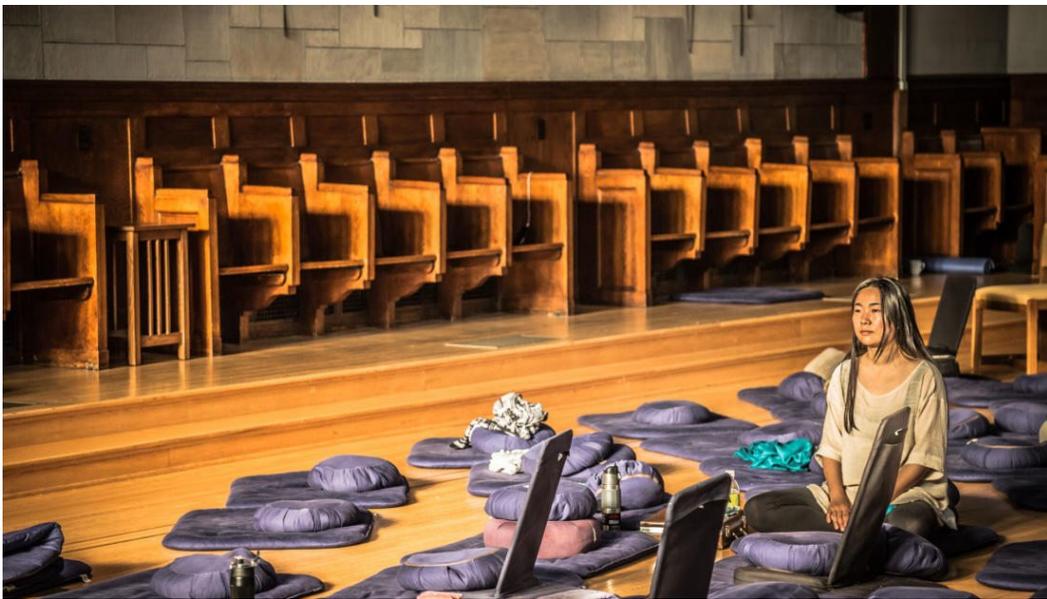


Listening to Silence, Hearing the Unspeakable

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5 mins read



Quiet contemplation can be a pathway to peace and wisdom.

By Jennifer Stitt

Today we are launching a new series on solitude by Jennifer Stitt, a historian of modern American thought, culture, and politics working on her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This piece on silence and solitude is the first of five short essays that will be published monthly.

In 1852, Herman Melville described the dark depravity of silence. “All profound things, and emotions of things are preceded and attained by Silence,” Melville wrote. “It is the most awful thing in all nature.” For Melville, there was no sanctuary in silence, no peace or wisdom to be found in calm quietude. It was, despite its profundity, a state of hopelessness and a denunciation of a godless, “accursed” world. Nearly destitute, buried beneath the burden of his unsold and unread books, his failures fueled his fear that he was, in the end, alone, unheard—that the mute emptiness was all that there was. From silence, Melville despondently declared, “those imposter philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?”

Melville stood alone, terrified, on the brink of oblivion, and heard only the echo of his own desolation. But many other thinkers have discovered solace in the “wise silence” of solitude. For them, silence rendered refuge, vital reprieve from the babel of insistent voices that incessantly aspired to persuade. In silent contemplation, one could finally hear oneself think.

A decade before Melville, in 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson described silence as an entire world unto itself, that soundless space where the whole soul of man resided, where “every part and particle is equally related,” and where the “common heart” simultaneously embraced

each individual's particularity and made humanity "one with all other."

But describing such spiritual unity was, even for a poet of Emerson's talents, nearly impossible. "Language cannot paint it," he wrote. "It is too subtle. It is undefinable, unmeasurable; but we know that it pervades and contains us." And yet, despite such ineffability, Emerson persistently probed the hidden depths of man's transcendence. He provoked his readers to consider their own divinity carefully and exhorted them to cultivate habits of solitary contemplation, habits which would awaken the soul to itself, to others, and, ultimately, to the wonders and mysteries of the world.

Emerson taught that revelation "of all nature and all thought" was accessible to everyone; "the learned," he asserted, "have no monopoly on wisdom." Just as every individual could learn to sit quietly and listen, every individual could also learn to hear—truly hear—the voice of God. He who would know "what the great God speaketh," Emerson proclaimed, must "'go into his closet and shut the door,' as Jesus said. . . . He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men's devotion." By discarding the inauthentic authority of mass man, the unexchangeable self—the soul, as Emerson understood it—could enter into communion with the infinite and divine. "The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure," he stated, "to the collective universal mind" where we all have a spirit-home, where "we see and know each other," and where society is made possible.

At the very moment that Emerson entered into his quiet closet, his friend and disciple Henry David Thoreau fled the bustle of Concord, Massachusetts, and built a cabin on the northwestern shore of Walden Pond. In his journal, Thoreau recounted listening to the "fertile and eloquent" silence while meditatively walking through the woods: "I wish to hear the silence of the night, for the silence is something positive and to be heard. . . . The silence rings; it is musical and thrills me. A night in which the silence was audible. I hear the unspeakable." As with Emerson, Thoreau's solitude filled his soul with spiritual satisfaction. "Silence is the communing of a

conscious soul with itself,” he avowed. “If the soul attend for a moment to its own infinity, then there is silence. She is audible to all men, at all times, in all places.”

Dissatisfied with an increasingly disenchanting, mechanistic world, Thoreau lamented the clamor and claptrap of an increasingly industrializing America. As he so forcefully put it in *Walden* (1854):

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly.

In silence and solitude, then, Thoreau recovered a realm that was still enchanted, where he could bear witness to the muted mysteries of the cosmos and to the conscious, contemplative nature of man. He understood that deliberate contemplation spurred deep thought—the sort of slow, serious thinking that allows us to understand our world, to distinguish truth from falsehood.

To be sure, neither Emerson nor Thoreau shunned speech. Both writers were outspoken political participants, and they provided people with a language of protest—however imperfect and incomplete that language might have been. In their own time, they implored Americans to stand up against the sins of slavery and war; later, their writings would inspire a generation of activists across the world to throw off the chains of colonialism, racism, and sexism, and to attempt to build better systems of government. What they repudiated was not speech as such. It was, rather, the thoughtless repetition of slogans and clichés—the empty, fast talk of the thousands of city

slickers who blindly hurdled headlong into the unconscious conformity of the crowd.

In our own culture of hyperactive distraction, we spend hours every day sidetracked, surfing from website to website, impulsively clicking links, skimming more and more text more and more quickly, compulsively sending messages and status updates into the electronic ether, shouting louder and louder in order to be heard. Against this cacophony, we too often forget to pause. We go days, weeks, months—even years—without engaging in silent reflection. We have lost the equilibrium that Emerson and Thoreau struck, that balance between thought and action, between the quiet calm of contemplation and the symphonic movement of society.

Solitary seekers such as Emerson and Thoreau show us that silence can be more than the awful absence of sound. Silence is not always a reflection of the world's wretchedness, as Melville would have had it. Quiet contemplation can instead become a pathway to our deepest, truest selves. It can lead us beyond ourselves, into the company of others, and toward an appreciation of the many marvels and miracles of the world. In the end, Emerson and Thoreau remind us that, if we dare to dive deeply into the soundless sea of solitary contemplation, we might just discover new islands of thought and meaning. We simply have to sit silently, inhabit the stillness, and listen.

***Jennifer Stitt** is a historian of modern American thought, culture, and politics who earned a B.A. and M.A. in history from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She's working on her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She lives and writes in Birmingham.*





A Short History of Walking

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6 mins read



Solitary Pilgrimages Can Lead to Social Protests

By Jennifer Stitt

This is part of a series on solitude by Jennifer Stitt, a historian of modern American thought, culture, and politics working on her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This piece on walking and solitude is the second of five short essays that will be published monthly. Read the first installment, “Listening to Silence, Hearing the Unspeakable” [here](#).

Six years after delving into the wilderness of Walden Woods [in search of the silence of solitude](#), Henry David Thoreau delivered a lecture that would develop into one of his most meaningful essays, “Walking, or, The Wild” (1861). Promoting a philosophy of pedestrianism, Thoreau proclaimed, “Every walk is a sort of crusade.” He described the centrality of walking to his daily life, asserting, “I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.”

For Thoreau, walking was not just a physical practice. It was also a spiritual exercise, a pilgrimage into both the self and the world, and it had become central to his thought and writing. “I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows,” he declared. “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest woods, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place.” In 1853, he noted in his journal, “It is worth the while to walk in wet weather; the earth and leaves are strewn with pearls.” Like a pearl diver, Thoreau turned the wilderness into his ocean, collecting treasures from nature’s depths, and from those pearls, he constructed a map of his “inner mindscape.” Walking, he wrote, allows us “to be able to see ourselves, not merely as others see us, but as we are.”

Meandering through the woods deliberately, slowly, lingering hither and thither, mirrored the thinking activity itself, and Thoreau's writing increasingly began to reflect his solitary sojourns. His teacher Ralph Waldo Emerson observed of his pupil, "The relation of body to mind was still finer than we have indicated. . . . The length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house he did not write at all."

Suffocated by the crowd of the city, alienated by its deafening mechanical din, Thoreau found freedom in the solitude of nature again and again and again. But he insisted that his walking away from modernity was not a renunciation of the world; it was not retreat, nor surrender, nor a solipsistic escape from society. His perambulatory crusade was, as he put it, a "reconquering [of the] Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels." Indeed, his walks empowered him to bear witness not just to the world's beauty but also to America's sins. Nature provided him with the space to wrestle with the nation's crimes, to confront the evils of empty materialism, war, and slavery.

Walking made Thoreau's thought possible—and his thought refashioned America's moral landscape. "America is said to be the arena on which the battle of freedom is to be fought," he vented. "Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice?" In the spring of 1851, Boston had capitulated to the South, returning runaway slaves to the chains of bondage under the Fugitive Slave Act. Twenty-five miles away, Thoreau spoke at the Concord Lyceum: "I feel that I owe my audience an apology for speaking to them tonight on any other subject than the Fugitive Slave Law on which every man is bound to express a distinct opinion—but I had prepared myself to speak a word now for Nature—for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture simply civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature." The walker, he went on to explain, remained utterly unfettered in the wilderness, free from the false god Mammon and from the tyranny of a corrupt community. No political law could violate the walker's moral freedom; wanderers

would discover beauty and justice in the natural world and would return, armed with those higher principles, to transform society. “We saunter toward the Holy Land,” he avowed, “till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light.”

In the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi, inspired by Thoreau’s teachings, advanced a doctrine of nonviolent civil disobedience called Satyagraha—a philosophy that would eventually help lead India into independence in 1947. Literally “clinging to truth,” or “Truth-force,” Satyagraha required the individual to cultivate herself in preparation for disciplined group action; the Satyagrahi vowed to peacefully withdraw her cooperation from the unjust state, from a tyrannical regime no longer capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction, good and evil, truth and falsehood. Through the practices of “self-control, simplicity of life, suffering without fear or hatred, recognition of the unity of all living beings, and whole-hearted . . . service of one’s neighbors,” the Satyagrahi could join together with others to participate in large-scale peaceful protests.

In 1930, Gandhi devoted twenty-four days to walking the countryside of India. He marched 241 miles to the sea, sauntering from his ashram near Ahmedabad to the coastal village of Dandi in order to defy British rule by refusing to cooperate with a punitive salt tax. “Ours is a sacred pilgrimage,” he announced. “Disobedience combined with love is the living water of life. Civil disobedience is a beautiful variant to signify growth.”

The method itself—walking, putting one foot in front of the other, stepping slowly here, striding more quickly there—was as significant as the political freedom that Gandhi’s actions symbolized. Walking was democratic. The poorest, most impoverished people could participate in the Salt March, and they did. It was “even open to children of understanding,” Gandhi pointed out, and women “can stand shoulder to shoulder with men in the struggle.” By the end of the march, tens of thousands of Indians had joined in acts of mass

civil disobedience, and more than 80,000 were arrested, 17,000 of whom were women. “A Satyagrahi, whether free or incarcerated, is ever victorious,” Gandhi told his followers. “He is vanquished only when he forsakes truth and non-violence and turns a deaf ear to the Inner Voice.”

Like Thoreau and Gandhi, hundreds of thousands of Americans listened to their inner voices and fought for freedom by peacefully walking during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. They famously marched on Washington, D.C., where 250,000 people bore witness to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream; they marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, risking arrest and subjecting their bodies to violence in order to secure voting rights for African Americans; and in 1963, thousands of black students climbed out of schoolhouse windows to protest racial segregation and danced down the streets of downtown Birmingham, Alabama, swaying and shimmying from the Sixth Street Baptist Church to Kelly Ingram Park, where Bull Connor’s fire hoses and police dogs could not drown out the chorale of children’s voices singing:

Ain’t gonna let nobody
Turn me around,
Turn me around.
Ain’t gonna let nobody
Turn me around.
I’m gonna keep on a-walkin’, Lord,
Keep on a-talkin’, Lord,
Marchin’ up to freedom land.

Walking has a long history, as long as human life itself. The idea that the solitary pilgrimage so frequently inspired social protests remains as one of our wonderfully perplexing paradoxes. But it makes sense when we pause to contemplate the act of walking. As Rebecca Solnit points out in *Wanderlust*, her lyrical meditation on the meanings and uses of pedestrianism, “The impulse to organize around walking is at first an odd one. After all, those who value walking often speak of independence, solitude, and the freedom that comes from lack of

structure and regimentation. But there are three prerequisites to going out into the world to walk for pleasure. One must have free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints. These basic freedoms have been the subjects of countless struggles.”

In 2017, we have seen those struggles continue. In the United States alone, there was the Women’s March on Washington in January; in April, the March for Science; and in August and September, marches against white supremacy in the wake of violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. It seems as if we are realizing—even in our electronic era of hashtag activism, YouTube sensations, and Twitter-vised (no longer televised) revolutions—the power of “praying with our feet,” of walking away from our computer screens and sauntering into the streets.

Too often we forget our own power as individuals to effect change, to stand up to the daily injustices we too frequently ignore. The past is always ambiguous, and it never provides us with prophets. But it can remind us of what is at stake. History can remind us that those brave millions who marched for freedom had the capacity to turn their thought into action and their action into thought. On our walks into the wilderness, we can see ourselves as we are. We can see our worlds, and we can reimagine and redraw our moral maps—if we remember to keep walking toward that great awakening light.

***Jennifer Stitt** is a historian of modern American thought, culture, and politics who earned a B.A. and M.A. in history from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She’s working on her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She lives and writes in Birmingham.*





The Difference between Loneliness and Solitude

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7 mins read



American loneliness has deep cultural and historical roots. Can we remedy it with the promise of solitude?

By Jennifer Stitt

Americans lead lonely lives. [Or so say so many headlines.](#) Study after study posits that we have never been more socially isolated than we are now, and that the pain of loneliness is expressed not just in our psychic yearning for companionship but also in our physical afflictions. Lonely minds are also lonely bodies, experiencing higher rates of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, dementia, cancer, impaired immune function, inflammation, and premature death. The lethality of loneliness has been compared to smoking fifteen cigarettes per day, and to the physical effects of severe alcoholism. Some studies even indicate that lonely bodies exhibit altered genetic and cellular structures.

Paradoxically, these revelations have arrived at the very moment that our smart phones, designed to keep us constantly connected, have increasingly colonized our lives. Our electronic devices ding and ring and chirp and buzz at all hours of the day and night, calling us back to our work, reminding us to make time for play—and yet all of those alerts and notifications leave us feeling empty, drained, more alone and alienated than ever. And just as our appetite for and consumption of social media has become a daily dietary staple—allowing us to keep in touch with people all around the world—our personal interactions have somehow become more and more shallow and less and less fulfilling.

Over the last twenty years, feelings of loneliness have doubled—up from 20 per cent of American adults in 1980 to an astonishing 40 per cent in 2010. But is this a purely modern phenomenon? Or does American loneliness have deeper cultural and historical roots?

In the nineteenth century, loneliness and solitude occupied the minds of many American thinkers. In 1863, for example, the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson wrote hauntingly about the ache and anxiety of isolation:

The Loneliness One dare not sound —
And would as soon surmise
As in its Grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size —

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see —
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny —

The Horror not to be surveyed —
But skirted in the Dark —
With Consciousness suspended —
After being under Lock —

I fear me this — is Loneliness —
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate — or seal —

Dickinson's lonely horror, which she "skirted in the Dark," cut into the caverns and corridors of her very soul and, at least at times, sealed her off from the pleasures and obligations of friendship.

Scholars have long disagreed about the reasons behind Dickinson's renunciation of society: Did the anguish of isolation inspire, or "illuminate," her lyrical creativity? Did she make a voluntary, conscious, artistic decision to retreat? Or did sickness reflexively lead to an unwelcome seclusion? Notably, she was afflicted with iritis in her mid-thirties (an inflammation of the muscles of the eye) and died in 1886 after two and a half years of prolonged illness from Bright's disease (historically understood as inflammation of the kidneys and frequently associated with hypertension and heart disease). Whatever

the reasons for her emotional pain and embodied suffering, Dickinson's solitary life and work often reads much like a nineteenth-century version of our twenty-first-century visceral fear of being left alone with ourselves.

In the twentieth century, as Americans increasingly flocked to big cities, images of urban loneliness became more widespread. Take, for only one instance, Edward Hopper's iconic *Nighthawks* (1942), a now-ubiquitous symbol of isolation within the crowded city: Four lone souls find themselves imprisoned inside the glass cage of an anonymous diner, together and yet wholly, impenetrably apart. Their existential longing, their cosmic aloneness, is on perpetual display for all to see. Their fluorescent faces stare desolately—thoughtlessly—into separate, invisible distances. Hopper's heart-rending painting portrays a version of what William James described in 1895 as “the nightmare view of life,” life at “the edge of the slope,” a life not worth living.

But some mid-twentieth-century thinkers were beginning to pick apart these blurred categories. In the wake of the Holocaust and devastation of WWII, after Europe had been ravaged by the political isolation of individuals left powerless by totalitarian regimes, it had become increasingly apparent that solitude—the freedom to keep company with oneself—was something distinct from isolation and loneliness. In 1957, the German-American theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich described this striking difference: “Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man's being alone,” he declared. “It has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.”

These distinctions also captured the political theorist Hannah Arendt's imagination, and, in 1953, she wrote a formative essay, “Ideology and Terror.” She had fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and had become a naturalized American citizen in 1951, and she drew upon her experience of totalitarianism in Europe to develop a triumvirate—*isolation* (*Isolation*), *loneliness* (*Verlassenheit*), and

solitude (*Einsamkeit*)—that would be at the heart of all of her subsequent thinking.

For Arendt, isolation threatened political life. Tyrannical governments used lies and propaganda to remake reality, to rewrite history, rendering the individual's relationship with her world unrecognizable. Terror severed people's political contacts, and it destroyed their ability to deliberate, judge, and act in public. Tyranny transformed the public sphere into an uninhabitable, unnavigable wilderness.

Loneliness was an even more extreme state of “uprootedness” or “superfluousness,” as Arendt put it. It not only threatened public political life. It also destroyed private life and the individual's capacity for thought—a hallmark of totalitarian governments. “Isolation and loneliness are not the same,” Arendt observed. “I can be isolated—that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me—without being lonely; and I can be lonely—that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship—without being isolated.” The peculiar thing about totalitarianism, as she understood it, was that it capitalized on isolation and loneliness to destroy *both* public and private life, leaving the individual politically and existentially homeless. *Verlassenheit* can also be translated as “abandonment,” which is what Arendt meant when she said that loneliness leaves the individual with “no place in the world [to be] recognized and guaranteed by others.” Lonely people are abandoned people who don't “belong to the world at all,” she lamented, which is “among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.”

Unlike isolation and loneliness, solitude carved out space for the thinking activity, for the inner dialogue that makes moral judgments—the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood—possible. In her *Denktagebuch* (thought diary), Arendt indicated that *Einsamkeit* was the state of being “alone with myself, thinking.” And she continued to develop this concept in “Ideology and Terror,” when she wrote:

All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other. For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them “whole” again.

For Arendt, then, the private and public worlds were distinguishable even if they weren't entirely separate. She was never lonely in her solitude because she had the freedom to think, to converse and debate with herself, to discover truth and meaning. In solitude, she cultivated a friendship with her deepest, innermost self. But she also needed a community of others to recognize her unique, “unexchangeable” self—and she understood that being fully human requires our recognition, and even celebration, of plurality and difference. We move from the glorious solitude of our own thought into a shared world of public deliberation, judgment, and action.

The epidemic of American loneliness has deep historical and cultural roots. In many ways, American history can be read as a story of loss—from the very beginning, Native Americans and African slaves and white European colonists all felt (even if in markedly different ways) the loss of community, the loss of a sense of place, the loss of spirituality, the loss, even, of love. Dickinson and Hopper are only two examples of this American iconography of loss. But what makes Arendt's thought so illuminating to lonely Americans today, in the twenty-first century, is precisely her positive promise of solitude. Through the practice of solitude, we can recover a sense of belonging, first to ourselves and then to the world.

We are more plugged in, more connected, than we have ever been. And yet we are also lonelier. We are facing a president whose daily Tweets instill fear, uncertainty, suspicion, and doubt among the

population; we are witnessing a renewed assault on immigrants, the LBGTIQ community, women, Jews, Blacks, Muslims, the poor, the elderly, and the sick; and our public spaces for open democratic debate have been slowly eroding. No wonder, then, that we feel lonelier than ever.

Perhaps the most radical thing we can do is to turn off our smart phones, turn off social media, turn off the news, and consciously cultivate private spaces for solitary contemplation. Arendt reminds us that if we can learn to keep ourselves company, we can free our minds and our bodies from the terror of not being seen or heard. We can learn to appreciate and love our unique, unexchangeable selves, which, in turn, makes it possible for us to appreciate and love human plurality in all of its beauty and complexity. Through the practice of solitude, we can illuminate our common world.

***Jennifer Stitt** is a historian of modern American thought, culture, and politics who earned a B.A. and M.A. in history from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She's working on her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She lives and writes in Birmingham.*

This is third installment of a five-part series on solitude by Stitt. Read the [first installment here](#) and [second installment here](#).

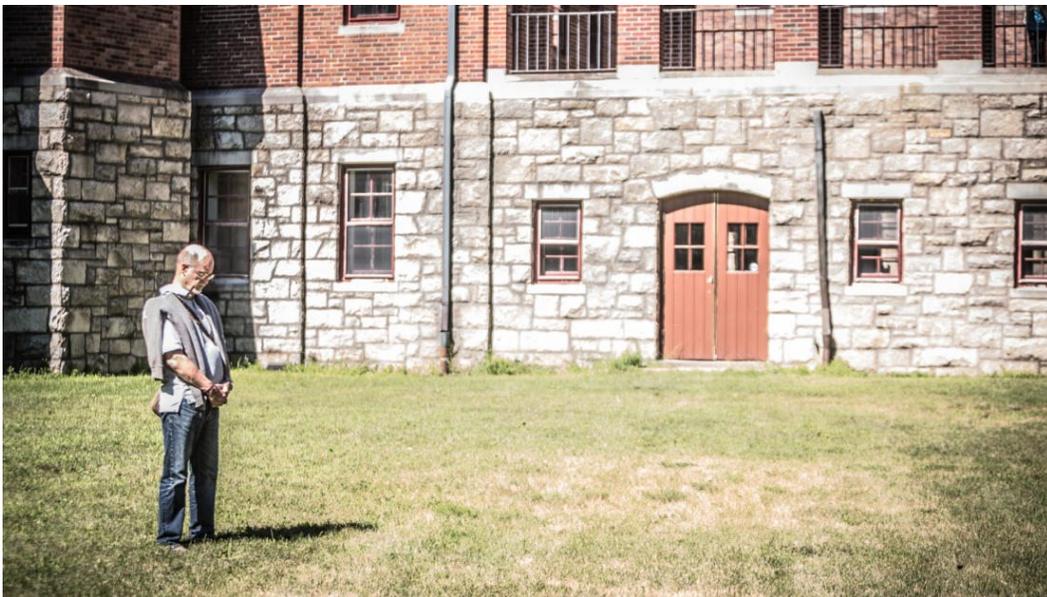




The Courage to Be in Solitude

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Solitary contemplation demands of us nothing less than a moral reckoning and it is most important when our shared world is threatened.

By Jennifer Stitt

The remedy for loneliness
is in learning to admit
solitude as one admits
the bayonet: gracefully,
now that already
it pierces the heart.

—Denis Johnson, “The White Fires of Venus” (1975)

In dark times, we often turn to literature to help us understand the turmoil raging within ourselves and our worlds. During the 1850s, for example, American readers looked to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) for moral clarity, when the evils of chattel slavery threatened to tear the nation apart. During the 1950s and ’60s, millions of people thumbed through the pages of Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* (1951), searching for some insight into the mechanics of mass movements—mass movements that had swept across Europe during the first half of the twentieth century and had culminated in the rise of murderous dictators like Hitler and Stalin. And during the 1970s and ’80s, wisdom-seekers solicited philosophical illumination from Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), hoping to make sense of the dehumanizing forces of technocracy and mechanization, and meaning-making in a postmodern society.

In 2017, we, too, find ourselves facing dark times. Between Britain’s Brexit bungle; Donald Trump’s contemptuous campaign and calamitous election to the American presidency; the rise of racist

right-wing parties throughout Europe; and the torrent of proto-totalitarian forces endangering Latin America, Russia, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, democracy around the world has again come under attack. It's no small wonder, then, that we are once more turning to books to crystallize the confusion of our current moment. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-four* (1949), Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) have surged to the top of our bestseller's lists.

Although these works were written by thinkers from vastly different backgrounds, and although each of them imagined vastly different dystopian horrors, all of them described a world in which critical thought had been suppressed—a world where citizens had been willingly transformed into powerless cogs in a nightmarish political regime, where they had suddenly become incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood. As Arendt so powerfully pointed out in 1951, totalitarian government didn't just destroy public political life. It destroyed private life as well. Totalitarianism “bases itself on loneliness,” she proclaimed, “on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.”

In many ways, this is the most urgent lesson for us today: In order to protect and preserve public democratic deliberation and action, we must first protect and preserve our private lives by cultivating spaces for solitary contemplation.

Thomas Merton, the Catholic thinker and monastic mystic, reminds us of precisely what is at stake, both politically and spiritually, when we surrender our solitude. In 1958, he wrote,

Society depends for its existence on the inviolable personal solitude of its members. Society, to merit its name, must be made up not of numbers, or mechanical units, but of persons. To be a person implies responsibility and freedom, and both these imply a certain interior solitude, a sense of personal integrity, a sense of one's own reality

and of one's ability to give himself to society—or to refuse that gift. *When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love: and consequently it is held together by a violent and abusive authority. But when men are violently deprived of the solitude and freedom which are their due, the society in which they live becomes putrid, it festers with servility, resentment and hate.*

Our right to belong to the world, then, is inextricably tied to our ability to dwell within our own unique solitude. A society made up of thoughtless persons, as both Arendt and Merton understood so well, is no society at all: The possibility of building a shared community is vanquished once we become unthinking cogs in the political machine, incapable of recognizing and valuing the humanity in ourselves and in others. If we lose our capacity to engage in that solitary “conversation which the soul holds with herself”—that crucial question-and-answer process “in which we examine what we say and what we do”—we also risk losing touch not just with “our own secret knowledge” (to borrow a line from the poet Seamus Heaney) but also with the “actual givens” of our lives, with reality itself.

Solitary contemplation, in other words, demands of us nothing less than a moral reckoning. It demands that we heed Arendt's warning and stop for a critical moment to “think what we are doing.” It demands that we admit the possibility that we might be wrong, that we might be hypocrites, or that we might be capable of horrifying cruelties. It demands that we face our own depravity.

This kind of solitude is not easy. W. B. Yeats once said that one can “show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself” as a soldier who walks willingly into battle. In 1963, the German-American theologian Paul Tillich also recognized the terror of facing the ugliness within ourselves and our worlds. He declared that, in solitude, “we meet ourselves not as ourselves, but as the battlefield for creation and destruction, for God and the demons.” “Who can bear it?” he lamented. But bear it we must. Isolation and loneliness—the toolkit of tyranny—“can be conquered only by those who can bear

solitude.” To have the courage to think critically, to unsettle established conventions, to resist the easy comforts of conformity, is to have the courage to redraw and reimagine our moral maps. In the end, we might find grace in our solitude, we might be inspired by the better angels of our nature to build a better community. We must “dare to have solitude,” Tillich concluded, “to face the eternal, to find others, to see ourselves.”

In solitude, then, we confront not just hope and beauty but despair and suffering. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that we have to “confront suffering.” We have to “look deeply into the nature of suffering in order to recognize its cause.” Once we understand its roots, “the path leading to the transformation of suffering is revealed. And if [we] go on that path—namely, the path of right thinking, right speech, and right action—then [we] can transform [our] suffering. And if [we] practice as a nation, [we] help the whole nation to transform suffering.”

In dark times, it is precisely this kind of reckoning with ourselves and our worlds that is essential to the resistance of tyranny. In our automated age of unthinking distraction, it has become more imperative than ever that we consciously cultivate spaces for solitary contemplation. We must learn to strike a balance between solitude and society, between the hard work of the thinking activity and the mindless entertainment of consumerism. We must turn off our screens and tune out the incessant drone of information, and we must resist the allure of our news feeds where everything has become increasingly homogenized and intolerant of individual differences. By disregarding these distractions, we admittedly face the possibility that our engagement with the world has been largely vacuous rather than informed, superficial rather than authentic. But solitude is not easy. We must have courage.

Solitary contemplation becomes more than self-cultivation and self-care at precisely the moment when our shared world is threatened, when, as Yeats put it, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,” and “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” when “The best lack all

conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” Solitary contemplation can become an act of political resistance when political turmoil threatens to darken our horizons of possibility, when it appears that the sun is setting on the prospect of taking an alternate path.

The present will soon become the past, and if history is contingent, then so is our current moment. As Nhat Hanh reminds us, our “freedom is not given to us by anyone; we have to cultivate it ourselves. It is a daily practice.” In dark times, solitary contemplation provides us with a way to preserve our innermost freedom, and it gives us the hope that we might better understand ourselves and our worlds. Private solitary contemplation can provide us with that rare lightning flash of insight that illuminates how we ought to live and act in public. It requires courage. But if we can dare to think deeply and differently, if we can possess the foresight and fortitude to resist thoughtless conformity, to stir up the stagnant waters of our conventional wisdom, we might just think ourselves onto an alternate path—a path that might just lead us out of the darkness.

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This is fourth installment of a five-part series on solitude by Stitt. Read the [first installment here](#), the [second installment here](#), and the [third installment here](#).





Solitary Encounters

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Making Our Selves and Our Stories

By Jennifer Stitt

are we creators in fact
or collectors of relics:
do we make grow
or cast into stone?

—A. R. Ammons, “Tape for the Turn of the Year” (1965)

Every story has a beginning. [This one began with silence](#)—with the awful absence of sound and Herman Melville’s fear that he might wander over the edge of the abyss only to find depravity in his accursed quietude. It began, too, with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mute mastery of man’s transcendence, Henry David Thoreau’s soundless sea of deep contemplation, and the countless unnamed solitary seekers who sat still for a wise and noiseless moment, dared to listen to their innermost voices, and heard the unspeakable.

Every story has a beginning. Mine begins, too, with silence—with being silenced. My voice was smothered and squashed for years by a violent mother whose anger and bitterness consumed her, whose anger and bitterness very nearly consumed me. As a young girl, my only desire was to vanish from the world, and I did by disappearing into the stories printed in books. I devoured books. I wandered alone into strange worlds where friendship and love were real possibilities; I discovered good worlds that offset the gloom of my own, worlds where the darkness didn’t always defeat the light; I learned about free worlds where people spoke and had companions who heard them.

For years, I sojourned deeper and deeper into myself. But I realize now that all those hours spent alone reading were also hours spent sauntering out and down far-flung paths, roaming beyond the boundaries of my narrow reality, where I could imagine other, different, and better ways to live. Books were miraculous doorways that opened out and into the lives of others. “Could a greater miracle

take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" Henry David Thoreau exulted in *Walden* (1854), one of the books that buoyed me with a sense of hope, wonder, and empathy in my intellectual infancy.

For years, I traveled alongside solitaries, seekers, monastic mystics, freedom fighters, poets, theologians, theorists, and thinkers. I drank their words as a pilgrim stranded in a desert would drink water: fervently, greedily, frantically, and gratefully. All that time, I had been studying and practicing solitude, but I didn't know it. Not yet. I wouldn't recognize that until much later, on a particularly sunny and unseasonably warm September day during my third year of graduate school when I decided to get up from my desk and go for a walk.

* * *



Thoreau's cove, Lake Walden, Concord, Mass., c. 1900-1910. A view of Walden Pond, where Thoreau lived for two years, two months, and

two days from 1845-1847, photographed approximately forty-eight years after his death.

On January 14, 1853, Henry David Thoreau recorded a melancholy observation in his journal: “The bones of children soon turn to dust again.” During the frozen winter months, Thoreau’s thoughts were often occupied by death, and his January journals are especially riddled with these images of decay. Five days earlier, on January 9, he recounted a stark, bleak, and eroding landscape: “I heard from time to time the sound of stones and earth falling and rolling down the bank in the cuts. The earth is almost entirely bare.” On January 21, he recorded a nightmarish passage about depravity: “Yesterday I was influenced with the rottenness of human relations,” he wrote. “In the night, I dreamed of delving amid the graves of the dead, and soiled my fingers with their rank mould.” For many of us, January is a time of reflection and contemplation. As each new year begins, we collectively pause to take stock of our lives, of what we said and did during the past 365 days, and we resolve to refine our selves and alter our actions. For Thoreau, too, January was a meditative month. But it was also a month of mourning, of longing to once again converse with the dead. Eleven years after his older brother John’s death, Thoreau still sometimes succumbed to his sadness—as he would every January for the rest of his life.

* * *

On New Year’s Day 1842, John Thoreau nicked his finger while stropping his razor. He was twenty-six years old, and he didn’t think a thing about it. A few days later, though, he noticed that his finger had begun to throb. And a few days after that, it began to look gangrenous. That’s when he collapsed, convulsing, on the doorstep of his family’s home. He had contracted tetanus, or “lockjaw,” and he suffered from excruciating spasms for nearly three days. On the afternoon of January 11, John died in Henry’s arms.

Henry's grief very nearly consumed him. A week after John's funeral, Henry's private heartsickness finally overwhelmed his mind and his body, and he suffered for several days from psychosomatic convulsions—a disease that can only be described as pseudotetanus. For several weeks, he found himself unable to write, incapable even of jotting a quick line in his journal. Finally, on February 19, he noted, "I begin to see how that the preparation for all issues is to do virtuously." The seed that would blossom into two years of deliberate and ethical living at Walden Pond had been planted. The next day, he mused that "the death of friends should inspire us as much as their lives. If they are great and rich enough, they will leave consolation to their mourners." Each entry was an elegy for his brother, a lament, perhaps, but not one without hope or gratitude. "How can any good depart? It does not go and come, but we," he concluded. On the February 21, he described his disorientation: "I am like a feather floating in the atmosphere; on every side is depth unfathomable. I feel as if years had been crowded into the last month." His soul and body, he said, had split into "two" that "should walk as one." On February 23, a brighter light glimmered inside the caverns of his mind: "Every poet's muse is circumscribed in her wanderings," he declared, "and may well be said to haunt some favorite spring or mountain."

Every story has a beginning. This is Henry's: after his brother's death, he began to wander. He was spiritually and psychically lost, and he fled to Walden Woods to try to write. He gradually found his way back to himself and, in a way, back to his beloved brother John—slowly, meanderingly, through the art of walking. In 1849, he developed a new daily routine: in the mornings and evenings, he dedicated himself to reading, and he read everything from scientific papers to Greek poetry to Chinese philosophy to Hindu scripture. The afternoons were for walking, for looking, for paying attention, and he often spent more than four hours a day lingering in the Concord landscape, measuring, recording, and collecting its many riches. He went out into the wilderness in search of his muse, and he found it, famously, in nature. The "fertile and eloquent" silence echoing

through the Massachusetts woods reverberated through Thoreau's body and soul with each sauntering step. He observed the flora and fauna, eulogized fallen trees, stalked chipmunks, and spied on sparrows. "What bird wilt thou employ / To bring me word of thee?" he asked of his brother's spirit, of the majestic hawks that flew far above Fairhaven Cliffs. Thoreau stumbled toward finding his voice and his vocation, and, eventually, from 1850 until his death in 1862, he would come to record very nearly every step, every sight, every sound, and every wild, wondrous miracle in his journal. He was living and writing a philosophy of pedestrianism.



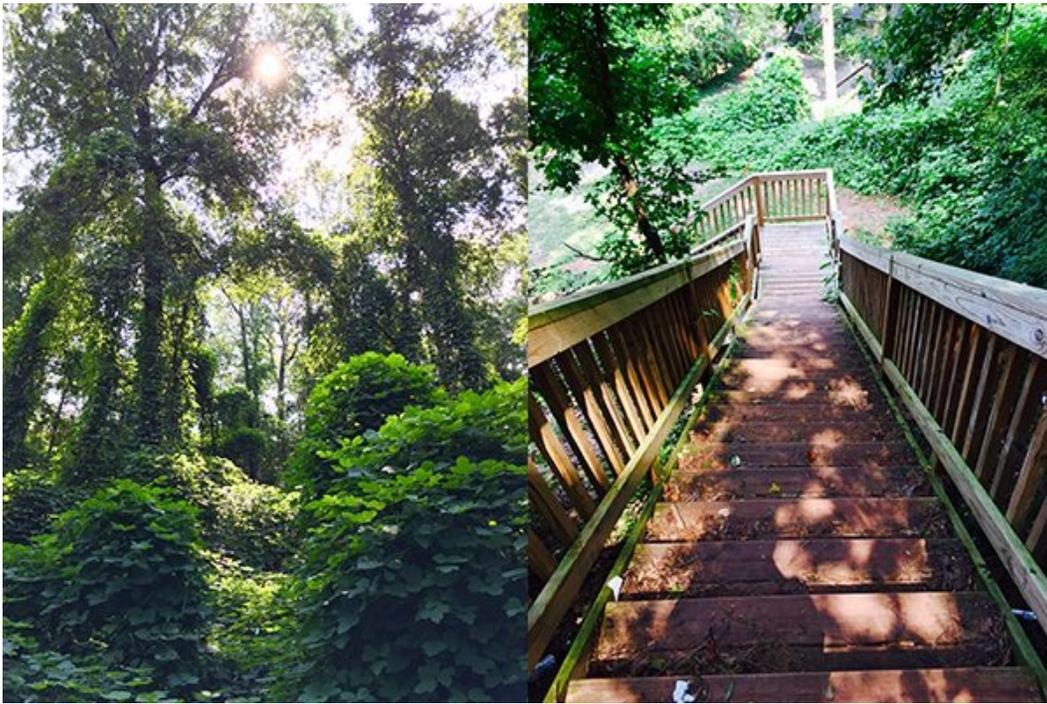
Site of Thoreau's hut, Lake Walden, Concord, Mass., c. 1908. In Walt Whitman's 1882 book, *Specimen Days*, he remembered visiting Thoreau's grave at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts, before making a pilgrimage to Walden Pond, writing: "I got out and went up of course on foot, and stood a long while and ponder'd. . . . By Henry's side lies his brother John, of whom much was expected, but he died young. Then to Walden pond, that beautifully embower'd sheet of water, and spent over an hour there.

On the spot in the woods where Thoreau had his solitary house is now quite a cairn of stones, to mark the place; I too carried one and deposited on the heap.”

Hundreds of feet above Birmingham, Alabama, where I live, there is a paved walking path, an asphalt trail carved into the side of a mountain. Much of the plant life along the path is kudzu, a pestilent yet enchanting and verdant vine that has overtaken much of the mountain’s flora. Thankfully, the trees still protest the kudzu’s murderous shade, stretching up toward the sunlight: wise old oaks, yellow poplars, sycamores, mockernut hickories, and, on the road up the mountain, a lone persimmon tree. The animals are abundant, although I mostly pay attention to the birds: eastern towhees, chipping sparrows, mockingbirds, starlings, tufted titmice, Carolina chickadees, red birds that blend in with the red rocks, and, during spring and summer, indigo buntings more brilliantly blue than any cerulean sky you could ever imagine. The path is a pocket of wildness—in the city but not of it—and is a place of refuge where urban *flâneurs* can momentarily escape the crowd of the city and find some solitude in the woods.



Vulcan Trail, Birmingham, Alabama, September 2017. The Vulcan Trail is a paved mile-long walking and bicycle trail built into the northern slope of Red Mountain in Birmingham, Alabama. The main trail overlooks the city and is handicapped-accessible.



Kudzu-covered trees (L); Staircase to a Southside neighborhood (R). Kudzu covers much of the mountain's flora, preventing erosion but also slowly strangling decades-old trees; many of the homeowners and apartment-dwellers who live directly below the Vulcan Trail have built staircases that ascend the side of the mountain to access the main path.

The trail is hewn into Red Mountain, which is named for its red rocks, for its mineral-rich Silurian strata that jut out and up from the earth. Hundreds of years ago, Native Americans used the hematite iron ore to dye fabric rust-brown and to paint their bodies and horses crimson during times of war. At the turn of the century, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, after the city was founded, those same red rocks transformed Birmingham into an iron- and steel-producing industrial hub. The trail itself, Vulcan Trail, is named for the Roman god of fire and forge—and a fifty-six-foot-tall cast-iron statue of that magic metalsmith watches over the mountain, the largest cast-iron statue in the world.

On a particularly sunny and unseasonably warm September afternoon, I suddenly abandoned the rickety, coffee-stained, knife-scuffed butcher's block table that serves as my writing desk, and I walked out of my house and up the road to the mountain and onto the trail.



Colossal iron statue of Vulcan, 56 ft. high, weight 100,000 lbs., in Mines Bldg., World's Fair, St. Louis, U.S.A., c. 1904. Vulcan was commissioned in 1904 to represent Birmingham—a manufacturing city founded in 1871—at that year's World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. Sculpted by the Italian-American artist Giuseppe Moretti, Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and forge, reflected Birmingham's power to transform her natural resources into iron and steel, booming industries during the early decades of the twentieth century. Today the giant Vulcan statue sits atop Red Mountain, towering over the Magic City, and he has his own park and museum.

That September, walking was on my mind. I was writing [an essay about the history of walking](#), and I had been religiously reading Thoreau's *Journal*; like Thoreau, I took up my pen and made obsessive observations in my own notebook about his perambulations. I had been working at my desk for several days when it struck me that I

hadn't been for a walk in a while. And so out I went, one foot in front of the other, to the road up the mountain and onto the trail.

This is where the story gets difficult, the terrain a bit rocky. For most people, walking comes naturally. It's as easy as breathing. We walk all the time. From the car into the market; a few blocks from the office to the Indian place for lunch; around the corner to the cozy coffee shop; down sidewalks, through parks, up hiking trails. But that September, I was recovering from a long illness, and walking any distance at all without collapsing had become a luxury. I didn't know whether I could clamor up the slope of Red Mountain and make it onto the Vulcan Trail. But I tried, and I did.

What called me to the mountain that day? Perhaps it was Thoreau's spirit. I had always felt a spiritual affinity for his writing. I had always been especially struck by Henry's love for John and saddened by his sorrowful, elegiac journal entries. And it was true that Thoreau's grief hit me harder this time around. No longer a child, I, too, had suffered losses; I, too, had lost myself; I, too, was a feather floating through unfathomable depths. My mourning was for a lost self rather than a lost sibling. It was an invisible despair, but it was another kind of grieving nevertheless, a camouflaged grief for an altered body and all the lost possibilities that accompanied my chronic illness—exotic foods never to be eaten, far-away places never to be explored, children never to be born. Or perhaps it was simply stir-craziness, and my body and mind united in that moment to demand a bit of sunlight and fresh air.



A wild trail in September. Above and beyond the main paved trail are dirt paths and untamed passages for more adventurous explorers. These secret routes are swampy and nearly unnavigable during the summer months but are slowly transformed into traversable tracks as the foliage falls away during autumn and winter.

This essay is supposed to be about encountering solitude, and it is. But first I had to walk slowly back to myself before I learned how to recognize solitude, before I learned how to genuinely practice it with an open and loving heart. I had to wander down many [lonely, isolated paths that turned out to be painful dead ends](#). Walking, Thoreau wrote, allows us “to be able to see ourselves, not merely as others see us, but as we are.” What I discovered was this: [solitude requires courage, and it demands that we wrestle with our weaknesses as well as our strengths](#), that we be present in our bodies and our minds before we can awaken to the world and inner peace. After John’s death, Henry walked, and walked, and walked. He walked until he saw himself as he truly was, until he could truly hear his innermost voice, and he kept on walking for the rest of his life. *But the project wasn’t walking itself*. The project, I realized, was what walking allowed Thoreau to do: to be attentive to the world, to be present in both body and mind, and, ultimately, to think.

* * *

There’s a famous passage in *Walden* that has been so often quoted that it has become a kind of cliché:

The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. . . . We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. . . . Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.

In spite of Thoreau’s haughty tone, this is a profound and illuminating insight: Our capacity for deep, contemplative thought is what makes us human. Thinking—conversing with ourselves and

evaluating what it is that we say and do—is what cultivates our consciences and makes us moral beings. And yet too many of us sadly sleepwalk through our lives, endlessly distracted by our smartphones, or by the latest app or game or gadget. If we cannot keep company with ourselves, we cannot keep company with others.

* * *

The poet A. R. Ammons once asked whether we are “creators in fact / or collectors of relics.” It is a particularly poignant query for a historian, but it’s an important question for all of us. Are we makers or are we collectors? Are we artists, or passive curators of the artifacts of our lives and our worlds? “The earth and leaves are strewn with pearls,” Thoreau once observed during a walk in wet weather. He collected those pearls, stored them away in his journals, and arranged and re-arranged the way they were displayed in his books. And yet he made something: he sought solitude and made a thoughtful life. He threw off the chains of conformity, and challenged himself and his neighbors to forge stronger friendships and to build more democratic communities. Thoreau’s daily pedestrian practice reminds us that we, too, are also storytellers—that each unique, unexchangeable person has her own story to tell—and that each of us has the power to choose which path to walk down and the power to choose to tell a different story.

Every story has a beginning, and the telling of those stories is in fact an act of communion. Stories are where we think ourselves into another person’s experience, where we live—even if only for a fleeting moment—another person’s life, and where we dwell in our dreams together. As James Baldwin put it in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), “The questions which one asks oneself become one’s key to the experiences of others. One can only face in others what one can face in oneself. On this confrontation depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion. This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours.”

In 1968, Hannah Arendt wrote that “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it,” that “it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they are.” We begin and end with stories, and if we are awake and maybe a little bit lucky, we discover that we have the capacity to tell our stories to others, and that we have the capacity to listen in turn to stories that we would never otherwise imagine. That is our great human potential and the source of our hope, our infinite expectation of the dawn.

Every story has a beginning. And each beginning is above all an act of imagination and an act of creation. Out of nothing we bring something into being. Or perhaps, rather, out of something—some hitherto unspeakable experience, some hitherto incommunicable kernel of truth—we dare to speak words to strangers that we ordinarily wouldn’t say aloud even to ourselves. Those stories guide us out of the darkness, remind us of our own extraordinary power to hope, to think deeply about our political and moral worlds, to judge what is right and wrong, and to take deliberate action in the public sphere.

Every story has a beginning. What’s yours?

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