3rd Sem hons

CC-6
Sociology of Religion

Religious and solitude

Three Types of Deep Solitude: Religious Quests, Aesthetic Retreats, and Withdrawals due to Personal Distress

Abstract: Deep solitude is defined by prolonged withdrawal and intense passion. Three types of deep solitude are discussed in this essay: religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals due to distress. Though these three deep solitudes share little in common, all three depend on prosaic routines to forestall psychic anomie.

1. Solitude and Deep Solitude: Conceptual Issues

The concept of solitude, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might say, is a grouping of activities that share only a family resemblance. The school teacher or sales clerk who disengages for a brief solitary respite from the stress of fulfilling her duties to others shares nothing more with the prisoner forced into solitary confinement for weeks, months, or more than the bare fact of being alone. Likewise, the author or composer who repairs to a room of her own for intensely focused creative work enters a solitude far removed from the peripatetic rambles of the bird watcher alone in the woods. Motives matter, too. Indeed, almost every solitude may be entered for a variety of reasons. An author may write alone for money and/or fame or simply to solve a problem or discover the story she has to tell. Even prisoners, if given the choice, may choose solitary confinement with all the risks of loneliness, boredom, and psychological anomie over the improved circumstances they might obtain by violating their principles or betraying a friend. In social scientific terms, the contexts and practices that constitute these solitudes form a Venn diagram with only a crescent of overlap at the center of all circles.

Given the great variety of social situations and personal circumstances in which individuals may end up on their own, there is no practical way to discuss solitude at large. In order to make cogent observations about solitude one must specify in advance just what type or category of solitude one has in mind. Given this consideration, I propose here to limit myself to the rarest sort of social withdrawal that occurs only when individuals voluntarily disengage from interpersonal activity for extended periods of time. I call this category of withdrawals 'deep solitude.' The adjective 'deep' here implies the passion that moves individuals to disengage from others for prolonged retreats. Deep solitudes are uncommon because it is not in ← 155 | 156 → the nature of human beings to live alone all of the time. But then, it is not in the nature of human beings to socialize continuously throughout the day. Most of us strike a balance in which we circulate in and out of solitude and sociability during the course of our schedules and routines. It takes a rare set of powerful emotions and compelling motivations to abandon one's web of social relations and concomitant social identities to engage in deeply personal pursuits. And it must be said that even those who withdraw into deep solitude do not keep to themselves all of the time. Most choose habitats not too far removed from communities where they occasionally travel to restock provisions and catch up with family and friends. But then, those fully committed to deep solitude quickly return to life on their own.

But how far does the notion of deep solitude carry us? A social theorist immediately would look for common denominators and intrinsic variations that treat deep solitude as a genus that divides into a number of more specific species. Thus, in my book, Solitary Action: Acting on Our Own in Everyday Life (2016), I identify a general process of behavior that is present (or in one case absent) from things people do by themselves. Thereafter, I differentiate that generic process into four specific categories of solitary action: reflexives, peripatetics, regimens, and engrossments. But deep solitude resists being theorized in this way. Why? Because beyond the compulsion of deeply experienced emotions, deep solitudes share no common denominators and passion is too polymorphous in itself to serve as a common denominator. What does the ascetic religious hermit share in common with the recluse who luxuriates in the rustic beauties of the wilderness? And what do religious hermits or aesthetic solitaries share with individuals who withdraw from intercourse with others to experience, absorb, and calm intensely painful

emotions that disrupt their lives? Like briefer and less intense periods of solitude as indicated above, deep solitudes comprise a family of language games whose properties barely overlap at all. Nonetheless, if there is no overarching process or general quality that all deep solitudes share, there are several different kinds of deep solitude, each of which involves its own set of motives, meanings, and solitary ways of life. In this essay, I discuss three categorical types of deep solitude as distinguished above: ascetic religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals to confront disruptive emotions. Thereafter, I briefly return to note one prosaic element that all deep solitudes share.

2. Ascetic Religious Quests

Those who withdraw to the monastic cell, or more often in earlier times the desert cave or the wilderness hut, enter deep solitude in its most extreme form. They are in fact, a species of what Max Weber memorably termed "religious virtuosi" ← 156 | 157 → (287), a species marked not only by withdrawal, but by self-imposed asceticism as well. If, as sometimes happens, solitude is referenced with an aura of mysticism or mystery surrounding the term, the solitude of the religious anchorite or hermit is an obvious source of the aura we detect. Saints Anthony and Jerome as well as Paul of Thebes left such a deep impression on early Christian culture and such an enduring legacy in monastic orders that it may seem anachronistic to speak of such spiritual vocations today. True, they are rare, but then we cannot be sure how common or rare were the solitudes of early Christianity, or for that matter, the solitudes of pre-Christian mystics or the solitary vocations undertaken by members of Eastern religions in the past or in more recent times. In any event, the spiritual call to solitude has not been completely extinguished in modernity. This much is evident from the life and works of Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Late in life Merton withdrew into solitude as a religious hermit. However, many publications from his large output of writings prior to that point not only make clear that he felt the call to a solitary vocation, but also that he possessed a subtle understanding and appreciation of what is at stake in the sacred pursuit and the challenges that confront the individual who accepts this vocation. Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (1960) presents one of his most thoughtful and acute examinations of the spiritual vocation to solitude. I shall rely on Merton's insights here as a guide to this reclusive way of life. A number of principle themes in Merton's essays are summarized in the following passage:

> The true solitary is not one who simply withdraws from society. Mere withdrawal, regression leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit. The solitary of whom I speak is called not to leave society but to transcend it; not to withdraw from the fellowship with other men but to renounce the appearance, the myth of union in diversion in order to attain union on a higher and a more spiritual level – the mystic level of the Body of Christ. He renounces that union with his immediate neighbors that are apparently achieved through the medium of the aspirations, fictions, and conventions prevalent in his social group. But in so doing he attains to the basic, invisible, mysterious unity, which makes all men "one Man" in Christ's Church beyond, and in spite of natural social groups by which their special myths and slogans keep man in a state of division. The solitary then has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a simple, spiritual oneness in himself which when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men. (181–82)

Merton's sweeping dismissal of "mere withdrawal" underscores the qualities of Weber's religious virtuoso to which, in effect, Merton implies every true solitary must aspire. The solitary renounces the superficial "diversion" (and self-deceptions, self-gratification, social myths, illusion, and even the kind of simple faith that prevails among Christians in everyday life), as Merton makes clear at various points ← 157 | 158 → in the essay. The solitary seeks a mystical, mysterious union with the divine, but a union he experiences within himself as an oneness with all humanity as well. There is what Merton calls an "absurd" quality in this quest, but not the absurdity that might occur to the uncomprehending bystander. The absurdity comes with the solitary's "anguish of realizing that underneath the apparent logical pattern of a more or less 'well-organized' rational life there lays an abyss of rationality, confusion, pointlessness,

and indeed chaos" (179). Merton goes on to condense this interior sense of life's absurdity in a trenchant way. This absurdity involves a special kind of renunciation, a renunciation of "the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight self-contained illusion about himself and his little world" (180).

It is not out of place to notice here how far removed the ascetic, spiritual quest of Merton's solitary is from the way ordinary solitary actions are performed in everyday life. Most forms of mundane solitary action proceed via processes of contextually reflexive moves in which each step in a sequence finds its place in the context of the nature and results of preceding moves and simultaneously creates and forecloses opportunities for the next move in the sequence (Cohen 75–76). But the religious recluse is called upon to abjure context formation of any kind. It is quite clear that Merton leaves no place for the individual on a spiritual vocation to follow a sequence of action as if writing a novel, playing solitaire, or preparing a household budget. Even those ordinary activities that call for internal discipline because they lack much context formation (e.g. assembly line work, household chores) bear little resemblance to the solitary, ascetic religious quest. Whereas assembly line workers or students memorizing items for an exam may need to discipline themselves for several hours at a time, the spiritual vocation is a continuous affair. So long as the individual persists in the quest, the self-imposed discipline is an unremitting integral aspect of every moment of daily life.

In a sense, the absurd renunciation of the construction of illusions would make it seem as though in the early stages of a solitary vocation the individual creates a condition of anomie. Indeed, Merton devotes a substantial section of his essay to what he terms a "sea of perils" (184–200), many of which resemble the confusion, insecurities, and doubts that victims of solitary confinement struggle to avoid with great feats of cognitive ingenuity (Cohen 183–88). Though Merton finds that certain individuals are, in a sense, destined from an early age for a solitary life for which they may be well-suited by temperament and character, many others reach the spiritual vocation of solitude the hard way, and it is these individuals who face the perils of what I here suggest are the effects of anomie. The torment of these experiences is described in remarkably vivid imagery toward the close of the essay, when Merton writes of the plight of the solitary who finds "he cannot pray, to see, ← 158 | 159 → to hope," and Merton suggests this circumstance may not be rare. At such times the solitary individual may experience "[n]ot the sweet passivity which the books (that supply popular versions of solitude) extol, but a bitter, arid struggle to press forward through a blinding sandstorm. The solitary may beat his head against the wall of doubt. That may be the full extent of his contemplation … a doubt that undermines his very reasons for existing and for doing what he does" (202).

Nowhere in everyday life will one encounter the extraordinary struggle of the spiritual vocation. Indeed, Merton's candor about the perils of the solitary spiritual quest seems intended to disabuse those who might have romantic notions about the pleasures of this extraordinarily intense and trying way of life. But the vocation, of course, is not about asceticism and the renunciation of mundane illusions. It is rather about the transcendent experience of unity with God and humanity. Here Merton, as befits a religious mystic, leaves us with a mystery. The tortuous existential doubt ultimately ends in silence, and with silence comes an end to all existential questions. But when the questions end, a spiritual certitude arrives, "the only certitude he knows: The presence of God in the midst of uncertainty, and nothingness" (202). This experience is so distant, even from the lives of the devout laity, that to frame this reception of certainty in the divine as a matter of sociological interest necessarily and inevitably misses the point. And, indeed the experience of mystic union may emerge in a flash as a transcendent spiritual epiphany.

But what comes then? Merton tells us that "the solitary man says nothing, does his work … He knows where he is going, but he is not sure of his way" (22–23). Hence, even beyond the moment of spiritual illumination, the religious ascetic steers clear of the kinds of ordinary context formation that, as Merton would have it, produce the illusions with which most of us live in our ordinary ways of life.

Now for a coda: There are hints that mystical epiphanies may not be confined to the religious realm. Simone Weil, a deeply spiritual essayist suggests the possibility that both science and art may in rare instances be undertaken as sacred (or perhaps, quasi-sacred) solitary quests:

Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and the anonymous. This is the realm of the sacred ... What is sacred in science is truth; what is sacred in art is beauty. Truth and beauty are impersonal ... impersonality is only reached by the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself, and impossible except in solitude, and not only physical but mental solitude. (318)

Weil, of course, means to refer here only to the heroic artist or the scientific genius. The mystical sense of the truth and beauty to which she refers perhaps alludes to the kind of epiphany I discuss in Solitary Action (173–82). ← 159 | 160 →

3. Aesthetic Retreats

To shift from the life of sacrifice and tribulation of the religious anchorite to the temporal solitude described by poets and essayists since ancient times is to create a disjunction so sharp that it justifies in itself the need to treat deep solitude as a series of different realms. But there is something illusory at times about this second realm of deep solitude. We know of this solitude primarily because well-regarded members of literary elites have sung its praises beginning in ancient Rome. More to the point, most of these authors employ romantic voices that create ornately stylized images of a kind of carefree solitude that seems too much of an ideal to be true in all respects. Romantic images can be illuminating and edifying in their own right. At their best, they distil the essence of a solitary habitat or experience. But one wonders if they gloss over the less than ideal realities of solitary settings or ways of life. Certainly there have always been some folks, who, like Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Of Solitude" (1580), have opted to retire from public life to enjoy time by themselves, reading and enjoying the fine fruits of a life well-lived. But the pool of individuals prepared to live this life must be small. For one thing, people must possess the financial resources to support themselves or the full set of skills necessary to live off the land. For another, they must possess the free time to leave society behind for an extended period of seclusion. Moreover, they must possess peace of mind, a rare commodity indeed, at least in our anxious and troubled times. But as Montaigne cautions readers of his essay, those burdened with troublesome feelings and desires cannot enjoy this kind of solitude (177–78). In saying this, Montaigne draws a line that distinguishes this tranquil realm of solitude from the two tumultuous realms discussed above and below. Emotional turmoil seems all but inevitable in the spiritual solitude of the ascetic anchorite and the experience of turmoil is at the heart of the deeply troubled solitarist to be discussed in the next section. The solitude here is that of an individual whose mind is already relaxed.

No matter how rare the aesthetic realm of solitude is in practice, it occupies a special hold in the popular imagination today. This is because the aesthetic quality of literary accounts of this solitude has settled on an idyllic image of solitary life in nature. Beyond Romantic literature, this image has grown with the advent of entire genres of paintings and photographs of beautiful landscapes and seascapes that imply the joys of a prolonged rustic retreat. A few illustrious landmarks can provide a glimpse of how this aesthetically refined image of solitude evolved.

The culturally refined connotation of solitude began with the authors who first described the practice in the later period of the history of ancient Rome. As Robert Sayre suggests, the taste for solitude emerged as land for rural second homes became available to successful public figures (20–25). Sayre does not say how popular the ← 160 | 161 → idea may have been, but we know it mainly through the writings of Roman authors, including Horace, Seneca, and Pliny the Younger, whose influence survived their time. The following excerpt from a poem by Horace illustrates the refined sense of enjoyment in solitary retreat in its classic Roman form: "O rural home: when shall I behold you! When shall I be able. Now with

books of the ancients. Now with sleep and idles hours. To quaff sweet forgetfulness of life's cares" (qtd. in Sayre 22).

The Roman idea of solitude resurfaces much closer to modern times. One of the best expressions of this continuation comes in the "Ode on Solitude" (1700) by Alexander Pope, who may have written it at a very precocious age. Be this as it may, it is worth mentioning that Pope was a life-long student of ancient Roman poetry, ultimately composing a set of works entitled Imitations of Horace (1733–37). It may be that Pope's poem may thus directly expand upon Horace's Roman appreciation of solitude:

Happy the man, whose wish and care

A few paternal acres bound,

Content to breathe his native air,

In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,

Whose flocks supply him with attire,

Whose trees in summer yield him shade,

In winter fire.

Blest! Who can unconcern'dly find

Hours, days, and years slide soft away,

In health of body, peace of mind,

Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease

Together mix'd; sweet recreation,

And innocence, which most does please,

With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;

Thus unlamented let me dye;

Steal from the world, and not a stone

Tell where I lie. (265)

The poetic form already suggests the refined quality of the solitary retreat. We observe as well that while Pope does not require a large estate for his solitude, he does ask for an inherited farm, a property that only

prosperous English families could expect to pass along to their offspring at the time. Unlike Horace, Pope longs for the self-sufficiency that a working farm affords. But it is not at all clear that he would prefer to do any farm work himself. Instead, as in Horace, we find Pope ← 161 | 162 → eager for the tranquil life of alternating between periods of reading and sleep. This is not the life of an active aristocrat or businessman. It is rather an ideal for a certain kind of cultural aesthete. It is, of course, also a romanticized ideal rather than a reality. There may have been landowners with inheritances sizeable enough to provide them with an abundance of leisure time. But it is doubtful that even among this highly advantaged elite, life was as idyllic as Pope imagined it to be. The notion of solitary retreats has attracted other romantics as well. For example, as Wolf Lepenies observes, a sense of melancholy was introduced to the notion of solitary retreat in the late Middle Ages and early modern times (29–86). Here solitude was seen as a refuge for second-level aristocrats and bourgeois arrivistes who found themselves cut off from any real access to power. Confined to superficial rounds of social relations fleshed out with gossip and rumor in literary salons, members of this frustrated stratum found meaning in life and opportunities for emotional release in a new Romantic ideal of solitude, an ideal composed of heterogeneous elements such as the love of nature, a sensitive appreciation of literature and the fine arts, and above all, a bias in favor of emotion over reason (Lepenies 66).

The frustrated Romantics of whom Lepenies writes may have amplified and refined the aesthetic appreciation of nature that was a more implicit than explicit quality of the classical sense of solitude as it advanced from the Romans to Pope. This is not to overlook the melancholy note they also introduced, a note of sadness bordering on self-pity epitomized, if not hyperbolized, in various remarks of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his Reveries of the Solitary Walker (1782), remarks in which he laments the rejection and estrangement he felt from the literary circles whose acceptance he desired. But as we approach modern times, the Romantic (or at least romantically rendered) experience of living alone in harmony with nature has flourished to a greater extent.

One can cite any number of poets, essayists, and artists who have contributed to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. But a smaller number recounted how it actually felt to withdraw into nature for a considerable period of time. One author who did, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), brought with him a literary talent, a Romantic sensitivity, an aversion to town life, and an abounding love of nature that makes his Walden (1854) a beautiful statement of the small joys and tranquil pleasures of absorbing the atmosphere and the detail of encountering nature by oneself. Consider only the first sentences of the section devoted to solitude:

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. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is ← 162 | 163 → 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. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. (87)

One can find many passages of this kind in Walden. But one of the most interesting things about this selection and about the section of Walden on solitude at large (87–94) is his emphasis upon serenity, which like the lake in the breeze is "rippled but not ruffled." Another selection from the chapter on solitude expands upon this peace of mind in a straightforward way:

I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never

> yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (88)

Though Thoreau leaves no literary hint, it may be that he here means to dismiss the Romantic belief that solitude is a time for melancholy or dark moods. In any event, he is quite clear about his own peace and joy living alone in the woods. It should be said that Thoreau did not spend all of his time simply soaking in these good feelings. Not only did he keep busy working his rented woodland plot and writing chapters of Walden, but during the course of Walden, Thoreau mentions recurrent visits to his many friends in Concord, Massachusetts, a town situated about two miles from his solitary retreat. Perhaps his physical and intellectual labors provided a prophylactic to the dull boredom of a frightening anomie with which he otherwise might have been forced to contend. Still, Thoreau does not entirely overlook the difficulties of rustic solitude. He is perhaps more aware than many of his admirers that not every individual is as fit for solitude as he is (89). This point, which echoes Merton's sense that some are better fit than others for the rigors of a solitary vocation, also provides an instructive contrast with the discussion that follows of deep solitude in times of distress.

4. Deep Solitude in Times of Distress

In all likelihood circumstances of emotional distress, more than any other condition, induce people to withdraw from interpersonal routines. Distress with this kind of power comes in many different forms. The prototype here is grief over the loss of a loved one. But people may also feel the need for a solitary retreat after receiving a frightening medical diagnosis, after the dissolution of an intimate ← 163 | 164 → relationship or the disintegration of a family, following the trauma of being fired or otherwise suffering a severe setback in one's finances, occupation, or career. These are instances of what Anthony Giddens terms "fateful moments" (113–14), moments when unavoidable circumstances force life-altering choices upon individuals. It is a time when one's narrative of self-identity and relationships with others that may have been taken for granted for many years may need to be reframed, reinterpreted, and revised. Such questions are almost inevitable in times of personal crisis. This is not to say that everyone beset by existential problems withdraws into deep solitude. Some people are more adept at self-reflection than others. Some may prefer to discuss their adjustments in times of crisis with a trusted confidante or a psychotherapist. Nevertheless, as the late British author and psychologist Anthony Storr observes, it is better at times for others to set aside the impulse to comfort or support the troubled until we are sure they may not prefer to be alone (29).

Beyond fateful moments, a variety of other strong feelings may compel particularly sensitive individuals to retreat into solitude for significant periods of time. Emotions such as fear, remorse, and shame may accumulate while in public, to the point where the individual withdraws into solitude to allow the feelings to emerge. These are periods of catharsis. Released from the proprieties of interaction, the individual is free to absorb the brunt of feelings without concern that she may embarrass herself or anyone else. Having experienced her feelings, she may also try to make sense of them no matter how inconsistent or guilt-provoking they may be. To ventilate one's feelings is seldom easy or comfortable. But, catharsis in itself is widely recognized to end up having a calming effect even if the source of the painful feelings will always remain in view.

What is it about catharsis that offers emotional relief? The conventional answer, and persuasive one as well, is that people simply need to purge their feelings much as a steam kettle whistles to permit the pent-up steam to escape. But perhaps catharsis offers comfort in another way as well. Storr describes a folk theory held in some parts of rural Greece (31). The local custom requires widows to withdraw from society for five years before returning to their regular social life. The rural Greeks hold that by recurrently feeling the loss (e.g. during daily visits to the husband's grave) the widow experiences her grief many

times over until she has absorbed it to the point where she dulls her pain and then comes to terms with it in her life. Though five uninterrupted years of grief may be more time apart from society than most people can bear, extended periods of solitude may help people to manage all kinds of distressing feelings, some chronic and others acute. It may take many nights alone in bed before one begins to diminish the pitch and frequency of the ← 164 | 165 → waves of fear stirred up by a threatening medical diagnosis. Likewise, exceptionally self-critical individuals may need to withdraw periodically to bank the fires of self-reproach in the ashes of regret.

Such is the case for May Sarton (1912–1995), a talented, and in the late stages of her career, a widely acclaimed poet and novelist. She was also a person with the courage to expose her deepest criticism of herself in print, and though her candid and dignified voice speaks well for her, her self-criticisms were often painful and harsh. Though Sarton led a very busy social life, complete with travel, friendship, and love, to accommodate her feelings, she periodically retreated by herself to a small house she kept for the purpose, first in New Hampshire and then in Maine. In 1973 she published a memoir of one of these visits entitled Journal of a Solitude, which is one of the best examples I have seen of catharsis put into words. Consider several lines from the opening entry in the book:

> For a long time now, every meeting with another human being has been a collision. I feel too much, sense too much, exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting and tormented self … I feel like an inadequate machine that breaks down at crucial moments and grinds to a dreadful halt … or, even worse, explodes in some innocent person's face … I live alone, perhaps for no good reason, for the reason that I am an impossible creature set apart by a temperament I have never learned to use as it could be used, thrown off by a word, a glance, a rainy day, or one drink too many. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when I enter the huge, empty silence if I cannot find support there. I go up to heaven and down to hell in an hour. (12)

Sarton provides in other entries more specific events she regrets along with commentaries on her worries and anxieties. She knows herself well enough to know that she has an "impossible" temperament. So, while she does strive to make sense of her feelings, one does not get the sense that she is engaged in some kind of self-therapy. It appears more likely that Sarton needs these times alone in rural New England to simply absorb feelings of the burdens of being with other people, of the harms she feels she has inflicted on some, and for her own continuing dissatisfaction with herself. Unlike the widow, or the newly divorced, or the fired, Sarton can never come to grips with these feelings once and for all. Her recurrent retreats are better understood as episodes when she allows herself to register and recognize her feelings about herself for what they are. Though she wrestles with her sense that she must try to improve, it also seems that by releasing the full force of her feelings she is able to keep them from overwhelming her as well. Thus, Sarton's solitudes are the way she copes with her emotions and this, in turn, enables her to return from solitude with the ability to fully engage in her social life again. As in the Greek folk theory, she enters her solitudes to rehearse feelings she already knows well. Perhaps she found ← 165 | 166 → these episodes necessary to absorb, and then, through repetition, to dull the cutting edge of her self-criticism and thereby her self-inflicted pain.

5. Coping with Anomie: Prosaic Activities in Passionate Pursuits

Deep solitude appeals to individuals driven by transcendent passions. Anchorites, aesthetes, and the distressed share this much in common. Yet time and again in accounts of solitary retreats authors mention their prosaic activities. As I have indicated above, they do so to forestall the dangers of anomie. But this is not the sociological condition of anomie as famously conceived by Emile Durkheim in Suicide (1895). Durkheim drew attention to anomie as a collapse of cultural regulation following economic crises, wars, and other sudden breakdowns in social order (241–77). The individual experiences this anomie as a

psychic chaos, an all-consuming flood of disconnected impulses, emotions, and thoughts that destroys all sense of self-control, agency and personal identity. Deep solitude creates a self-induced form of social disorganization that threatens the individual with psychic anomie just as much as a social catastrophe.

The question all solitaries must confront is how does one forestall losing control of one's mind? Alcohol and drugs do not really provide much relief. The individual might just as well return to the outer world as to dull and cool the passions that inspired the retreat. What is needed is a way to organize daily life in a manner that provides at least a minimal sense of order and self-control. It is not coincidental then that so many accounts of prolonged solitude refer in some way to recurrent forms of mundane activities that contribute nothing substantial to any given solitary pursuit. Merton advises those on a solitary vocation to keep to their daily work even as they remain uncertain of where they are bound. Thoreau devotes an entire chapter to the work he did while he was alone at Walden Pond. But Sarton brings to life her struggles to keep to the ordinary chores that anchor the order of her days in a particularly vivid way:

[A]s a prisoner does (and in winter my life is imprisoned much of the time), I know it is essential for me to move within a structure. The bed must be made (it is what I hate doing most), the dishes washed, the place tidied up before I can get to work [her writing] with a free mind. There must be rewards for hard tasks, and often a cigarette had been the reward for putting out the rubbish or cleaning Punch's [her pet bird's] cage. (83–84)

Both Merton and Thoreau suggest that it takes a certain kind of person to lead a solitary life. Sarton suggests that among other qualities the solitary must possess the inner strength to maintain a kind of everyday discipline even against her own ← 166 | 167 → resistance. Thus, in a broad sense, even in deep solitude Durkheim was right. As human beings we seem to need some organization to regulate our lives lest our minds run wild and we are lost. For most of us, our rounds of sociable and solitary activities and our moral commitments to others provide sufficient regulation. But when one retreats into prolonged solitude one leaves behind the social elements of this support. Only those with the wisdom and will to maintain prosaic order are able to engage in solitary, passionate pursuits.

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Religion and Spiritual Searching in Times of Solitude
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When you don't have to think of anything, when your mind isn't being taking to think by the environment, where does your mind go? What gives you the most comfort to fantasize about? That's your God. Your religion is what you do with your solitude. — Archbishop William Temple.

Despite the century, place of birth or age, human beings had always questioned everything that was going on around them. Spiritual searching and existence of God was and still is one of the most questionable aspects in history. What fascinates me the most is, why people, who have experienced loneliness, solitude or losses, more than anybody else consider themselves the believers? And what brings them into religion in the first place?

I am sure that everyone of us felt loneliness at some point in our lives. Some people feel it from times to times, others constantly. When one person enjoys it, the other would like to run away from it as far as possible. Every person has it's own way of dealing with this strong feeling. For me, the state of solitude has become a constant companion, but also a powerful force to start caring for others.

During hard times, for example when people feel abandoned. fragile and isolated, some might find an answer to their questions in religious books and spiritual searching. Many feel at ease, knowing that there

… a higher power, which will guide them through difficulties, and that in the end we might be [illegible] our mistakes.

Fear not. Indeed, I am with you both; I hear and I see. — The Quran, Sura Taha, verse 46

Unfortunately in our modern society, spiritual values have been replaced by materialistic [illegible] of those values are ignored and, sometimes, are even considered to be shameful, especially among young people.

Probably one of the reasons why lonely people are more spiritual and religious, is because they have enough time to explore the deepest self and to pay attention to the world outside. When person is connected spiritually and has a strong belief in something greater, it gives the sense of presence, a meaning to every action. It provides a new self-image and self-awareness. It also leads to tolerance toward other people and nature. The beauty of this phenomena is in the process of its forming. With some people it can take days and years, with others it strikes out of nowhere, in a single moment, when you enter a Cathedral or a Mosque, and emotions overwhelm you and suddenly everything seems different.

You are no longer in a state of solitude. You are no longer separate. Everything is a puzzle of one big picture and you are a part of it. It is hard to explain to a nonbeliever, how religion and God can help through tough times. As it is said,

Say, For those who have faith, it is a guidance and healing; but for those who are faithless, there is a deafness in their ears and it is lost to their sight. They are [as if they were] called from a distant place. — The Quran, Surah Fussilat, verse 44.

Major survey by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life finds that most Americans, nowadays, have a non-dogmatic approach to faith. A strong majority of those, who are connected to religion do not believe it is the only way to salvation, and at the same time, almost all of this majority regularly goes to churches and mosques. But is it helpful and meaningful at all, when you do something repeatedly, without giving it any thought? I don't think so. I hope that my generation will soon realize that it is not a bad thing to stay close to your traditional values, explore yourself and that you do not have to feel ashamed or different