

Solitude

Agnes Martin said “The best thing in life happens to you when you are alone.” To my cliché, I discovered the wholeness of my existential self and connection to God when I was in front of nature in Washington State years ago. I thought it was because of nature, being the manifestation of God. But, recently I realized that there was more to it. In the summer of 2020, I was almost completely alone for two months. My wife and my daughter stayed away in Korea. There were no meaningful social interactions due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Very soon, I found myself looking into my inner self and contemplating existential questions, just like what I had experienced in the mountains of Washington State. It was exactly the same state of mind that I would call "solitude."

So, what is solitude? Anthony Storr, a psychiatrist, in *Solitude - A Return to the Self*, seems to equate solitude with being alone either by choice or enforcement, and claims “... the capacity to be alone is a valuable resource. It enables men and women to get in touch with their deepest feelings; to come to terms with loss; to sort out their ideas; to change attitudes.” Philip Koch writes in his philosophical endeavor, *Solitude - A Philosophical Encounter*, “It is a time in which experience is disengaged from other people. All of the other features of solitude that come intuitively to mind, the physical isolation, the reflective cast of mind, the freedom, the silence, the distinctive feel of space and time – all of these flow from that core feature, the absence of others in one’s experiential world.” He then presents five virtues of solitude: freedom, attunement to self, attunement to nature, reflective perspective, and creativity.

Being alone is not enough to create solitude, though. I found that noticeably recognizable objects in a scene trigger too much activity in my left brain, that is, coming up with a narrative interpretation of the objects. My brain gets busy analyzing the functionality, utility, and risk of the objects. This is due to our survival instinct. For instance, a smartphone in a serene lake would definitely trigger such a narrative. The left brain involvement will spoil a sense of solitude completely. Similarly, a scene of celebration seldom evokes a quiet contemplation of our inner self. A mesmerizing sunset or a spectacular canyon would absorb our attention completely and leave no room for attunement to self.

The state of mind in solitude should also be free from fear or any uncomfortable alertness. I was walking in a deep forest on Mt. Hood, Oregon a while ago. There was no one for hours. I could have been in solitude if I felt relaxed in the forest. But, it was so deep and I was fearful for any surprising or dangerous encounter. I was walking through an overgrown path where I thought it would be a perfect place for bears to frequent. Suddenly, a black brown hairy animal came into sight right in my path. I instantly panicked. But it was a large German Shepherd followed by a couple about 20 feet behind. A while later, I was again in a dense forest with tall trees. It was completely quiet other than occasional sounds of birds. Then, I heard a sound of a large branch cracking in the tree somewhere above my head. I was immediately thinking of a large predator on the tree and my heart started pounding. All my senses got alerted toward defense. What a disaster for solitude!

Being alone can be lonely. However, I found that loneliness is completely different from solitude. Loneliness is typically triggered by a sudden reduction in social interaction. It is the state of mind longing for an intimate interaction. It is a depressing emotion that rejects the current state of being alone. It does

not carry any attunement to self or nature. Solitude, on the contrary, is actually full of contentment. It does not look for anything to consume. Typically, it is full of nature, devoid of social beings. When Thoreau was in solitude, he said in *Walden*, “This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. [...] The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled.” He was not alone at all. He was in full encounter with nature.

I am not sure why, but some scenes that have evoked solitude for me are calm, cold, and somber in color and shapes. An ochre grass field under cold spring rain reveals a very calm and somber mood and evokes deep solitude. Dark foliage under rain in late November also gives a similar sensation. These are some of my favorite scenes in Korea. They even carry a sense of sorrow. It is not a distraction in looking inside of me. It is actually quite the opposite. Sorrow somehow seems to wash away a variety of clinging thoughts that might bother me from concentration.

Most importantly, I think that our state of mind resonates with the quality of the scene in front of us. Solitude is a peaceful and harmonious state of mind. Only such a quality of scene can lead us into solitude. Admiral Byrd, who sought solitude by exploring Antarctica alone, clearly summed up his experience of peace and harmony in *Alone*, “It was all delicate and illusive. The colors were subdued and not numerous; the jewels few; the setting simple. But the way these things went together showed a master’s touch. [...] The day was dying, the night being born – but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence – a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps. It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man’s oneness with the universe.”

The world we are living in has become more communicative. We are connected and informed more than ever. Institutions and enterprises relentlessly drive technologies to capitalize our desire to be connected and informed. Their rent-seeking behavior goes far beyond justice by exploiting resources reserved for our future generations. We now survive by togetherness. As Sherry Turkle claimed in her *Alone Together*, technological devices left us to be socially connected at all times, even when we are alone. The extreme connectedness and informedness has made us more political and peer-pressured. People get tired from social fatigue. Humans and nature are the same manifestation of God. Being connected to nature is equally essential as human encounter. Only the oneness with the universe will lead us to find our pure innocence. The true and balanced position of solitude in our life has become our urgency. As an artist, it becomes my duty to convey my experience of solitude through visual arrangements. But, I do not have a grand undertaking like theosophical artists such as Mondrian and Kandinsky as I do not believe a painting could change a person, let alone the world. It can only resonate with the person.

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