



Solitude and Community: A Personal Pursuit

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“It is not good that the human is alone; I will make a helper as a partner” (Gen 2:18, my paraphrase).

I understand myself and all people to be made for community. I also have known for a long time that I need solitude. A tag line on a news feed I saw recently referred to the difficulty many people were having with loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic and attributed it to their struggle with “solitude.” We all understand the concern raised, that the coronavirus pandemic and the forced isolation have been and continue to be harmful in many lives. The isolation and loneliness of this prolonged time of disruption in our social patterns have been exceptionally hard, but I take issue with their use of the word *solitude*.

I have found profound value in solitude. Moreover, our faith traditions offer rich support for the practice. Community and solitude are two steps in the same dance of being human. The human creature God made needs to be in fellowship with others, and there is also ample testimony biblically and experientially to our need for time to be alone in contemplation. Community and solitude both nurture my faith. Solitude has been a welcome time of spiritual and emotional regeneration for me. And, I would argue, solitude is, paradoxically, also a time of deep connections. If loneliness is the feeling of being disconnected from the social contact

The interplay between solitude and community is vital for our lives in the modern world. Solitude is not a permanent destination, but a necessary place in which to find renewal and a deeper sense of humanity, creation, and God.

we need, the practice of solitude is capable of making connection and transforming the experience.

Solitude can become one's choice even within the unwelcome times of loneliness or within the challenging times of stress caused by or experienced by too many demands by too many others. We all have differing needs for the amount of time spent with others and time spent alone. I believe from experience, and from listening to those who study human development, that the truth of Genesis 2 is common to us all in varying degrees. Community in some form is essential for human life, and so also is solitude. Recognizing our varied needs, I will not prescribe. I can only share my own story and how I have grown to find solitude, even the extended times of solitude during this pandemic, to be welcome opportunities for spiritual growth and rest.

From an early age I enjoyed solitude and sought out time to be solitary. I did not know why at the time; I was unaware of the purpose of solitude, nor of what it did for me. And I did not call it "solitude." To my memory, my pursuit felt almost natural, but I am sure it was learned. I grew up in a small town in the Midwestern United States, surrounded by farms and patches of deciduous woods. And it was to those woods that I went to be alone, to listen and watch, and to return home joyful and restored, though I would never have described it that way at that time of my life. As I look back on my youthful pursuit of solitude, the key factor that characterized my time in the woods as solitude was that I went to discover new things or rediscover something I had seen before. Basically, I went to listen and observe, which means there was something to hear and something to witness. As far as I can remember it, I did not feel alone, but rather, I was in a world that was alive. Mother would ask, "How were the woods?" And I'd tell her what I had seen and heard, pheasants and hawks on the way there, salamanders and squirrels in the woods.

Perhaps my pursuit started internally when I heard stories of my mother's summers spent on her relatives' farms in the far northwestern corner of Minnesota, or my father's stories of rafting in the heartland of Wisconsin on the Flambeau River and camping on its banks. Both of my parents spoke of childhoods filled with hours spent experiencing quiet time observing the wonders of creation, and they encouraged the same for me. I am sure that is one of the reasons that a favorite hymn during my childhood was "This Is My Father's World," with its mention of hearing God in the rustling grass. Perhaps that is where it started. I now appreciate how my mother accommodated my desire to explore the woods around our town; how she packed a small backpack with a lunch, and I'd be away for hours. To this day, time among the trees is part of the solitude I pursue, and I believe my practice has been an immense benefit to me as a pastor. I believe the practice of solitude has provided for me a balance in life that has been helpful and strengthening in thirty-five years of my very public vocation of parish ministry. And the practice of solitude, especially in outdoor settings, has become even more necessary because of the additional stressors the pandemic has brought upon us all. *Balance* is the key word for me.

I don't intend to imply that I think the public aspect of parish life is overly stressful and unbalancing. Although I'll readily admit that the pandemic has made much of our work more stressful, I feel the need of community deep in my bones, as much as or more than the need for solitude. And I see the two as part of the rhythm I need for health, much like the circadian rhythms of wakefulness and sleep. I know I need the healthful aspects of solitude to get by. It is not an either/or of how I spend my time. Rather, it is a both/and of maintaining and sustaining my spirit. The public aspect of parish ministry can take a toll. But I say that without rancor or disparagement because I also know the health and joy that community provides. I love a crowd; I love the interplay of personalities and ideas that can only happen in a community. I once described my experience of co-leading a metro synod youth gathering of a thousand youth like the excitement of sitting in an innertube amid river rapids and letting the power of the water cascade over your shoulders. That youth gathering was sheer joy for me, and it energized me for weeks afterward.

I love the public nature of my work. I look forward to Sunday mornings and the sound of many voices in song and prayer. I love the unpredictable interactions at the children's sermon, I love babies interrupting the service, and I love the coffee hour that always lasts for more than an hour. I am always with the last ones who reluctantly turn out the lights. I continue to love youth gatherings and VBS celebrations. These aspects of community have been in short supply in too many congregations during this time of pandemic restrictions. We are missing so much. Being in community can reaffirm belonging, provide a sense of place, and reinforce a way of being and the practices of hospitality and goodness. Community is where we get to see the face of God in the faces of the many. I cannot be fully me without community. And though I love community, I continue to pursue solitude; I believe I need it.

Although solitude may mean something quite different for each person, I am sure common threads connect for all. And I am sure some will figure out my Myers-Briggs and Gallup StrengthsFinder profiles. I lean ever so slightly toward the introvert side of both, and I see connections everywhere. I know that my life in community is served well by solitude. I know that I prefer natural settings to practice solitude, but that is not always possible. While I served congregations in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area, I could find moments of solitude while jogging or walking in the city parks, sitting alone in a sanctuary, visiting the library, or sitting alone at home. I believe solitude is possible anywhere, that it can happen in the middle of a public space, at the city zoo, in a city park surrounded by the sounds of city life, and at the mall—anywhere. Solitude and public space are hardly mutually exclusive. To find time to be alone with your thoughts and a silent prayer in the middle of the sounds and crowds of the public space actually allows you valuable time to relax, to be open, and to recognize, in the presence of strangers, how connected we all are, how inherently related we all are, and how God so loves all people.

Twenty-one years ago, I entered my current call as a parish pastor in a rural town with a population of roughly 1,300 in a county of 5,000 residents. Here 90 percent of the land is designated as state and national forest. Time for solitude now

happens in the forest or in the garden, at the bee yard, on my deer stand, in the canoe, on the lakeshore. Early on in my call to this congregation, certain elders of the church community would inquire whether I was taking time “to get out.” In another setting a pastor might have heard that as a question about visitation and getting out of the office. In such a public vocation it is easy to feel defensive. I did. These individuals, however, were asking if I was hiking, or paddling, or exploring. And I learned that for them, such things were part of health and spirituality, and they wanted the same for me. When they asked this of me, I began to see that they were acting as my spiritual mentors, making sure it was well with my soul. During the isolation of the pandemic some members have shared with me that they have actually sought out more personal time in nature to balance the stress. Twenty years later, one of these elders still asks me his question after every worship service: “Pastor, are you taking time to get out?” And then, together, we praise God for what we have witnessed in the previous week. I hear his joy and revel in the deep peace resonant in his spirit. Anyone familiar with “forest bathing,” the Japanese concept of *shinrin-yoku*, would recognize what these mentors understand and are prescribing without naming it.

Ten years ago, members of the community introduced me to deer hunting, and I have found this experience also to be one of productive solitude. I find refreshment, joy, and connections in the hours spent alone, quietly waiting in the deer stand. Sitting in the deer stand, wearing a safety harness, strapped to a spruce tree that responds to the environment and sways in the wind, translating its experience by its touch on my back, I find my spirit restored by hours of listening, waiting, interpreting, and responding. The experience puts me in mind of a story about John Muir climbing the highest Douglas fir during a windstorm to feel the power of the wind. A chickadee perching on my rifle barrel, a pine martin climbing the tree next to mine, the lone wolf stalking beneath me, the distant sound of trucks on the road—all speak of interconnection.

Even in the quiet of solitude we are reminded by all these sounds of our place with others. The experience continually declares that I am not alone, nor able to exist alone; we are all part of the ecosystem God has put here. Solitude allows for that time of deepening awareness of place and connection, hence the recognition and affirmation of belonging. Every sense perceives and receives the truth that I am a part of and belong to the larger context of God, who has created all things. Sitting in the stand in a heightened state of waiting and watching, listening purposefully for one thing, for the sound of a hoof in the leaves, puts me in mind of the watchman on the wall, described in Psalm 130, straining to see into the darkness for the purpose of community security or the hope for a redeemer and experiencing the welcome relief when dawn brings a new day. We joke whether Martin Luther said, “I wish I could pray the way my dog looks at meat”; I wish we could pray with the listening intensity with which a hunter waits. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope” (Ps 130:5).

Solitude, then, is time of intense and purposeful listening. Many years ago, I gained a formative practice while working at a summer canoe camp. One thing

defined that summer ministry experience and continues to influence my ministry and life. The required reading before arrival at camp was *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brief description of the theological community he and other German pastors formed. The daily patterns of communal life described in *Life Together* informed our daily routine that summer, whether we were in the camp community or on the canoe trail. As in Bonhoeffer's community, each day began with "first word," a reading of God's Word with interpretation and prayer. These days I find I depend upon this practice every day, and I have made it my devotional discipline. Before doing anything else, a first word from God begins the day. Because I start with daily time of listening and reflection, I can carry that word with me throughout each day.

Solitude is never my destination, however, for solitude does not define the whole of a person. I find these times of solitude immensely creative and refreshing, but always temporary. Whenever I walk down the hill from a hike or hunt, or paddle back after time on the water, or walk back into the church office after tending the gardens or visiting the local park, I am reminded of many passages describing Jesus finding a lonely place to pray and then always returning to the community of disciples and the ministry within the crowds. I always know the time spent in solitude has done its work on me. I find that in solitude all distractions and noise that can obscure the divine voice are swept away, so that we can hear and then listen to the voice that has been speaking to our spirits. And being assured of our place within the divine conversation, we are able to hear the voices of community and creation better, and then respond.

Solitude, practiced this way, is not the same as "down time," a break, "me time," or personal time off. All these are good and healthy, but solitude for me is a practice and a discipline infused with Word and contemplation. Through the practice of solitude, paradoxically, I find deep connection. It is a spiritual discipline of awareness. This intensely personal time reveals the presence of all other things. I believe it is impossible to be so isolated that consciousness itself does not declare our interconnections. Solitude is intense personal time with God—creature to Creator, seeker to Wisdom—and in the process of listening, so much more is opened.

The essential ingredient is time. My former camp director sent me to an outdoor education retreat to prepare to become the camp naturalist for the summer. During that retreat one practice that resonated with me was "Seton sitting," named for the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton. We were assigned time to find a place to sit and to be so still that the woods would resume their natural rhythms. The purpose was to be able to observe what was actually happening in the world surrounding the sitter. Silent stillness allows one to welcome back a variety of forest creatures who may have retreated or gone silent when the sitter first arrived. The practice is, of course, revealing of our relationships with everything around us that sometimes goes unnoticed. But it takes time, and like solitude or devotional time, it requires discipline. Solitude, whether in natural settings, at retreat centers, at church, or at the kitchen table, is time for intent listening; this act of listening implies hearing with a purpose, the purpose of connection and learning, and then also serving. Solitude takes time and intention.

The longer I have practiced solitude, the more I understand the insight I have heard from others that the journey inward always leads upward. In seeking better to understand myself, I am always drawn into the circles of relationship that form and nurture us. The primary relationship is, of course, with our Maker and Redeemer, whose very Spirit listens to our thoughts and prayers. The journey inward, whether in a quiet room, on a stump in the forest, or on a bench in the park, always invites the Companion who comes to make a home in our hearts. And in doing so, the Companion always informs the spirit within each person of the intricacies and interconnections of societies, communities, ecosystems. Thus, the time alone is like sitting out one dance—enough time to get up refreshed and rejoin the dance of Trinity, the interconnected reality of community with all things. For we are never really alone. As Jesus assured his disciples that he was never alone—“Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me” (John 16:32)—so we also can embrace this truth in our times of solitude.

In moments of solitude, I am reacquainted with the Word that takes flesh, and does so also in me through an indwelling of Word that calls, sustains, and holds me in faith. But also in solitude there grows a hunger of sorts, a recognition of incompleteness. In the experience of being absent for a time from others in whom the Word also incarnates again and again—as “the least of these” (Matt 25:40) or as the stranger—this hunger for connection invites the solitary one to return to community refreshed. In solitude, in deeper self-awareness, we are reminded that we thrive in each other’s company. I have heard it said that humans are by nature pulled by a mystic gravity of the soul to be in relationship with others. I know it is true for me. Of course, there is now ample evidence that the spectrum of a person’s affinity for solitude and community is wide. And yet it is impossible for us to be without others. Our foundational text proclaims that we were made for one another: “It is not good that the human be alone.” We are made for fellowship; we are shaped by community.

How to describe the beneficial effects of solitude? What do I feel it has done for me? And why do I recommend it for the spiritual health of others? In this time when our sense of community is disrupted by the prolonged pandemic and we have little knowledge of how much longer it will last, we can use our time of solitude to practice openness and to be aware of the connections that still hold us together. Part of the experience of solitude shaped by the Word is to welcome the enduring presence of God that we seek. The bonds and belonging we experience there are inseparable. Solitude is a practice of self-awareness, celebrating my relatedness to the creation surrounding me, so that I may return to community—even within the present constraints imposed by the pandemic—refreshed to be a steward with other stewards. Recognizing the unbreakable and indelible bond to the Creator, whose blessing I seek, I carry the blessing forward, and pray that I am a blessing to the communities I serve. 

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