

The Psychology of Solitude



In Praise of Solitude

“We must preserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude.” (Montaigne)

“When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude.” (Wordsworth)

“The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life – in them everything essential was decided.” (Carl Jung)

“The best is the deep quiet in which I live and grow against the world, and harvest what they cannot take from me by fire and sword.” (Goethe)

“Wives, children, and goods must be had, and especially health, by him that can get it; but we are not so to set our hearts upon them that our happiness must have its dependence upon them; we must preserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty, and principal solitude and retreat.” (Montaigne)

“The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude.” (Aldous Huxley)

“Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous - to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd.” (Thomas Mann)

“A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.” (Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*)

Object Relations Theory and the Overemphasis on the Importance of Relationships

The current emphasis upon intimate interpersonal relationships as the touchstone of health and happiness is a comparatively recent phenomenon. (Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*)

Object relations theorists believe that, from the beginning of life, human beings are seeking relationships, not merely instinctual satisfaction. They think of neurosis as representing a failure to make satisfying human relationships rather than as a matter of inhibited or undeveloped sexual drives. (Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*)

Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psychoanalysis, assumes that man is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness. Yet the lives of creative individuals often seem to run counter to this assumption. For example, many of the world's greatest thinkers have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This is true of Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascale, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. (Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*)

There are, therefore, many reasons for giving a high place to attachment in any hierarchy of human needs. Indeed, some sociologists, would doubt whether the individual possesses any significance when considered apart from the family and social groups of which he is a member. Most members of Western society assume that close family ties will constitute an important part of their lives; that these ties will be supplemented by other loves and friendship; and that it is these relationships which will give their own lives significance. As Peter Marris has put it:

“The relationships that matter most to us are characteristically to particular people whom we love – husband or wife, parents, children, dearest friend – and sometimes to particular places – a home or personal territory that we invest with the same loving qualities. These specific relationships, which we experience as unique and irreplaceable, seem to embody most crucially the meaning of our lives.”

Bowlby assumes that the primary need of human beings, from infancy onward, is for supportive and rewarding relationships with other human beings, and that this need for attachment extends far beyond the need for sexual fulfilment. (Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*)

The Danger in Placing Too Much Emphasis on Relationships

If the partner becomes God he can just as easily become the Devil; the reason is not far to seek. For one thing, one becomes bound to the object in dependency. One needs it for self-justification. One can be utterly dependent whether one needs the object as a source of strength, in a masochistic way, or whether one needs it to feel one's own self-expansive strength, by manipulating it sadistically. In either case one's self-development is restricted by the object, absorbed by it. It is too narrow a fetishization of meaning, and one comes to resent it and chafe at it. If you find the ideal love and try to make it the sole judge of good and bad in yourself, the measure of your strivings, you become simply the reflex of another person. You lose yourself in the other, just as obedient children lose themselves in the family. No wonder that dependency, whether of the god or the slave in the relationship, carries with it so much underlying resentment....When you confuse personal love and cosmic heroism you are bound to fail in both spheres. The impossibility of the heroism undermines the love, even if it is real. As Rank so aptly says, this double failure is what produces the sense of utter despair that we see in modern man. It is impossible to get blood from a stone, to get spirituality from a physical

being, and so one feels "inferior" that his life has somehow not succeeded, that he has not realized his true gifts, and so on. (Ernest Becker, Denial of Death)

I believe that if we are able to acknowledge our isolated situations in existence and to confront them with resoluteness, we will be able to turn lovingly toward others. If, on the other hand, we are overcome with dread before the abyss of loneliness, we will not reach out toward others but instead will flail at them in order not to drown in the sea of existence. In this instance our relationships will not be true relationships at all but out of joint, miscarriages, distortions of what might have been. We will not relate to others with a full sense of them as like ourselves, as sentient beings, also alone, also frightened, also carving out a world of at-homeness from the paste of things. We behave toward other beings as toward tools or equipment. The other, now no longer an "other" but an "it," is placed there, within one's circle of world, for a *function*. The fundamental function, of course, is *isolation denial*, but awareness of this function is too close to the lurking terror. Greater concealment is needed; metafunctions emerge; and we constitute relationships that provide a product (for example, power, fusion, protection, greatness, or adoration) that in turn serves to deny isolation. (Irvin Yalom, Existential Psychotherapy)

"It seems to be difficult for the individual to realize that there exists a division between one's spiritual and purely human needs, and that the satisfaction and fulfillment for each has to be found in different spheres. As a rule, we find the two aspects hopelessly confused in modern relationships, where one person is made the god-like judge over good and bad in the other person. In the long run, such symbiotic relationships becomes demoralizing to both parties, for it is just as unbearable to be God as it is to remain an utter slave." (Otto Rank)

Cultivating Meaning in Solitude - The Capacity to be Alone

The capacity to form attachments on equal terms is considered evidence of emotional maturity. It is the absence of this capacity which is pathological. Whether there may be other criteria of emotional maturity, like the capacity to be alone, is seldom taken into account. (Anthony Storr, Solitude: A Return to the Self)

“It is probably true to say that in psychoanalytical literature more has been written on the fear of being alone or the wish to be alone than on the ability to be alone; also a considerable amount of work has been done on the withdrawn state, a defensive organization implying an expectation of persecution. It would seem to me that a discussion of the positive aspects of the capacity to be alone is overdue.” (Donald Winnicott)

We should also remember that exceptional people have suffered long periods of solitary confinement without coming to feel that their lives are meaningless, whilst others have deliberately sought weeks or months of solitude for reasons to which we shall return. (Anthony Storr, Solitude: A Return to the Self)

It appears, therefore, that some development of the capacity to be alone is necessary if the brain is to function at its best, and if the individual is to fulfil his highest potential. Human beings easily become alienated from their own deepest needs and feelings. Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one's own inner world are all facilitated by solitude.

"Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius." Edward Gibbon

“No man ever will unfold the capacities of his own intellect who does not at least checker his life with solitude.” (De Quincey)

The Difficulty of Being Solitary

“For the time will come when solitude will make you weary, when your pride will double up, and your courage gnash its teeth. And you will cry, “I am alone!” (Zarathustra)

And to speak of solitude again, it becomes clearer and clearer that fundamentally this is nothing that one can choose or refrain from. We are solitary. We can delude ourselves about this and act as if it were not true. That is all. But how much better it is to recognize that we are alone; yes, even to begin from this realization. It will, of course, make us dizzy; for all points that our eyes used to rest on are taken away from us, there is no longer anything near us, and everything far away is infinitely far. A man taken out of his room and, almost without preparation or transition, placed on the heights of a great mountain range, would feel something like that: an unequalled insecurity, an abandonment to the nameless, would almost annihilate him. He would feel he was falling or think he was being catapulted out into space or exploded into a thousand pieces: what a colossal lie his brain would have to invent in order to catch up with and explain the situation of his senses. That is how all distances, all measures, change for the person who becomes solitary; many of these changes occur suddenly and then, as with the man on the mountaintop, unusual fantasies and strange feelings arise, which seem to grow out beyond all that is bearable. But it is necessary for us to experience that too. We must accept our reality as vastly as we possibly can; everything, even the unprecedented, must be possible within it. This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us: the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us. (Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet)

“Another characteristic of modern people is loneliness. They describe this feeling as one of being “on the outside,” isolated, or, if they are sophisticated, they say that they feel alienated. They emphasize how crucial it is for them to be invited to this party or that dinner, not because they especially want to go (though they generally do go) nor because they will get enjoyment, companionship, sharing of experience and human warmth in the gathering (very often they do not, but are simply bored). Rather, being invited is crucial because it is a proof that they are not alone. Loneliness is such an omnipotent and painful threat to many persons that they have little conception of the positive values of solitude, and even at times are very frightened at the prospect of being alone. Many people suffer from “the fear of finding oneself alone,” remarks André Gide, “and so they don’t find themselves at all. (Rollo May, *Man’s Search for Himself*)

"But you yourself will always be the worst enemy you can encounter; you yourself lie in wait for yourself in caves and forests." (Z 90)

What primarily makes solitude a heroic virtue is its agonal character. With whom, then, does the solitary struggle? The answer, of course, is himself. The solitary is not only his own best friend and conversationalist, but also his own best critic and fiercest antagonist. (Leslie Thiele, *Politics of the Soul*)