

SOLITUDE IN THE MODERN WORLD

The spiritual foundations of a contemporary desire for private space

by Jane Clark

In 2015 I gave a talk for the Oxford University Centre for Continuous Education as part of a series of day schools on 'Approaches to Mysticism'. My fellow speakers explored solitude and retreat within the context of long-established religious paths – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam – and it fell to me to talk about its importance for the many people nowadays who are not attached to any formal tradition. To do this, I found myself going back to the artists and thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries, at the very start of what we think as the modern era, and was surprised to find how essential the notion of solitude – having a private space in which to explore our thoughts and feelings – was to the development of concepts we now see as foundational for western society: individualism, freedom, social and political equality, democracy. This article is an attempt to explore this connection in a little more depth.

The contemporary importance of solitude can be quite easily seen in the way that we live now in most western societies. In traditional cultures, it was rare to be alone; people lived in close contact with one another in small towns and villages, or in small houses where parents, children and grandchildren co-existed. But these days, a significant section of the population lives by themselves. The exact figures vary, but according to some sources, as many as [34% of Europeans and 27% of Americans](#) now occupy single households. This number is set to increase over the next decades, not only because of the numbers of older people who find themselves alone as life expectancy increases, but also because more and more young and middle-aged people are choosing the single life.

Even if we live with other people, we now regard it almost as a human right, once we reach adolescence, to have our own room to which we can withdraw. And this trend is extended in the age of computers and smartphones, when even in the midst of a crowd on a bus or train we can put on our headphones and retreat into a world of our own creation. Of course, one reason for this is that we are more affluent now than ever before and can afford to buy our own flat or a house large enough to give every child their own space. But this is not the whole story: we choose how to use our wealth, and therefore we live like this because we see it as desirable. In previous eras, this was not at all the case. The psychiatrist Anthony Storr, whose book *Solitude*, published in the 1980s, is a seminal work on the subject, points out that for most people before the 19th century who were not monks or mystics,

withdrawal from communal living was not seen to be desirable at all, and it was sought only in very particular circumstances, such as times of grief or illness.

At the same time, as a society we are now struggling with the new problem of loneliness – people who find themselves alone when they have not chosen to be. It is increasingly understood that the consequences of this are not only psychological, although conditions such as depression are without doubt more prevalent amongst people who feel isolated. [Recent research](#) has shown that healthwise feeling lonely is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, having high blood pressure or being overweight and is very likely to lead to premature death. The social consequences are so great that it has been spoken of as an ‘epidemic’, and the UK government has recently appointed a Minister of Loneliness and set up a new government body – the [Jo Cox Commission](#), named in honour of the MP murdered during the 2016 Brexit campaign – to tackle the problem.

One of the most famous, and perceptive, quotes about the matter comes from the American poet Marianne Moore, who said: “The cure for loneliness is solitude”. This implies that solitude is not just a matter of being physically alone; it is a state of mind, an attitude which embraces the possibilities which open up when we are away from the pressures of society. And it is something that we do not always achieve, but fall instead into the abyss of isolation and loneliness.

The Bliss of Solitude

The practice of retreat and withdrawal from human society, whether permanently, as in the case of the Desert Fathers within the Christian tradition, or for fixed periods, as in the Islamic Sufi tradition of forty-day retreat, has always been a part of spiritual life. There has also been a philosophical tradition of solitude, of withdrawing from company in order to think deeply. Thus, we have accounts from antiquity of Socrates standing motionless in the midst of a battle whilst pursuing a line of thought, and René Descartes’s description of his short period of retreat in a ‘smoke-filled room’ in the winter of 1619, when he was given his radical ideas on science and consciousness in the form of a vision.

But the perception of solitude and retreat as something necessary for the development of all human beings – as an essential component of a fulfilled life – came about in quite a specific way with the Romantic movement of the 19th century, when poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge and Shelley began to extol its virtues in their work. What is more, their understanding of solitude as a practice was distinctly different from the rather focused, disciplined exercise common to traditional religious retreats. I am going to concentrate on the work of William Wordsworth, who has been called ‘the poet of solitude’, but one can find many other examples. Byron, for instance, confided to his diary at the very height of his fame: “I only go out to get me a fresh appetite for being alone”.

A good place to start is with Wordsworth's 1804 poem, usually referred to as *Daffodils* – although Wordsworth himself left it untitled – describing an experience in the Lake District in the North of England. This is one of the best-known verses in the English language, and almost everyone can quote lines from it. But as with many things which are very familiar, its profound meaning is not always registered.

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.*

*The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.*

There are two mentions of solitude in the poem – in the first verse and in the last. In the first line, he uses the word 'lonely', but not, I would maintain, to indicate the kind of alienated state of isolation of which we have already spoken. Nor should it be taken literally, for we know that his sister, Dorothy, was with him. Rather, this image of wandering and floating over the landscape without a definite goal is a metaphor, and what it denotes is freedom of thought – a state where the mind is allowed to roam untrammelled by expectation or dogma. According to the commentator [Geoffrey Watson](#), this notion can be traced back to the 16th-century essayist, Michel de Montaigne, who set out in his journal to examine and record his own thought processes, including every idea and emotion that occurred to him, without discriminating between them. He wrote:

“My mind usually brings forth its profoundest ideas, as well as its maddest and those I like best, unexpectedly.”

They come, he maintained, in all sorts of circumstances – “on horseback, at table, in bed, but mostly on horseback, where my thoughts wander most widely.” (Watson, p.349)

Watson tells us that when Montaigne first published his *Essais* in 1580, this notion of letting the mind wander was a novel one. He notes that: Montaigne does not deny that minds need discipline too, and he often praises his father’s insistence on a rich diet of early reading and on an earnest study of ancient languages. But such disciplines need to be superseded by something wider, he believed, if they are to bear fruit. (Watson, p.350)

The ‘fruit’ that Montaigne was seeking was the thoroughly modern one of new ideas and new concepts which go beyond existing intellectual or cultural boundaries. This was also the aim of the Romantics, who specifically rejected the mediation of the church and the state in their search for truth. They were self-confessed non-conformists, longing for fresh insights and visions of grandeur which came from a realm outside that of received wisdom. Such insights can only be given by what we might call in a more theistic context ‘inspiration’, or even ‘revelation’, and they invited this by opening up the mind and letting it ‘float’ and ‘wander’ like a Wordsworthian cloud.

The outcome of such a process cannot be controlled or anticipated. It comes, as Montaigne noticed, “unexpectedly”, and thus, we find in the third line of Wordsworth’s poem:

*...all at once I saw a crowd,
a host, of golden daffodils...*

This image of the daffodils is so familiar now, and lends itself so readily to a chocolate-box type depiction, that it is easy to miss the fact that Wordsworth is intending to convey a dramatic and overwhelming experience which powerfully impinged itself upon his soul, creating in him a feeling, a deep emotion. So strong was its effect that it remained with him and could be evoked many years later, as he describes in the fourth verse. One could say perhaps that what was given was a taste of eternity, which, being essentially outside of time, remained accessible as an ever-fresh experience. The ‘inward’ eye is no doubt a reference to the faculty of imagination, which in the view of the Romantics is not a lesser power which delivers only what we might call ‘imaginary’ or fanciful, delusional, truths. Rather, they saw it as a powerful organ of perception that can lead us to higher truths that cannot be attained purely by reason. So again, in this fourth verse, there is a reference to an intellectually unfocussed state of mind – “in vacant or in pensive mood” – where thought is unhinged from its usual tracks, so that the treasure chest, the ‘wealth’, of recollection can be opened up.

The evocation of an essential experience, Wordsworth implies, is a particular grace imparted by solitude. It is 'bliss', and this is also, according to Watson, a departure from tradition. Up until this point, introspection had most often been associated with melancholic states of mind, or with the self-deprecation of religious repentance. For the Romantics, by contrast, the kind of insights afforded by the imagination are essentially joyful and uplifting, so that we yearn to return to them. In this, they echo the writings of the mystical, rather than the merely religious traditions, where an encounter with that which lies beyond reason is also described as joy. Within Sufism, for instance, it is commonly compared to a passionate relationship with a lover, with all the bliss of union and pain of separation. The great Indian poet Amir Khusrau writes:

*Which garden do you come from that your scent
is so sweet, My rose? Your breeze enlarges the
the soul, and the dead heart is brought to life.
Though you load my body, weak as hair,
With a universe of woe, I will not trade
A single strand of your hair for both worlds.
(Ghazal 249)*

Solitude and Wilderness

For the Romantics, solitude tended to mean withdrawal from human society in order to commune with nature, and specifically, nature in the raw – that is, wilderness. And what resulted was not always the straightforward experience described in *Daffodils*. In his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude* – which describes his interior life and development, as well as his external life – Wordsworth recounts a childhood experience of stealing a boat and sailing across a lake, where he had a startling encounter with an awesome and terrifying cliff. After this, he describes:

*... for many days, my brain
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
There was a darkness, call it solitude,
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty
Forms that do not live
Like living men mov'd slowly through the mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.*

This is a very clear reminder that what the Romantics sought in nature was not the aesthetically beautiful as such, but [the sublime](#) – that aspect of nature which reveals

to us the grandeur and majesty of the divine. This takes us out of our familiar territory – thus, “no images of trees or sea or sky” – into new and more awesome, and therefore more troubling, realms; the forms perceived are dark because they are beyond the normal reach of human knowledge, so can only be dimly perceived. This was what poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron were pursuing when they made their visits to the great wild landscapes of the Lake District or the Alps, and what was depicted by Romantic artists like Turner when he painted the sea in its most turbulent mode. There is a hint of this even in the gentle imagery of *Daffodils*, which stretch towards infinity – “Continuous as the stars that shine/And twinkle on the milky way”.

For Wordsworth, nature in its sublime aspect was not just an object to be contemplated. He saw it as an active force by which, through protracted exposure, our souls are educated in the higher spiritual realities until, as he puts it in *Prelude*, “we recognize / a grandeur in the beatings of the heart”. Unlike the tarnished and corrupt systems created by human beings, he thought of nature as a pure, sanctified source of knowledge that has the power to cleanse our souls. Thus in *Prelude* 12, he describes how, becoming disillusioned with the actions of his fellow human beings when he was living in London, he took refuge in nature and then...

*Thus moderated, thus composed, I found
Once more in man an object of delight,
Of pure imagination, and of love;
And, as the horizon of my mind enlarged,
Again I took the intellectual eye
For my instructor, studious more to see
Great truths, than touch and handle little ones.*

Here there is an implicit understanding that as human beings, we need to participate in society, in human affairs, and to use our intellect and reason. But in order to keep “the horizon of the mind enlarged” so that we do not get completely caught up in petty day-to-day concerns, or “little truths”, we need to periodically return to a state of solitude and be reminded of immensity and “great truths”.

These ideas of the Romantics were echoed and expanded by their American contemporaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson and Thoreau were both important philosophers and essayists, members of the group now known as the [Transcendentalists](#), who were deeply engaged in forging a new political order in 19th century America. But Thoreau is best known nowadays for his book *Walden*, which was a journal that he kept of a two-year experiment living alone in a cabin in the woods near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. He wrote in his [Journal](#):

“This stillness, solitude, wildness of nature is a kind of thoroughwort, or boneset, to my intellect. That is what I go out to seek. It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him.” (January 7th, 1857)

The thoroughwort is a little plant, a member of the sunflower family, that is used in traditional Indian medicine to set broken bones. So here again we have an echo of the Wordsworthian idea, expressed by a man of enormous intellectual ability, that reason by itself can go astray, and become crooked like a broken bone.

Although Walden Woods are a relatively tame environment, the notion of immensity, the sublime, is also present in Thoreau's vision. He writes:

“We need the tonic of wildness... At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets.” (*Walden*, Chapter 17)

The influence of Thoreau and Emerson had very direct consequences upon public policy in the USA, as it led to the setting up of the great National Parks in the late 19th century – Yellowstone in 1872, Yosemite in 1890. This happened largely through the efforts of [John Muir](#), who was a passionate follower of Emerson. Such things are now an essential part of our contemporary culture; America has 59 National Parks, visited by more than 80 million people every year, and the UK has 15, including the Lake District, which alone receives nearly 12 million visitors annually. In addition, there are many smaller places which are open to the public, where we can all go and experience the beneficial and healing power of nature, and – in the face of “the unfathomable” – be brought back to “great truths”.

Solitude, Individualism and Democracy

But perhaps the most important innovation that the Romantics brought was the idea that the sensations and emotions experienced at moments of insight, such as described in *Daffodils*, are important and valid – that they constitute real knowledge. This was radical in almost every sense, because unlike the learning offered by universities or kept sacrosanct within the enclaves of religion, this kind of experience does not require the mediation of external authority and is open to everyone, regardless of class, education, race or gender. It is here that the political and social concerns of the Transcendentalists – and indeed, those of Wordsworth, who had visited Paris in the early years of the French Revolution and been initially enamoured of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – coincided with their understanding of the importance of solitude. Thus Emerson begins his seminal *Essay on Self-reliance* with these words:

“A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages...

[So] trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors...”

This rallying call for every person (we should note that, as was common in his time, Emerson uses ‘man’ as a generic term for all human beings) to take control of their destiny based upon their own perceptions and conscience, was very much in the spirit of an age when both the USA and the UK were moving towards universal suffrage – i.e., the principle that every member of society, not just an educated or wealthy élite, should have a say in government. Emerson and Thoreau are known for advocating individualism, that is, giving priority to the individual over the state; Thoreau’s second most famous work, for instance, is his essay on ‘[Civil Disobedience](#)’ where he argues for the right to break the law if our conscience perceives it to be unjust. Such ideas have of course gained great influence in the present day. But it is rarely remembered that it was absolutely intrinsic to the qualities of independent thought as the Transcendentalists originally conceived them, that they could only be achieved by entering into extensive periods of solitude; as Emerson writes: “these are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world”. He goes on:

“We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.”

Emerson’s advice was that we need to find a balance between solitude and society in our lives, although his own preference was strongly for the former. He also saw, like Marianne Moore, that solitude is not just a matter of physical alone-ness, but is primarily a state of mind:

“It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

Solitude and the Self

The practice of solitude does not always involve immersion in nature. It can take place in the midst of everyday life by taking ourselves away from other people into our own space – to a study, a bedroom, a summerhouse in the garden. Wordsworth’s “bliss of solitude”, for instance, took place as he lay upon his “couch”, not as he was

walking in the hills. Giving importance to our thoughts and feelings naturally gives rise to a desire to reflect upon them, and also to express them creatively.

This connection between solitude and creativity was explored by the British psychologist Anthony Storr in his book *Solitude*, in which he investigated the lives of artists and thinkers such as Michaelangelo, Beethoven, Kant and Beatrix Potter, who from the point of view of modern psychology might be considered to have led lonely or isolated lives. But Storr argues that they found a particular kind of fulfillment in their work. He too goes back to the 18th century, and the historian Edward Gibbons, who maintained that, “Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius”. Similarly, Virginia Woolf, in her 1928 essay examining the relative lack of female literature in the past, concludes that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write”.

The full title of Storr’s book is *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, pointing out that our relationship to our self is the very essence of solitude. We can remove ourselves from society and other people; we can remove ourselves even from nature, as the religious hermits used to do in their caves. But we cannot be removed from our own self. As Montaigne noted: “Solitude is being wedded to ourselves”. This aspect was particularly explored by the poet Emily Dickinson, a peripheral member of the Transcendentalist group who was admired by Emerson and corresponded with him, although she never met him personally. Dickinson lived all her life with her family in Amherst, Massachusetts, and in her final years rarely left her house, or even her room. Whether her isolation was voluntary, or caused by an illness such as epilepsy, is the subject of debate. But what is certain is that in her poetry she conducts a thorough investigation of the state of alone-ness in all its guises, both joyful and terrible. This is one of her most famous poems, entitled simply *Solitude*.

*There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite infinity.*

Dickinson referred to her self as “the undiscovered continent” and found there the “finite infinity” that the Romantics and the Transcendentalists had sought in nature. In this exploration of the “landscape of the spirit”, her observations come very close to those of mystical writers, whose most profound purpose through the ages has been to discover the divine within themselves, “Into my mind shines that which space cannot contain”, said St Augustine in the 4th century; “To know oneself is to know the divine image and likeness in oneself”, said his contemporary, St Ambrose.

So in our exploration of what it means to be in a state of solitude – rather than simply alone or lonely – I would suggest that it is to be in contact with our self in its most profound depths. This is the great opportunity presented by our contemporary access to privacy and personal space, which seen like this is an unprecedented privilege. So to end, I bring a verse by a very modern poet, Philip Larkin, speaking about a stolen moment of solitude in his poem *Best Company*.

*Viciously, I shut the door.
The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside
Ushers in evening rain. Once more
Uncontradicting solitude
Supports me on its giant palm;
And like a sea-anemone
Or simple snail, there cautiously
Unfolds, emerges, what I am.*

The first version of this article, entitled ‘The Bliss of Solitude’, was given at a day seminar at The Oxford University Department of Continuous Education on May 21st, 2016 as part of the series ‘Approaches to Mysticism’.

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