

“How Do You Like Your Life Best-- In Solitude or With Companions?”

A Sermon By Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, October 22, 2006

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

“Solitude is employing the richness of self. Loneliness is facing the poverty of self,” said May Sarton, a wonderful poet. She was also Unitarian Universalist. Solitude and loneliness sometimes get confused with each other, but finding companionship probably won’t resolve the confusion.

Henry David Thoreau commented in Walden after his two years by the little pond that people “frequently say to me, ‘I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially.’” He wasn’t lonely. In fact he preferred his solitude to time spent with others. “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude,” he said. “We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among [people] than when we stay in our chambers.”

That’s been my experience too. I’ve seldom been lonely when I was alone, but it’s different in a crowd of people. If you don’t know the people around you the “not-knowing them” can feel like real isolation. But I think the loneliest feeling arises when you know your companions well and don’t feel at home with them, don’t really want to be with them—perhaps because it was painful for you when you last saw them.

How do you like your life best--in solitude or with companions?

The test of this is not just who your companions are, or how winsome you are. Psychiatrist Carl Jung suggested that all people lean one way or the other--and it isn’t something we choose consciously or intentionally.

Some psychologists say everyone is extroverted or introverted or somewhere in between on a continuum they measure by a psychological test, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I’m sure some of you have taken the Myers-Briggs. Those psychologists say the primary difference between introverts and extroverts is where we get our energy.

Introverts are territorial. They “desire space: private places in the mind and private environmental places” as David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates said in their book Please Understand Me. Introverts need to go to those places to recharge their batteries when contact with others wears them down.

Extroverts get energized by contact with others and are more likely to report “loneliness when they are not in contact with other people.” (Keirsey-Bates, p14-15) Another psychologist, K. Bradway, discovered long ago that extroverts make up about 75 percent of the general population. “Indeed,” said Keirsey and Bates “western culture seems to sanction the outgoing, sociable, and gregarious temperament.... Solitary activities frequently are seen as ways to structure time until something better comes along, and this something better by definition involves interacting with people.”

Many extroverts have their deepest spiritual experiences when they are with other people. Woody Allen said “I was thrown out of New York University for cheating on a metaphysics exam. The professor caught me looking deeply into the soul of the student seated next to me.”

Of course there's no such thing as pure extroverts or introverts. We're all mixtures. I'm mostly introverted though I test close to the middle of the scale. As a child I was shy and had to work to learn outgoing behavior.

Thoreau was an introvert, big-time. He had more than a streak of arrogance too, nurtured by strength he felt when alone in the wilderness. In Walden he said "only one [person] in a million [is] awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions [for] a poetic or divine life." Since the US population was twenty-five million when he wrote that you can guess who he thought that one person was. If he were alive today I doubt if Thoreau would choose to take a walk in the woods with any of us.

I think it's worthwhile for extroverts as well as introverts to explore solitude. Alice Koller said: "Being solitary is being alone well. Being alone luxuriously immersed in doings of your own choice, aware of the fullness of your own presence rather than of the absence of others. Because solitude is an achievement." I suspect she was an extrovert who really had to work at it to achieve the positive results of solitude. For an introvert it comes naturally. Introverts have to have solitude to feel complete.

Eight years ago when I was on a sabbatical in Greece I went in search of solitude to the religious realm of Mount Athos, a province where only Orthodox monks live in monasteries that are open to pilgrims of all faiths. The heart of my journey was four days of utter solitariness, walking by myself between them. Each night I ate the simple meal the Greek monks set before me and slept in one of their cells. I seldom spoke to anyone. No one at all spoke to me.

I found the solitude torturous and fecund. It would have been easier being alone the whole time in the woods. That was my best time, even when I was exhausted from climbing mountains alone on the dirt trails connecting the monasteries. Each was a dozen miles from the last. I saw only two or three people each day as I walked.

I got excited each evening as I neared a monastery. Who and what would I find here? Only once did a monk share personal moments with me. He spoke no English; I spoke no Greek. "Calispera" I said. That was all I could say. He grunted something and signed me in. Then he beckoned for me to follow him. We walked outside and away from the hermitage to the crumbling wall of an old chapel. We sat down under an ancient tree.

A hole in the wall opened to blackness within. He pointed inside, urging me to look there. I leaned in and saw nothing. No light entered the crawl space except through the hole that I was blocking with my body.

All I could see was blotches of white until my irises became adjusted to the darkness. Then spots appeared on the blotches, providing some detail. When my brain sorted out my confusion I saw what was there. Hundreds of skulls were leering out at me, skulls left by monks who had inhabited the monastery during the thousand years that it had been inhabited.

I bounced back and looked at my companion. He smiled, pointed to himself and then pointed back into the darkness. He moved his hand back and forth several times until I understood. One day he'd be there.

This was what it meant to be an Orthodox monk in this place with no women: to live in solitude close to nature without the distractions of the city, to attend a rigorous schedule of

worship five times a day beginning before daybreak and ending long after sundown; to do manual labor and meditate on God's purposes; to accept this hard life for the glory it also imparted—and to die and have one's bones and skull stacked in this unpretentious place.

We walked back into the monastery and soon I was alone again in a dormitory cell they had assigned me for the night—but not for long. Four musical Greek pilgrims joined me. They performed a quartet with their snoring all night long, playing their nose music in a minor key. My friend the monk waved to me as I walked away the next morning. I waved back. His brief friendliness had etched his form sharply in my memory.

As I said my experience was torturous. I didn't think I could last another day. When I was back with my wife Mary, speech fairly burst out of me. It was as if I had lost a power I then regained. Still the experience was one of the most profound, most satisfying of my sabbatical.

I was completely alone on my hike for hours each day. My experience became more intense as the time passed. Silence boomed within me and flowed about me each day, bathing the wounds I suffered each night in the loneliness I felt as an alien among the Orthodox monks. My sense of Being expanded until it filled my consciousness. When I returned to my ordinary world it didn't feel the same. I felt centered where previously my life had been filled with busyness. Then I got busy again.

Can I get back to that center? Sometimes, when I seek solitude. When I was alone in nature my experience was so intense at times that the memory still startles me, rising as an image in my mind when I least expect it, in the bending of a tree in wind like one I saw on a Greek mountain, or appearing as a human face on the surface of water like one I saw somewhere on the Aegean Sea when the wind ruffled its surface to reveal the face beneath.

“Solitude is un-American,” said Erica Jong in Fear of Flying. So many things are un-American. We do that to ourselves, trying to be what our culture demands. There's more than that to life, whether we are extroverts or introverts. We are human, sacred, beloved, thinking animals, every one of us.

We need the perspective that solitude gives us so we can step back into ourselves. But solitude isn't enough. We also need our friends to share the richness solitude gives. If we were only alone the richness would wither away. Together we become a community; we become the world with one another.

Marge Piercy said in “The Low Road”

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start a
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fundraising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter,
ten thousand, power and your own paper,
a hundred thousand, your own media,
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

Marge was talking about changing the world. That starts in solitude, with being one person, and then adding one more. Solitude goes that way when it is richest of all. But it doesn't stop at one. We all need feeding.

But it starts at one. It always starts at one. And though you may find one side of yourself easier to practice, the side of extroversion or the side of introversion, it takes both sides of you to be whole, to have the solitude and the being with others you love.

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