

T H E J O Y S O F S O L I T U D E

BY BILL VOSSLER

Imagine a long beach of white sand on a deserted tropical island. Wiggle your toes into the warm sand as you sigh and lean back against the trunk of a gently swaying palm tree.

Your eyes close in repose, while the ocean surf whispers to you 20 feet away. The sun drapes its warm arm across your shoulders and the scent of tropical flowers drifts to you on the breeze.

The sky is impossibly high and blue, the water gorgeous turquoise. You are alone, but content. You have discovered the joy of solitude.

"Surprisingly," says Dr. Pete Suedfeld, professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, "our research shows that much of the time when people are alone, they don't feel lonely, which is quite opposite from the popular perception."

Americans are ambivalent about solitude. "We're a herd species," Suedfeld says. "We have a cultural bias against solitude. The well-adjusted person is thought to be sociable, so if you're not with other people, you shouldn't be happy. Or if you are happy, there's probably something wrong with you."

On the other hand, Americans need solitude more than other people. Edward Hall says in *The Silent Language*, "Because our culture is changing so rapidly, we may not have an established set of

mechanisms for dealing with other people. We may just need more time alone to figure things out."

Not to mention the need for solitude against roaring traffic and screaming sirens, blaring TVs, car stereos and ubiquitous noise.

"It's ironic," says Dr. David Myers, author of *Pursuit of Happiness*, "In a time when the hustle and bustle of working, shopping and entertainment have become a seven-day-a-week affair, Euro-American cultures have turned away from solitude."

So what? Hasn't solitude always been the purview of the famous and the weird, or of philosophers such as Thoreau, who wrote, "I have never met a companion who was so companionable as solitude"?

Not really, Suedfeld says. Everybody can benefit from solitude.

The Joys of Solitude

So, what are the advantages—and joys—of solitude?

● Increasing your self-control.

One of the joys of solitude is conquering stubborn negative habits like smoking, drinking and overeating. These are triggered by regular environmental cues—the end of a meal, sitting down at a familiar desk and so on.

"In an unfamiliar place," writes Anthony Storr in *Solitude: A Return to*

the Self, "where one no longer does the same thing at the same time each day, cues from the environment either disappear or lose some of their significance." Thus it is easier to alter one's habits and control the bad ones.

● Learning to rely on yourself.

Talents and abilities you didn't know about often show themselves during solitude. For instance, you're camping alone and discover that you can cook edible food.

● Becoming closer to God.

Christians believe that peace, joy and a sense of purpose follow from communing with God. However, if we run around busy and distracted, it's very difficult to hear God speaking.

Solitude allows us the opportunity to listen. What we hear, or sense, can help us right the drifting ship of our lives, or plot an entirely new course.

Jesus gave a clear example of seeking solitude and time for prayer and renewal by journeying into the wilderness or to a mountaintop to get away from the crowds.

Church history is filled with accounts of Christians who have journeyed into solitude and returned, altered in the most positive way and filled with renewed commitment and joy. Solitude can work the same for you.

● **Managing stress.** Solitude promotes better health, and little in

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life is more joyous than good health. Dr. Craig Ellison, executive director of New Hope Counseling Center in Nyack, New York, says, "Solitude helps us manage our stress. It lowers our stress level and promotes a sense of well-being."

● **Releasing creativity.** With no one around to question methods, thoughts or actions, people discover anew the playful creativity so often lost in elementary school.

Creative work is joyous work, says Suedfeld. "In solitude, people can let their minds roam. A disproportionate amount of creative thinking occurs while people are alone."

Myers agrees. "Being freed from distractions may trigger vivid fantasies and deep insights."

Through creativity, human beings find some of their deepest needs met—and their greatest joys. "The happiest people are creative people," Ellison says.

● **The pleasure of not being distracted.** America has become the distracted society. "In solitude you have a chance," says Suedfeld, "to think deeply about complex matters, without disturbance from outside." Deep thinking often leads to the solutions to stubborn problems.

● **Recharging your batteries.** Solitude helps people gain perspective in their lives, helps them think positively and

reinvigorates them for returning to the workday fray.

Plan Your Solitude

Unfortunately solitude is not always easy to achieve, especially in an American society which seems defined by noise and distraction. But if you're determined, there are ways to find solitude:

● **Plan for it.** "I take mine every morning before the rest of the family is up," says Ellison. "Of course, that means I must discipline myself to go to bed early."

● **Examine your own life.** When is the best time for your solitude? What will you need to delay, or give up, to gain solitude for yourself? Ellison suggests less TV.

As little as 15 to 30 minutes a day of solitude will work wonders for you. Figure out ways to shoehorn solitude into your unique life situation. Trade baby-sitting time with neighbors. Designate an evening or afternoon hour away when your spouse will handle all child-care responsibilities.

Do what you must to get your solitude.

Where To Take Solitude

Plan, too, where you'll bask in your solitude. Some suggestions:

● **In nature.** Parks, any safe, secluded place in a grove of trees, in the back yard—anywhere you can be alone for a while.

● **Exercising.** Find a safe, private place to walk. You'll accrue solitude plus the physical benefits of walking. Jogging, swimming, ice skating, skiing and other exercises also work.

● **Quiet places.** Visit a church—sit in a pew or the choir loft. Seek solitude in library study rooms. Visit a coffee shop if you can handle the chatter.

● **In your own home.** Turn off the phone, put out the cat and retreat into an unused room. Even with distant noise, you can achieve solitude. Or tune in "white noise"—the hissing between FM radio stations—to drown out other noises (white noise becomes non-discernable).

● **In your own mind.** Your mind is your secret weapon. It can take you anywhere, even to a mental place of solitude.

Sit quietly and think of the piney scent of a forest, with the trill of distant birds, the cathedral-like silence, the muted light and the crunch of the leaves under your feet.

Or visualize the beach and picture a seagull as it soars high above you as you rise from beneath the palm tree, meander across the white sand to the turquoise ocean and dive—joyously alone and unencumbered—into the warm water. □

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SOLITUDE ALLOWS US THE OPPORTUNITY TO LISTEN. WHAT WE HEAR, OR SENSE, CAN HELP US RIGHT THE DRIFTING SHIP OF OUR LIVES, OR PLOT AN ENTIRELY NEW COURSE.