

Solitude  
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UUMSB

Readings:

Thoreau – Walden - “Solitude”

Men 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." I am tempted to reply to such — This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.

—From *Blue Pastures* – Mary Oliver

It is a silver morning like any other. I am at my desk. Then the phone rings, or someone raps at the door. I am deep in the machinery of my wits. Reluctantly I rise, I answer the phone or I open the door. And the thought which I had in hand, or almost in hand, is gone.

Creative work needs solitude. It needs concentration, without interruptions. It needs the whole sky to fly in, and no eye watching until it comes to that certainty which it aspires to, but does not necessarily have at once. Privacy, then. A place apart—to pace, to chew pencils, to scribble and erase and scribble again.

But just as often, if not more often, the interruption comes not from another but from the self itself, or some other self within the self, that whistles and pounds upon the door panels and tosses itself, splashing into the pond of meditation. And what does it have to say? That you must phone the dentist, that you are out of mustard, that your uncle Stanley’s birthday is two weeks hence. You react, of course. Then you return to your work, only to find that the imps of idea have fled back into the mist.

It is this internal force—this intimate interrupter—whose tracks I would follow. The world sheds, in the energetic way of an open and communal place, its many greetings, as a world should. What quarrel can there be with that? But that the self can interrupt the self—and does—is a dark and more curious matter.

Sermon:

One of the steps you have to take in becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister is going to a multi-day psychological and career assessment. Before I had my assessment I knew what introvert and extrovert meant, but I hadn't really thought about the terms in relation to my own well-being. I had to take the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, which some of you may have taken before. It is the one that gives you four letters to represent aspects of your personality. Each of the four letters can toggle between two choices, giving a finite number of combinations and types. The first letter can represent introvert or extrovert. My testing result for that letter was not very strong in either direction. The evaluator suggested this meant that I needed to consciously carve out time to be alone and feed that part of myself together with my public work in ministry. Being an introvert or extrovert isn't about what we can and can't do, but rather when we need to be recharged, do we do that best in groups or with time to ourselves? Many of us have jobs that are "service" oriented positions, where we are interacting with lots of people. When we need to reflect and rest, how do we do that best?

I bring all this up because today I want to talk about solitude. For some of us, solitude sounds like a cold drink of water on a hot day, and for some of us, it sounds like something we might want to avoid. Finding solitude can be important to our spiritual lives, and can be a way to encourage ourselves to stretch, or soothe our spirits. In our reading from Mary Oliver, she suggests that creativity requires solitude, privacy, a place apart, and the opportunity to delve into the self and unpack distractions.<sup>1</sup> Some people are at their most creative when surrounded by others, working together on a project. However, when the project is the self, it can be hard to hear our internal voice, the still small voice inside, without solitude. We do internal work together in meditation, in worship and that is vital. It is the experience of being held in our journey with others. When we find ourselves in a place or time of solitude, we have the opportunity to practice being held by the web of all creation, knowing we are held in relationship, even when we cannot see another human being nearby. Thoreau, for all his solitude at Walden, was not overly far from town. He was not a hermit. He was a man, figuring himself and the world out, with lots and lots of solitude. In *Walden*, Thoreau wrote,

What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery... but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.

Lots of folks asked Thoreau about his plans to be away from others because that separateness can feel scary for many reasons. We might fear what we could learn about ourselves as we explore what comes up when we focus on our interior worlds. We might fear what we learn when distractions are removed between ourselves and our feelings, fears, or dreams. We fear separateness as well because there is a sense of physical danger being away from other people. We fear we might be hurt and no one would know, or that someone could hurt us, and these fears are real. I am not super comfortable with the dark, and I sometimes have anxiety when I am alone in the woods, or on a city street alone at night. There is a jogging route I go on regularly when I am up at our family camp in Vermont. I really like the route because half of it is going by a pond and camps, and half is on a road with only a few buildings. This past trip I was on that

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1 Mary Oliver, *Blue Pastures*

road four times and saw one car. I love the jog, I love being there. I go past the pond, a marsh and wildlife preserve, an abandoned orchard, brooks, fields, it is lovely. But I do worry that I will meet a dog, wild critter, or person that might do me harm. So as I am jogging, thinking about things, and trying to be present to the beauty, I am also worrying a bit. In her poem, "Going to Walden," Mary Oliver suggests that solitude is not found by going to a pond in Concord, or to the woods, but "It is the slow and difficult trick of living, and finding it where you are."<sup>2</sup> Solitude does not require that we repair to the woods, or head off on a trail alone. We can find solitude in our back yard, in a park, at our kitchen table, in our daily lives. We just need the opportunity to turn our thoughts inward, to touch the ground, feel wind on our face, and be with ourselves.

In sacred texts and stories, it is most often when people are alone that they find direction, from Abraham and Moses, to Jesus and Paul, to Rumi and Sufi mystics, to the Buddha, Hildegard of Bingen, and countless others. Rilke once wrote:

What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours - that is what you must be able to attain. To be solitary as you were when you were a child, when the grownups walked around involved with matters that seemed large and important because they looked so busy and because you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing...."<sup>3</sup>

It can be hard to find not only quiet, but solitude, and we need time for both solitude and companionship. Some of us live in relative quiet, and space for solitude and contemplation are easy to come by. Some of us live in more chaotic homes with people coming and going, with kids or parents to care for. We need balance, and what that balance looks like for each person will be different.

In the classic book *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk explains the twelve day vision he had as a child about his role for his people, the Oglala Sioux. To those who were caring for him, he was apparently very sick, unmoving on a pallet, throughout the vision. In his vision however he traveled, interacting with men, horses and other animals, and voices, and on his way back to himself felt lonely. After this long journey with many revelations, he hurried back to his family's tepee and saw himself lying sick before he came into himself.<sup>4</sup> This reading in our hymnal is from this vision (614):

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all,  
and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.  
And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell  
and I understood more than I saw.  
For I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit,  
and the shapes as they must live together like one being.  
And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that make one  
circle, wide as daylight and as starlight,  
and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree  
to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.  
And I saw that it was holy.

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2 Mary Oliver, "Going to Walden"

3 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, quoted on <http://www.cloisterseminars.org/blog/2015/1/23/the-art-of-being-alone>

4 p.28

Part of the work of solitude is coming back to see the networks of relationships that support us. When we come back to community after being away, we have the chance to see our interconnection with new eyes. When we understand ourselves better, when we have developed the skill of being alone *and* connected, we are better able to be in community. Our relationships, learning, and growth in community support us when we are alone, by choice or circumstance. Solitude “is the slow and difficult trick of living, and finding it where you are.”<sup>5</sup> Or in Woody Guthrie's words:

My peace, my peace is all I've got, it's all I've ever known  
My peace is worth a thousand times more than anything I own  
I pass my peace around and 'round, 'cross hands of every hue;  
My peace, my peace is all I've got that I can give to you.<sup>6</sup>

So may it be. Amen.

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5 Mary Oliver

6 Woody Guthrie, Arlo Guthrie, [woodyguthrie.org](http://woodyguthrie.org)