

A photograph of a rugged mountain peak, likely snow-capped, silhouetted against a soft, orange and pink sunset sky.

## Alone is not Lonely: The Power of Positive Solitude

**“The best thinking is done in solitude; the worst has been done in turmoil”**

**- Thomas Edison**

It’s been too long since I wrote a piece for One Big Idea. The Blog has not been actively or heavily promoted, rather shared with a few friends and colleagues, and the feedback has been positive.

As I write in early March of 2021, the world is living through a global pandemic – the COVID-19 pandemic – that has cost over 2.6 million lives worldwide, created economic havoc through necessary lockdowns, driven countless businesses to bankruptcy, delayed medical treatment for a host of diseases and conditions, and contributed to a mental health crisis, the extent of which we do not yet understand.

It has reversed decades of poverty-reduction and created a crisis in the social fabrics of many parts of the world, igniting moral debates about the balance between public health and economics, between “looking after our own populations” and ensuring adequate supply of COVID-19 vaccines around the globe.

The pandemic has reshaped our understanding of what can be accomplished through remote work, even remote medical diagnosis, has accelerated a global shift to digitization, and has, through drastic reductions of human movement and traffic, redefined some fundamental circumstances that we thought irreversible. This includes the recovery of bodies of water to relative health, the return of songbirds to densely populated cities and a host of others. It is no exaggeration to say that the pandemic has motivated a rethink about what societies consider important.

The pandemic has also created a sense of disconnection and isolation for people around the world, due to lockdown protocols and the dismantling, almost overnight, of many mechanisms of social interaction and support.

People of all ages, backgrounds, cultures and any other metric or comparative one can think of, are suffering from loneliness and disconnection, suffering from unaccustomed isolation and solitude.

The subject of this One Big Idea is indeed solitude.

But looked at perhaps from a slightly different lens: that of potential, privilege and possibility, linked to positive solitude. Being alone need not equate to being lonely, and solitude can be a path to deeper connection, instead of a static place of alone-ness.

Please don't take these words as professionally informed therapy, but only as a few thoughts that may inspire more research, and possibly a more helpful view of solitude than is often portrayed in conventional, and more recent, human experience.

"The difference between solitude as rejuvenation and solitude as suffering is the quality of self-reflection that one can generate while in it, and the ability to come back to social groups when one wants to."

The Virtues of Isolation

The Atlantic, March 2017

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/03/the-virtues-of-isolation/521100/>

## What does it Mean?

OK, I agree. Heavy stuff, and for some, maybe a bit academic or too theoretical. Yes, feeling alone and lonely can be devastating, and can lead to serious health issues on many levels. And let me get something out of the way, to address any questions or perceptions of bias: if you've read one or two posts on this site, you've probably – quite rightly – come to the conclusion that I am an introvert and probably a bit unconventional. Too true on both counts.

Being an introvert however, does not mean being an antisocial hermit. Most days.

It simply means that I belong to a group of people who need time alone to reflect and to recharge. If you get your energy from a crowd, you are probably an extrovert, if you get it in solitude, you are an introvert. An elegant definition and a distinction that is thought-provoking but easy to grasp intuitively.

That doesn't mean an absence of connection or a lack of appreciation for social and other forms of human interaction. What's my point? I get you if solitude feels like loneliness.

Have you ever felt alone in a crowd of people? At peace in a moment where you are in such solitude that you can hear your own breathing, heartbeat and inner voice?

Quietude and solitude can be both a place and a source (or connection to a source) of inspiration, innovation, imagination and power of many types. Like other elements of life, the experience of solitude is not fixed or one-dimensional. It is directly linked to the perspective, the view or the lens you bring to it, and so, it can be the place and the source of your best thinking, or it can be a unique form of pain.

Which do you choose?

In that choice lies our ability to reclaim a sense of balance, to redefine how we live solitude, and to turn what might at first feel like the absence of something, into the incalculable privilege that is quiet contemplation, silence, stillness and the opportunity to connect to something larger than ourselves through solitude.

## Let's Get Practical

OK, I admit it: may have gotten lost in my own head there for a couple of minutes, sorry!

Thanks for sticking with me on this one. "So, what?" you might ask. "Why did I spend two minutes of life I'll never get back, to read this far?"

Well, I don't know! The fun of the One Big Idea Blog is that I have a platform to share a few thoughts, and that you make of them what is most useful to you! 😊

If you intrinsically value solitude, I've basically managed to say "the earth is round", but perhaps the following ideas will inspire. If you've been wrestling with solitude and equating it to loneliness, perhaps one or two thoughts in these pages will help shift your perspective to a more positive and helpful place.

- Ask yourself "What If..." – when solitude feels like a weight on your being, as yourself "What if..." you could use that moment to start to solve a personal challenge, trigger your creative abilities, innovate a new proposition for your business or your employer, or take a slightly different approach to a persistent problem at school?
- Think about how often you've said "I don't have time...", and envision what new experience you can create or imagine in your moments of solitude, that you can either experience immediately (meditate, learn a new language, develop a new skill or competence, take one of the thousands of free online courses, read a good book, draw or paint something, even if, like me, you couldn't draw two eyes

that belong on the same head if your life depended on it...whatever suits you), or that you can “save” for later

- Really stretch: stop and feel into that sense of solitude. Explore it with your mind, emotions and spirit. Reach the core of it and learn something about yourself that could be transformative
- If “owning” the solitude doesn’t quite do it for you (yet), just visit with it for a moment, think about the ideas on these pages, and then quickly do something that will break you away from the sense of loneliness before it hits you: call a friend, video chat or arrange a virtual round of drinks (yes, I know, we are all amazed at this technology but also suffering video call fatigue!)
- Arrange to have a “buddy” or buddies on call specifically to help with this – to actively shift you from “solitude is loneliness” to “solitude is a privilege” – so that you can both/all use those moments to create, contribute and connect
- Push it even further by using the sense of solitude as a trigger to advance something: “Solutions in Solitude” – I like it, but I won’t copyright – feel free to use it if it helps!! 😊
- Join one or two of the growing number of high-quality online events: not quite the same as being there in person, but a few I’ve experienced recently have created very memorable and high-value ways to interact, participate and even virtually meet some fellow attendees/delegates – a great way to balance solitude with engagement and remind ourselves that there are choices to be made
- Think in terms of relative solitude: if your home is full and active, enjoy the blessings that represents; at the same time, look for pockets of solitude. As we shift to partial “work from home” or WFH models post-pandemic, what will you do with the time saved – and the peace and silence gained from reduced commutes, less traffic and (one, solitary tear rolling down my cheek) possibly less travel?

## By the Way...

I recognize all this is a point of view, nothing more, nor less. It will resonate with some and not with others. All good. If your situation is serious and you feel the need to get more structured, professional help, please do. If these words serve to provoke or inspire a new thought, or reinforce a positive approach to solitude, that's just fine with me!

If you are on board about the nature of solitude, or even about its potential nature and character, let's embrace what some rarely have the opportunity to experience, and appreciate what I suspect many of us will miss once it is less readily accessible and available: Positive Solitude.

In some parts of the world, entire societies and their evolution are shaped significantly by the absence of space, privacy and yes, solitude. In others, solitude is valued, respected and woven into the core of personal, community and societal organization.

*"There's a reason artists, musicians, and authors seek solitude when they want to create something. A private space, whether it's a secluded studio or a cabin in the woods, allows them to be more creative. Studies confirm that being alone often fosters creativity."*

5 Ways Solitude Can Make You More Successful, Backed By Science INC., August 2018

<https://www.inc.com/amy-morin/5-ways-solitude-can-make-you-more-successful-backed-by-science.html>

Connecting to a welcome solitude at will, even in a crowd or in a place of busy-ness, is invaluable. Cultivating the ability to then use that moment to connect more deeply, or to hone in on a more immediate and "substantive" opportunity or challenge can

generate great value. It's also the case, I believe, that the simple act of bathing in a moment of solitude offers benefits that tend to be underappreciated. I leave it to each of you to identify through expert sources, how that might be the case!

One thing of note: in an earlier post, I mention the work of Susan Cain (The Books That Started the Quiet Movement - Quiet Revolution) – for this occasion, I highlight one takeaway: that conventional group-based brainstorming can be enhanced by allowing the team to go their separate ways, take time to contemplate in private, and regroup. A compelling illustration of the power of solitude.

**“Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt in solitude,  
where we are least alone.”**

**- Lord Byron**

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