



The Virtues of Solitude

To cure the loneliness epidemic, we need to learn how to be alone.

Lynn Casteel Harper

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discussing the difficulties of cultivating solitude, “Henry David Thoreau laments the person who makes frequent trips to the post office, loaded down with correspondence, yet has ‘not heard from himself’ in a long while.” How often do you “hear from yourself”? When was the last time you spent an hour alone in silence—without screens, books, music, or other stimulation—and what was that like?

2. Many of the commentators Harper cites point to the uniquely contemporary dimensions of our “loneliness epidemic.” But the questions about solitude that she highlights seem perennial: after all, Thoreau was worried about the stark dangers to solitude posed by letter-writing. Is our present lack of solitude a contemporary problem, or does this framing romanticize past people and cultures?

3. Harper proposes that communities should develop “solitude infrastructure”—public libraries with reading nooks, public parks that support birdwatching and quiet walks, etc. Is there a difference between public and private solitude? Is one preferable? What “solitude infrastructure” exists in your own community?

4. Harper mentions that faith communities can help foster solitude, sometimes even in their communal services. In particular, she mentions the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers), whose worship services are mostly held in silence. Do your own faith communities help foster solitude? Are there particular liturgical formats which are more effective at developing this solitude? What makes them effective—and how should their effectiveness be weighed against the other purposes of communal spirituality?

5. “Whole industries have emerged to sell us fixes to our frenetic lives, promising inner peace that is only a retreat, an app, a spa day, or a lifestyle hack away,” Harper notes. Indeed, there is now a plethora of digital tools—especially prayer and meditation apps—that purport to help their users strengthen their interior lives. Have you used any of these tools? Do you think Harper is right to dismiss them? Must the “solitude agenda” turn us into Luddites?

6. “Of course, we all need small pleasures that demand little from us: word games, TV shows, cat videos,” Harper concedes. In this framing, what does solitude tangibly “demand” from us? What is so hard about cultivating it? Are there ways we can make it easier for ourselves—or is the difficulty the point? And what are the rewards you’ve found?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Benedict Coleridge, “The Entry into Darkness,” May 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/entry-darkness>

Antón Barba-Kay, “The Attention Trap,” February 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/attention-trap>

Ian Marcus Corbin, “What’s Behind America’s Loneliness Crisis?” July/August 2024:
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/whats-behind-americas-loneliness-crisis>

Griffin Oleynick, “Freedom in Solitude,” April 16, 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/freedom-solitude>