On Solitude

When was the last time you spent an extended amount of time alone? Not just without the physical company of others, but also without any virtual company—that is, without those whom you connect with via texts, e-mails, instant messages, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter. Time alone is surely among the scarcest resources in our networked times.

The difficulty we face in finding quiet places for reflection would not have surprised the nineteenth century's most famous loner, Henry David Thoreau. He would, however, have been shocked by how connected we are to a virtual world, as opposed to the real world, or ourselves. In 1845, Thoreau wanted more time to think and write than living in Concord, Massachusetts, afforded him, so he took up residence in a small cabin he built himself on the shore of Walden Pond, a little more than a mile outside of town, and lived there for two years, two months, and two days. In the book *Walden*, he describes his experiment living apart from society—"living off the grid," in today's terms—as a decision "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Solitude for Thoreau was not deprivation; it was a choice that allowed time and space for introspection, self-reflection, discovery, and writing. Indeed, one of the topics he reflected on, wrote about, and devoted a chapter of *Walden* to was solitude. For him, the aloneness experienced by someone deep in thought is quite different from physical isolation or social alienation. "A man thinking or working," he writes, "is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows." Then Thoreau compares the solitude and sociability of the farmer to that of the college student:

> The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervish in the desert. The farmer can work alone in the field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome, because

> he is employed; but when he comes home at night he cannot sit down in a room alone, at the mercy of his thoughts, but must be where he can "see the folks," and recreate, and, as he thinks, remunerate himself for his day's solitude; and hence he wonders how the student can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui and "the blues"; but he does not realize that the student, though in the house, is still at work in *his* field, and chopping in *his* woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the same recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it.

In this passage, Thoreau is sympathetic to the farmer who wants company to escape his thoughts after a long day of laboring alone in the field. But Thoreau wants those who perform physical labor to see that *thinking* is the field in which the student works, and that solitude is an essential condition for carrying out sustained mental labor.

If Thoreau is right, then part of being a student is learning to enjoy working alone. Being alone may not be pleasant or easy at the outset, but the concentration required to learn to play the piano, program a computer, or write an introspective essay requires time apart from interruption or the chatter of others' voices.

What happens when we're alone that can't happen when we're in groups? Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson and his collaborators studied the behavior of a range of experts—violinists, chess players, golfers, even college students who study well—and found that the best performers spend significantly more time practicing in solitude. Only when alone can one do what Ericsson calls "deliberate practice"; only when alone can one focus on monitoring and revising the skills that are, at any given level of achievement, just beyond reach. Deliberate practice can't be casual. It can't be faked. It can be done only by people who are genuinely motivated to strive for some higher level of achievement, experience, performance, or understanding. For Thoreau, that higher goal was experiential: he wanted to find a way "to live deliberately."

When successful writers describe their composing processes, they tend to point to some type of deliberate practice, performed in solitude. Some writers are at their most focused and creative just after they wake.

Toni Morrison, for instance, rises and makes coffee in the early morning when the sky is still dark. She sips her coffee and watches the daylight arrive, and then she is ready to write. Other writers slip off to small cottages or shacks near their homes: this is what Russell Banks and Michael Pollan do and what Virginia Woolf, Roald Dahl, and Thoreau did before them. Most of us, of course, don't have a shack of our own, or even a room of our own, but we can still learn from the examples of generations of writers who have found that some form of solitude—a temporary release from noise, worries, and responsibilities—is essential to gaining access to the mysterious creative powers of the imagination and the intellect.

Getting off the grid is much more difficult now than it was in Thoreau's time. When a computer is one's primary writing tool—and also one's library, news source, shopping mall, and social life—it takes virtually superhuman powers of discipline not to open a browser window and fall into clicking on a link or two to take a break from the hard work of composing. It's not just beginning writers who struggle with this temptation: in the acknowledgments page of her book *NW*, novelist Zadie Smith gives credit to two Internet-blocking applications (one called Freedom, the other SelfControl) for "creating the time" she needed in virtual solitude to complete her work. Given the distractions, old and new, that face every writer, what can you do to create the solitude you need to write? It may seem that the only solution is to unplug and move to a cabin off the grid, but there are other solutions—recall Thoreau's axiom that "solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows." Your Walden, in other words, can be anywhere: in a coffee shop, in an apartment complex, in a room next to a commuter train line—anywhere.

When Susan Cain was preparing to write *Quiet*, her book about the hidden power of introverts, she decided she'd work best in a home office. She arranged her study with a neat desk, lots of counter space, and natural light. She had all the privacy one could hope for. Perfect for an introvert, right? It turns out that it wasn't the perfect place for Cain; in fact, she couldn't get started. To escape the isolation, Cain found herself carrying her laptop to a neighborhood café to work among other people who were also hunched over their laptops. Why did this place become Cain's primary workplace? The café, she says,

> was social, yet its casual, come-and-go-as-you-please nature left me free from unwelcome entanglements and able to "deliberately practice" my writing. I could toggle back and forth between observer and social actor as much as I wanted. I could also control my environment. Each day I chose the location of my table—in the center of the room or along the perimeter—depending on whether I wanted to be seen as well as to see. And I had the option to leave whenever I wanted peace and quiet to edit what I'd written that day.

Cain, who treasures being alone, found the kind of solitude she needed, as well as inspiration and stimulation, in a room of other writers. Solitude is not measured by the counter space separating the writer from her fellow coffee drinkers; it is measured in the writer's relationship to her work.

Practice Session One

Reflecting

For two days, observe and take notes about your experiences with solitude. Don't judge; just describe.

When and where do you have the most time during the day for sustained thought and work?

How do you respond to extended time working alone? How do you respond to time alone when you are not working?

What are your typical distractions? Is music a distraction or an aid to focus? Do different kinds of music affect your focus differently?

How often do you make calls, text, tweet, check e-mail, surf the Web, or check Facebook?

What distractions are an unavoidable part of your day?

What other distractions are avoidable?