

Sermon: The Gift of Solitude
February 5, 2017
Rev. Lynda Sutherland

When looking on the UUA "Worship Web" for readings about solitude, I came across this lovely meditation:

WHEN MY MIND IS STILL AND ALONE

By [Paul H Beattie](#)

When my mind is still and alone with the beating of my heart, I remember many things too easily forgotten: the purity of early love; the maturity of unselfish love that seeks nothing but another's good; the idealism that has persisted through all the tempest of life.

When my mind is still and alone with the beating of my heart, I find a quiet assurance, an inner peace, in the core of my being. It can face the doubt, the loneliness, the anxiety -- it can accept these harsh realities and can even grow because of these challenges to my essential being.

When my mind is still and alone with the beating of my heart, I can sense my basic humanity, and then I know that all men and women are my brothers and sisters. Nothing but my own fear and distrust can separate me from the love of friends. If I can trust others, accept them, enjoy them, then my life shall surely be richer and more full. If I can accept others, this will help them to be more truly themselves and they will be more able to accept me.

When my mind is still and alone with the beating of my heart, I know how much life has given me: the history of the race, friends and family, the opportunity to work, the chance to build myself. Then wells within me the urge to live more abundantly, with greater trust and joy, with more profound seriousness and earnest striving, and yet more calmly at the heart of life.

When my mind is still, and alone with the beating of my heart...
It *sounds* peaceful and lovely, doesn't it?

Or does it?

When I think of solitude, my mind goes back to an experience I had in my youth.

When I reached tenth grade, I joined a Girl Scout troop called Explorers. At this time in my life (unlike now!), I loved to climb trees and hike and camp out in all sorts of weather. This Explorer troop was right up my alley.

We spent many weekends in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver, and those are some of the fondest memories of my growing-up years.

One weekend in early autumn, we planned a 15 mile hike, with a wilderness camp at the 8 mile point. Up and down, through pine and aspen and across bare rocky slopes, we hiked with our food, sleeping bags, and tarps, a change of socks, first aid kits, water, and waterproofed matches – dipped in wax so they would still work if we got rained on or fell in the creek.

I had a brand new pair of hiking boots, purchased for this weekend excursion. They had leather uppers, which I had treated with water-repellant, and came up above my ankles to help prevent a turned ankle. My pack was similarly water-proofed, and I had kept it under 25 pounds. I had whittled a new walking-stick. I was *ready!*

It was a beautiful sunny day, the golden aspen leaves shimmered in the breeze, and we hiked along singing our Girl Scout songs: “I Love to Go a-wandering, along my mountain track...” It was great! – until my new boots began to raise blisters on my feet.

I hiked more and more slowly, fighting the pain, until I was barely hobbling along. I fell behind the pack, and no one noticed I was not keeping up with them. I was kind of embarrassed, so I didn’t call out for them to wait. Pretty soon I lost sight of the others, and then I could no longer hear their voices. I was, literally, alone in the wilderness.

I sat down on a boulder beside the trail, to rest my sore feet and catch my breath. The world felt immense. It was SO QUIET. I suddenly felt the full impact of being alone, sitting in the middle of the great big world.

Solitude.

I didn’t like it.

My mind began running away from me, inventing dangers: I could get bitten by a rattler. I could be dinner for a mountain lion. I could be lost, and die of starvation.

In somewhat of a panic, I hauled myself up and started down the path again as best I could. Now my mind began attacking me: I should never have let myself get separated from my hiking buddy. I should have broken in my boots better. I shouldn’t have read under the covers after lights out. I should have been better-behaved, and now look how I was being punished. I was hopeless; I might as well give up, sit down, and resign myself to my fate. But, in spite of it all, I kept walking – hobbling.

Obviously that story had a happy ending, since I’m here with you today. The troop leader realized I was not with the others – the leaders took their responsibility for us seriously – and came back to find me. But this experience is a picture of how I have experienced Solitude through much of my life. Not as a friend.

At the same time, even this scary and uncomfortable solitude allowed me to gain valuable insight into myself. When left to myself, I tend to feel helpless. When left to myself, I tend to feel guilty. When left to myself, I struggle with whether I want to go on in the midst of difficulty. When left to myself, I do summon the ability to keep on going, put one foot in front of the other.

It has been said that the way a person acts when no one is watching speaks volumes about their character. The corollary to that is, the story we tell ourselves when no one else is watching determines how authentically we are living our lives.

When we find ourselves alone in the dark woods, do we let our panic tell the story? Or do we take a look at our fears, and at what we do when we are afraid?

When we are all by ourselves, do we let our inner critic tell us all that we should have done, and should now be doing, and that we are somehow at fault because we are not – we *can* not – do it *all*?

When we are trying to fall asleep at night in a quiet room, do we sometimes find ourselves overwhelmed with despair, and wonder why and how we can keep on going, and whether it will make any difference in the end?

When we have an extended time when all we can hear is our own thoughts, do we hurry to find something – *anything* – to distract us from those thoughts? Have you done that? I have! Netflix, facebook, a book, the weather channel, the grocery store, are some of my go-tos when I am feeling uncomfortable with my thoughts.

And yet, we also know, we really do, that it is when we are alone, when we still our minds from the worry and the guilt and the chatter and the reasons to be angry/depressed/afraid, when we let our minds float on the current of life that IS, right here right now right in this moment...

This is when we remember who we really are. When we see what it is that gives us life, and what we would give our lives for. When we wrestle with what we have to offer the world, the reason we are here – and we all have a reason. Not given by an authority in the sky, not predestined, not that kind of reason. But the reason or reasons we have found as we have journeyed through life.

I say we all have a reason, because we are hard-wired to have one. We are a meaning-making animal, and we tell ourselves stories all the time. In solitude is when we can examine our stories, and see whether they still make sense to us, whether they are still serving us.

In solitude, we have a chance to examine the deep questions of life? Who am I? Why am I here, right now, and what purpose do I serve in the lives of those I love, in my community, in the world? What shall I do with my one wild and precious life? What might I dare to dream?

Ah, to dream. Remember the dreams you had as a kid? Mine was to reform the public school system. Now you know. Impossible, yes. And yet, I *was* able to school my own children according to my own philosophy of learning, which was heavily informed by Maria Montessori, B.F. Skinner, and other progressive educators. My original dream was realized, not how I envisioned it, but in a way that has been a deep satisfaction to me in my life. At least for those eight kids, I made a big difference in the world.

It isn't always easy, letting ourselves dream. We're essentially a pragmatic culture, and we pride ourselves on evidence-based decision making. I am all for being realistic in our plans and decisions, at least for the most part. Calculated risk, too. and being open to learn more and change our minds based on new evidence.

But dreams don't do very well in the mode of possibility. Dreams, in order to be dreams, need to be set free of the constraints of the possible. If an idea is plotted out according to what is possible, it is a plan, not a dream. I'm reminded of the exchange between Alice and the Queen in Alice and Wonderland:

"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

To dream the impossible dream. You gotta have a dream, if you don't have a dream, how you gonna make a dream come true? What impossible dream do you still have in your heart, that could be the start of something worthy of your one wild and precious life?

When we still our minds and they are alone with the beating of our hearts, *that* is when dreaming tiptoes in to dance for us, to dance with us. In solitude is when we can *listen* to our hearts, and find our own bottom line.

When we get past the chatter, past the fear and guilt and all the other voices saying "a happy outcome is just not possible here," *then we can find our own bottom line, the pace we say, "this I believe, this I will work for and never relent."*

A Jewish friend once gave a service in our Decorah UU Fellowship about the benefits of honoring a Sabbath observance each week. It can help remind us that, if we are to still our minds enough to listen to our hearts, we must make space for that to happen.

What would make it a sabbath for you? Taking a break from news? From social media? Taking time to cook or bake something from scratch? Having clean sheets to crawl into? A walk in the woods? A long, soaky bath? Using the good china and setting a beautiful table? Wineglass centerpieces?

Perhaps a yoga class could do it for you. A time in a sunny corner of your house or curled up by a fire with your journal. Song, dance, drumming, artistic creation, there are a myriad of paths into that solitude by which our daily and weekly experiences can be examined, brought together with the rest of what is in our hearts, and be used to make sense of the world. In solitude we can take a deep breath. In solitude we can grow. In solitude, we can become better friends with ourselves, which is important, because one person we can never get away from is – ourselves!

Since we are here, in the dark wood, let us be open to the gift of Solitude. We may find unexpected treasure to take with us as we get up off that rock and keep walking down the path, blisters and all, to rejoin our company on this journey we are in together.

Let me close with these words by poet Denise Levertov:

“Beginners”

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.