

Alone Time

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There are days when solitude is a heady wine that intoxicates you with freedom, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall.

Collette, *Earthly Paradise: an Autobiography*

Solitude is something that many of us have become quite familiar with throughout the past two years, spent in and out of mandated isolation. We have all faced different realities during the pandemic, our specific situations dependent on where we are, who we are, and what we do. The circumstances we have been thrown into would have been inconceivable to most of us prior to the arrival of COVID-19. Though we've now had two years to try to work through the onslaught of challenges, there are still some baffling elements of living in relative solitude that may leave us confused and questioning. We have seen and stumbled through the effects of the pandemic but have also experienced and witnessed drastic shifts in culture and consciousness; how we understand things like race, class, and climate. The way we might have imagined our lives playing out might not align with our current realities. Everything from our awareness of the way we interact with others, to our cognizance of sickness and health and our cultural responses to care, to our consciousness of oppressive systems and institutions upholding disparities and inequalities, and our recognition of the very imminent threats to the planet's ecological wellbeing have been greatly affected by this era of dramatic global change. As we begin to shift back into lives almost similar to the ones we lived before, the time has come for us to try to work through the complications we've faced. But to begin processing, we must find ways to express what we've felt and explain how we came to those feelings; tasks much easier to outline than to pursue. It's a complicated process, though undoubtedly a beneficial one.

To grasp why pandemic solitude has had such perplexing effects on us, we must understand the effects of solitude under normal circumstances. Solitude, the "state of being alone,"¹ is known to be hugely beneficial, though inherently challenging. It allows "the freedom to engage in intrinsically motivated activities, creativity (including self-transformation), intimacy, and spirituality"² by reducing, or eliminating external judgements, pressures, and expectations.³ This freedom can make solitude liberating and empowering, though the same freedom can also cause solitude to become intimidating and overwhelming. Without social conventions showing us right from wrong and helping us define who we are, we are bound to find ourselves in a state of self-reckoning.⁴ This state, albeit enlightening and encouraging of personal growth, forces us to look more deeply within ourselves than we may be accustomed to or comfortable with. Levels of tolerance for being alone vary from person to person, and solitude can connote different things for different people. Each of our unique predispositions to solitude and our personal capacities to thrive in aloneness are shaped by specific personality factors, including extraversion or introversion, emotional stability, openness to new experiences, and general preferences.⁵ All experiences of solitude are not created equal. While it is true that there are uncomfortable elements for everyone to overcome, "solitude is unlikely to be equally nourishing for all individuals."⁶ Aside from these internal, personal factors, it is thought that "the voluntariness or degree

of control a person has in a situation may be the most important factor that tips the balance between an experience of positive solitude and an experience of loneliness.”⁷

All this in mind, the differences between what we may have expected and what we faced in pandemic-related solitude become more apparent. The solitude that we were thrown into was the evil twin of the solitude we once knew, the one we perhaps relished or even longed for. With our experiential knowledge, we can now see how “people often idealize conditions that, if realized, they would find intolerable.”⁸ One only has to recall the early days of the pandemic when we optimistically looked forward to rest, relaxation, and pursuing productive new hobbies, unaware of the mental preparedness we would need to endure months and months of social isolation. Because circumstances around the globe have been so dire, our solitude has not been voluntary. Remaining in our homes alone, or maybe with the few folks we share those spaces with, was not something that we simply chose to do for fun. Many of us were made to isolate and exist in solitude by forces far beyond our control. Not only did we have no say in the duration of our spells of solitude, we also didn’t necessarily have the capacity to determine our own surroundings or what resources we had at our disposal. Without the ability to choose when to end our time alone, and without a real concept for when the end would arrive, loneliness was more capable of taking over and left many of us feeling severed from our communities. Cut off from the people and places we once relied on for comfort and stability, and in a time when those two things were more valuable than ever before, we were apt to feel somewhat hopeless and trapped.

Because of the unique context in which we experienced this solitude, the freedoms we might have benefitted from were also severely restricted. The existence and increasing omnipresence of social media, and media in general, are to thank (or blame) for this. Though we were physically separated from our networks of family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances, we were more virtually connected than ever through Twitter, Instagram, Zoom, Facebook, FaceTime, TikTok, email, and, of course, telephone calls. This peculiar mode of connecting without really connecting brought about some complicated, double-edged implications as it became a more prominent aspect of our limited lives inside. In some ways, this might have helped us to feel less alone. We could speak with others, see them, and know what they were up to and how they spent their days. Conversely, this might have also led us to feeling more alone, almost teasing the three-dimensional interactions we craved and spaces we longed to see and feel in real life. Constant access to online content might have offered some lighthearted distractions, some reprieve from our own thoughts and the daunting task of learning to “be at peace with oneself,” but the innocent behaviour of perusing can quickly spiral out of control.⁹ Doom scrolling left us inundated with information, oversaturated with bad news and troubling things that we could do nothing about, aside from worry. Our constant access to information was both a blessing and a curse. It allowed us to learn more about ourselves and our passions, but it also enabled us to know too much about the tumultuous and stressful goings-on of the world around us while we were shut away from it off-screen.

Despite these things, the freedom to follow our own passions and pursuits of personal pleasure was not entirely lost. Without the immediate physical presence of others or the typical social norms of public space in effect, many of us had the opportunity for the first time—or the first time in a long time—to exist in a way that felt natural, honouring our unique needs and relaxing our learned habits. We could indulge in offbeat interests, experimenting with how we identify and present to ourselves and perhaps to

the world. We could silently excuse ourselves from standards of society and do silly things just for the sake of enjoyment. We could try out forty-seven new hobbies and abandon each one after five minutes. We could, legitimately, do nothing at all for as long as we wanted, or needed to.

The idea of self-determination within the confines of mandatory isolation is wonderful, though it is also an idealization. Finding balanced patterns that actually manifest in feeling good long term is complicated and made more difficult by the increased mental health challenges and “pandemic brain” that many of us faced due to the inescapable and insurmountable stresses of the past two years.¹⁰ Additionally, social media exposure interfered with our ability to take advantage of this freedom because of its pervasive ability to encourage comparison, enforce unrealistic expectations, and ingrain the notions of “hustle culture” deeply within our minds. While we could still do things to nurture ourselves, comparison with the carefully curated social media synopses of other people’s lives, productivity, and success could induce guilt for taking the breaks we may have required. Comparison with our past selves and what we were once able to accomplish may have also left us feeling badly about the inevitable changes in stamina and perceived success during the changing times.

To make things more difficult, the shift in our paradigm of existence throughout the pandemic affected how we understand and conceptualize time, which we may have taken for granted before. Reality has changed drastically since spring 2020. When the world halted and our usual routines came to an abrupt stop, our typical mode of measuring time did as well. Our minds keep track of time through novel experiences; repeated events and exciting moments stand out and act as landmarks, enabling us to maintain a relative understanding of the passage of time.¹¹ When our routines dissolved, so too did the time-markers that we had relied upon, leading the days and weeks to become flexible, liquid, unaffixed from the usual rhythms of our lives. In the absence of the usual, periods of time came to be measured and rationalized by things like case counts and death tolls.¹² Seasons are no longer seasons; our last few years can be divided and told by waves of COVID, which is perhaps one of the clearest indications of just how drastically our reality has changed,¹³

In addition to our shift in understanding the movement of time, our perception of our place in time and our ability to conceptualize the future has changed, too. Though we track the waves, the ebb and flow of cases and deaths and variants, we are reminded again and again that we really have no way of knowing what might be on the horizon. One could argue that this has obviously always been the case. As Arielle Pardes writes, “We’re stuck in the middle of it. Or maybe still the beginning. Or maybe closer to the end. No one knows when this will be over, or what the world will look like on the other side.”¹⁴ Without ability to pinpoint when “the end” of the pandemic will be, and therefore, when “the future” will begin to materialize, it becomes tricky to fall back into our old habits of ideating our lives so many years down the line, planning and pondering what we’d like to do and where we’d like to be. Though it’s a bit convoluted to conceptualize, the pandemic has not only left us to mourn our lives before it began, but also to mourn our hypothetical futures.

The versions of ourselves that we once thought we would become knew nothing of this situation and existed in a world that did not materialize as we thought it would. Learning to exist in the present—let alone adapting our idealized paths forward—will take time. Mourning versions of ourselves that never had the opportunity to actualize is a phenomenon that is unquestionably peculiar and difficult to fully

wrap one's head around, but it is yet another legitimate source of stress and upset that we've had to digest.

There are reasons and explanations for the complicated and convoluted emotions we've faced throughout the pandemic. To try to identify and analyze every nuance is a process that will take time and patience; the academic pursuit of doing so will likely continue for years and years to come. What is most important to understand now, is that we have come by these frustrating, upsetting, bewildering times honestly. There was no right or wrong way to tackle these big, weird feelings as they came to join us in our abundant, involuntary alone time. There was no way to avoid feeling some sort of strangeness and the world will take more time than we would like to settle into this new version of itself. It makes sense to be stuck on our experiences and to have doubts and questions as we begin to teach ourselves how to be in this new way. Of course, it is also important to note that though the experience of the pandemic through relative isolation was far from rosy, having the ability to isolate did carry a certain amount of privilege and was not the only experience throughout this time. Many faced the changing world head on as essential workers, many faced unstable housing situations; the unique scenarios are infinite, and I could not possibly speak to each one. In any case, it is important to honour the feelings, experiences, and parts of ourselves that we met for the first time throughout the pandemic, regardless of what our personal situations may have been. It is important to be gentle and patient with ourselves and with others as we continue on this pathway of paradigm shifts and lifestyle transformations. It is important to give ourselves permission to mourn the great losses, both real and theoretical, that we have been struck with over this time. It is important to allow ourselves to revisit these tough moments and, finally, to allow ourselves to begin moving forward into the new world.

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