The JOY *of* SOLITUDE

How to Reconnect with Yourself in an Overconnected World

Robert J. Coplan

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Contents

1.	I Am Alone: Introducing Solitude	1
2.	I Think I'm Alone Now: What Solitude Is (and Is Not)	11
3.	Why Solitude Gets a Bad Rap: I've Got a Theory	27
4.	Not Only the Lonely: Confronting the Very Worst of Solitude	45
5.	Well Enough Alone? I've Got a Theory	63
6.	When Solitude Is "Just Right": Aloneliness and the Goldilocks Principle	83
7.	Loners & Homebodies & Introverts, Oh My! The Memes Versus Realities of Preferring Solitude	101
8.	Learning to Play Solo: How to Do Solitude Better	123
9.	Making It Alone: How Solitude Can Enhance Your Creative Side	143
10.	Me, Myself, and AI: How to Be Alone with Your Phone	161
11.	Growing Up Alone: How to Promote Healthy Solitude in Children	181
12.	Being Single or Being Alone Together: How to Navigate Solitude in Your Relationships	203
13.	Ending Up Alone: Some Final Thoughts About Solitude	223
	Acknowledgments	233
	Bibliography	235
	Index	249

Chapter 1

I Am Alone

Introducing Solitude

It turns out, all I needed to know about solitude I could have learned in kindergarten.

When I was a graduate student training as a developmental psychologist, my thesis research focused on the different ways that young children play at school. Consequently, I spent countless hours observing the day-to-day activities at preschools and kindergartens. I would show up each morning, armed with my clipboard and stopwatch, and spend the day sitting on one of those tiny child-sized chairs in the corner of the classroom, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Sometimes children would come up and ask what I was doing there or invite me to play. But after a while, everyone got used to me being there, and I just kind of disappeared into the background decor.

You can learn a lot about children just by watching. Most previous research about young children's social behaviors focused on how kids learned to get along well with others, which is a primary task of growing up. And, of course, getting along well with others remains a critical task for adults too. Historically, developmental psychologists have also been really concerned about the implications of children *not* getting along well with others. So, when they sat and observed young

children together at school, they paid a lot of attention to episodes of conflict and aggression. This is not at all surprising, because these types of events are noisy and disrupt the classroom for everyone. And in the case of aggression, someone can get hurt. That is also why we pay so much attention to these same sorts of episodes among adults.

But I was interested in something different. I wanted to learn more about how children got along with *themselves*. For me, there was something fascinating about those children who played alone despite being around so many other potential playmates. So, I watched, and then I watched some more. Of course, every child is different. But after a while, some patterns began to emerge. I noticed that I could often classify the various children who tended to spend a lot of time alone at school into different specific types.

Some of these children seemed to be quite content to play quietly alone, building with blocks, drawing pictures, or doing other solo activities. When other children approached to invite them to play together, they often said yes. But when those social opportunities played themselves out, these children would happily return to their solitary activities.

Another type of child I noticed appeared more uneasy when alone. They would spend a lot of their time watching their classmates play but refrain from joining in. They certainly seemed interested in what other kids were doing and gravitated toward opportunities to make a social connection. However, the closer they got to the action, the more their growing discomfort seemed to push them back. So, they hovered on the edges of social circles, rarely moving past the periphery.

Yet other children who played alone were more boisterous. They tended to be somewhat socially clumsy and, as a result, were frequently rebuffed in their efforts to play with others. These children appeared frustrated when they ended up having to play by themselves. They did not want to be alone, and you could see it on their faces.

I also took note of the most outgoing children, who flitted around

the room, constantly seeking social stimulation and engagement. In the rare moments when these children found themselves alone, it was clear that this was not a place they wanted to be. They quickly moved on to the next social thing.

At the time when I was conducting this research, I thought I already knew a lot about solitude. Today, I can look back and understand that not only did I not know a lot, but I had no idea how much I didn't know. It was all there right in front of me, though. The kindergarten classroom was the perfect microcosm for understanding the hidden complexities of solitude. These children were models of the many different relationships we can form with solitude. Maybe if I had looked harder, if I had opened myself up more to what these children might be thinking ("I wish someone would play with me" versus "What color should I paint this tree?") and feeling (sad versus content), I would have understood that these children's different experiences of being alone were key to understanding the complex and even paradoxical links between solitude and well-being.

I guess this would be a better story if, during one of those observation sessions, I had experienced a sudden revelation about the inner workings of solitude. But alas, that is not what happened. Nevertheless, it was those many hours spent just watching children play that first sparked my interest in the idea that solitude is more complicated than we might think. I didn't get my moment of true scientific revelation until almost thirty years later. But that is a story for later.

We Are All Alone

Solitude is a part of the human experience. According to the American Time Use Survey, at age fifteen, Americans spend an average of more than three hours per day alone. In our twenties and thirties, time spent in solitude rises to about four and a half hours per day. As we age, each

passing year brings more time alone, and by age seventy, we average more than seven hours a day in solitude. Solitude is an experience we are all deeply familiar with. It is a fundamental aspect of everyday life. So, it is somewhat surprising that we know so little about it. And perhaps it is for that very reason that so many misconceptions, myths, and downright fallacies about solitude persist.

Solitude tends to evoke a wide range of reactions. In part, this is because each of us experiences it differently. As a result, we all form our own unique relationship with solitude. Relationships are tricky to predict and understand because they have what are sometimes referred to as *emergent properties*. This means that the full nature of a relationship is more than the sum of its parts, or the individual characteristics of the people involved in the relationship. Have you ever tried to play matchmaker with two of your friends? You might know both of these people quite well and feel certain that they will hit it off. But when the time comes, the date is a disaster, and your friends end up asking how you could have possibly thought they would be a good match. There is no need to feel bad. Relationships take on their own unique properties and are often unpredictable, even if you know almost everything there is to know about the two people involved.

Similarly, there are emergent properties at play in our unique relationships with our own company. For some people, this relationship is nourishing and intimate, and solitude makes them feel good; for others, this relationship is frustrating and exhausting, and solitude tends to make them feel angry; for others still, this relationship can be unnerving and ambivalent, and solitude often makes them feel anxious; and so on. But just like other relationships, our relationship with solitude can have both good and bad aspects, and if we really want our relationship with solitude to be healthy, we have to be willing to work at it.

One of the pervasive problems with solitude is that although it is often a regular part of our day, we don't pay much attention to it, and

as a result, we neglect how important it is to our well-being. A friend of mine told me a story about an interesting conversation he had with the person seated next to him at a wedding. (You never know whom you will be sitting with at a wedding.) His tablemate was a physical therapist who specialized in the pelvic area and was passionate about his work. He mentioned that although serious problems in that area of the body eventually get dealt with, most people probably have some type of minor dysfunction that is negatively affecting them in ways they don't realize. He went on to say that this was likely because, although the pelvis is a critical part of our body in terms of our health and wellness, it can feel taboo to discuss: people just don't generally like to talk about pee, poo, and sex. His main lament was that if people just paid a bit more attention to their pelvis, and made even some minor adjustments, their lives would noticeably improve.

This strikes me as a good metaphor for what I think is going on with solitude—and it gets at the crux of this book. Most people probably don't think that much about solitude. We sometimes read about solitude in the news or come across the topic scrolling through social media. But these are usually extreme examples, stories highlighting the dangers of the growing loneliness epidemic or the trials of a solo adventurer who spent months alone in the wilderness. But I have learned that we need to pay more attention to solitude, our relationship to it, and how it impacts our health and wellness. Because just like our pelvis area, many of us probably have some type of minor dysfunction in our relationship with solitude, and it turns out that even small tweaks are likely to lead to noticeable improvements. In short, we need to talk more about solitude.

A classic and prescient quote about solitude comes from Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century French mathematician, inventor, and philosopher, who wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." How about we give this a try.

Go find a quiet place and sit by yourself, alone with your thoughts, for fifteen minutes. No sleeping, no technology, no distractions: just you and the inside of your head. Set an alarm to alert you when fifteen minutes is up, but don't check the time remaining. Stop reading now and go do that, and then come back and pick up right here where you left off.

Fifteen Minutes Later

How did it go? Be honest. Did you cheat? Did you make it through the entire fifteen minutes? Did you check your phone? Did you fall asleep? Some people find this experience peaceful and relaxing, are surprised by how quickly the time passes, and feel refreshed when the alarm goes off. For others, it is just okay, and they were mostly bored. For yet others, sitting alone and unoccupied is unsettling; they just cannot seem to get out of their own head. And for many people, this exercise is excruciating and stressful. They count down the seconds until they can at last be released, if they even make it that far. So, every reader of this book might have been sitting alone, but each had their own uniquely personal experience of solitude.

What you just undertook was the basis for one of my favorite research studies about solitude. In 2014, the University of Virginia professor Timothy Wilson and other psychology researchers conducted a series of experiments in which they asked college students to sit on a chair, alone with their thoughts, in a small room with the door closed for fifteen minutes. Afterward, the students answered a series of questions about how they felt during this time. There were several variations to the structure of the experiment and to the context. For example, in some cases, the students completed their solitary time in a lab room at the university, and in other cases, students did this at home.

When I asked Wilson to tell me more about this study, he disclosed that his colleagues and students were split over what they thought would

happen. Wilson himself believed that participants would generally enjoy this scenario, based on his own personal affinity for solitude. He admitted to being pretty surprised by the results: overall, and across all the studies and scenarios, students reported a strong dislike for this experience. They also recounted being very bored. Among the students who participated from home, about one-third confessed that they had cheated and failed to last the full fifteen minutes (so do not feel too bad if you didn't make it through the exercise yourself).

In one variation of the experiment, all the student participants had the chance beforehand to try out what it feels like to get a painful electric shock.* They were then given the same instructions to go sit alone with their thoughts in a lab room for fifteen minutes. But these participants were also told that they could receive the electric shock again by pressing a red button in the room. Amazingly, the majority of participants in the lab found the experience of sitting alone doing nothing so aversive that they chose instead to fill the time by self-administering a painful electric shock. Think about that for a minute: most people would rather inflict pain upon themselves than just sit alone for fifteen minutes with nothing to do but think.

As an aside, most of the participants gave themselves one or two shocks. But one male participant apparently self-administered 190(!) shocks to himself in a fifteen-minute period. I will not speculate here as to why he might have chosen to do that . . .†

Of course, this experiment was not just about solitude per se; it was also about being alone with one's thoughts. In this way, I would suggest that this experiment likely tells us more about college students' ability to cope (or not cope) with boredom and being cut off from

* This was done so that if they self-administered a shock later, it was not likely because of curiosity.

† . . . although it did make me think of Bill Murray's cameo in the dentist scene of the movie version of *Little Shop of Horrors* . . . just saying . . .

their smartphones than it tells us about typical experiences of solitude. However, a few years later in 2018, the same results were found in a much more diverse sample of several thousand participants across eleven countries. So, I think we can conclude that people generally do not like sitting alone with their thoughts. As we will discuss, solitude has a long-standing poor reputation, and studies like these reinforce it. These findings also underscore a major challenge in "selling" the potential benefits of solitude: some people just have an immediate negative reaction to being alone and cannot even imagine how it might be personally helpful. For them, almost any solitude feels like too much. Yet there are also people who crave solitude, and for them, it often feels like they are not getting enough time alone.

With that in mind, take a moment and answer this question:

Overall, the amount of time I get to spend alone each week is:

(a) definitely not enough

(b) somewhat less than I would like to

(c) just about right

(d) somewhat more than I would like to

(e) definitely too much

Did you choose "just about right"? If so, consider yourself part of a lucky minority. Over the years, I have asked this question to thousands of people, and fewer than one in three people select this response. The results of the other responses are distributed relatively evenly across the other options, with slightly more people typically choosing "somewhat more than I would like to" or "definitely too much" than "somewhat less than I would like to" or "definitely not enough." This means that

more than two-thirds of people are *dissatisfied* with how much time they spend alone, either seeking to avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation (too much solitude) or craving the comforts of more "me time" (not enough solitude).

Of course, how much time you spend alone is only one component of your relationship with solitude. There's also the question of how you *feel* when you are alone (are you bored? anxious? calm? focused?); what you *do* when you are alone (do you meditate? pursue hobbies? get stuff done? scroll through social media?); and the *reasons* you are alone (are you trying to avoid stressful social situations? trying to recharge your battery after a busy and "people-y" day at work?). But no matter how you define or evaluate it, most people are dissatisfied with their relationship with solitude. The good news is it turns out we can do something about that.

The Promise(s) of (This Book on) Solitude

It has never been more important to understand the costs and benefits of solitude. Another finding from the American Time Use Survey is that the average amount of time spent alone across adults in the United States gradually increased from 2003 to 2019. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic, during which time alone increased much more dramatically around the world. More than four hundred years ago, the philosopher Francis Bacon famously wrote, "Knowledge is power." In this book, I will draw upon what I know from more than thirty years of studying solitude to empower you to establish and cultivate a healthy relationship with solitude. Regardless of whether you get too much alone time, not enough alone time, or just the right amount, this book is going to explain how you can get more out of solitude and why. Drawing from the most recent research in psychology, neuroscience, cultural anthropology, and evolutionary biology, but also combined

with real-world experiences and what is trending on social media, I will help you unlock the potential of spending time alone as a positive force for your mental health and well-being.

In the first part of the book, we will take a deep dive into the science and psychology of solitude. We will learn about the *duality* of solitude and how and why it can be both harmful and helpful for our health and well-being. And along the way, we will answer all sorts of questions, ranging from "Is it solitude if I am with my pet?" to "Why does not getting to play catch with others sometimes feel like physical pain?" to "Why does walking alone in a forest make me feel calmer?"

In the second part of the book, we will apply this newly acquired knowledge about the complexities of solitude to help you optimize experiences of being alone across various domains in your life. This section is sort of like a user's guide for solitude, and we will address questions ranging from "How does solitude spark creativity?" to "Are married people really happier than singles?" to "How do I find the right balance in my life between time alone and time with others?"

So read on, and let's explore together when, why, how, and for whom solitude will be helpful versus hurtful. Because sometimes, it may be important for us to be left alone.

Chapter 2

I Think I'm Alone Now

What Solitude Is (and Is Not)

Tarot cards have become trendy again in the past few years, with a particular surge of interest and attention appearing on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tarot cards were first documented in the mid-fifteenth century in northern Italy, where they were used to play a variety of card games. By the 1700s, tarot cards had spread throughout Europe, and their use evolved to include divination. The Hermit is the ninth Major Arcana card in traditional tarot decks. A typical depiction of the Hermit is an old man standing alone on a mountain peak, holding a staff in one hand and a lantern in the other. According to the Tarot Guide website, the Hermit represents opposite aspects of solitude depending upon whether it is drawn in the upright or reversed position. The upright Hermit represents spiritual enlightenment, self-reflection, inner guidance, and solitude. In contrast, the reversed Hermit indicates loneliness, isolation, withdrawal, and paranoia.

I think the creators of the Hermit tarot card could have written an excellent book about solitude. This description almost perfectly encapsulates the complexities of solitude and appropriately highlights its underlying duality. As it is stipulated, the Hermit can bring both

joy and sorrow, depending upon how it is drawn. It has taken some time, but I think we are finally starting to work out why some people, metaphorically speaking, more often draw the Hermit tarot card in the upright position versus the reversed position. And importantly, we now have some pretty good ideas about how to help stack the deck so that the odds of pulling the upright Hermit are more in our favor.

As part of my job as a university professor, I regularly teach a course called The Psychology of Solitude. Each year, I ask the students in this class to do the fifteen-minute "sit alone with your thoughts" exercise as homework. When we talk about what it was like for them, a passionate discussion always ensues and serves as a great illustration of how solitude can mean so many different things to different people. For me, this is one of the things that makes it so interesting.

I also ask my students to complete the following sentence by filling in the blank with the first word or words that pop into their mind:

Solitude is _____.

What came to mind for you? Over the years I have asked this question to thousands of people of all ages. I never cease to be amazed by how many *different* types of answers I get back. Everything from solitude is "alone," "by yourself," and "separation"; to solitude is "bliss," "peaceful," and "awesome"; to solitude is "lonely," "sad," and "bleak." Not at all surprisingly, the general public does not agree on exactly what solitude is or what it entails.

But, of course, these days, if you really want to know how people feel about something, you need to check Twitter (now known as X). So, I did. In collaboration with my PhD student at the time, Will Hipson, and some colleagues who specialize in analyzing "big data," we set out to explore how Twitter users talked about solitude. To do this, our research team created a giant database of all the tweets that contained

the words "solitude," "loneliness,"* or "alone" during a one-year period from mid-2018 to mid-2019. This resulted in a pool of almost twenty million tweets.† I was particularly interested in whether people differed in the way they talked about solitude versus loneliness. To answer this question, my very smart colleagues created a program that analyzed and compared the content of the other words that were included in each of the tweets that contained these target words.

We found that tweets that included the words "solitude" and "loneliness" were equally likely to also mention the word "alone." This was not particularly surprising. However, tweets with the word "loneliness" were also more likely to include words associated with negative emotions. For example, the most common words to co-occur in these tweets included "sad," "scared," "bored," "depressed," "hurt," and "broke." In contrast, tweets about "solitude" were more likely to include more positive words, with the most common co-occurrences including "enjoy," "peace," "quiet," "nature," "bliss," "spiritual," "recharge," and "Superman."‡

Of course, Twitter users are not all that representative of the wider population, but it is interesting to see how these words and concepts are used by this specific subset of individuals. I would be curious to see if we would find the same results if we used a different social media platform, like TikTok or Instagram, or analyzed text from some of the discussions on Reddit. For now, we can say that Twitter users do not consider solitude and loneliness to be equivalent. This is a good start: although the terms "loneliness" and "solitude" are often used interchangeably, they are not the same thing!

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* All variations of these terms, such as "solitary" or "lonely," were also included.

† This data was collected before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I assume that the usage of these words was even more frequent during the height of lockdowns and other social distancing measures.

‡ Aficionados of the superhero genre will note that this last one probably had something to do with Superman's hidden retreat, the Fortress of Solitude.

Loneliness has been much explored and discussed of late, particularly in the context of our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The philosopher Paul Johannes Tillich provided an often quoted distinction between loneliness and solitude in his 1963 book, *The Eternal Now*: "[Language] has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone." But it is the historian David Vincent who provided my favorite definition of loneliness, labeling it "failed solitude." Loneliness is most often the result of social isolation: spending too much time alone not by our own choice. In this way, loneliness creates a wanting. If you are lonely, you desire more—and deeper—social connection because there is a discrepancy between your social needs and your actual social experiences. To be clear, loneliness deserves our attention. Chronic feelings of loneliness can lead to serious mental health problems, such as depression, and it can even negatively impact our physical health. But loneliness is *not* solitude. We can feel lonely even in a roomful of people, be it a work event with colleagues or at a party surrounded by friends. Teenagers might feel lonely and disconnected while sitting at the family dinner table. In this way, loneliness does not presuppose solitude. And on the flip side, we can be completely alone but not feel lonely at all. This is most often the case if we've chosen to spend time in solitude. So, solitude does not presuppose loneliness.

But even if we know that solitude is not loneliness, that still does not give us a clear definition of what solitude is. Upon first instinct, it seems like solitude should be a straightforward concept to define. I certainly thought this was the case at the outset of my career.

Here are several hypothetical situations. In which case or cases would you consider yourself to be in solitude?

(a) Alone in a room with the door closed

(b) Sitting by yourself on a crowded commuter train

(c) Walking your dog in the woods

(d) Strolling and browsing the exhibits at a popular art gallery

(e) Video chatting with three friends on your smartphone

(f) All of the above

Which one(s) did you pick? It turns out that according to researchers who study solitude, the correct answer is actually *all of them.* Each of these scenarios has been used by researchers as an example of solitude. As you can see, even those of us who study this topic for a living do not actually agree on how to define and describe what exactly constitutes solitude.

So, What Is Solitude?

If you look up the word "solitude" in the dictionary, you will find definitions such as "the quality or state of being alone or remote from society" (*Merriam-Webster*) and "the situation of being alone without other people" (*Cambridge*). These dictionary definitions highlight a predominant theme in conceptualizations of solitude as a *physical separation* from others (think: "alone on a deserted isle"). From this perspective, someone who is standing in an open field with no one else around is demonstrably alone. This makes intuitive sense and, at first glance, seems like a pretty straightforward definition. But first glances can be deceiving. Things start to blur as you take a closer look. For example, how far apart do you actually have to be from others for it to be considered solitude? Should it be as far as the eye can see or the ear can hear? Are you still alone if you can make out some indistinct human forms in the distance? Is there a particular distance threshold from others that, once surpassed, renders you officially alone? Or does

distance matter less than a physical barrier that creates a separation, such as a teenager in their bedroom with the door closed? As it turns out, there is no actual agreed-upon criterion for the minimum physical distance separated from others required for someone to be classified as in solitude.

To further complicate matters, this is only considering one's physical distance from other *people*. Do other living things count? Are you alone if you are snuggled up on the couch with your dog or cat? If this issue is to be considered, how far up or down the evolutionary ladder do we have to go for your nonhuman companion to make you "not alone"? Are you alone if you are with your parrot? Fish? Chia Pet? Resist the urge to roll your eyes—this is a serious question! There are real reasons we might be interested in whether someone is truly alone if they are with different types of pets. Research shows that pets can indeed serve a social function. After reviewing studies of pet ownership conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, German researchers concluded that having a dog or cat made both children and adults feel less lonely.

Regardless, this suggests that physical distance should not be the only criterion for determining solitude. Indeed, as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (allegedly) said, "My solitude does not depend on the presence or absence of people" (and maybe also pets). What else can we consider to help us clarify the definition? Let's borrow an idea from William Shakespeare, who famously wrote that "all the world's a stage."

More than fifty years ago, the sociologist Erving Goffman proposed using the theater stage as a metaphor to help us understand how we think about ourselves when we are in social situations. He suggested that as we go about our day in the presence of other people, we are "onstage," and the rest of the world is our audience. This is an intriguing idea. Imagine yourself on an actual stage in an auditorium full of people. When we are onstage, we are in the spotlight and must consider how others see us, what they might think of us, what they might say,

and how they might act. In this situation, we are very, and sometimes painfully, aware of everything we do because it is being watched and evaluated by an audience filled with potential critics. This constant pressure to self-monitor our performance can make us feel under the gun and lead to exhaustion.

Now, imagine you have finished your performance, the audience has left, and you step offstage. This is solitude. When we are offstage, we can be ourselves completely. No one is observing or evaluating us, and there's no one we must engage with, respond to, or perform for. In this way, solitude is simply freedom from social demands, freedom to be our true selves, freedom to just . . . be.

This leads to the conceptualization of solitude as a *perceived separation* from others. In this way, solitude is less a state of being and more like a state of mind. From this perspective, solitude can be found when walking the streets of a foreign city or reading alone at a table in a crowded coffee shop. This approach also adds a very subjective and personal dimension to solitude. Some may consider themselves alone while browsing the shelves of a local bookstore, but others may be acutely aware of the presence of others and feel too self-conscious to pull out and peruse a book dealing with a particularly sensitive topic. But even if you are in the former camp, the shop owner might inadvertently shatter your cocoon of perceived solitude at any moment with an offer to help you find something.

This example highlights another core element of solitude: its fragility and potentially fleeting nature. The philosopher and author Philip Koch defined solitude as being disengaged from other people, but he lamented that true solitude was never truly achievable because the world is ultimately inescapable. Koch raised these ideas in the early 1990s, and with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that they were prophetic. Even then, Koch called into question whether we can truly be alone if we are always on the verge of being interrupted. Sound familiar?

This is a common theme in the age of smartphones and social media. Indeed, when it comes to defining solitude, technology complicates everything. It is now possible (and quite common) to be physically alone but virtually interacting with others—or at least on the verge of doing so. This can be a double-edged sword.

For example, during his teenage years, my son spent countless hours alone in his bedroom playing video games. But this was something quite different from the stereotypical isolated, brooding, basement-dwelling teenage gamer of previous generations. Although my son was indeed by himself in his room, between his smartphone and his headset, he was in almost constant contact with his friends. What emanated through his closed door did not sound like someone alone at all. Instead, I heard a steady stream of screams, whoops, laughs, and shared glee. In this case, would anyone really want to make the argument that he was sitting in solitude?

Indeed, many have opined that technology will mean the end of solitude. How can we ever truly be offstage if our phone or other devices are waiting in the wings and can interrupt us at any moment? And things are likely to only get more complex. The most recent advances in artificial intelligence now force us to consider the (previously unthinkable) question: Are you alone if you are interacting with AI? We'll table this for now and return to it later.

In the meantime, let's go back and consider two other dictionary definitions of solitude: "a state or situation in which you are alone usually because you want to be" (*Britannica Dictionary*) and "the state of being alone, especially when you find this pleasant" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*). These definitions highlight the crucial component of autonomy. When it comes to solitude, having a choice matters . . . a lot. As we saw earlier, social isolation, which most often represents unwanted time alone, leads to loneliness, depression, and ill-being. But when you *choose* solitude, you are opening the door for a unique set of opportunities and potentialities that cannot be found in the constant company of others.

I am not sure that this makes for the best definition of solitude, but it is certainly a critical contributor to our experiences of being alone—and its implications for our well-being. So where does this leave us in terms of providing a clear definition of solitude? The most honest answer I can give you is that things still remain a bit fuzzy. Many researchers and theorists are transitioning to a more functional definition of solitude, settling on something like: "not interacting with others, either in person or virtually." I would still argue that it is more nuanced than that.

All the way back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, it has been argued that beauty is transient in nature and open to interpretation. This notion has since been expressed in various forms by many others, including Shakespeare ("Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye") and Benjamin Franklin ("Beauty, like supreme dominion, is but supported by opinion"). It was perhaps most elegantly articulated by the author Margaret Wolfe Hungerford in her 1878 book, *Molly Bawn*, as "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." In many ways, I think we can say the same thing about solitude.

The Paradoxes of Solitude

The pantheons of Greek and Roman mythology do not include a specific god of solitude.* If we were to name one, though, a good candidate might be Hephaestus, the ancient Greek god of fire, the forge, and crafts. Hephaestus was said to lack the physical perfection of other gods. As a result, he was ostracized and ultimately cast out from Olympus. He spent most of his time alone in his workshop, where he honed his artistry and created an array of unmatched armor and weaponry,

* In Japanese mythology, a likely choice would be Amenominakanushi, who was first a deity who manifested when heaven and earth came into existence and is often described as "single," "solitary," or the "deity who emerged in solitude."

including the shield of Achilles, along with a multitude of exquisite statues and other works of fine art. This mythology may be one of the first depictions of the archetype of the solitary artist, a common solitude trope that endures to this day.

But if it were up to me, the ancient Roman god Janus would be considered the honorary god of solitude. Janus was the god of beginnings and endings, presided over doorways and passageways, and is associated with transitions, like the new year.* Janus was often depicted with a double-faced head and is the source of the expression "Janus-faced," which refers to being hypocritical, duplicitous, or two-faced. Dualism is a fundamental concept in religion, mythology, and folklore: God versus the devil, yin versus yang, life versus death, good versus evil, and so on. As we saw with the Hermit tarot card, this duality also seems to be at the core of human experiences of solitude.

Embedded in this dualism, solitude evokes actual paradoxes, managing to simultaneously reflect two opposite things. Perhaps the most glaring paradox about solitude is that it routinely serves as both a reward and a punishment. For example, solitude is often given as a gift to others, like a spa day for an exhausted and stressed-out parent. And many of us reward ourselves with time alone. This "me time" might take the form of a long walk, a hot bath, curling up with a book, bingeing a favorite show, or watching endless cute cat videos on TikTok. Whatever activity you choose, solitude can function as a well-earned payoff.

I heard some of the most poignant illustrations of this not long ago, when I was a guest on a live radio show. Listeners were prompted to call in and tell me and my hosts about a time when solitude was "good during challenging times." One caller told us about her experiences working as a first responder during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative strains of her job later led her to be diagnosed with

* Fun fact: This is why the month of January was named after him.

post-traumatic stress disorder. She characterized herself as always having been an extravert, but during her treatment and recovery, she found it very difficult to be around people. For her, spending time alone was a present she could offer herself, a calming place to catch her breath and reset. I was particularly moved by her description of solitude "being like gold" to her.

Toward the end of the hour-long show, a mother of three young children called in to tell us her story. After her own mother succumbed to cancer, this caller described the excruciating challenge of mourning her loss while caring for three little ones, who, of course, could not understand what she was going through. She talked about how she had to "fake it all day long." Looking for a way to cope, she took up running. Each day, she would lace up her jogging shoes and wait for her husband to come home from work. As soon as he came in the door, she would literally run out it. She confided that she usually spent the first half hour of her solitary runs crying but that this catharsis was incredibly healing. She cherished the gift of having "full permission to feel everything [she] was feeling." By the end of each run, she felt grateful for all the good things she had in her life. As these compelling narratives illustrate, solitude can sometimes evolve from a pleasant "bonus" to an absolute essential need for our mental health and well-being.

On the flip side, solitude also routinely functions as a form of punishment. In this respect, solitude represents something to be avoided. For example, when a young child misbehaves or does not follow instructions, many parents will place the child in a time-out. Most often used with younger children, this procedure usually involves having the unruly child sit quietly alone for some period of time. This disciplinary technique has proven to be quite effective in reducing problem behaviors and is widely advocated as an alternative to spanking and other forms of physical punishment.

Doesn't it seem a bit odd that the punishment we sometimes dole