

SOLITUDE – A return to the Self

by ANTHONY STORR (Free Press, 1988)

This is a time in our country when many of us find ourselves spending more time alone. This book is a psychology text that was gifted to me in 1995, and I have picked up many times over the years. I believe it has something to us at this time, in terms of the importance of solitude and what can happen in those quiet times when we are alone. Solitude does not necessarily mean that we are physically alone but that we are in a place where we are able to be with ourselves. Solitude give us a perspective that can be hard to find when we're busy.

"The capacity to be alone is a valuable resource, it enables men and women to get in touch with their deepest feelings, to come to terms with loss, to sort out their ideas; to change attitudes. To grow our imaginations."

Anthony Storr looks at what can happen when we are alone, how we discover our creativity, pursue interests that matter to us, work on projects that we enjoy, cultivate our imagination and make sense of our lives. He explores the lives of very familiar artists, writers and musicians for whom creativity was largely a solitary pursuit.

Sometimes silence and rest speak to us more powerfully than effortful problem solving. Solutions often arise in their own time when we let our problems be, when we walk and actually notice what's happening around us. Sometimes it can be hearing a robin sing or children be children, or remembering something we are grateful for that restores our perspective on our lives.

Coming to terms with loss is difficult, painful, and largely a solitary process. Being alone is important for people who are trying to come to terms with very difficult experiences of trauma and loss in their lives. Grief can only partially be shared.

As a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Storr knows full well how important close affectionate relationships are in our lives. In no way does he understate just how critical they are. In fact for most of us, it is the security of knowing that we have someone to go back to that makes it safe to be alone. But he feels we've idealised the importance of relationships as the only way to happiness and salvation, and neglected the equally important role that learning to be alone plays in our development. Idealising intimacy and close relationships does them a huge injustice: *"to concentrate so exclusively on personal relationships, is to put more weight on them than they can bear."*

The capacity to be alone is a skill we can learn. Ideally, we need to build the capacity to be alone in our children. We nurture a capacity to be alone in children, not by abandoning them for periods, but by being present in a quiet way and allowing them to play undisturbed. It is being able to "be alone in the presence of his or her mother" that enables a child to explore and grow their imagination. What we tend to do instead is to our children is to put them under remorseless pressure to socialise.

We expend extraordinary energy teaching children to be sociable. "Don't bite", "play nicely", "games are more fun if you keep the rules". We send them to nursery partly so they can learn to interact with their peers; we are angry with them if they are rude and we supervise them with an almost bizarre degree of anxiety. Meanwhile we give them no training or support in the apparently difficult and "unnatural" skill of being alone.

How different it would be for the struggling parent to make it a reward for virtue – "You have been so helpful/good/polite/whatever all afternoon, now you can go to your room and be alone for a bit as a treat" – and never a punishment.

The capacity to be alone is a reflection of an inner security which has been built up over a child's early years. We're not talking about a child who is painfully isolated, fearful and lives in a withdrawn state. We're talking about a child needed some solitary time to exercise their imagination and express their personal creativity. Being alone is important for the child (and later the adult) to allow them get to know their true inner feelings. As adults we can also experience being alone with our thoughts in the company of a close friend who is happy to work silently alongside us and leave us be as we immerse ourselves in some project.

"Being able to get in touch with one's deepest thoughts and feelings, and providing time for them to regroup themselves into new formations and combinations, are important aspects of the creative process as well as a way of relieving tension and helping our mental health."

Enforced solitude is one of the harshest methods of human torture. To find oneself entirely helpless in the hands of malignant persecutors has to be one of the worst nightmares we can experience. Inexplicable fatigue, apathy, loss of emotional control, and despair are common. Prisoners find uncertainty is the worst torment. Depression, hallucinations and self-mutilation are common reactions. Symptoms can persist for years after exiting solitary confinement. Inability to resume intimacy as a result of complete breakdown of basic trust in people.

Loneliness and solitude

Loneliness is something many people have struggled with over the past year. At some level we are all lonely. What has been especially hard over the past year has been the social isolation which has deprived people of touch, of emotional support, of feedback that might let them know they're actually doing OK, that what they feel is normal. But the loneliness associated with serious health risks is not automatically solved by social contact. In fact the link between loneliness and poor health was found mostly in people who had lots of social contact.

There are two types of loneliness; A loneliness that cannot be resolved or taken away, but can be only be known and faced. The other is a more familiar social loneliness which arises from a lack of social contact, or the inability to "be with" people even when they are present and available to us in our lives.

There are moments in all our lives when we realise other people can only get us so far. That however valuable their guidance and support may be, the ultimate responsibility for how I live my life is mine alone. No matter how close we may be to another, there is a point beyond which they cannot accompany us; there is a basic aloneness to existence that must be faced and cannot be avoided. Coping to terms with this requires courage. But when we do, we find we have much freer perspective on our personal and social lives.

REVIEWS ...

"Bring excellent news for those who, whatever their reasons for doing so, live alone" Spectator

"A combination of gentleness and authority, that is exceptionally absorbing and thought provoking" Guardian

"Mr Storr redresses a balance that badly needed to be redressed and threads his way past current clichés to an admirably sane conclusion." New York Times

THE CHOICE: *Even in hell hope can flower*

by EDITH EGER (Penguin, 2017)

When *The Choice* was recommended to me by my book club, I wasn't at all enthusiastic about reading it. But when I did, I found it as gripping as any thriller I'd ever read, as moving a story as I can remember, and as satisfying an ending as one could hope for. In fact, it turned out to be one of the happiest books I've read this year.

Marian Keyes agrees with me: "I can't describe to you how powerful this book is" (from back cover)

This is a memoir written by Edith Eger at ninety years of age, who spent a year in Auschwitz, when she was 16. As a budding ballerina she was made to dance by Josef Mengele which probably spared her from death. The horrors of Auschwitz didn't break her but the trauma she experienced remained with her long after liberation.

Her past haunted her for years. It was a wound she carried inside, a sorrow so deep that for years she wasn't able to speak of it. She had all the classic symptoms of trauma: anxious dizzy feelings every time she heard a siren, or heavy footsteps, or shouting men. This is how she describes trauma:

"a nearly constant feeling in my gut that something is wrong, or that something terrible is about to happen, the automatic fear responses in my body telling me to run away, to take cover, to hide myself from the danger that is everywhere."

For most of her adulthood, she thought her survival depended on "keeping the past and its darkness locked away." She ended up in America in her 30s and did everything to keep her past hidden. In time she realised that in choosing to keep her past a secret, she was choosing not to be free. "I had my secret, and my secret had me".

If 'Solitude' is about our need to be alone with ourselves, 'The Choice' is a book about the how we find the freedom from the past, to be ourselves in the present. Whereas Storr's *Solitude* is written out of a broadly European Zeitgeist - which the accent is on tragedy, human limitation, Edith Eger's "The Choice" has an unmistakably 'New World' feel. Rather than dwell on the tragic, it speaks to our potential to grow and make a better life for ourselves, however difficult our past may have been.

It's a gripping read; it doesn't gloss over the horrors of but neither does it dwell on them. In fact, her life was marked by several traumas, some which happened before Auschwitz and many which happened after her time in Auschwitz.

"Auschwitz was hell" she said in a recent interview. "We lived in a state of perpetual fear. If you touched the guards in any way you were shot; If you tried to escape you were electrocuted." It was important for her across several decades of her adult life, to connect with these memories and feel their impact.

"You can't heal what you don't feel". So don't over-medicate your sorrow or your rage but don't hold on to them either."

What kept her going in Auschwitz? One thought she held onto and called up when she was most terrified, was something her mother had once said to her: 'No one can take from you what you hold in your mind'. There was a piece of her soul that she held onto and gave to nobody. In Storr's book, he talks about the observation made by Bruno Bettelheim, a psychiatrist who was a long term prisoner in two camps, that those who died were those who had abandoned any attempt at personal autonomy, who acquiesced to their captors dehumanising control.

When asked recently what was the most important tool she relied on to get her through Auschwitz, she answered "Curiosity - I always wanted to know what's going to happen next".

Edith's book is not preachy; it isn't telling us what we should do. It's showing us what is possible for those of us with difficult pasts. In terms of recovery, Edith has walked the walk; she embodies a reassuring truth about human beings. That whatever pain or sorrows we encounter, they do not in themselves have the power to destroy us. Because we have within us a far greater power to heal and be made whole.

What does it mean to recover from a trauma such as Auschwitz? "I don't forget the past, I haven't overcome it. I came to terms with it. I don't live in Auschwitz anymore, I live in the present."

"We are all likely to be victimised in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimisation. It comes from the outside. In

contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimisation. We develop a victim's mind – a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive and without healthy limits or boundaries. We become our own jailors when we choose to live in the confines of the victim's mind. We cannot choose to live a life free of hurt. But we can choose to be free, to escape the past, no matter what befalls us, and to embrace the possible"

At 53 she became a licenced psychologist in California and went on to become a gifted Jungian psychotherapist. What she says to practicing psychotherapists is that you cannot heal in others what you haven't come to terms with in herself. She is still alive and has three children, five grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren. Family is a strong theme running through this book.

Edith wrote it to help each of us to become free of our failures and fears, our anger and mistakes, our regret and unresolved grief. There are countless books written by psychologist detailing paths to freedom. But there is something deeply credible and empowering when you read a story who walked the talk. My overall sense from reading it was "if she can do it, so can I".

REVIEWS

"I can't imagine a more important message for modern times. Edger's book is a triumph, and should be read by all who care about both inner freedom and the future of humanity." New York Times

"The Choice is a gift to humanity. One of those rare novels that you don't want to end and leaves you changed forever." Desmond Tutu
"Compelling and irresistible, a genuine ... life-changer". Good Housekeeping

The only value in reviewing these two books that deal about being alone is to learn something from them that can be helpful in the times we are living through. So here's my take on what Anthony Storr and Edith Eger can teach us about how to be alone:

HOW TO BE ALONE ... IN A TIME OF COVID

T. Bates Jan '21

Solitude is a door you enter to a place with you can connect with your heart. In moments of quiet many important things can happen in terms of healing, integration and finding fresh perspectives on your life.

Grayson Perry, the artist, describes his solitude as "a refuge, a place inside my head, where I can go on my own, and process the world and its complexities; a kind of 'inner shed' in which I can lose myself ... and find myself."

When you first walk into your own "shed", don't expect peace and quiet. The human mind is a study in chaos theory. Mostly, it's like a six year old's birthday party where every child has had too much sugar. "This is mine", "She's not being fair", "Tell him to stop". When you first step into our own company, the noise in your head may be deafening, and you may feel on edge.

It's very easy at this point to be drawn into stories about why you're not good enough and how you can make yourself a better person. If we can resist being carried off by these stories, and stop fighting with ourselves

with yourself, your mind will eventually settle. Kindness is essential. We are all, as the poet Louis MacNeice wrote, “a jumble of opposites’.

Anthony Storr had a simple phrase to let go our stories and nagging thoughts: “*There I go again*”. This is not the time to analyse our lives. This is quiet time. Edith Eger says: Don't try to understand things, that's do much in your head; go to the heart and say to yourself “sounds like you're feeling ...”

Check in on how your body is doing. Notice if there is any tension or discomfort. Just see if you can let go some of the tension you are holding.

Next, see if you can shift your inside from what's happening inside you to what's happening around you. The wind, the sunlight, clouds gathering on the horizon. Your feet crunching on the frost. Allow your attention to move from one thing to the next. As you follow the flow of your perceptions, your mind settles even more. A recent study found that taking a fifteen minute ‘Awe Walk’ at least once a week (where a person is instructed to look for anything interesting or amazing in their surroundings) destressed people and changed how they saw themselves (UCSF, Sept 21, 20). When Edith Eger was asked for she survived extremely tough times in her life, she answered “One word, curiosity”. Be curious about what's happening and be open to being surprised by what happens next.

This is solitude. You're not trying to fix anything. You're allowing your mind to settle, you stop fighting with yourself and allow the squabbling children in your head to quieten down. And perhaps then you may see your problems in a new light. The answers to the difficulties we are facing are rarely simple, but a calm and clear mind can point us in the right direction.

Wordsworth wrote once: “There is a dark inscrutable workmanship that reconciles discordant elements, make them cling together in one society.” Being alone and being quiet also allows our minds to ‘reconcile discordant elements’ in our lives. To accept and integrate experiences that may have been left out in the cold because they don't easily fit in with the picture we had of ourselves. Time alone can result in us tearing up the old picture and seeing our lives on a much larger canvas.

When I think of solitude, I think of Paul Simon. His ‘shed’, as he turned 21, was the downstairs bathroom in the family home in New Jersey. Around midnight, after his parents had gone to bed, he liked to lock himself in there with his guitar. He would turn off the lights and turn on the taps. The sound of running water soothed him. The tiles gave his playing a lovely echo. He went there, he said, “To play and to dream”. One night he was working on a piece of music he liked, but he had no words to go with it. At 3AM, he looked around and the words came to him. “Hello Darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again”. When he first recorded “Sound of Silence” with Columbia, he called the album “Wednesday 3AM”.

Our own SAMUEL Beckett said all good writing: “All our words are stolen from silence.”

Now I'm not saying that every time you take a walk or lock yourself into the bathroom, you're going to re-emerge with some amazing work of Art. What these two books are saying is that learning to be alone, taking time to enjoy your own company, in whatever way is most comfortable for you, is a creative act. And something will always happen. Your job is to let go your old stories and be open to being surprised.

END