

Preparation for Aloneness

All the lonely people, where do they all come from?

The Beatles, "Eleanor Rigby"

“Aloneness” is fundamental to the human condition. Henri Nouwen, in *Bread for the Journey*, states, “All human beings are alone. No other person will completely feel like we do, think like we do, act like we do. Each of us is unique.” Our language and our thought, however, have different views for this state of being alone: “aloneness” is a relatively neutral term, “loneliness” suggests an undesirable and isolated state, and “solitude” describes a more contented and peaceful condition. Florence Falk, in *On My Own*, describes the psychology of being alone as a “vast spectrum”: “our experience of aloneness can veer from the loss and emptiness of isolation on one end to the spaciousness and plenitude of solitude on the other.”

Many psychologists suggest that our response to being alone is a component of the basic personality trait called “extraversion / introversion.” An extravert (also spelled “extrovert”) is more comfortable in groups, while an introvert is more comfortable alone. This doesn’t mean that an introvert can never enjoy other people or that an extravert can’t stand being alone—it’s more about how a person recharges. Introverts typically need solitude to recharge their energies and sense of wellbeing; extraverts recharge in the presence of others.

Culture also influences our experience of being alone. In China, an individual is rarely alone, and a life sentence of solitary confinement is considered a worse punishment than death. In low population situations such as the Outback in Australia and early North America, an absence of companions was often seen as an opportunity for growth, so that youth were sent on solitary quests to discover themselves. Yet community-oriented cultures like China or Japan do not equate with extraversion—both cultures tend toward introversion. American culture values both “rugged individualism” and extraversion, an outgoing group-oriented personality.

Some thinkers believe that the American sense of community has declined over the past century, leading to a deep sense of loneliness. Robert Wuthnow, in *Sharing the Journey*, concludes, “Ours is a highly fluid society. Many of us lead anonymous lives. We no longer live in the same neighborhoods all our lives or retain close ties with our kin.” Recently, texting and Internet social networks have become our community, but such tools may lead us to more isolation. Sherry Turkle, in *Alone Together*, suggests that “Digital connections . . . may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”

In our spiritual lives as well, aloneness can lead to numbing isolation or to enriching solitude. Many find their spiritual lives nourished by activities of solitude like meditation and prayer. Ron Rolheiser, a Catholic priest, reminds us that “there is a certain inner work that we can only do by ourselves, alone, in silence.” Yet Rolheiser goes on to say that religious communities, both large groups and small, are also a source of spiritual growth.

The question is whether we let our aloneness become loneliness or whether we allow it to lead us into solitude. *Henri Nouwen*

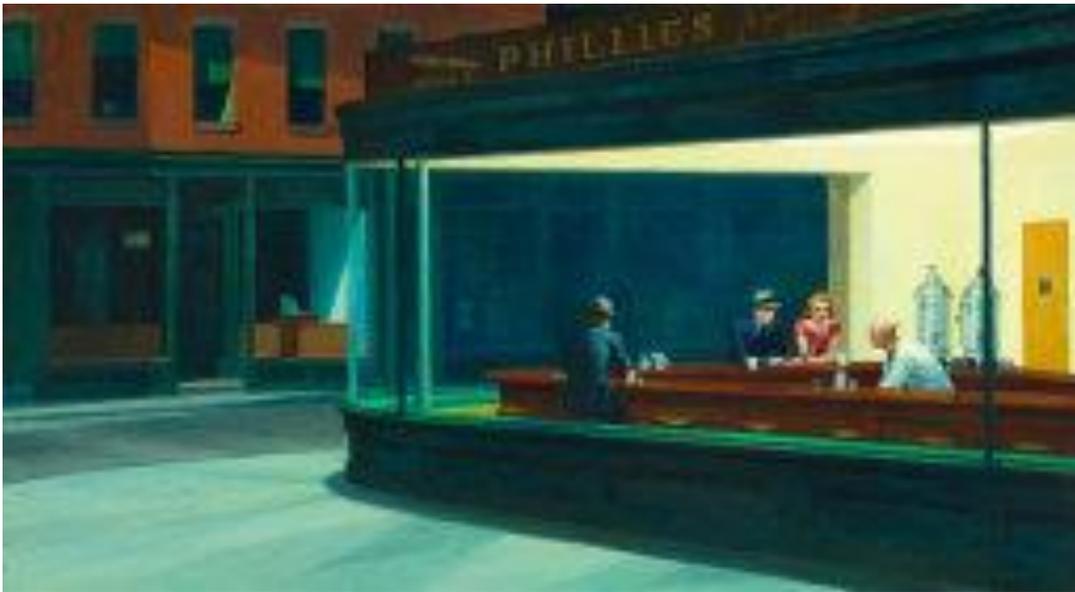
We never touch but at points. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

I have never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. *Henry David Thoreau*

Machines *can* dull the pangs of loneliness. One of the principal jobs of personal electronics is to distract us or to provide prosthetic substitutes for human company. In the near future, they will become much more adept at filling even the most intimate human needs. *Giles Slade*

And the Japanese know that, oftentimes, the best way to honor you is to *leave you alone*. They honor personal space, perhaps because they have always had so little of it. . . . The Japanese seem to operate on the assumption that *space and time* are what people want—the introvert assumption. *Laurie Helgoe, Introvert Power*

It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness It could be the whole human condition. *Edward Hopper, referring to his paintings, many of which depict stark, lonely scenes.*



Edward Hopper, Nighthawks (1942)

Questions to Ponder

1. How do you balance time alone and time spent with others? This question will be shared with the group.
2. When in your childhood do you remember being alone? When alone were you safe or in danger? What did you discover about yourself?
3. Consider how your personality type (extravert/introvert) may affect how you feel about being alone. One definition of extraverts and introverts is how they recharge. How do you recharge, alone or with others?
4. Reflect on a time recently when you were not with anyone else for more than a few hours. How did you feel during this time?
5. Do you want to change how you react to aloneness?
6. Has technology changed your relationship with being alone?
7. In your spiritual life, do you find solitude or community more valuable?