere from three to 40 days; retreats run by outside groups—Catholic, Jewish, Tibetan, for example; or guests may also create their own “rest and relaxation” retreats. Massages and other body treatments are available. No prior knowledge of Sufism is necessary, nor do guests need to be exclusively interested in that practice. “Love, peace, and harmony are the three most important things here,” says McCloud. Classes and workshops on Sufism and other religious and spiritual practices are offered daily; all, as well as the universal worship on Sundays, are open to everyone.

The main house has guest rooms, but there are also cabins and huts. Silent retreaters have simple, mostly vegetarian, meals delivered to them, while others eat together in the dining hall. The local natural beauty alone may be enough for some to book a stay at The Abode. Wooded hikes and mountain climbs offer majestic views. There is even a bridge suspended over a cliff, affording a sense of “standing in mid-air,” McCloud reports. “Some like it as a meditation spot. It’s like a bridge to nowhere. Others are too scared to go out there.

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