

Loneliness

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“We are not merely lonely, we are lonely for our own kind.” — (source unknown to me)

“To picture a truly alienated man, picture a Kafka to whom it had never occurred to write a word.” — Percy, Walker, “The Man in the Train”, in *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 1975, p. 83.

Any intellectual trapped in a cultural desolation like Silicon Valley and aching for some conversation about the books he is reading, knows to the depths of his soul why exile has always been considered one of the severest punishments.

Loneliness is never what is portrayed in a movie, even though the camera may follow a character through years of complete isolation. Loneliness is the absence of any camera.

There is no such thing as a hero without an audience, whether that audience be many or One, past, present, or future, real or imagined.

If people throughout the world suddenly began to believe that loneliness was a mark of distinction, that each minute of loneliness endured contributed to the success of an enterprise of overwhelming importance, half the loneliness of the world would disappear overnight.

“A letter, supposedly sent to [Strindberg] by Nietzsche, said that he hardly regarded loneliness as a hardship, but rather felt it ‘a priceless distinction and at the same time a purification.’ Such a letter, even from such a mad mountaintop hand, must surely have cheered them both. Everyone, indeed.” — Osborne, John, “The Pearl Fisher”, review of Ingmar Bergman’s autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 27, 1988, p. 18.

We must ask ourselves why the mountain men of the 19th century, who often went for weeks without seeing a single human soul, were apparently less lonely than many city and suburban dwellers in this age of telephones, radio, TV, computer networks, cars, jet planes. The strange truth may be that what we are often longing for is the presence of the *non*-human.

“Et pourquoi cet effroi de rester solitaire
Qui pique le troupeau des hommes d’aujourd’hui,
Comme si leur commerce était bien suffisant?”

[“Why does the fear of solitude
So terrorize modern man?
As if human company were enough!”¹]

“When I hear modern people complain of being lonely then I know what has happened. They have lost the cosmos. — It is nothing human and personal that we are short of. What we lack is cosmic life, the sun in us and the moon in us. We can’t get the sun in us by lying naked like pigs on a beach. The very sun that is bronzing us is inwardly disintegrating us — as we know sooner or later. Process of katabolism. We can only get the sun by a sort of worship: and the same with the moon. By *going forth* to worship the sun, worship that is felt in the blood. Tricks and postures only make matters worse.” — Lawrence, D. H., *Apocalypse*, Penguin Books, 1960, p. 30.

“Summertime is a good time to re-examine New York and to receive again the gift of privacy, the jewel of loneliness.” — White, E. B., “Here in New York”, in *Great Essays*, ed. Houston Peterson, Washington Square Press, Inc., N.Y., 1967, p. 430.

An eminently worthwhile project would be that of studying people who seem willing and able to live in isolation (and there are such people). What is the source of their strength? Is it a residue of their childhood? Is it a preference for the company of plants and animals? Or a more abstract companionship with “the world” — for example, the house, trees, grass, land, and sky where the person lives?

The middle-aged men and women I have known who seemed quite content to live alone for months, even years, have had, without exception, three traits: optimism, self-confidence, and physical beauty.

Much-needed book: a study of island dwellers — of those who choose to live on small islands, not necessarily entirely alone, but with at most one or two other people in the same house, and with at most a few neighbors. How do these people spend their lives? What do they do each day?

“He who is unable to mingle in society, or who requires nothing, by reason of sufficing for himself, is no part of the state, so that he is either a wild beast or a divinity.” — Aristotle, *Politics*, book i.

One of the best enemies of loneliness is arrogance.

Water from stone: after a lifetime of trying to find people to talk to, the smart old person

1. Verlaine, Paul, “Written in 1875”, tr. Sorrell, Martin, in *Paul Verlaine: Selected Poems*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1999, p. 145.

learns how to get water from the stone that is his environment: learns to make the most of conversations with waitresses, or with the woman who comes to prune the roses, or with the plumber, or with librarians, or with the one or two among his neighbors who are capable of even a few minutes of conversation, or with the chance acquaintances he makes via email. It is not a question of good conversation with your equals or none at all.

A great deal of modern art can be described as various attempts to make friends with loneliness by making loneliness visible. Consider the sculpture of Giacometti, in which, since ordinary space is insufficient to express the real distances that exist between people, the figures themselves must be made grotesquely thin in order to express just how much the emptiness presses upon them.

“When evening comes, I go home and enter my study; at the door I discard these daily clothes full of dirt and dust, and put on regal and curial robes, and thus condignly clad I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where I am received by them lovingly, and partake of that nourishment which alone is mine; and for it was I born. Then I am bold to converse with them, and question them as to the reasons for their actions, and they out of their courtesy willingly answer me; and during those four hours I am above any trouble, I fear not poverty, nor does death appal me; I utterly become one of them...” — Machiavelli, Niccolo, letter to Francesco Vettori, quoted in Santillana, Giorgio de, *The Age of Adventure*, Mentor Books, N.Y., 1956, p. 108.

For a certain rare type of intellectual, loneliness itself becomes an almost irresistible challenge. Even when faced with the prospect of at last finding the companionship he has craved all his life, he cannot help wondering if there might not be some thought, some state of mind, some relationship with the world, which might make it possible for him to live contentedly without other people.

He is lonely. What can he do? *Something they will hate!*

You feel lonely because you think you are the only one who feels that way. But think of the thousands who are walking the grim winter streets feeling exactly as you do!

I encourage anyone who is inclined to dismiss this idea as merely an amusing cynicism, to try it the next time he or she is suffering from loneliness. It is entirely possible that loneliness is more likely to be the “same” feeling (as measured by the machine described in the chapter, “Psychology”) in different individuals than are many types of pleasure. In loneliness, you may be closer to other human beings than you are at any other time in your life.

“I was invited to submit ideas to the McGovern campaign. Nothing was done with my suggestions. I wanted Sarge Shriver to say, ‘You’re not happy, are you? Nobody in this country is happy but the rich people. Something is wrong. I’ll tell you what’s wrong: We’re lonesome!’

We're being kept apart from our neighbors. Why? Because the rich people can go on taking our money away if we don't hang together. They can go on taking our power away. They *want* us to be lonesome; they want us huddled in our houses with just our wives and kids, watching television, because they can manipulate us then. They can make us buy anything, they can make us vote the way they want. How did Americans beat the Great Depression? We banded together. In those days, members of unions called each other "brother" and "sister," and they meant it. We're going to bring that spirit back! Brother and sister!... We are going to band together with our neighbors to clean up our neighborhoods, to get the crooks out of the unions, to get the prices down in the meat markets. Here's a war cry for the American people: "Lonesome no more!" That's the kind of demagoguery I approve of." — Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Playboy Interview", in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, Dell Publishing Co., N.Y., 1974, p. 274.

Doing the same thing that other people are doing is a way of being with them. One reason why expensive restaurants are popular among people who can't really afford to eat in them, is that they enable these people to spend some time in a rich family's house: the various kinds of meat taste like various kinds of furniture (mahogany, Louis XIV); various breads taste like wall coverings or the wall materials themselves; sherberts are sprinklers on the lawn at evening. Drinking wine should more properly be called "getting pillows" because as soon as the alcohol begins to take effect, the diner feels as though he or she is in a huge bed with everyone else.

Buying a product, possessing a product which others value highly is a form of companionship, and so much the better if the product is valued by persons of wealth and distinction. But even if the product has merely been owned, handled, used, by others, no matter how ordinary the product may be, it can provide a kind of companionship, witness the shopping carts full of discards which so many of the homeless seem never to be without. On the other hand, when everyone is reducing their consumption, as in the U.S. during World War II, *not* buying, *not* possessing new commercial products is a way of being with others.

The proliferation of singles' organizations since the '70's has little to do with the sexual yearnings of single men and women, not even of those approaching middle-age, but with the fact that having a relationship (as the phrase goes) makes one a member of an esteemed group, particularly if one is a successful professional. The loneliness arises from not being in this group, not from lacking a mate. (In the class we are considering, all candidates are pretty much the same, as we learn after a few hundred meetings.)

Much of the suffering we experience in attempting to give up bad habits or in going our own way in some endeavor, arises from the sudden loneliness these attempts produce. Many drug addicts prefer the companionship of the needle to the isolation and lack of purpose of a life without drugs. Who can imagine anything more lonely than being in perfect health and having no physical or mental illnesses to connect oneself to others?

"'Heroin addiction,' writes psychologist Rollo May, 'gives a way of life to the young person. Having suffered under perpetual purposelessness, his structure now consists of how to escape the cops, how to get the money he needs, where to get his next fix — all these give him a new web of energy in place of his previous structureless world.'" — Toffler, Alvin, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, N.Y., 1980, p 373.

If we sometimes wonder why peasants and farmers in Europe continue, generation after generation, to build and live in houses which are drafty and cold in winter, the answer may not be that they don't know how to build better houses, but that they much prefer to freeze with their ances-

tors than to be comfortable alone.

A whole mythology exists to soften the loneliness of the intellectual and artistic life: stories of great figures of the past who were ignored in their own time but are now universally recognized, the message being that one is never really alone because posterity is always there (which, of course, in the vast majority of cases, is simply not true).

One can view political and artistic revolutions as simply a means by which certain peculiar people go about creating a little companionship for themselves.

We can endure almost anything as long as there is someone to observe us. Suffering alone is infinitely more difficult than suffering in the presence of others, i.e., those who can make our suffering *worthwhile*.

The naiveté of the public regarding what living in isolation means, is exemplified by the public's admiration for Dick Proenneke, author of *One Man's Wilderness* (1973), which described his years of living in a log cabin in Alaska. But you are not living in isolation if you keep diaries of your everyday activities, and furthermore have a movie camera on hand at all times and record your daily activities for use in a later documentary (*Alone in the Wilderness*). Proenneke didn't live alone: he lived in the company of thousands, perhaps millions of onlookers.

In parts of Asia, enormous eyes are sometimes painted on Buddhist towers. Consider how our loneliness might be eased if it became the custom to include pictures or bas-relief sculptures of eyes in the nooks and crannies of our houses and of the products we use on a daily basis. Thus, for example, on a cold, rainy day, while crawling around in the attic of the house where we live alone, looking for a leak in the roof, we would find, on the side of a beam, a carved and painted eye left there by the previous owner some ten or fifteen years ago (and, in thanks, we might then take the time to make, or buy, a replica, and place it, say, on a beam in a dark corner of the basement). Or late at night, in freezing cold and driving snow, alone and far from home, while trying to find why the car has suddenly stalled, we might suddenly see, behind one of the manifolds (hardly recognizable because of its coating of dirt and grease) a little plastic eye, hung there on a piece of wire by, say, one of the assembly-line workers many years ago. Lesser forms of companionship have enabled people to live for yet another day.

A modern version of such eyes would be TV cameras placed in locations which always threaten to push lonely people over the edge: for example, ponds in the dead of winter, especially ignored or abandoned ponds such as those behind tall grass by the side of busy highways and ponds in city parks; also inside warehouse dumpsters and in all abandoned buildings. These cameras would then be connected to screens in laundromats and mass transit waiting stations.

The future belongs to those who can endure unendurable loneliness.

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