

Living in solitude: How to connect with ourselves

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PRO UBUNTU! P. 72

# Alone *but not* lonely

These days, we can be connected in a multitude of ways. But have we lost the most essential connection of all—to ourselves?

BY DIANA RICO

PHOTOGRAPH: BHUMINAN PIYATHASANAN

A hiker with a backpack and trekking poles is walking on a grassy ridge at sunset. The hiker is silhouetted against the bright orange and yellow sky. The background shows rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky.

*"You don't want everyone in our species to be bouncing off the walls—you want some people to think about things before they do them."*

ROBERT J. COPLAN, CO-EDITOR OF *THE HANDBOOK OF SOLITUDE*

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKADUN/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

**T**HE PAINTING WAS SPEAKING TO me. In the solitude of the near-empty Los Angeles County Art Museum, Robert Motherwell's big, black-and-white *Elegy to the Spanish Republic 100* was addressing my broken heart.

Its messages were coming in, not through my eyes or ears, but through my abdomen, womb, heart.

The painting said: *Here, let me pour a soothing balm over your wounds. Let me knit together the broken pieces of your psyche. Your hurt self will heal, in time.*

On the heels of a painful breakup, I'd been offered a temporary editing gig in the museum's publishing department. The best part of the job was the I.D. badge that allowed me access to all the galleries, all the time—even when they were closed to the public, when the art and I could be alone.

So every morning I visited this monumental canvas that Motherwell painted in homage to the Spanish Civil War. Alone, I stood in silent communion with the brushy black egg shapes divided by vertical bars. After a month of imbibing the artwork's magic, when my gig was up, my soul was on its way to mending.

But that was years ago, before we were plugged in 24/7. Imagine the same scenario today: I'm standing in front of *Elegy* and my smartphone vibrates in my pocket. I fish it out, read a text from a friend and instantly text her back. While I'm waiting for her response, I Google "Robert Motherwell," which yields fascinating trivia (the abstract expressionist painted more than 100 *Elegies*; he was inspired by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca), but which also takes me further away from the impact of the artwork.

I obsessively check my emails for signs of the ex. Not that I expect to hear from him. (But why haven't I?!) And so, totally distracted, I hop around to other galleries, glancing at dozens of paintings, touched by none of them.

These days, I've got a zillion ways to connect. But has the most essential connection of all—to myself—been lost? >>>

*"All of the problems of men come from a single thing, which is the inability to be at ease alone in a room."*

BLAISE PASCAL

**L**OOK AT THAT QUOTE ON THE LEFT. IF the French philosopher-mathematician thought solitude was a challenge back in the 17th century, I wonder what he'd say now. The average office worker is interrupted by emails and phone calls every three minutes, which negatively impacts brain function and productivity. More and more people are having trouble sleeping because they can't unplug at night. Groupthink models dominate even the classroom, where children who don't respond well to group-learning activities are branded as problematic rather than thoughtful.

And yet the benefits of solitude and its cousin, silence, have been known throughout history and across cultures. The originators of the world's great religions—the Buddha and Moses, Muhammad and Jesus Christ—had their most important spiritual revelations during periods of retreat from human society, as did many other prophets and saints. Not just spiritual leaders, but artists and writers, scientists and inventors—ranging from Francisco Goya to Franz Kafka, from Marie Curie to Steve Wozniak—have spent large amounts of time in solitude to do their world-changing work.

These days, scientists are finding that solitude can enhance certain kinds of learning and even, paradoxically, encourage deeper personal relationships. By refreshing our cognitive functions, alone time can help us become more productive and solve problems more effectively, not to mention allow space for the blossoming of self-knowledge and creativity. But we are continually pulled away from this restorative state by the relentless distractions of modern life.

"It's so much easier to double down on screen time and social time and Internet video and every other kind of stimulation that we can get; that feels easier to people than finding ways to carve out time to be alone," says psychologist Christopher R. Long, who teaches at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas.

With University of Massachusetts psychology professor James R. Averill, Long co-authored one of the first studies to look at solitude as a positive state. When this groundbreaking paper, "Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone," was published in 2003 in the *Journal for the*

*Theory of Social Behavior*, most social science had been focused on the pathological aspects of solitary behavior. Long says the bias in research hasn't changed much, but the public is starting to notice the exhausting effects of living without solitude.

"More and more, I think many people are trying to understand, 'How can I make room for alone time in my life? What am I missing out on by not having solitude? What are the sacrifices I'm making by working all the time or constantly being plugged in?'" he says.

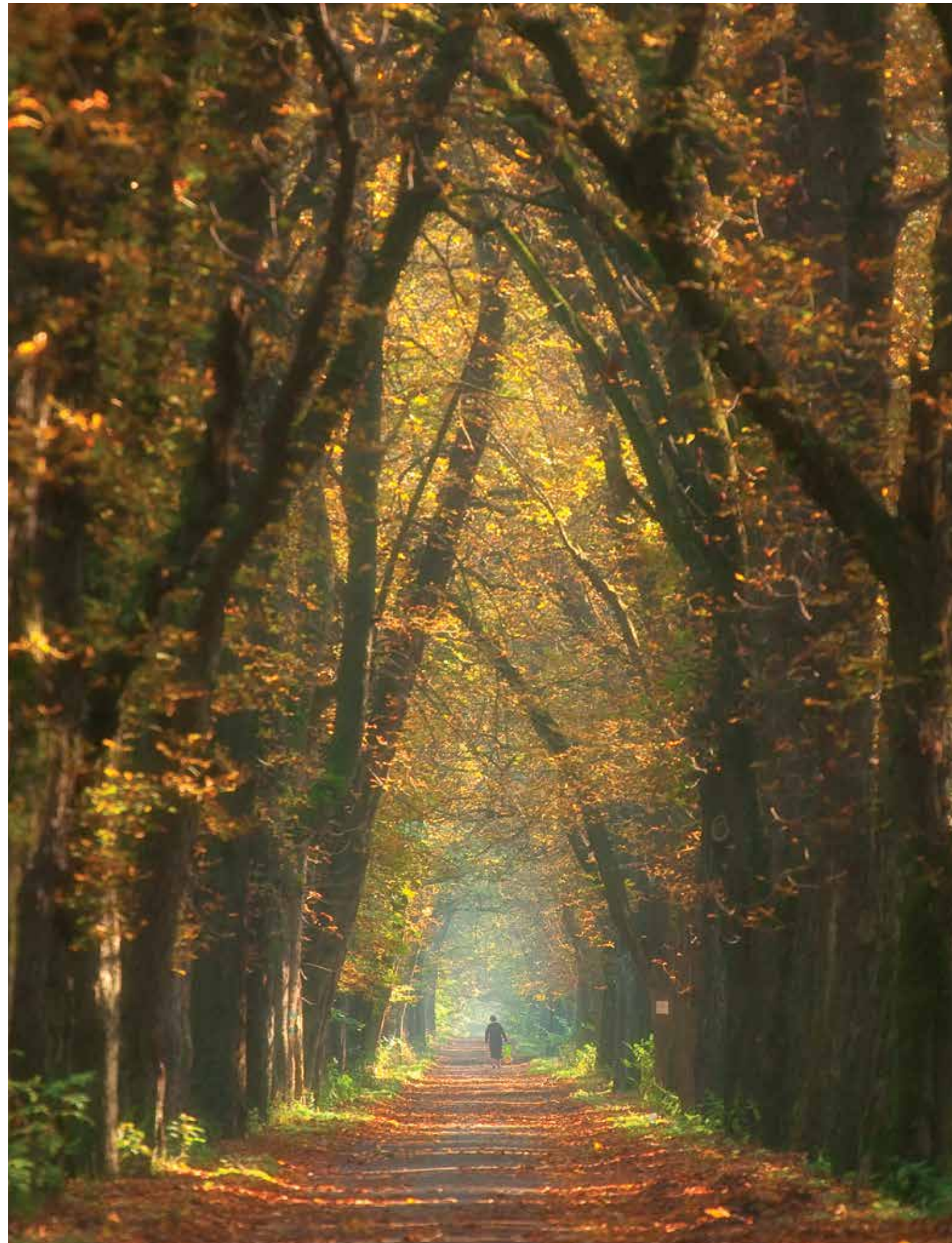
It helps to have an understanding of how modern technology impacts us. I'm the first to admit that our near-miraculous ability to connect electronically has made my world richer in countless ways. But it's also not so easy to unplug. The repeated use of our tech toys stimulates the reward centers in the most primitive part of our brain, the medulla and the cerebellum. That causes our dopamine neurotransmitters to release chemicals that make us feel good. So, of course, the more we do it, the more we crave it.

Branding consultant Martin Lindstrom, author of *Brandwashed: Tricks Companies Use to Manipulate Our Minds and Persuade Us to Buy*, conducted an experiment in 2011 with the company MindSign Neuromarketing to find out whether iPhones were addictive—whether they activated the part of the brain that gets stimulated by alcohol, cocaine, or video games.

Eight men and eight women were exposed separately to audio and video of a ringing and vibrating iPhone. Their brains, monitored using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), showed increased activity in the insular cortex, an area associated with love and compassion. In other words, they reacted to the sound of their phones as they would to the presence of a loved one.

It's not just iPhones that are addictive. In a 2010 study by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland, students were asked to go for "a day without media" and record their feelings. "In withdrawal," "very anxious" and "frantically craving" were among their responses.

Both kids and adults are finding it harder to unplug, even after bedtime, when—according to research from the Sleep Disorders



PHOTOGRAPH: MARCIN SOBAS/MARCINSOBAS.COM

Center at the JFK Medical Center in Edison, New Jersey—use of cellphones is correlated with mood swings, depression, anxiety and attention-deficit disorders.

All this over-connectivity gives us neither nourishing solitude nor deeper relationships. In 2010, psychologists at Leeds University in the U.K. found a strong link between Internet usage and depression; of the 1,319 participants in their study, those who showed signs of Internet addiction also had depression scores five times higher than the others. A small study in 2012 at the University of California, Irvine, found that workers who check their emails constantly had heart rates in a “high alert” state. And new research published in *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* revealed that a teenager’s likelihood of detachment from parents and peers increased by 5 percent for every hour on the Internet.

*“There is in us this calling, this almost nagging feeling that something essential and real is being passed up by quotidian and habitual modes of being.”*

DANIEL VILLASENOR

**M**Y QIGONG TEACHER, DANIEL VILLASENOR, founder of the MogaDao Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, usually spends more than half of each day totally removed from electronic technology, social interaction and teaching. “And most people actually ignore that by turning to the very things that are blocking that calling. So they add more distractions, and more voices, and more normal kinds of impedimenta to their lives in order to not hear the calling. Instead of saying, ‘I’ll get there one day,’ it takes, I think, a tremendous amount of decisive verve to really go there.”

Now, let me make a distinction. Solitude isn’t the same as loneliness. “Loneliness is solitude with a problem,” observes poet-essayist Maggie Nelson in *Bluets*. The Indian guru Osho noted that “loneliness is when one feels something is missing; solitude gives one the opportunity to fill oneself from within.” Unexpectedly, as one fills oneself from within, one’s ability to connect with others meaningfully is enhanced.

NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg discovered this counterintuitive fact while



PHOTOGRAPH: BUDI YUWONO

researching *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. In 1950, 4 million Americans lived by themselves, less than 10 percent of all U.S. households. Today, the number is over 32 million, or about 28 percent.

This trend is growing throughout the developed world, rising fastest in India, China and Brazil. In Stockholm, where the book ends, more than half the households are solo. "Fifty years ago there was a lot of social pressure to be married," says Klinenberg. "You were seen as odd or neurotic if you didn't live with a romantic partner. And today, if you're in a bad marriage, you have to justify staying in it. Values have changed, and the possibilities for organizing your life have changed."

One of the biggest changes, he says, is that more people can afford to live alone than ever before. Another is that in many cultures women are less repressed than in the past. No human society sustained large numbers of people living alone until the second half of the 20th century, and then it started happening nearly every place in the world where there's affluence and women's liberation. But that doesn't mean that the millions of people who are choosing to live alone are unsociable—quite the opposite. One of Klinenberg's most startling findings is that people who live alone tend to spend more time socializing and engaging in public life than married couples do.

"I've spoken to a lot of people who said they needed time for restorative solitude. Their jobs demanded a big emotional and psychological commitment," he says. "Like most of us, they've spent a huge amount of time in digital media, they have an overabundance of friends, they're hyperconnected, and having an oasis to retreat to at the end of the day is crucial for them. And they said that, paradoxically, living alone gives them the capacity to make deeper and better connections."

This yin-yang relationship between being alone and being social is at least in part related to our brain chemistry. According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, bestselling author of *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* and director of the University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute, solitude "reduces the routine

production of excitatory neurotransmitters. And it enhances modulators such as oxytocin, whose effects on sociality are positive"—thus sending us back out into the world wanting to renew human connection. Oxytocin, which is released during childbirth and lactation and also during both female and male orgasms, is often dubbed "the cuddle hormone" for its effects on bonding.

My friend Judith Arcana, a poet, biographer and political activist based in Portland, Oregon, could be a poster child for Klinenberg's findings. When I met Judith at a writer's colony five years ago, I was fascinated that she and her longtime romantic partner lived in separate homes. Even when they tried living in a house big enough for each to have an office and bedroom, "I was always aware that he was there. He was very decent about it; it's not like he was trying to intrude. But I couldn't ever be just with myself because, in fact, I wasn't," she says.

Social scientists have written about a subtle self-consciousness that creeps in when we're with somebody else, even when we're not interacting with them. "There's something about just the mere presence of another person in the room—even though you're not talking to each other, you're not bothering each other—somehow it takes away some resources you would have if you were totally by yourself," observes social psychologist Bella DePaulo, the author of *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. "Being alone is just not the same as having somebody else around," because being conscious of ourselves as the object of someone else's awareness draws our energy and constrains our innate freedom.

For my friend Judith, as for most creative people, solitude enables her to plumb her imaginative depths. "There's no question that for serious extended periods that are more than sparks, that really support and encourage the work of writing, being alone... allows whatever I've got inside to be heard by me internally and also allows it to come out of me."

Yet she nurtures many relationships with close friends and colleagues, as well as engaging in the public sphere as a longtime activist for women's rights and other social justice causes. These activities are actually fueled by her time alone: "It allows me to be

more useful socially and politically, because my mind and spirit are larger as a result of the solitude."

In fact, a direct thread tying solitude to relationships was something psychologist Long and his colleagues were surprised to discover in a series of studies they did on solitude for the U.S. Forest Service starting in 1999. Many of the participants in those studies, according to Long, noted that they were thinking about relationships with others: "Should I forgive this person?" "Is it right to be with them?" And many reported that at the end of the episode, they felt some sort of closure and could return to their relationships with more strength and clarity.

"It's actually an incredible interdependence," concludes sociologist Klinenberg, "that makes our independence possible."

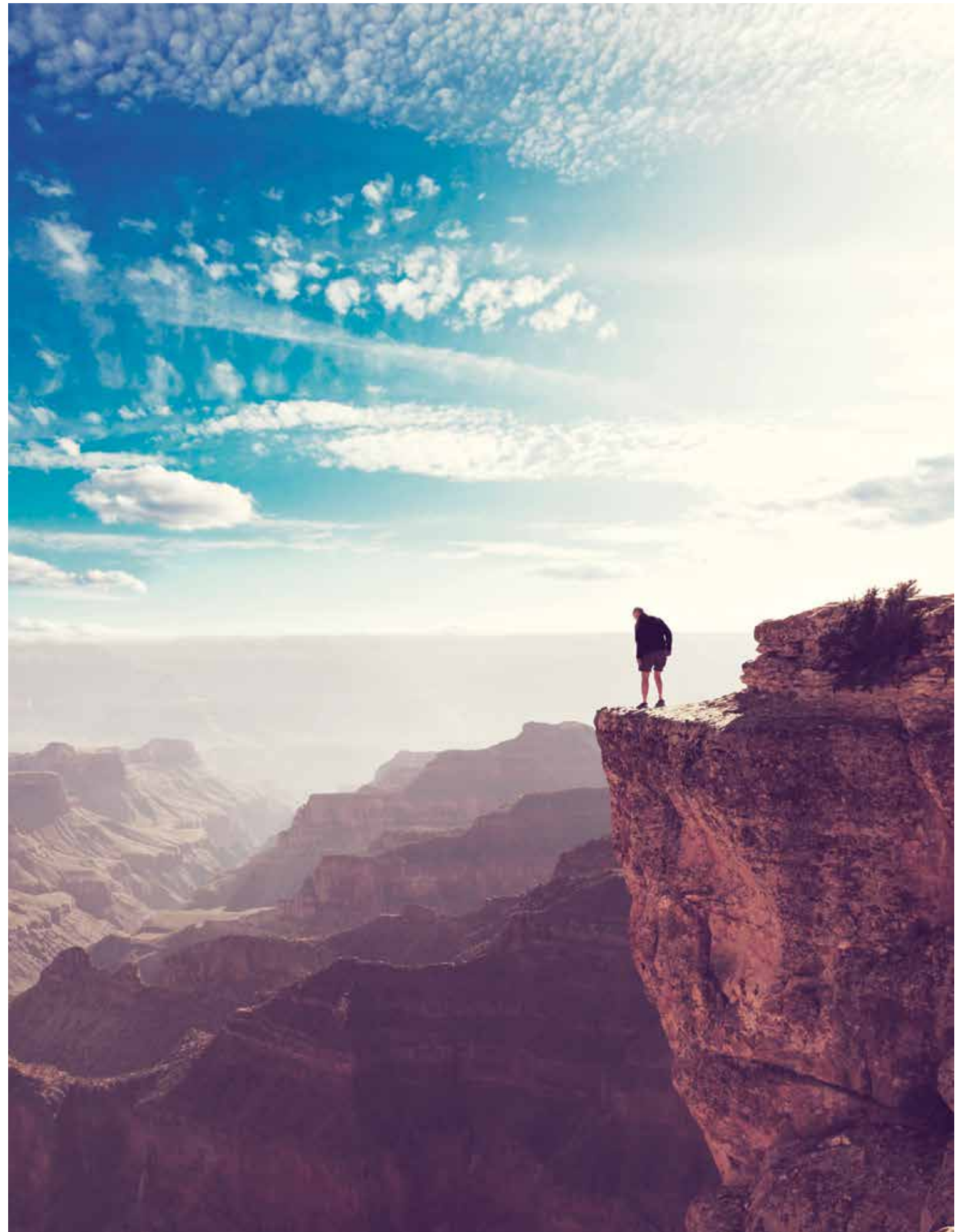
*"In each person there is a point of absolute non-connection with everything else and with everyone. This is fascinating and frightening."*

JOHN O'DONOHUE

**T**HIS WAS WHAT THE LATE IRISH poet John O'Donohue wrote in *Anam Cara*, his meditation on the soul. The more we keep aloneness at bay, the less skillfully are we able to deal with it, and the more terrifying it gets. But by running away from ourselves in fear, we also lose out on the rich bounty that solitude can yield: "The blessings for which we hunger are not to be found in other places or people. These gifts can only be given to you by your self. They are at home at the hearth of your soul."

I thought of this recently when I was seated in a near-empty airplane waiting for takeoff. A woman in front of me called (it seemed) every family member and friend she knew, just to tell them she was on the plane. There was no meaningful conversation exchanged; it felt to me more like a high-anxiety attempt to stave off facing solitude.

"Now the realm of communication is being totally abused, because the technological means of communication have overtaken our own understanding of the spiritual necessity of non-communication," says my teacher Daniel. "We think that communication is



PHOTOGRAPH: GALYNA ANDRUSHKO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



PHOTOGRAPH: MATJAJ ČATER

just based on more communication. Instead, communication is based on a vast absence of communication.”

But there’s no getting around the fact that “being alone is quite scary. It’s scary even for people who love it,” says educator Diana Senechal, author of *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*. “It takes practice and a certain amount of discipline to learn to shape your aloneness.”

Writers, artists, musicians, choreographers, architects, inventors, scientists, and other creatives work alone for large swaths of time, and we have learned to shape our aloneness in order to get to the other side of the anxiety, where the treasures lie. But we do that within a culture that overvalues group activity. Groupthink has become a common buzzword in the workplace, where we’ve seen trends toward offices featuring open space plans instead of private rooms with doors and work practices emphasizing group brainstorming rather than solitary thought—despite evidence showing that these can be detrimental to creative problem solving and decision making.

The groupthink problem starts early, according to Senechal. As a child, she attended eight different schools in several countries, ranging from the Netherlands to the Soviet Union, so she was exposed to many modes of learning. She worries that the focus on groupthink is destroying the life of the mind, which requires time spent alone—“when we deal with matters of substance that require thought.”

This holds true for adults as well as for schoolchildren. As an example, she cites the ultimate solitary activity: reading literature. “One of the things that happens when you read a book carefully is you enter a different world. If you are not distracted, if you’re not constantly checking your email, you can trust this world and hear it and see it and actually be in it for a while,” she explains.

The highly valued group model also tends to stigmatize people who are more comfortable in solitary activity. As a little girl, I was so quiet in the classroom that my fourth-grade teacher presented it as a problem to my parents. For years I thought there was something wrong with me—until I spoke to psychologist Robert J. Coplan, a professor at Carleton University in Ottawa. Coplan studies solitary behavior in children, and



PHOTOGRAPH: SVETLANA CHISTYAKOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

he says that while some children withdraw out of anxiety or fear, others simply have a preference for healthy solitude. “These kids are not more lonely or more depressed,” says Coplan, who co-edited *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*. “They seem to do quite well in school. Shyness is a personality trait that evolved in our species for a reason. You don’t want everyone to be bouncing off the walls—you want some people to think about things before they do them.”

Swedish research psychologist Anders Ericsson’s famous 1993 study of music students shows the value of solitude in certain kinds of learning. The study divided violin students at West Berlin’s elite Music Academy into three groups: the “best violinists,” who were on track for international solo careers; the “good violinists”; and those who were training to be teachers, not performers. The students kept diaries and were interviewed about their practices.

All three groups spent more than 50 hours a week in music activities, but the “best violinists” rated “practice alone” as the most critical of their actions. By the time they were 18, this group had practiced alone an average of 7,000-plus hours, 2,000 hours more than the “good violinists” and 4,000 hours more than the teachers-in-training.

Ericsson coined the term *deliberate practice* to describe the more intensive work one accomplishes when practicing solo, a method also commonly used by expert chess players and athletes. Subsequent studies by Ericsson (who now teaches at the University of Florida) and other researchers in what’s become known as the Expert Performance field show that elite performers in many arenas maintain their excellence by extended deliberate practice. Their findings lend credence to Pablo Picasso’s statement: “Without great solitude, no serious work is possible.”

But the solitude deficiency remains. Cultural critic William Deresiewicz, who writes about leadership, literature and higher education for such publications as *The American Scholar* and the *New York Times*, believes that it’s contributed to a crisis of leadership in the United States. Because of the entrenched emphasis on groupthink, says the author of *A Jane Austen Education*, “the

leaders we have in politics, academia, the arts, everything—everyone’s working from the same consensus.” Strong leadership is “about having an ideal that you value higher than you value yourself, higher than you value any external marker of success.” This level of vision for the public good can only derive from time spent alone, he contends.

In 2009, Deresiewicz delivered a speech titled “Solitude and Leadership” to first-year students at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The lecture argues that leaders-in-training must spend time in solitude. “You need to have a self that, when the world pushes against it, you have something to push back with,” he says now. And this applies just as much to grownups as to youth—perhaps more so. “This is a lifelong thing. It’s precisely in adulthood that you have to fight against the spiritual and mental ossification.”

*“A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.”*

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

**S**O WROTE THE 19TH-CENTURY GERMAN philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, neatly summing up what I value most about time alone—it is when I feel most liberated, most deeply able to be my authentic and uncensored self, unmediated by awareness of the other.

In my waking time alone, my psyche comes unfettered, and the treasures buried inside me reveal themselves. That intimacy with the self is essential in the development of consciousness, neuroscientist Damasio tells me. “There is one aspect of consciousness that has to do with sheer knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of nature,” he says. “Solitude lets one penetrate that knowledge more easily, with less interference from day to day routines and trivia.”

To get to that level of consciousness, solitude isn’t enough—we need silence as well. “The bottom line is that something happens when we sit quietly for a period of time. We make some kind of mystical connections with reality,” says Rabbi Cooper, a leading teacher of Jewish meditation and author of

*God Is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* and many other books.

It’s no accident that so many of the world’s religions feature narratives in which the spiritual seeker retreats from society. The withdrawal from society is an essential prerequisite for connecting with divinity. In the 13th century, an Arab Andalusian Sufi mystic named Ibn Arabi authored the first important manual of Islamic mysticism, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, in which he details the glorious mystical journey that awaits one who engages in the 40 days of retreat traditionally prescribed for Sufis. “The extent of your distance from creation,” he wrote, “is the extent of your closeness to God, outwardly and inwardly.”

But in a striking parallel to sociologist Klinenberg’s findings about people who say that living alone permits them to be more engaged in the world, these religious narratives all include the seeker’s return to community, bearing the sacred messages gleaned during the time alone. Rabbi Cooper says this is an essential purpose of contemplative practice, regardless of the length of time one does it: “It’s not designed to escape from the world but to keep your center without getting lost. ... And then there’s a point where we draw the line, where we use silence to prepare to meet the world and to engage in the world.”

It doesn’t matter whether we’re seeking holy messages from the divine or just wanting to get clear with our thoughts. Time spent alone can benefit anyone. “Many people suffer from the fear of finding oneself alone,” warned existential psychologist Rollo May in the 1950s, “and so they don’t find themselves at all.”

This is indeed the danger we face in modern times. “There are some statistics about how it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert on something or it takes 21 days to form a new habit,” points out psychologist Long. “Think about how many hours we spend staring at a screen. We’re experts at touching a screen with our thumb. Maybe if you spent that time in solitude, that’s how long it would take to become an expert on who you are.” ■

**DIANA RICO**, an award-winning writer and editor living in Taos, New Mexico, wants everybody to understand that’s she’s not a curmudgeonly recluse. Really.