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978-1-009-25660-5 — Solitude
Netta Weinstein, Heather Hansen, Thuy-vy T. Nguyen
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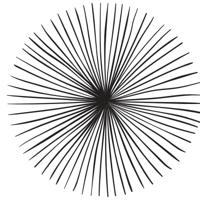
INTRODUCTION



Imagine you're sitting in the cockpit of a single-engine plane, cruising 2,000 feet above the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. It's pitch black outside, and you're flying blind into strong headwinds and driving rain. There's no radio on board, and you are the plane's sole occupant. You are no longer an earth dweller with feet planted on terra firma, but you don't belong to the sky either, not really – the immense roar of the engine and the pungent smell of petrol in the cabin make that clear enough.

Now, somewhere over the frigid northern waters, your engine sputters and dies, and you're momentarily hypnotized by the glowing, spinning dial of the altimeter as the plane plummets toward the sea. The profound silence of the powerless plane at first is stunning, but then you spring into action to revive the motor. At least thirty seconds have elapsed since the engine quit as the plane drops below 300 feet in altitude and continues its decline. You wonder how high the waves below may rise to meet you when, finally, the engine roars back to life and you ascend back into the clouds.

This harrowing scene is how aviatrix Beryl Markham described her historic journey as the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west (from England to Canada). That was in September 1936, nine years after Charles Lindbergh made the first solo transatlantic crossing and four years after Amelia Earhart was the first woman to do it – but they had both flown with the prevailing winds from west to east. Instead, Markham flew into the wind and, with her twenty-one-hour twenty-five-minute flight, accomplished what no one else had up to that point. (She was aiming for New York, but after her fuel vents iced over, Markham was

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forced nose down into a bog in Nova Scotia, breaking the windscreen with her head during the rough "landing.")

Despite falling a bit short of her original goal, Markham had solo-piloted her flashy Vega Gull with a turquoise body and silver wings straight into the history books. This is how she described sitting in that seat: "Being alone in an aeroplane for even so short a time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in semi-darkness, nothing to contemplate but the size of your small courage, nothing to wonder about but the beliefs, the faces, and the hopes rooted in your mind – such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night. You are the stranger."

To solitude researchers, including the three authors of this book, Markham's powerful account speaks volumes about what it means to be alone for any of us. Solitude is, in essence, a solo flight. A lot of what can make people feel uncomfortable – or exhilarated – in that state is that it insists that we face ourselves, with all of our troubles and triumphs, emotions and expectations. For many people, there is a comforting familiarity in that, whereas for others, there can be a startling strangeness. Sometimes we are flying blind in that space, and things can go wrong while we're in flight, but with the right awareness, preparation, and tools, as we talk about at length in this book, we can ultimately make it a successful journey. In short, regardless of whether we are skilled or a novice at spending time alone, it can be as defined or amorphous, as empty or full, as certain or uncertain, as we choose to make it.

In Markham's time, as in ours, the decision to *go toward* alone time was an uncommon one. Like many in history who recognize that humans are largely social creatures, she knew that spending time in solitude was unconventional and perhaps even undesirable for most people. "You can live a lifetime and, at the end of it, know more about other people than you know about yourself. You learn to watch other people, but you never watch yourself because you strive against loneliness," wrote Markham. "The abhorrence of loneliness is as natural as wanting to live at all." Yet Marham had ultimately spent so much time alone while flying planes and training racehorses that silence had become a habit, solitude a haven – and loneliness the stranger.

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Markham was born in England in 1902 but raised in colonial Kenya, where she learned to fly planes. By the time she climbed into the cockpit for her record-breaking flight, age thirty-three years, she had already logged some quarter million pilot miles. Markham was realistic about the dangers of flying during the dawn of aviation, and of flying as a woman alone, but outweighing all of that were the freedom and transformative solitude that it allowed. She alluded to that in her thrilling memoir *West with the Night*. While cruising over the southern tip of Ireland during her historic flight, she remarked on some of the last rain-drenched lights she'd see for many hours after heading over black water: "I am above them and the plane roars in a sobbing world, but it imparts no sadness to me. I feel the security of solitude, the exhilaration of escape. So long as I can see the lights and imagine the people walking under them, I feel selfishly triumphant, as if I have eluded care and left even the small sorrow of rain in other hands."

Flying alone across the Atlantic, and in particularly foul weather, obviously took tremendous courage and confidence. Likewise, while it's seldom death-defying, solitude in any form requires all of us to muster up some moxie. That's because there's a lot, particularly in our modern world, indicating that we should *run from* time alone, that it is a problem to be solved, a waste of time, or, paradoxically, an illegitimate indulgence. According to some experts and many headlines, many of us are enduring an epidemic of loneliness (even in the days prior to the epic social strangeness inflicted by COVID-19). Some current books and media coverage are fraught with misconceptions about solitude, presuming that those who want or need it are introverted or socially inept or that one's alone space is a zone of nothingness (a zero-sum game). In popular culture, in particular, we are led to believe that solitude is something to avoid or endure; just consider the sad singletons desperate to connect with a mate, like Bridget Jones or the *Sex in the City* clan. Women in particular are saddled with the stereotype of aspiring to be social butterflies, in communication with others 24/7. (We three researchers/authors know from our own experiences that this isn't true and regularly crave and pursue time apart from our loved ones.)

Little in mainstream society today indicates that when we choose it, solitude can be wonderful, even transformative. Instead, all that talk of

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loneliness in modern life can make us think that solitude is a disease requiring treatment, and perhaps cured by avoiding solo moments altogether. Until recently, science has supported those assumptions because decades of prevailing research have focused on humans as "social animals" and on the fact that fulfilling relationships are integral to happiness. Being social has been highly valued by most researchers, and society has devoted its resources to understanding, developing, and embracing relationships with others. Researchers have studied relationships for so long that we now know a lot about how those interactions affect well-being. We know exactly what we mean by "close relationships" (romantic partners, parents), "conversations" (sit down and talk), and "horizontal" (friend) or "vertical" (boss) relationships.

From that work, we have also learned a lot about solitude in the extremes, for example, for prisoners and astronauts and in early childhood development (a different kind of captive and space cadet!). While there is value in studying the effects of alone time on the very young and among isolated people, including some elders, that laser focus has left a gaping hole in terms of what role solitude plays for everyone else in the middle, and in our everyday lives. In an effort to fill that gap, we draw from many of the major theories that have formed psychology as we know it to understand the role of social relationships *and* the relationship with the self. Those include developmental psychology (research on children and adolescents), humanistic psychology (writings by psychoanalysts or research related to meaning and *self-determination theory*), social psychology (research related to societal norms), and environmental psychology (research related to nature).

From that research, we know that just as we have physical needs, we also have mental ones. Just as our bodies need food and water to sustain us, to help us grow and strengthen, our minds need the experience of relatedness with others (for some people, this includes a kinship with nature) *and* autonomy within ourselves. Those gains are not muscle and bone but their mental equivalents. That relatedness need is an easy concept to understand, and it probably comes as no surprise to hear that we need to feel close and connected to others to feel content. Even in a book about solitude, we can't ignore the importance of relatedness to others, and we consider in these pages what our need to connect with others means for the time we spend alone, and vice versa.

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Basic psychological research and theories tell us that, yes, other people matter hugely to contentment. "Social" is an inherently positive concept, while its flip side – unsocial or merely alone – is viewed negatively, even stigmatized. So, by comparison, scientists have spent very little time and resources on understanding the role of solitude, and the power of positive solitude in particular, in shaping our lives. These mysteries have never really been grappled with, and that was intriguing to the three of us researchers/authors. Because, in reality, the social sciences are not always about the "social" world, and in our own professional (and personal) journeys, we have been drawn to concepts like "personal growth" and "self-connection" and to how the nonsocial environment, such as we experience in the beauty and power of nature, can impact those aspects of our lives. In short, we believe that there is much more to well-being than our social relationships.

When we pushed beyond the body of existing research on being alone, which was limited for our purposes of understanding *positive* solitude, we found ourselves in a territory uncharted and explored by few others. That's why we put together the Solitude Project – both a physical and a virtual space – and have spent several years researching what time alone means to different people around the world. As a result, we had to draw a new map of what our outer and inner landscapes could look like when we make solitude a sought-after destination. That was a daunting but exciting space to be in, and what we learned from our research subjects has revolutionized the study of solitude in some ways – and made us leaders in understanding and interpreting what everyday solitude looks like for people on diverse paths and in different phases of life. Our research participants' perceptions continue to guide the direction of our work and to impact who we are and how we spend our days.

We three came to the study of solitude with very different backgrounds and expertise, which we believe combine to offer unique perspectives on solitude from the dawn of humanity to the present day. Netta is a social psychologist and university professor who has spent much of her career focused, paradoxically, on relationships and motivation. The shift to looking at individuals spending time alone was, therefore, a big one. The idea that we each have the power to think about and to regulate ourselves in solitude, and the fact that time alone

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can have a profound influence on who we are out in the world (including in our relationships), changed her identity as a researcher and her understanding of solitude in her own life.

Thuy-vy is a professor of psychology who has been researching solitude since she got hooked on the topic during her graduate studies years ago. Like Netta, Thuy-vy uses rigorous experimentation and scientific understanding gleaned from that process to try to improve the quality of our lives. Using that quantitative or "hard science" approach, scientists learn through statistics – objective evidence that describes and explains phenomena. But to truly understand people's lived experiences in solitude, both Thuy-vy and Netta realized that they had to push beyond the hard data to get at why solitude has become an essential yet overlooked part of daily life.

Realizing the limitations of a quantitative approach in capturing the richness of individual wisdom and experiences, they recruited Heather, a longtime journalist and science writer, to help gather and interpret those conversations with research subjects. Our shared goal was to conduct *qualitative* research with three objectives: letting people from all walks of life speak for themselves about their solitude, analyzing those contributions, and describing those findings for the benefit of a wider audience. The result of that work, in part, is this book.

Despite our different paths as researchers, our destination was the same: an understanding of what role solitude plays – and can play – in the daily lives of ordinary people like us. We three have experienced the push and pull (mostly pull!) of solitude in our own lives and know its value for each of us, individually, in helping to establish our personal identity and beliefs. (We side with Beryl Markham and countless others who have seen, and presently see, a universe all their own in solitude.) But that wasn't enough, and we needed to hear from as many others as possible, and over time, dozens of our research subjects – whose voices you'll hear throughout this book – have offered myriad insights that have changed the way we authors view time alone.

Learning about many people's ordinary experiences of solitude turned out to offer, in a way, some of the most extraordinary insights. In talking to a diverse group of people, including a nineteen-year-old Black, male medical student in South Africa and a white, female retiree

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in Scotland, we heard some remarkable similarities in the potential to recenter and reenergize oneself in solitude. We also heard differences about the meaning of that time in different phases of life. We began to see that solitude *happens* throughout life, whether or not one specifically seeks it, and we recognize that most of us can be better positioned to be resilient in that space and to maximize its benefits.

It may surprise some people to learn that the average adult spends nearly one-third of their waking life alone (that proportion was rising even before COVID-19 pandemic restrictions became part of daily life), and even more as we get older. Also, the number of people living on their own now is higher than at any point in history, and in general, fewer people in wealthy countries are now marrying or living in a cohabiting union, and if they do, it is later in life. Whether they landed there by chance or choice, that trend toward solo living is seen by some as a crisis of well-being and as the unraveling of our social fabric. Remember, that's because we are taught from the time we're in diapers that being alone is bad, and that message is reinforced throughout our lives. As a result, loneliness and solitude – two unrelated states and ideas – have gotten muddled together.

It's true that the experience of being alone can be painful or, at the very least, unwelcome for some people. To them, solitude is a place where dark thoughts bubble up, where we can get lost in feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy, or disconnectedness. We recognize that, at times, fending for ourselves can be intimidating. All the authors of this book have moved around the world for work and school and have endured lonely, uneasy periods. But simply spending less time alone or more time with others isn't a "cure" for loneliness. As many of us know, we can feel deeply lonely even in the company of others. In the coming chapters, we talk about what really causes loneliness and how to avoid its pitfalls in solitude.

While it wasn't our original intention, we largely researched and wrote this book at a unique time in history – a moment that reinforced many common misconceptions about time alone. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world to greater and lesser degrees in early 2020 and came to be defined by who we were with or without. The quantity, and not so much the quality, of our relationships and our alone

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time was in the spotlight, and there was a tremendous emphasis during that time on how we could stay *in touch* with one another. By contrast, there was little focus on how we could be our own touchstones, and few experts suggested that the open space of alone time represented an opportunity for well-being. Instead, the message we got was that there was danger from the virus "out there" but also "in here," in our silent, private, vacant places, where loneliness could creep in and hobble us.

While the pandemic hadn't relented completely at the time of writing, in many parts of the world, we have been returning to a more familiar, if changed, landscape. In the best-case scenario, that period of being physically cut off from much of what we knew has been a break from the treadmill of ordinary life, an opportunity even, in which to reprioritize. Do we really need to spend time on those "filler" friendships? Do our kids need to have every minute of free time scheduled? Before the pandemic, many of us were feeling like we were in constant contact with friends, family, and coworkers (and then came the Zoom calls!). We now know that there are many more quality ways we could be spending that time – listening to music, reading, learning a language, sewing, baking, and on and on.

As we expand on in the coming chapters, we don't see solitude as a threat to our need to belong; rather, we see the two as complementary parts of our lives, each offering different benefits. Unlike a solitary polar bear roaming the snowy tundra or colony-dwelling honeybees, humans are a hybrid species. We require a balance of solo and social (whether we're so-called introverts or extroverts), and we don't have to pick one over the other as we're often led to believe. The facts, insights, and stories of solitude in this book show that the "solo self" is not at odds with the outside world but is fully compatible with the "social self." The assumption is that time alone fragments society, but at its best, it can be a unifying force that positively shapes our understanding of our own minds and others' and transforms our social circles for the better. Solitude is an opportunity to occasionally shut out the noise of other people's lives and gain an understanding of our inner worlds while offering a chance to perhaps, paradoxically, improve the quality of our relationships.

Ideally, solitude is not a shift *away* from others but an intentional move *toward* our best possible selves. Only when we make the decision to

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focus on ourselves in a meaningful way can we dispel and transform misconceptions about solitude in our own minds. That's important because, as critical as healthy outside relationships are, our number one relationship should be with ourselves. Drilling down to the core of who we each are is critical to understanding important aspects of our being, like what our true beliefs are, where our priorities lie, and what our goals should be. As researchers, we share a passion for understanding how people relate to their core selves – the most important values, emotions, and beliefs we have – and we find solitude stories told to us by research subjects both fascinating and informative in that regard.

Those insights highlight an alternative narrative, spanning history and cultures, that enforces the concept that spending time alone matters deeply for transcending social conventions, gaining wisdom, and identifying a personally meaningful path. In this volume, in fact, we take a rare multidisciplinary look at what solitude has meant throughout human history and what it means now. With the help of historians, philosophers, writers, anthropologists, and neuroscientists, among others, we break down solitude to understand its component parts – and then we build it back up. Through that process, we begin to see that there is something sacred (not in the religious sense, unless you want it to be) in the decision to disengage from society, for however short a period.

Alone time – which, remember, you have been doing your whole life to some extent – has been misunderstood and, we believe, drastically underestimated. Research on the benefits of solitude is still in its early stages, but what we know so far from experimentation is that alone time can have many perks, from relaxation and recharging to problem solving and emotion regulation. Our research also shows that authentic solitude (when we are truly ourselves) is key to well-being because it is the zone where we best connect with our values, interests, and emotions. In that space, there can be truth, sincerity, independence, and intimacy. We can choose solitude for any number of reasons, and those can shift from one minute to the next. Regardless, we believe that time well spent in solitude is critical to embracing an insightful, meaningful, and peaceful life. Our research also points to how we can learn to be comfortable and more resilient in solitude, and we share that information as well.

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One theme that has arisen time and again in our discussions of solitude is another myth we seek to debunk: when we can imagine solitude as positive, we tend to think that excelling in aloneness is a holy grail, or lost art, that can be mastered only by retreating to a secluded Tibetan monastery. But our research paints a much different portrait, one of opportunity – the advantages of solitude are readily attainable in our daily lives if we choose that path. As researchers, we have learned that there is no universal perfection in solitude, no right way to do it; there is only the individual exerting their personhood there, and that's enough. As the architects of our own solo space, we can build a shelter to house the inner resources that help us make sense of our world.

Although it doesn't require monastic devotion, pursuing solitude does require embracing its inherent paradox – that it's a space where we may be limited to our own thoughts and desires but at the same time have zero boundaries containing us. Ultimately, seeking solitude is an act of self-care that anyone can undertake, but choosing it can be a radical act for some people. In that place, we can learn to recognize that solitude is not the absence of anything, not really, but rather the presence of everything. And when we do that, we can see that what we used to think of as punishment becomes possibility.

Like pioneering aviator Beryl Markham, any of us may find ourselves in solitude and feel, at times, as if we are unaccompanied pilots bumping around in the dark, a stranger to ourselves, alone without a guide. But we can also know solitude as a solo flight where our wits and wisdom, our tools and training, can be tapped to help us along the way. Markham wrote, "Flight is but momentary escape from the eternal custody of earth." We can see solitude that same way, as a chance to disconnect from tethers, as an opportunity to lift off and be free with frivolity or intensity, and to learn, examine, play, and dream.

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