

## Solo in Seattle

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*nonfiction by Alice Lowe*

1. Every summer, the second week of July, I leave my home in San Diego and go to Seattle to house-garden-catsit for a friend while she teaches at a writing conference in Taos. I arrive a couple of days early so we can visit. Then I usher her out the door and down the steps to the tune of her last-minute reminders—“Don’t forget her vitamins every day;” “You’ll pick up the CSA box on Friday, right?”—and my assurances—“I’ve written everything down. Don’t worry.” I close the door, and with a few abracadabras I shift a chair here, a lamp there, and make it my own.

2. We’re both grateful for the arrangement. Priscilla and her aging cat, Miss Sarah, need someone to stay at the house and administer full-time kitty coddling, not just drop in once or twice a day to feed and scoop. And I need (desire, crave, cherish) this time by myself. I know Priscilla’s house and environs almost as well as my own, and I’ve established comfortable routines: a catalog of favorite walks, neighborhoods, shops, eateries. But it’s the solitude that I relish. I’m eager to read and write, ponder and putter, absorb sights and sounds: the passing scene as I sit by the window and brush Miss S, the early morning mist on the water and the Canada geese on the shore as I circle Green Lake, the multitudes descending on Pike Place Market from a window seat at Le Panier.

3. I want to write about solitude during my solitary week in Seattle. It’s been done to death, I know, so I have to consider: Do I need to add my voice to the pantheon of artists and writers, thinkers and theoreticians, going back to the beginning of recorded time? It’s not as if I’m going to argue with them. I’m in accord with the consensus that solitude is essential to introspection, to creativity, to mental well-being (this last perhaps a 20<sup>th</sup>-century concept).

4. I live in contented companionship with my husband of eighteen years. Don, like me, is a private person, and we honor each other’s space and time, and separate creative pursuits. The narrator of Virginia Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, notes how couples become unconscious of each other’s presence—in what I see as a positive way—“so that they move as if alone, speak aloud things which they do not expect to be answered, and in general seem to experience all the comfort of solitude without its loneliness.” Marriage provides a ready-made companionship, one I can regulate, and which allows me to withdraw from the rest of the world. But it still isn’t solitude.

5. I turn to Virginia Woolf as a matter of course—she’s my touchstone, my muse. Woolf acknowledged the challenge of maintaining separateness within her own cozy dyad. I’ve concluded from extensive study that she and Leonard achieved an equilibrium that was satisfying to

both. As in my own case, it didn't negate her need for physical and emotional solitude. Her best-known fictional creation, Clarissa Dalloway, chose her husband over a rival suitor with that in mind: "For in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him. But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable...."

6. Don doesn't share my yearning for intervals—days or weeks, at home or away—alone. Women are the ones most likely to find themselves overwhelmed by obligation and by others; we (I boldly speak for us all) are apt to feel more keenly the need for Woolf's "room of one's own." She pointed out that men have long been granted a right to solitude denied to women and believed private space—with the time and the means to make use of it—was necessary for women to write, to exercise creativity, to realize a sense of themselves.

7. Woolf called solitude "... the last resort of the civilized: our souls are so creased and soured in meaning we can only unfold them when we are alone." She took long solitary walks over the Sussex South Downs near Monks House, her country home, sometimes to focus more intently on her writing and reading, sometimes to take a break from them. Solitude was an opportunity to draw inward, to the past or future, to be alone with her thoughts. She didn't require the quiet of the countryside; she took equal delight in London city life, the anomaly of being alone in the crowd,

both participant and observer. "To walk alone in London is the greatest rest," she wrote in her diary, a sentiment shared by Clarissa Dalloway.

8. One of Woolf's character/personas in *The Waves* sings a "song of glory:" "Heaven be praised for solitude that has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrases. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever [sic] with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself." This eloquent passage may seem exaggerated, yet I confess to sitting at Priscilla's small wooden table with those same "bare things" and feeling like I may burst with contentment.

9. The sixteenth-century French statesman Michel de Montaigne was a master among essayists and Virginia Woolf's own model. Montaigne's "Of Solitude" glorifies the alone state. "The wise man will choose it," he says, "to live more at leisure and at one's ease." Montaigne backs up his arguments with citations from Greek and Latin philosophers—Socrates, Pliny, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Lucretius, Tibullus ("In solitude to be to thyself a throng"). He omits, or maybe avoids, Aristotle from the authorities he consults on this topic, perhaps confused like the rest of us about a much-quoted passage: "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god." This odd ambiguity has led scholars, students, and those of us who see ourselves as neither wild beasts nor gods to scratch our chins and wonder, "What's

that supposed to mean?" Montaigne and the sages of old send me scurrying back to Woolf and more contemporary voices.

10. I read the "solitude journals" of Doris Grumbach, May Sarton, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Women of the same generation, their accounts read much alike in many respects, yet each one is distinctive. Each absorbs and processes her own experience, bringing to it her unique history, her present state of mind. Grumbach—in winter on the Maine coast, her companion away, no nearby neighbors, no TV or phone—found her interior voice louder, more insistent. She cherished the time alone but needed to impose strict isolation on herself, what she called a "tapestry of silence," for fear that talking to anyone would mar her experience.

11. I've dismissed the so-called solitude of a twosome as an oxymoron, but I don't think solitude and isolation are the same thing. Grumbach may have found her blanket of total seclusion essential to her own experience of solitude, but I don't need to be cut off from humanity to feel nourished by my urban retreats. For me solitude doesn't entail a secluded cabin in remote woods or on a deserted shore. Nor need it entail deprivation or loneliness—running water, internet connection, and other creature comforts are permissible, including occasional socializing. Thoreau told generations of true believers, "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." Yet his wilderness was a dinner-bell away from the Emersons' home and hearth;

he had frequent visitors at Walden Pond and often dined with friends in town. It was by this trial and error that he found his own equilibrium and was able to conclude that "I have an immense appetite for solitude, like an infant for sleep, and if I don't get enough for this year, I shall cry all the next."

12. May Sarton mused on solitude in a number of her published memoirs, most notably her *Journal of a Solitude*. Like Grumbach, she welcomed time alone, but it appears more as a counterweight in the ebb and flow of her life. This resonates for me—like Sarton my times of solitude are a respite and an opportunity to process the events of daily life. When I'm familiar with the character and mindset of a novelist like Woolf and to a lesser degree Sarton, there's an added richness to their fiction when they project aspects of themselves onto fictional characters. The protagonist in *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* reflects that "Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is the richness of self."

13. My desire to spend periods of time alone doesn't make me a misanthrope. It's the absence of solitude that feeds my antisocial tendencies and makes me grouchy; solitude restores me to geniality. Yet this is difficult to convey to so many who don't seem to understand, who feel threatened. When you want to be by yourself rather than with even your nearest and dearest, you're well-advised to keep what Anne Morrow Lindbergh called your "secret vice" to yourself. I've learned to exercise great tact so as not to offend the tender-hearted.

14. Rebecca Solnit treats solitude as an underpinning for much of her exploration and rumination. *A Field Guide for Getting Lost* is predicated on the idea of shaking off shackles in order to find oneself. In *Wanderlust*, her history of walking, she refers to “a subtle state most dedicated urban walkers know, a sort of basking in solitude—a dark solitude punctuated with encounters as the night sky is punctuated with stars.” In the city “the world is made up of strangers, and to be a stranger surrounded by strangers, to walk along silently bearing one’s secrets and imagining those of the people one passes, is among the starkest of luxuries.”

15. So much of what’s been written, so much of my own experience, exults in that “starkest of luxuries,” city walking, being alone in the crowd. It sounds romantic, but there’s a dark side, often sidestepped—the element of risk, the danger for women in being out and alone, day or night, stationary or moving, urban or rural. Too isolated and we tense up at the sight of an approaching male, at the sound of footsteps, the slowing of a car. Always in danger of intimidation, harassment, and violence, we don’t have the freedom men take for granted. Solnit noted in the late 1990s that two-thirds of American women were afraid to walk alone in their own neighborhoods at night, a figure that’s sure to have increased since then. To find comfort in being a stranger among strangers is to acknowledge the truth of safety in numbers. Solo walking is just one expression of solitude, a way of eking out time alone when we can’t get away or have the

house to ourselves, but safety often drives us inside. We accept our limitations and the seclusion offered by the shelter of four walls and a locked door.

16. Finding solitude may be as much a challenge today as in Woolf’s time, if not more. The obstacles are different but just as daunting. Women aren’t as burdened with a lack of privacy as they once were, but the demands on their time and resources are unsurpassed. Still, I find it hard to imagine not knowing what to do with free time by oneself. Yet a surprising refrain that recurs in the literature is the idea that solitude is something we need to learn. Anne Morrow Lindbergh refuted John Donne’s much quoted “No man [sic] is an island” with her belief that we are all islands in a common sea. Our lives have become cluttered and we need to relearn how to be alone, because “if one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others.”

17. Jonathan Franzen approaches the issue more cerebrally. The unifying theme of his 2002 book of essays, *How to be Alone*, is, he says, “the problem of preserving individuality and complexity in a noisy and distracting mass culture: the question of how to be alone.” There’s no title essay in the collection, but “The Reader in Exile” is a diatribe, a dirge about the decline of reading. He posits that “the first lesson reading teaches is how to be alone.” Ergo, if people aren’t reading, they aren’t learning, which may be why solitude is looked on with such distrust by some, why they’re uncomfortable with it, their own and that of others.

18. I'm skeptical of what sounds like a combination of new-age-speak, and DIY. Franzen's title has been co-opted for, what else, a self-help book, a how-to, in a publisher's "School of Life" series. How is it, author Sara Maitland asks, that our culture claims to value individualism and independence yet can't handle solitude. Good point, but is a user's manual the answer? Like its companion volumes—*How to Develop Emotional Health, How to Deal with Adversity, How to Age and others*—there are steps and procedures to follow. I was prepared to make a facetious remark about a "solitude for dummies" book, but then I thought, what if there really is one? Almost but not quite. "The Importance of Solitude for Happiness" is a chapter in *Happiness for Dummies*. We need to learn that, too.

19. In my youth I recognized that I was at heart a loner, but I squelched those leanings. They scared me. A longing for solitude was a handicap to be overcome: people might not like and accept me if I disclosed the dark side of my personality, my "secret sin." It took a long time to accept and nurture that aspect of myself. I suspect it has something to do with aging and self-acceptance, what Einstein described as "solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity."

20. Like Thoreau, I've struck a balance. I don't want or need forty days in the wilderness: as little as a weekend of solitude allows me passage into the room of my own, at home or away, physical or figurative. And those solitary periods fortify me for life's

necessary and often rewarding social connections as well as its trials and challenges.

21. Emily Fox Gordon confesses that she loves to stay alone in hotels. It makes her feel free. "To do what isn't clear," she says; "to *sprawl*, not only on the bed but somehow all over the room." I used to travel occasionally for my work, and I looked forward to those hotel rooms at the end of a long day of meetings. It didn't matter if they were small or spacious, with or without room service, as long as I could close the door and be alone. To do what didn't matter. A woman at a conference told me she liked to use all the bath towels every morning and fling them around the room. We each spread out in our own way. It's a way of seizing control—why should it be a furtive undertaking? It strikes me as painfully female to feel guilty when we do something for ourselves. Maybe it is learned behavior after all.

Montaigne urged self-indulgence: "We have lived enough for others; let us at least live out the small remnant of life for ourselves; let us now call in our thoughts and intentions to ourselves, and to our own ease and repose."

22. There's a line from the movie *Aladdin* that my grandson used to bellow as a little tyke: "The universe is mine to command!" That sensation of power is its own reward. I physically and figuratively sprawl at Priscilla's house in Seattle. This week it's mine—all mine—and I'm going to bask in it. My solo reflections don't need to be lofty or penetrating; I'm not looking for my inner voice, not trying to find myself. After my power walk around Green Lake and the best bagel on the

west coast at Eltana, I'm ready to begin my day's work. I kickstart myself by leafing through my writing notebook. I do this to gather up reminders I've jotted to myself, project notes, phrases overheard, story ideas. I reread the entry I made on the first morning of my stay: "Solitude is: -not saying good morning & not feeling sheepish for not saying good morning; -freedom from distraction; -selfishness, pure & simple, having it my way. ..."

23. The "s" word—selfishness. No one mentions it, not by name, and no wonder. Not just a sin, it's among the seven deadlies, a hybrid of greed, pride, and gluttony. My past reluctance to admit to a yearning for solitude is a reflection of my fear of being judged selfish. What's different now? I'm old enough to not worry about what everyone else thinks, and old enough to indulge myself." A healthy dose of selfishness is what lurks behind benign images of spreading out and tossing towels. It's endemic. We mask our decadence with innocuous allusions to emotional balance and intellectual refreshment. It makes us more fit for humanity. We say: "I'll come home a better spouse / parent / colleague." That's true, but its glory is that it's something we do for ourselves. We flex our muscle; we are Aristotle's gods ... or wild beasts.