

## **The Companion of Self: Solitude and Loneliness**

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By Rev. Mary Ann Macklin

I recently lost a cherished yellowing newspaper clipping. It was an article, which honored the life and death of Anne Morrow Lindbergh. She lived a challenging and inspirational life. Many years ago, an acquaintance gifted me a copy of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "A Gift from the Sea"; it had belonged to her mother, then given to her, and then she gave it to me. How many of you have read it? Recently? It is well worth visiting again. I would also say the same about her husband Charles Lindbergh's book, "The Spirit of Saint Louis" which chronicles his solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

The writings of this couple, who parented five children, are quite amazing. In "A Gift From the Sea" Lindbergh shares with the reader reflections from a few days of solitude at the ocean's edge. Her book is timeless in many of its wisdoms and while her message is primarily directed towards women, I believe most of it transcends gender differences. She writes,

"Herein lies one key to the problem. If women were convinced that a day off or an hour of solitude was a reasonable ambition, they would find a way of attaining it... As far as the search for solitude is concerned, we live in a negative atmosphere as invisible, as all pervasive, and as enervating as a high humidity on an August afternoon. The world today does not understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone," and she continues, "What a commentary on our civilization," she goes on, "when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it—like a secret vice." (Gift from the Sea, 155, pg 48-49)

When I do premarital counseling with wedding couples (actually that's the only people I do premarital counseling with...wedding couples), I often insist the following: The week before the wedding make sure you set time aside for yourselves as a couple...and for yourselves individually. On the day of the wedding (unless they are doing that 'don't see each other thing') I strongly suggest the same...some time alone as a couple...some time alone by themselves. I agree with Anne Morrow Lindbergh who suggests that among the most important times in one's life---are those times when one is alone. (Pause. Important time alone).

Overall, much popular music through the ages has not played positively the virtues of being alone. I remember well when I was going through my 'Three Dog Night' phase in high school (Any of you remember TDN? Jeremiah Was A Bullfrog? All three of my brothers and I went through a "Three Dog Night" phase); anyway, I distinctly remember putting on the head phones and listening to the song "One" whose lyrics state, "One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do. Two can be as bad as one. It's the loneliest number since the number one, oh..." I couldn't remember all of the lyrics so I looked it up on the internet. Aside from a few phrases, the overall lyrical pattern is "One is the loneliest number" (repeated)

Frankly, I wish someone would have introduced me to Anne Morrow Lindbergh in my teen years or Rainer Maria Rilke. It was only later in my life that I learned the pleasure of solo trips. Recently, I traveled to the East Coast. I like driving alone...the space it gives me (and for those of you who know the car I drive...I get a lot of space). And I do enjoy the solitude. In fact, I also enjoy the shared solitude, which my family and I experience when we travel together on long drives. On one drive by myself...visiting friends along the way, I stopped in Pennsylvania; one of my friends gave me the book on tape, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters To A Young Poet" read by Stephen Mitchell. While I am a fan of Rilke's, I have never been a big fan of books on tape. My life is too often too full of words. I prefer either silence or some type of instrumental music while driving. Yet this gift called to me. So I listened to it...slowly over the miles...stopping the tape frequently and allowing the words to sink in through the silence of driving. (The book is exactly as its title states, a series of letters to a young poet in which Rilke humbly offers his thoughts and advice to a Mr. Kappus). In one part Rilke says the following about the relationship between two people:

I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each should Stand guard over the solitude of the other. For, if it lies in the nature of indifference and of the crowd to recognize no solitude, then love and friendship are there for the purpose of continually providing the opportunity for solitude  
-Letters to a Young Poet

(pause)

Is part of the purpose of love and friendship to provide opportunity for solitude for others? If so, how do we understand the relationship of solitude and loneliness?

Playwright Pearl Cleage purposes, “Loneliness is black coffee and late night television; solitude is herb tea and soft music (“In My Solitude” *Deals With the Devil*, 1993). Philosopher Hannah Arendt distinguishes the two, “Solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company.” Why does this happen? Spiritual question. Dissatisfaction.

So what is loneliness? In the textbook “Intimate Relationships” (Brehm, Perlman, Miller, Campbell, 2002, 1992, 1985, McGraw Hill) currently being used for classes on higher education campuses there is an entire chapter dedicated to loneliness, which is characterized as follows:

Loneliness is not the same as physical isolation. Instead, it is a feeling of deprivation and dissatisfaction produced by a discrepancy between the kinds of social relations one has and the kinds one desires. Two different types of loneliness have been identified: *social isolation* created by the lack of a social network, and *emotional isolation* based on the absence of a single intense relationship. (Intimate Relationships, pg 419).

So why is this important to any of us? By exploring our understanding of loneliness and solitude, I believe we can be more effective within our own lives about learning to create paths of positive solitude instead of loneliness.

And it is within this sense of a positive solitude that we can further unleash our potential as liberal religious seekers...as a people of faith.

Truthfully, I believe we have barely tapped our potential...as individuals and as a liberal religious faith community. And this life is calling us to be engaged in a deeper way; our world is hurting in many ways. A life of reflection and entrance into positive solitude can help us as individuals and as a community to have greater potential for giving and receiving, for seeking our truths and acting upon our convictions.

Allow me to close with some thoughts from the book "Positive Solitude" by Dr. Rae Andre. First, Dr. Andre offers ways for us to rethink the problem of loneliness. She defines loneliness as *a word that people use to summarize their experience of the difficult emotions they feel when they are alone....(pg 7-8)*

Dr. Andre posits that since we humans experience an ongoing feedback cycle with our environment, that when that feedback cycle gets disrupted...there is a gap.

The question is...How do we fill that gap? (sense of loneliness) How do we become more self reliant and creative? (Discern distraction: Finding yourself and losing yourself). What is creating a more positive solitude?

Dr. Andre suggests three steps to help create a more positive solitude for ourselves:

**Awareness, Change, Explore.**

**Awareness:** Simply expanding our thoughts, images and definitions of solitude.

This sermon is a lot about expanding your awareness. Read books. If you are a parent, read a book written by a parent (Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Madeleine L'Engle's "Two Part Invention") Also there are other wonderful authors who write on solitude: Rainer Maria Rilke, and May Sarton

**Change:** Change our behavior. Figure out your feedback gap; learn about what traps you in loneliness and learn to avoid those traps. Also, learn to choose things, which are meaningful, healthful and pleasurable, and lead to positive solitude.

This stage sounds simple yet is very difficult. It really does take patience and faith.

**Explore:** Explore the mystical part of solitude...It is an allowing. A surrendering.

Allow me to close with these mystical words from the sea, "The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient," Anne Morrow Lindbergh shares, "To dig for treasures, shows not only impatience and greed, but lack of faith. Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea. (Gift from the Sea: Anne Morrow Lindbergh, 1955)