

The Call of Solitude

How spending time alone can enhance intimacy. Being alone can fuel life.

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What's really blocking our joy in relationships, our creativity, and our peace of mind? One surprising answer, in this age of alienation, is a lack of solitude.

Meaningful alonetime, it turns out, is a powerful need and a necessary tonic in today's rapid-fire world. Indeed, solitude actually allows us to connect to others in a far richer way.

We live in a society that worships independence yet deeply fears alienation: our era is sped-up and overconnected. The earth's population has doubled since the 1950s, and in cities across the world, urban crowding and the new global economy have revolutionized social relationships. Cellular phones now extend the domain of the workplace into every part of our lives; religion no longer provides a place for quiet retreat but instead offers "megachurches" of social and secular amusement; and climbers on the top of Mt. McKinley whip out hand-held radios to call home. We are heading toward a time when, according to the *New York Times*, "portable phones, pagers, and data transmission devices of every sort will keep us terminally in touch." Yet in another, more profound way, we are terminally out of touch. The need for genuine and constructive aloneness has gotten utterly lost, and, in the process, so have we.

Now, more than ever, we need our solitude. Being alone gives us the power to regulate and adjust our lives. It can teach us fortitude and the ability to satisfy our own needs. A restorer of energy, the stillness of alone experiences provides us with much-needed rest. It brings forth our longing to explore, our curiosity about the unknown, our will to be an individual, our hopes for freedom. Alonetime is fuel for life.

As a psychologist, I have witnessed the enormous benefits of time alone and seen how it actually strengthens our attachments. A young woman confided in me that her husband was a wonderful lover, and the intimacy between them remarkable. Yet they did not go to bed or wake up at the

same time, and in the morning she sipped coffee and read the paper by herself. The streets were quiet, and she was truly alone. She would never give up that alonetime in exchange for more sex; those solitary mornings and her husband's solitary nights were the bedrock of their unusual intimacy.

Both the need to be alone and to engage others are essential to human happiness and survival, with equally provocative claims. Mother nature gives aloneness a high priority: sleep is nature's way of ensuring solitude. But given the rise in the number of sleep-disorder clinics and the sale of soporific drugs, even this one fundamental outlet for aloneness is in trouble.

Our error is in presuming that aloneness and attachment are either/or conditions. They are at odds only when they are pitted against each other. The healing aspects of solitude have not gone wholly unnoticed in current psychology; "time out" has been heralded as a coping strategy, as an emotional breather. However, the phrase "time out" suggests that, in the theatre of life, relating and stimulation are the important dramas and alonetime merely intermission. In truth, each profoundly enriches the other. So, let's discover the joys of solitude.

Alone But Not Lonely

In the past century, the way we have handled aloneness has changed dramatically. "Alone" did not always mean an absence of others. The word was coined in medieval times, and originally signified a completeness in one's singular being. In religious terminology, "solitude" typically meant the experience of oneness with God. Yet all current meanings of "alone" imply a lack of something. Invariably, solitude meets with social questioning, if not censure. Even worse, people associate going it alone with antisocial pursuits and unnecessary risk taking. Perhaps most striking, solitude conjures up pangs of loneliness.

Loneliness is indeed the most obvious risk of aloneness. The very idea of solitude may evoke deep childhood fears of abandonment and neglect, and cause some people to rush toward connectedness. But I do not believe that loneliness can be totally banished from life, nor that it should be. Like anxiety or guilt, it's part of the human condition. It tells us that we are not being understood and are perhaps too isolated from community and connection. Surprisingly, it can also tell us that we are not taking time to be in contact with our inner selves—to be alone.

Psychology is only just beginning to distinguish aloneness from loneliness. Longing for a lover, relative, or friend is not the cause of loneliness, nor is finding someone necessarily the cure. People inside a tight-knit nuclear family can be just as unknown and lonely as those living on their own. Attachments are not automatically fulfilling relationships. In some cases, attachments are maintained only at the cost of extreme personal compromise: people speak of being shackled and held hostage in a relationship. Certainly there are well-made marriages, but if we are primarily social animals, why would bonding prove so arduous?

Most people seek balance through finding someone or something that will keep them in the world with peers and alone in contentment. Alonetime and together time require smooth segues in order to avoid conflict. Many societies that emphasize close-knit family patterns also provide built-in loopholes that offer individual escape, acceptable ways to dissociate from society—

whether in trance dancing, vision quests, or hunting. Western travelers to Japan in particular are impressed by the niches set aside in public spaces for individuals to sit alone.

Where is Alonetime?

When listening to patients talk about their lovers, family, or friends, I am struck by their expressions of gratitude if they receive "time off" to engage in their own pursuits. Like prisoners who are granted parole before they deserve it, they feel that their freedom is a gracious gift. Therefore, they have a hard time ever suggesting the possibility of spending a relaxing day alone.

Perhaps our biggest mistake is the way we view solitude. Just as the need and love for food is satisfied in many ways—a gourmet meal, snack, cooking lessons, grazing, or a barbecue—alonetime can be found while with another, in crowds, in sleep, or in alert and chosen isolation. It does not even require quiet and stillness. Alonetime can be found in a roomful of people dancing, in prayer, in nature, in the creative act, at the computer, or with your mate. In a country retreat, I listened to the rain and watched it pour down on a skylight as I reflected on wilderness and its connection to being alone. Nearby, my husband was reading *Moby-Dick*. Yet, of course, we were both experiencing a form of alonetime. You can be alone with people, as my husband proved by showing me a passage from Melville: "[Queequeg] was a man some 20,000 miles from home... thrown among people as strange to him as though he were in the planet Jupiter; and yet he seemed entirely at his ease; preserving the utmost serenity; content with his own companions: always equal to himself."

Alone in Nature

One way alonetime is fueled is by experiences that put us in contact with nature. The "tonic of wilderness," as Thoreau called it, is a theme that still resounds today. In 1993, Borge Ousland, a Norwegian explorer, made one of the most difficult treks in polar history. Pulling a 300-pound sled, he skied alone to the North Pole over more than 600 miles of drifting ice. Once or twice a week he communicated with his base camp by radio. After his extraordinary solo trek of 52 days, he said, "I had feared I would be lonely; I had never spent so much as a single night alone in a tent before... But being alone proved to be one of the greatest experiences of the entire trek."

Throughout history, we see individuals who have tired of the confines of civilization and voiced a longing for free space. Tidal pools, empty fields, mountains, trees, and oceans evoke peace and contentment. Something sacred fills these open spaces. I believe we long for "places with no roads...but plenty of space" from the time we are children. When he was less than two years old, my grandson Benjamin, riding on the Metro in Washington, D.C., opened his hands as if reading a book. "I'm in the ocean," he said, describing the imaginary book. "I'm swimming with the dolphins."

Unfortunately, for the sake of necessity and convenience, most of us must learn to locate the solitary contentment of being alone in nature in our everyday lives. The other day, I walked alone in Bartholomew's Cobble, a historical nature preserve in Massachusetts, several miles from my house. Small caves in the Cobble may have been used from time to time as temporary

shelters by nomadic Indians. I found a rock in one of the caves to sit on, from which I watched a stream, and later lay down on a flatland that was equally quiet, enjoying the empty moments and feelings of awe.

Solitude & God

During an excursion to the Monasterio de Santa Maria de Pedralbes in Spain, I entered the large and mostly undecorated main sanctuary and was stunned by the quiet. How does the search for God overlap with the search for solitude? Religion must provide time for prayer and meditation. And the relationship of the individual to God is one solution to the paradox of aloneness and relatedness.

The life of the ancient solitary monk has much to convey to us about needs for alonetime and social engagement. Both monastery and monk stem from the same Greek word, meaning "alone" or "single." Interestingly, the word "convent" comes from the Latin *convenire*, which means to meet together. The origins of these two words, monastery and convent, poetically combine the two basic human needs to be alone and to be together.

Contemplation is often described as the preferred mode for achieving spiritual peace, which is why journeys on the way to truth or salvation are undertaken alone. Religious pilgrimages in the old sense still occur today, but they are briefer; we even see in people's recreational walks and runs attempts to escape the hectic pace of life and rid the mind of excess. These sojourns, of course, do not equal the many-month hikes of ancient times. But Buddhists continue to live in a state of pilgrimage, because they view life as a series of present moments that call us to a state of non-attachment and yet, at the same time, unity with God.

For religion to have its greatest appeal, it must allow time for solitude. The book of *Genesis* lays this foundation. Within the creation story, God established Saturday, the Shabbat, as a day of rest, set aside from all others. The Shabbat was a time to contemplate one's life and the scriptures. We can do the same, whether we take a day of rest for ourselves, or an hour of quiet prayer, or even a few minutes of meditation. Whether in a remote, faraway stillness or in the very center of a community, the hermit or itinerant monk resides in us all.

Technological Wonderland

In the classic silent film *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin's "modem" man runs around in circles tightening screws and bolting bolts in mad precision. Today, Chaplin's postmodern equivalent punches the keyboard, moves from chat room to e-mail to game screen, and sails into virtual reality with an earnestness that can cause equal delirium. Computer life is, I believe, an attempt to solve the problem of alonetime and social needs. In a culture that no longer provides wilderness or stretches of solitary time, the computer is the one machine that seemingly offers it all: stimulation, knowledge, news, alonetime, relationships, and even sex. One might say it has universal appeal. However, if we are not aware of why computer technology is attracting us, we cannot use it to our best advantage. The question is, are we routinely using the computer and

television to find alonetime without really realizing our unfulfilled alone need? Or are we becoming incapable of living in the moment except in technological time-outs like the computer?

A friend of mine wishes he could be lost in the woods with a cellular phone: that way, there could be utter silence with the opportunity to connect if he so desired. Yet the explorer of the Internet is never completely freed from the world. Tuned in to electronic information, he is inundated with knowledge. More and more, people are getting annoyed by the accessibility of modem hookups and the prevalence of telephones (on airplanes and in hotel rooms) because it makes them feel like they must work. At no other time in history have people's minds and bodies been so accessible. Today, being online seems the Western way to meet our needs for solitude and together time, but at what cost? Keeping silent about the pleasures of aloneness leaves us blind to the real allure of computer marvels. When an experience is altering our consciousness and we do not discriminate either how or why, then the experience is regulating us.

Alone in a Trance

Altered states of consciousness exploded into Western awareness in the 1960s, as fallout from the drug revolution and meditative practices. Such cultural adoption of altered states is commonly interpreted as anything from ritualized pathology to institutionalized religion. Yet certain altered states seem a direct link to that early sensory state of aloneness that we experience in the womb, and allow us to drift into a private world despite what is happening all around us.

Trance dancing, for instance, offers a unique kind of aloneness. Once I strolled on a boardwalk at Baltimore's Inner Harbor. The pavement was alive with boom boxes playing loud music, and a man began to gyrate to the sounds. Every part of his body moved in synchrony. Before long he was in his own world. If we look at trance as a way to be both engaged and disengaged from social connections, then we can understand it as a clever way to regulate alonetime and attachment.

Together and Alone: Negotiating Relationships

"It's hell with them or without them" is the phrase often used to describe life with another—male or female. Are long-term relationships possible? I believe so, but my blueprint has to do with reconstruction of alonetime needs.

Romantic love and a stable relationship were once seen as antithetical to each other. Now, according to one study on couples, "The two are supposed to exist in harmony. Partners are supposed to be able to switch from lawn-mowing and diapers to torrid sex at the drop of a hat; from long hours at work to sweet moments in the sun." The strain on couples to be all things to each other is no less than the general strain on people in all areas of society. Can all this be accomplished without one of the partners calling for time out? Obviously not, for it seems that as the push grows for greater and greater intimacy between people, so has the number of couples seeking separations and divorce.

After the first phase of ecstatic inseparableness, lovers feel a need to find themselves. The decline in synchrony between partners is rarely understood as part of the process of carrying love past the initial stage. When we look at the dynamics of relationships through an alonetime lens, our understanding changes. For instance, fighting has many causes. Many times anger, if not carried too far, is simply the alone need asserting itself the only way it can. It may be just what's needed to clear the air and gain breathing space and distance from your mate. Many of us remember, as young children, playing happily with friends but getting into a fight moments before parting, which made it easier to say good-bye.

When patients, male or female, speak of a desire to break away from their loved ones, I hear an enormous longing to be alone coupled with anguish about separating. Because of our confused beliefs about solitude, we are much more likely to complain to a therapist or friend that "I have problems with intimacy" than to say, "I need to be alone more often." We wonder if, by having fun alone, we are unfaithful to our spouse. I suggest learning to view solitude as part of ordinary experience rather than an artificial barrier against involvement with the world.

So how do we negotiate alonetime? Expressions such as "I need space" sting because they are so often disguised rejections. I can picture one significant change. People meet. They probe each other's likes and dislikes. The questions get serious. "Where do you want to live? Do you want children?" Add a few more: "Do you like to be alone? How frequently? Let me tell you what alonetime means to me." This kind of dialogue may enable us to freshly air our needs without threatening others.

At some point most idealized lovers become ordinary human beings. With the reappearance of this reality, a restlessness born from too little alonetime also becomes apparent. Now each partner has to return to their individual concerns in life. Couples who successfully handle this impasse do so usually through a renegotiation of the amount and condition of time spent together.

As individuals in a relationship evolve, so does the couple itself. People constantly transform one another. Sex may sometimes be hit-and-run, at other times a union so deep it feels biological. Commitment can be a joyous sacrament or a chain around one's neck. Alonetime allows us to reflect and sort things out. It is not necessarily a way to escape from bonding, for often we find our way back to someone else during alone contemplation, and forge stronger commitments.

Perhaps the poet John Donne said it best when he wrote to his lady love that he wanted "to teach you I am naked first." This great composer of love sonnets was claiming a need to know himself better and then to take on the challenge of their love.

Creatively Alone

We all know about the lone, creative artist. Solitude is an important route to creativity; indeed, research on creative and talented teenagers suggests that the most talented youngsters are those who treasure their solitude. However, the artist in all of us must risk disconnection, for forging a happy and worthwhile life—and navigating through that life fully and gracefully—is itself a creative act.

How can we measure the value of alonetime to a creative work life? Shrinking leisure time, and mental and physical exhaustion, are by-products of our accelerated work shifts. We all know people—if not ourselves—who cancel dates and say, "As soon as I get home, I'm going to sleep." I'm surprised at how the popular long lunch hour has been replaced by a lunchtime muffin at the desk followed by dinner next to the computer. Even breaks in the workday are rapidly disappearing. People today, caught in a struggle to produce work at the rate demanded by society, never consider the lack of alone moments. Once they do, they may decide to take control of their professional life by self-demoting, plateauing or turning down promotions, career shifting by changing to a less-pressured field, or employing themselves.

What Alonetime Offers

Life's creative solutions require alonetime. Solitude is required for the unconscious to process and unravel problems. Others inspire us, information feeds us, practice improves our performance, but we need quiet time to figure things out, to emerge with new discoveries, to unearth original answers. Letting myself slide into reverie has proven extremely productive when I'm stuck with a problem. When one of my patients presents a dilemma, focusing head-on isn't what typically resolves it.

The natural creativity in all of us—the sudden and slow insights, bursts and gentle bubbles of imagination—is found as a result of alonetime. Passion evolves in aloneness. Both creativity and curiosity are bred through contemplation.

We need to unshackle aloneness from its negative position as kin to loneliness. Remove it from battles with bonding and relationships. Make its message part of the social norm! Then uplift it from its lowly place on the mental health shelf. The relief provided by solitude, reverie, contemplation, alone and private times is inestimable. Remember that love is not all there is to psychic well-being; work and creativity also sustain health.

Alonetime is a great protector of the self and the human spirit. Ultimately, we might follow the message of every practiced meditator, who suggests living each moment as a new moment, with greater sensitivity to one's thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. That is the real message of alonetime, and it is through that profound self-awareness, that inner aloneness, that our lives will flower.

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