

Alone: On Two Types of Solitude

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Two years ago my wife left me. We had been together twenty years. Her move was sudden, but not, in retrospect, unplanned or without warning. Her father died, and she had recently turned fifty. Later, friends would describe these as reasons and even portents. That I was away didn't help. While she tended her dying father in a Las Vegas nursing home, I was drafting a novel at a writer's colony. When not writing or swimming in a lake across the street, I careened my Honda Civic along leafy winding Berkshire roads, blasting the same three Beatles songs over and over again on my CD player. The songs were "Ticket to Ride," "Yesterday," and "Help."

Now I'm on my own, alone.

Alone. Note how the word breaks between syllables into article and noun: a, as in one, or a single case out of the multitude; lone as in *loner*. When all else fails turn to etymology. Alone: c. 1300, contraction of Old English *all ana*, "all by oneself," from *all* (all, wholly) + *an* (one). Similar compounds found in German (*allein*) and Dutch (*alleen*). Definition: by one's self, apart from or exclusive of; single; solo; solitary; applied to a person or thing.

The word "alone" itself rings hollow, a two-syllable word where the two syllables deplete rather than fulfill or complement each other. See: *lone*, *lonely*, *single*, *solitary*, *solo*, *alien*. Only. Exclusively. I. Am. A. Lone. Alone: "In bad company" (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*).

I write this on the shore of a lake in Georgia, Lake Sinclair, "the cleanest lake in Georgia." I've come here to fulfill a one-year visiting writer appointment at the college in Milledgeville. But I've also come here to be alone. I've rented a house right on the lake, a modest A-frame with an L-shaped loft where I work and sleep, and where my desk faces a wall of triangular windows that look directly out past some pine trees at the lake.

Though I've been here less than a week, already I have my routines. I swim twice a day, across the inlet and back, three hundred strokes, at dawn and dusk. Mornings, into the sunrise; evenings, into the sunset. Afternoons, when the sun is too hot, I go out on the dock and just look at the lake.

There are neighbors here, or anyway there are other houses. But so far except for a passing water-skier I have yet to meet or even see another human soul, and I'm glad about that. I don't want company here. The lake is enough company. It's why I chose to live here and not in town. After thirty-two years in New York City, I've had enough society to last me the rest of my life.

Though the lake is dotted with mostly weekend cottages, through my window I see only trees and water. The distant shore is lined with pine trees, the homes there hidden. It could be a lake in Wisconsin, or in the Klondike. A geography of solitude: that's what I see from my desk. I've seen many such geographies in my time: the craggy islands of the Aegean, the frozen fjords of Norway, the sun-starved villages north of the Arctic Circle. But this one belongs to me; it's mine. Unlike the solitude that swept over and nearly drowned me back in New York when my wife left me, that forced solitude that took up with me like an unwanted lover, this one I have chosen for myself.

Here, at last, my solitude and I are happily wed.

Centuries divide my solitude from that of the first historical (Christian) solitary, Paul of Egypt (3rd century B.C.), who, at age sixteen, to escape the Decian persecution, fled to the Egyptian desert at Thebaid to spend the rest of his hundred-and-thirteen years in a cave. The man to be known as Saint Paul was but the first in a phalanx of ascetics who fled the chaos and persecutions of the Roman Empire to dwell in the deserts of Egypt. These "Desert Fathers" were the forerunners of all monks and hermits (from the Greek *eremos*, meaning "desert" or "uninhabited," hence *eremitic* or "desert-dwelling"). The desert drew them not only for the protection it afforded with its caves, but because it provided the perfect landscape in which to practice the skills of self-discipline as exemplified by Jesus's fasting. Living in the desert forced them to renounce worldly things and by doing so brought them closer to God. Later

monks who followed them there (notably Anthony the Great) introduced more formal aspects into the hermetic lifestyle. These included prayer, chanting, and fasting. These rituals in turn developed into cenobitic monasticism (read: “communal deprivation”) and flourished in what we today call monasteries.

But apart from saints and holy men, solitude has its proponents. “The wise person will flee the crowd,” wrote Montaigne, “endure it if necessary, but given the choice, choose solitude. We are not sufficiently rid of vices to contend with those of others.” In perhaps his most famous essay, “On Solitude,” Montaigne invokes Lucretius, urging us to “purge our heart[s]” of those impurities imposed by society. “We must take the soul back and withdraw it into itself; that is the real solitude which may be enjoyed in the midst of cities and the courts of kings; but it is best enjoyed alone.” In advancing the virtues of solitude, Montaigne makes no case against the company of others. He merely puts companionship in its place, arguing not just for the benefits of solitude, but for it as a necessity, an antidote to too much companionship, society as a means of avoiding or ignoring the kind of solitude that nourishes the soul, an organ fed by the act of contemplation, and for which no other form of nutrition will suffice.

But contemplation depends as much or more on deprivation as on nutrition. Like those plants that grow only in sandy soil, or those spiny fish that thrive only in the darkest ocean depths, the soul thrives not just on what feeds it, but on what it is denied. With the possible exception of Mr. Capote, no soul ever thrived at a dinner party. And what are bars, nightclubs, and restaurants but places designed, often with great cunning, to draw the fires of introspection with liquor and loud music? Add to these time honored distractions recent electronic innovations, and even when alone today we no longer find ourselves in solitude. We zap our interior lives and put off the inevitable confrontation with ourselves. Why? We’ll go to our graves clutching Blackberries and cell phones. If technology is companionship, then leave me alone.

Do I equate myself with Paul, or Anthony—let alone Jesus? I’m no Saint, nor am I great. Yet there are places where my solitude intersects with theirs,

ways in which, to borrow from Tolstoy, “all happy solitaries are solitary in the same way.” First, we spend a lot of our time alone. That, of course, is the primary requirement, the foundation on which all of the other attributes of asceticism are built. In his *Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life*, Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 A.D.), a close observer of the Desert Fathers and one himself toward the end of his life, catalogued the ascetic practices of hermits.

I need only to run down Evagrius’s list of recommendations for hermits to see how closely my own practices align themselves with those of Archimandrite, Athanasius, Anthony, and Augustine:

1. *Keep to a Sparse and Plain Diet.* Extravagant foods tempt desire. According to Evagrius, “If you have only bread, salt, [and] water, you can still meet the dues of hospitality.” And even without these things you can still make a stranger welcome. For me, the bread is usually vacuum-wrapped packets of Fitness Bread off the shelf at Kroger, my new supermarket, thirty minutes from here by car. This bread I normally eat with peanut butter for breakfast, and for dinner with a mound of vegetables—Swiss chard or broccoli—sautéed and steamed with a dash of soy sauce over caramelized onions. I like how, no matter how impossibly high I pile them in the pan, the leafy vegetables steam down to a modest bowl full. When in need of protein I’ll add a piece of fish or a turkey leg (I actually like eating around all those gristly tendons and sinews). The rest of my hermetic diet may be summed up in three words: espresso, hot, milk.

2. *With Regard to Clothes, be Content with What Is Sufficient for the Needs of the Body.* From the knees of my corduroy trousers the wales have long since been rubbed off. By now most of my cuffs and belt loops are frayed. The splendid cardigans that I bought for (and then inherited from) my dead papa are pulled in so many places it must be hard, around the holidays, for strangers to resist hanging Christmas bulbs off of me. I am not truly poor, just too lazy to shop and indifferent to fashion. This was brought home to me one summer when,

while visiting a friend in Rome, I was admonished for wearing white socks with leather sandals (to, of all places, the Spanish Steps: even Saint Anthony might have drawn a line there).

3. *Do Not Have a Servant.* Back in the Bronx, my cleaning lady came every three weeks. She emptied and cleaned my espresso pot, stacked my loose coins and crumpled receipts on my dresser top, dusted, vacuumed, removed the expired food from my fridge (see #1), and generally tidied up (no windows). But since I gave her five hundred dollars to assist in her husband's battle with immigration authorities, I didn't consider this a violation. Then again, Evagrius warns, "Even if you think that taking a servant would be for the servant's benefit, do not accept it." Now I have no servant, just a landlord who mows the grass.

4. *Do Not Associate with Those Who Are Materially Minded and Involved in Worldly Affairs.* This I find easy, since materialists don't interest me. I find them boring. Maybe this is because, materially, I haven't done that well for myself, but mostly for lack of trying. Far as I'm concerned, money is the booby prize one gets for having nothing better to do, exemplified by the financial wizards who brought us our current economic mess. For the record I forgive their shallow greed, but not their ineptitude.

5. *If You Find Yourself Growing Strongly Attached to Your Cell, Leave It.* Back in the Bronx, I was fond of my apartment, with its view of the blue rainbow bridge and turbulent waters. I like it even more here. I look out at the lake and I'm happy, or anyway content. And since I'm equally fond of my work, writing, I can easily imagine staying here day after day, with no distraction other than a swim now and then, or a paddle in my aluminum canoe. I do not miss people. When the phone rings (rarely), I'm annoyed at first, and even when the caller is someone I'm glad to hear from, after five minutes I've had enough: I want to go back to my solitude, to my sanctuary. Sometimes I have to force myself to step outside, to walk down to the dock and look at the lake and take note of the world. If I don't do so, come nightfall I'll have cabin fever, and go to bed

depressed. We needn't enter social situations to get our souls crushed. A set of walls can do the trick.

6. *Do Not Let Restless Desire Overcome Resolution.* The Desert Fathers had a word for it: *acedia* (or *acedie*): in the narrow sense, indolence, sloth, laziness. Not a moral condition, but a psychological one—a bane to monks, hermits, and solitaries through history, exposing them to sinful thought and action. Acedia isn't willful sloth, but a turpitude that endangers the best of intentions. When, weakened by listlessness, a disciple of Abba Moses sought his council, Abba Moses replied, "Go back to your cell and pray." Acedia weakens resolve and fills men with doubt. John Cassian described this condition, referred to as the "noonday devil," as a state of inertness incapable of bearing spiritual fruit. Physical labor was recommended as a remedy. Saint Paul wove baskets out of palm leaves; I paint, write, swim. Acedia plagues the novice more than it does the experienced solitary. As a child I was always bored—this in spite of having a twin brother at my disposal. I wonder now if my "boredom" wasn't *acedia*, if already as a child I wasn't experiencing a dose of the "dark night of the soul," if I wasn't bedeviled. Burton's melancholy, Kierkegaard's angst, Sartre's nausea, Camus's existential revolt, Mersault's alienation, my childhood fevers of boredom: are these not all *acedia* by different names? Whatever drives us out of ourselves (out of our cells), and away from integrity—that's *acedia*. It is the antithesis of discipline, its cure.

7. *Do Not Hanker After Fine Foods and Deceitful Pleasures.* "Eating with others," writes Evagrius, "carries the danger of being offered fine foods that provoke desire. Such invitations should be declined." Here in Milledgeville there are approximately three decent restaurants: one Japanese, one Italian, and a bar. So far I have been to the bar and the Italian place. I dislike eating in restaurants. As indifferent as I am to fine foods, I am obsessed with the quality (or lack thereof) of my surroundings. Thus I detest most restaurants, with their forced chic and volume as a substitute for mirth. I hate canned music of all kinds, and resent even more that to avoid it I must pay the premium exacted

by restaurants that don't offer it. (Do the rascals who shuck sound systems give kickbacks to establishments that agree to riddle their ceilings with loudspeakers?) Dim lighting annoys me, as do waiters who reach over your meal to pour your wine or replenish your ice water and busboys who hover vulture-like over waning meals. The "pleasures" of fine dining rarely seduce me.

8. *Provide Yourself with Such Work for Your Hands as Can Be Done, If Possible, Both During the Day and Night, So as Not to Burden Anyone.* Plaiting reed baskets was the preferred occupation of the Desert Fathers, the busy work that best fit Evagrius's criteria. I plait essays and stories out of words and sentences. Isn't it the same? In their time the Desert Fathers would entrust some disciple or agent to take their baskets into town to sell them at the marketplace, and return with provisions of flour, salt, and other humble staples procured with the proceeds. My marketplace is more amorphous, as are my proceeds. The baskets I weave from words get sold mainly to small press publishers and even smaller literary journals for equally diminutive reimbursement. My paintings also sell at prices modest to a fault. This too would have suited Evagrius, who tells hermits not to haggle: "When buying or selling you can hardly avoid sin. So in either case be sure to lose a little in the transaction." Done.

Have I made my solitude too appealing? But let me not kid you or myself by pretending there's nothing nasty about it, especially the kind imposed against one's wishes. When unwanted, solitude can be frightening. Two years have passed since, yet I still wake up some mornings filled with the shaky memory of how it felt to learn that my wife was no longer my wife. Friends worried about me—with reason. Asked, "How are you?" I told the truth, that I felt as if I'd had my right leg amputated without the benefit of anesthesia. I cried. Alone in the shower with the lights turned off, my tears mingled with public water. I kept saying to myself, "She's gone," but how can a verb, any verb, do justice to a negation? She simply and emphatically *wasn't*. Before I worked up the resolve to toss it down the garbage chute, the half of a broiled acorn squash

left over from the last meal she'd cooked for us grew a furry mantle of mold. I lived automatically, a robot attending obligations while contemplating bleak alternatives. My Bronx apartment was by the Henry Hudson Bridge: from my window a stunning blue rainbow of steel. Others had ended that way. I'd see the blue police boats at night combing the agitated waters with searchlights. What "alone" means at its worst: no damn bloody good reason to live. One may take cold comfort in the musings of Montaigne or Voltaire ("The happiest of lives is a busy solitude.") or Picasso ("Without great solitude, no serious work is possible.") or Goethe ("One can be nurtured in society; one is inspired only in solitude.") Such musings aside, we who spend most of our days alone know that whatever else our solitude makes us, we are bloody wretches, too. Aristotle hit closer to home when he said, "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient unto himself, is either a beast or a god." John Billings, too, hit the nail on the head when he said, "Solitude is a good place to visit, but a poor place to stay."

No matter how often and convincingly I tell myself that I have chosen my "new" solitude to replace and obliterate the one forced on me by fate, the fact is that I chose only its location and other trimmings: the dock, the lake, the canoe. The solitude is in me, put there partly by a wife who did not want to be a wife anymore. It is nothing to brag about. I fell into it as one falls into a ditch. And let us not lose sight of that nose-picking wretch, of the last time we changed the bedclothes, of beans eaten cold from a can, of towels redolent of bordellos, of used socks re-rolled and replaced in the dresser drawer, of the secret fingernail clipping repository behind the couch, of the caged frightened beast with his back to the sweating wall. Nor should we dismiss those sublime moments when, padding in socks and sweatpants from room to room, we are amazed by just how many rooms there are, and how emptily they yawn—as if no one lives there, not even he who pads there. Like the proverbial tree, with no audience to bear witness to our lives, we neither flourish nor fall. Only to the extent that we touch others do we live in the strictest sense of that term, in the sense that we enjoy life to its fullest, otherwise we—along with the inspirations, revelations,

and inventions arrived at in solitude—merely *exist*. Perhaps in reading these words you complete the circuit of my life. But one way or another, to be lived a life must be shared.

Before ending this essay, I must invoke one more solitary, the greatest of all, and without a doubt the most wretched, the prototypical Noble Savage and Beautiful Loser: Diogenes of Sinope, who made it his life's goal to "deface" societal mores and customs, rolling his bathtub/home along the streets of Athens and barking at people like a dog. Diogenes who, it was said, forswore all material comforts, who on seeing a peasant boy drink water from the hollow of his hands, smashed the wooden bowl that was his only possession. Having heard that Socrates defined man as a "featherless biped," he stormed Plato's academy grasping a plucked chicken and proclaimed, "Behold man!" When Alexander came upon him gazing attentively down on a pile of human bones, the founder of Cynicism explained, "I'm looking at the bones of your father but cannot tell them from those of a slave." When a stranger rebuked him for masturbating in the Agora, he replied, "Ah—if only I could ease my hunger as readily by rubbing my belly!"

I evoke Diogenes here to show that the solitary wretch and the prophet may be one and the same. No less a figure than Alexander thought so. Legend has it that Alexander, thrilled to meet the fabled Diogenes, asked if he might do the philosopher a favor. "Yes," naked Diogenes replied. "Stand out of my sunlight!" Diogenes made a virtue of his "doggish" behavior; indeed, the word cynic derives from the Greek *kynikos*, the adjectival form of *kyon*: "dog." Diogenes maintained that those who lived artificially—that is, according to the standards of a society based on hypocrisy—would do well to study the living habits of dogs. True (he pointed out), dogs are not especially contemplative, but neither do they engage in small talk or covetousness. Nor are they petty. Like the dogs he emulated, Diogenes barked at suspect mankind, and in so doing exposed society as a regressive farce. In Diogenes solitary wretch and prophet were perfectly united: saint as bum.

Wretched or saintly, my solitude brings me a step closer to eternity. In this

we solitaries are all prophets. The societal outlines that limit others blur, turn porous. In solitude the useless ego dissolves, opening us to the infinite. Birds sing louder, the sun shines brighter, every thunderstorm turns us into King Lear. A spider web speaks volumes. Solitude is poetry; companionship prose.

“One does not find solitude,” Margaret Duras writes, “one creates it. Solitude is created alone. I have created it.”

And here, by this lake in Georgia, so have I.