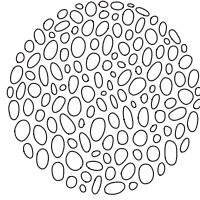


## CHAPTER 1

# Solitude Is Not Just for Hermits, Poets, and Billionaires



**I**N A SMALL HOUSE ON THE SHORE OF HOOD CANAL, a huge fjord carved into Washington State's densely forested coast, a man sits alone at a desk. If he looks up from his stack of books, he can see beyond brimming window boxes and across tranquil water to the snowcapped Olympic Mountains in the distance. He might even spy a great blue heron cutting through the air with slow swoops or an orca slicing powerfully through the water. But he spends most days reading voraciously, or scratching ideas on a notepad, occasionally getting up to crack open a Diet Coke.

Since the 1990s, that guy – Microsoft magnate Bill Gates – has been going on what he calls “think weeks,” during which he steps away from everyone and everything in his daily life for several days to be completely alone. The über-entrepreneur, and now philanthropist, escapes to the quiet cabin to still himself and to distill his ideas – essentially, to problem solve and look ahead. In the Netflix documentary *Inside Bill's Brain*, Gates calls it “CPU time,” named for the central processing unit, or the part of the computer that does what a program tells it to. “Hey, I just need to think,” Gates says, explaining his need for solitude. After all, without a functioning CPU, a computer is just a useless pile of metal and wire.<sup>1</sup>

This serene scene begs some fundamental questions about the condition we call solitude, who has access to it, and if it is essentially a positive or negative state (or neither). The concept of solitude has existed in stories and paintings, and in practice, for centuries. Looking at that history, as we do in this chapter, tells us a lot about the preconceptions we have about solitude today. Should we conclude from Gates's example

that enjoying meaningful solitude is only for billionaires or “tech-bros”? Is it only good and effective when we sequester ourselves completely in a secluded cabin, and for days or weeks at a time? (Spoiler alert: the answers are no and no.) Breaking down the myths and realities of solitude, as we do in our research and in this book, clears a way forward to better understand what solitude is and how we can all benefit from it, every day.

For better and worse, we see and relate to solitude in part due to the way our various cultures treat it. The images we see and the stories we hear, both historical and contemporary, create impressions about what it means to be alone and why we would or wouldn't want to be throughout our lives. By “culture” we mean not just the part of the world we grew up in, or the languages we speak, but also the dynamics of our families and other relationships from childhood through adulthood. We may have been raised in so-called individualist or collectivist societies that imprint on us the power of being alone, and revere or revile it, depending on those traditions. Or growing up in noisy or quiet families may have provided role models for positive alone time or led us to fear it. But we have found, in interviews with people in dozens of countries and by reflecting on our own experiences, that we can each hold unique ideas about what solitude means in our lives while collectively revealing certain universal truths about it.

This is important, because although each of us has an innate sense of what solitude is, there is surprisingly little consensus on its definition among those of us who study it. For the past forty years, psychologists have probed what it's like to be alone,<sup>2-4</sup> though, during that time, they have studied mainly children. The lone kid on the playground sparks concern in caregivers, and everyone wants to know if avoiding social interactions means trouble. Accepting its limitations, that research is still helpful in beginning to understand when solitude is good or bad and who tends to like or dislike it. But that approach has left a gaping hole in understanding the experience of solitude for us adults in our everyday lives.

For the past several years, in our own research, we have focused on filling that gap and on recognizing the many dimensions of solitude. With the input of thousands of people from all walks of life, we know

much more about time spent in solitude, and we now lead the field in defining what it means to be in solitude and understanding the impacts of that time. What makes it necessary or enjoyable, painful or feared? What effects does solitude have on the rest of our lives and on our relationships beyond the one we have with ourselves?

As we talk about in the coming chapters, we know now that solitude is not the same as loneliness, isolation, or withdrawal, even though those states are associated with the condition of being alone. And although psychologists used to treat solitude as “being alone” in a space absent other people, we now recognize that solitude can also happen in crowded parks and cafés full of chatter. We also see now, despite what history implies, that solitude isn’t reserved just for the powerful or spiritually accomplished.

So why is the lone genius on a woodsy retreat (often depicted as male, if we’re being real) the way many of us think about solitude? It’s a simple question with a fascinating answer played out over millennia and compacted down into the baggage we now carry when considering the who, what, where, when, and why of solitude today, in our daily lives. This book isn’t meant to offer a definitive history of solitude from the dawn of humans, but even a flyover look at how it’s been viewed over time helps shed light on some biases and beliefs. Looking at how solitude has been treated, and still is, can help us untangle why we approach it in the ways we do today, both as a society and as individuals. With that knowledge, we can also illuminate some of the misconceptions of solitude that impede us from enjoying it today and move ahead toward our own “you”-topias.

### FIRST, A LITTLE HISTORY

One of the reasons solitude is so interesting to study is because, as we have discovered in our research, the state or condition of being alone is an element of the human experience that transcends time and place, language and religion, age and gender. That doesn’t mean humans, since we first walked upright, have always experienced alone time in the same way or equally (gender and socioeconomic status have been important exceptions, as we’ll cover), just that it’s been a state sometimes celebrated, sometimes criticized – and most always marginalized –

throughout recorded history. Understanding that solitude has been embraced or shunned, worshipped or feared, discouraged or tolerated, through the ages hints at its power.

For millennia, solitude remained on the sidelines because, frankly, we weren't physically equipped for it. Solitude as an opportunity to experience a separate, internal space was outside the realm of the everyday lives of ancient hunter-gatherers. From this perspective, we are not "wired" to be alone (more on this in Chapter 6), and while we now top the pecking order on Earth, for most of history, we were fairly easy prey. Our ancestors, trying to avoid lions and leopards, knew that there was safety in numbers, at least for most members of a group. Before devising the technology required to flip the script on predators, we stuck together. This defensive behavior also served us well in forming societies that benefited from collective efforts like hunting and foraging.<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays, most of us don't need our neighbors' help to catch dinner, and our survival doesn't require putting others in peril. But this early history of primates may be responsible, in part, for why solitude is still outside of what is considered normal or expected, or practical. Even though we no longer need to be "selfish herd"<sup>6</sup> members like flocks of birds or schools of fish, humans still frequently adopt that mentality – and especially at times of danger, when individual reasoning is suspended in favor of pack trends (experts see this during structure fires or even when following stock market surges). "Group mind" can hijack our individuality and encourage alternative behavior we may not ordinarily exhibit. That innate desire to be part of the "in crowd," research has shown, also makes us less responsive to changes in our environment than we should be. It also makes us less likely to choose different ways of being that may ultimately benefit us – like spending time in solitude.<sup>7</sup>

Even as we moved off the savanna and into towns and cities, an understanding and acceptance of solitude continued to dwell on the fringes of human experience. In the best of times, solitude has come into favor as a fad, or at least a fascination, only to fall out again according to norms governed largely by academic, religious, and political leadership. (We delve into the science of that stigma in much greater depth in Chapters 2 and 6.) All the while, it has been greatly underestimated and undervalued in the mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

Some ideas about what solitude means in society today are driven by enduring stories and imagery from generations past that can influence, for better or worse, how we think about alone time and whether we welcome it. Those are sometimes clichés, such as the lone poet lying in a sunny meadow or a brooding philosopher sitting in an armchair by a fireplace. Other depictions of solitude have reached the masses via major religious traditions from around the world. They offer some of the earliest views of solitude, represented as a path to insight, growth, and spiritual transcendence (away from messier, “imperfect” social realms).

Ancient texts and countless images based on them (see Box 1.1) are infused with tales of prophets seeking guidance and wisdom in the “wilderness.”<sup>9</sup> Islam teaches that the prophet Muhammed went solo to a mountain cave for one month per year. He was visited there by the angel Gabriel, who revealed to him the first verses of the Qur’an, the faith’s sacred, central text.<sup>10</sup> Prophets in Jewish and Christian traditions, as depicted in the Bible, also tended to spend a lot of time alone. Both Moses and Elijah were advocates of solitude; Hebrew prophet Moses (traditionally credited with writing the Torah, which, in Judaism, is the law of God) “entered the cloud” of deep solitude on Mount Sinai to have God divinely reveal to him the Ten Commandments.<sup>11</sup> Ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra) seemingly outdid them all by retreating to wander the rocky, sparse Iranian mountains on and off, and alone, for a decade.<sup>12,13</sup>

For centuries more, those teachings continued to inspire the idea of solitude for spiritual transformation, and the hermits and monks who followed the prophets – still far from the mainstream – continued to seek sublimity.<sup>14</sup> This idea may seem oxymoronic on its face – that holy people shunned the presence of others for a self-serving purpose (transcendence) – but it wasn’t selfish to them. Instead, solitude was required to achieve utmost focus on something beyond themselves; time alone was meant for connecting with the divine. That need was understood at the time, and their deprivation was revered (and perhaps envied) by more common folks who knew suffering to be a route to salvation and happiness. Solitude represented an experience inaccessible to most, and it created, at least for some, an unrequited, romanticized longing for it.<sup>15</sup>

**BOX 1.1 BUDDHA BENEATH THE BODHI TREE**

Perhaps the most recognizable, and maybe idealized, image of solitude is the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. His eyes are closed to indicate an inward focus, his legs are crossed in a meditative pose, and on his face is a slight smile of peaceful contentment. Quite often in this ethereal imagery, the Bodhi tree, with its gnarled but leafy branches stretching outward in all directions, represents spiritual growth and development of selfhood. But how did the Buddha – the enlightened one, the knower – get there, and what lessons exist for us about the value of solitude?

The young Buddha, called Siddhartha Gotama at birth, was raised in wealth and comfort in Nepal, ignorant about the suffering of the poor. When he first ventured beyond his castle walls, Gotama believed the rest of the world shared his lucky birthright, and he was shaken when he saw, for the first time, poverty, illness, and death. To make sense of such a divergent and painful reality, Gotama sought help from the spiritual leaders around him. They suggested he fast and pray, but that didn't seem to do the trick, and after years of trying, a still-confused Gotama decided to go it alone in search of answers. It was then, in the solitude of a nearby forest, that he is believed to have found enlightenment. That formed the basis of what we now know as Buddhist doctrine, which professes that an existence based on attachment causes suffering and that pain can only be alleviated by freeing ourselves from the illusion of permanence.<sup>16</sup>

Through his attempt to understand the world on his own, the Buddha was able to return to society as a wise teacher with his own unique views and a new philosophy of the “good life.” Today, we generally frame what the Buddha was doing in solitude as meditation or its cousin, mindfulness – both popular but not required practices for finding meaning in time alone.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond its designated path to spiritual enlightenment, for most of history, solitude has been reserved for devotees like monks or cloistered nuns, those willing to swap societal and family ties for isolation and the doorway, they believe, to both a higher being and a higher purpose.

Excepting those idealized forms of solitude undertaken by religious figures, solitude was viewed mostly with suspicion over the following millennia. The fear of solitude seems, paradoxically, to stem from what gives it appeal – in the absence of social influence, people have the freedom to try out self-reflection, self-sufficiency, and independent thought. That was a power entrusted only to a few, and over time, it's been seen as dangerous in the hands of the shiftless majority.<sup>8</sup>

During the move from the Middle Ages into modernity, many physicians believed that a person's natural balance was thrown off by certain ways of life that affected their mental health. They warned that ascetic nuns and monks were at grave risk of melancholy from extreme self-discipline. Marsilio Ficino, an immensely influential scholar, priest, and philosopher in mid-to late fifteenth-century Italy, instructed scholars to lay off overthinking in solitude. Ficino, who also dabbled in astrology and medicine, believed that too much cogitating caused people's brains to dry out, which he believed led to depression.<sup>18</sup> It wasn't the beginning of that line of thinking – medical folks since Galen of ancient Greece (circa the second century) conflated being solitary with melancholy, a kind of vague sadness – nor was it the end, and it continued in that vein for centuries.<sup>19</sup> Oxford academic and vicar Robert Burton wrote in his best-selling encyclopedia of depression *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in 1621 that solitude transforms people from “sociable creatures, [to] become beasts, monsters, inhumane, ugly to behold.”<sup>20</sup>

Even up into the mid-nineteenth century, solitude was highlighted as deviant in many ways. In his *American Practice of Medicine* from 1846, physician Wooster Beach talked about several maladies believed to be either caused or intensified by solitude, including grief, melancholy, epilepsy, “love sickness,” and hydrophobia (a key symptom of what we now know as rabies). His conclusion: “Solitude should, therefore, by all means be avoided.”<sup>21,22</sup> Sentiments toward solitude weren't much different across the pond. In the 1850 edition of the *People's Medical Journal, and Family Physician* – at the time, a publication rivaling the prominent *Lancet* – British doctor Thomas Harrison Yeoman wrote, “The leading characteristics of melancholy are – a love of solitude, gloom, fear, suspicion and taciturnity.”<sup>23</sup>

At best, some people seemed to have had a complicated relationship with the concept of being alone, or perhaps a dawning recognition of its

possibilities. Despite the mainstream being dominated by discouraging messages about solitude, there have been moments when it has been more or less “in fashion,” albeit among those privileged with downtime and/or privacy. During the Renaissance in Europe (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries), some folks began to think differently about spending time in their own company.<sup>15,24,25</sup> They wanted to revive the teachings of ancient Greece and Rome, and in that context, they talked a lot about the “self” and the “individual.” The ancient Greeks believed, as Aristotle professed, that humans are political animals, but some also toiled over the value of the individual. Socrates was a chatty, city-loving philosopher – one famously indifferent to popular opinion – who argued for the supremacy of the individual conscience over the approval of society.<sup>25–27</sup> Later, the Roman Stoic known as Seneca wrote, “The primary indication, to my thinking, of a well-ordered mind is a man’s ability to remain in one place and linger in his own company.”<sup>28</sup>

Volumes of candid personal essays on the pros and cons of solitude were written during the Renaissance. Some of the most controversial were penned by reluctant politician and French philosopher Michel de Montaigne in the mid-fifteenth century. One is called “Of Solitude,” in which he insisted, “We must reserve a withdrawing-room wholly our own, and entirely free, wherein to settle our true liberty, our principal retreat and solitude.” He was most likely talking about noblemen like himself, and not the women or servants around him, but Montaigne’s thinking nevertheless represented an evolution in the understanding that there is a wholeness in being alone (and that it doesn’t cause your brain to dehydrate like a raisin). “We have a mind that can turn to itself, that can be its own company; that has wherewithal to attack and to defend, to receive and to give. Let us not then fear, in this solitude, to languish in an uncomfortable vacancy of thought,” he wrote.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Montaigne lived at a moment when economic conditions across Europe were improving for many. Privacy became a real possibility and objective, first for “nobles,” then for others who could afford to build either more rooms or at least more partitions in their homes. For the first time, a growing number of individuals could seek solitude, if only for a short time. In some cases, even women – particularly if they were part of genteel society – could enjoy more than



just a few moments of quiet apart from familial and social responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> (More on this in Box 1.2.).

Despite the shift in thinking for some people around “solitariness” (the term used back then), time alone remained a divisive topic. Most people still believed the individual was defined only in relation to society and that those who found themselves outside of that paradigm should be criticized – or pitied. That thinking may have stemmed more from a fear of the unknown than from anything else, because the masses likely had little firsthand knowledge of complete solitude. During the early industrial era in the mid-eighteenth century, seeking solo time wasn’t realistic because just making it through the day often relied on continuous social interactions. Even if someone did want to be alone, living in small, crowded homes or working in congested sweatshops would have made that difficult to do for any stretch of time. The working classes had little time for the Buddha’s brand of self-reflective solitude – though they may have had solitude “breaks,” according to David Vincent, author of *A History of Solitude*. On the flip side, and for some people, being alone may have been more a by-product of long hours of labor in the fields – more depleting than peaceful.<sup>24</sup>

During this time, there was also little enthusiasm among ruling elites for working individuals to find their own paths to wisdom (seen at the time as closely related to religious faith and morality). Most people were also illiterate and therefore unable to interpret spiritual teachings for themselves. Expounding on spirituality was the purview of religious leaders, who defined right and wrong, and spiritual pursuits were appropriate only in churches and social gatherings. Beyond those contexts, discovering one’s own untaught truths threatened an established social order and was discouraged by religious leaders.<sup>24</sup>

That narrow view didn’t change much during the hypersocial period of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when churning over progressive and liberal ideas in countless “salons” was all the rage and solitude was seen by many as a perversion. Eminent Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, “A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy’d a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable.”<sup>30</sup> But there were exceptions, such as

Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), who recommended everyday solitude for anyone who had the right mind-set for it. In a follow-up to that book, in his essay “Of Solitude” (1720), he wrote that the essence of solitude did not lie in the seclusion of a monk’s cell and could just as easily be found on the trading floor of what’s now the London Stock Exchange. The trick, he said, is for us to become “perfectly retired from the world” and ready and willing to be content on our own.<sup>31</sup> For some outliers like Defoe, who suspected that society held more questions than answers, time apart from others became an appealing place for self-discovery.

#### BOX 1.2 WOMEN IN SOLITUDE

The experiences of women throughout history are often difficult to discover, at least from the written record (while men have penned most of history, women have lived it in ways rarely recorded) – and their relationship to solitude is no exception. But as three female researchers and three women with different but profound relationships with solitude, we are acutely aware of the need to try to represent a true diversity of experiences. The history of women and solitude up to the present day is most certainly incomplete, but several prominent voices hint at the enduring importance of time alone to many women throughout the ages – including our own.<sup>47</sup>

The “herstory” of solitude exists on the fringes of society over the centuries, just as it did for many men, but how and why women have achieved solitude differs in some intriguing ways. That’s due, in large part, to gender stereotypes that exist in some form to this day, such as that women are “talkers” who want, or even need, to communicate to satisfy emotional needs. We are also perennially seen as “caretakers” who are thus expected to be available to others constantly and to relegate our own needs to partners and children at home, and at the office too (women are still overrepresented in occupations focused on social contribution and interpersonal communication).<sup>48</sup>

Historically, the picture was grimmer in terms of women’s secondary status in society. Women were believed to be the weaker sex, and men thought a woman left to her own devices would not have the mental strength to resist the devil. The definitive handbook on witchcraft,

*Malleus Maleficarum* (or *Hammer of Witches*), from 1486, which prompted two centuries of European “witch hunting” hysteria, gives us a peek at why. “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil,” it says. This meant that women who wanted to be on their own had to ride a swinging pendulum to the other extreme by declaring religious devotion.<sup>49</sup>

So-called desert mothers are not nearly as well known as their male counterparts, but nevertheless, there were female Christian ascetics in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the British Isles in the fourth and fifth centuries. Those *ammās*, as they were often called, joined monastic communities, but many also lived on their own as hermits. Choosing such an extreme religious vocation was a script flip on expected social values and expectations and, arguably, a mental and physical “way out” of living under patriarchal oppression. (In particular, the vow of chastity that *ammās* took was a solid workaround for women seeking physical independence.)<sup>50</sup>

Solitude, however, wasn’t just a means of escape but a meaningful space in which women could think and profess as spiritual teachers. Syncletica of Alexandria, living in fourth- and fifth-century Roman Egypt, was one such woman.<sup>51</sup> She was reportedly rich, beautiful, and educated but gave away her wealth and moved to the desert to live a holy, hermetic life. Even though she was certainly a fan of quiet contemplation, many people took pilgrimages to hear what she had to say. One of Amma Syncletica’s bits of wisdom rejects the idea that one must be a recluse to access solitude and its benefits, while also warning of the potential for rumination there. “It is possible to be a solitary in one’s mind while living in a crowd; and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of his own thoughts,” she said.<sup>52</sup>

The eremitic tradition petered out somewhat in the ninth and tenth centuries but surged again when, in the latter half of the Middle Ages (roughly 1100 to 1500 CE), women in Britain and Europe were again seeking solitude, in a different but no less extreme way.<sup>24</sup> That was the age of the “ anchoress,” during which time hundreds of laywomen chose to live alone (as long as they could financially support the endeavor), walled up in twelve-foot-square cells with no means of physical escape, to devote themselves to prayer and contemplation.<sup>53</sup>

The word  *anchoress*  derives from the Greek  *anachero* , meaning “to withdraw.” That life of relative isolation – they also counseled visitors from within their “anchorhold” – was believed to elevate them to a higher level of existence. They were a kind of supernun, though they didn’t take any vows, in that they had the power to seek salvation for others; some even believed the anchoress could usher the dead past purgatory. Beyond her obvious physical constraints, the anchoress fulfilled a powerful spiritual purpose far beyond other Christians – and most women – of her day.<sup>48</sup>

Many anchorite guidebooks written over centuries praised total solitude and made frequent reference to the preceding desert hermits as role models. One thirteenth-century guide,  *Ancrene Wisse* , reminded the anchoress that the consolation for her sacrifice was the service it provided others. “The anchoress is called an ‘anchor,’ and anchored under the church like an anchor under the side of a ship to hold the ship, so that waves and storms do not capsize it,” it said. This unique role represents a rare moment in history when the spiritual authority of women was recognized, even sought. (There were also male “anchorites,” but they were always outnumbered by women seeking the role.)<sup>54</sup>

Unlike an amma, the anchoress was on her own in the middle of town. Her cell was generally attached to a church and had three windows – one that overlooked the church interior, one that faced a parlor where a servant swapped food for waste, and another that opened to the outside. (There were no doors – an effort to “protect” her physical body from temptation and sin.) She was advised to keep her hair short and her clothes simple, as did the desert mothers and fathers. But holding an important position in the center of the community set the anchoress apart from what we know of hermits. While they shared the choice to live apart from society in extreme ways, the anchoress moved – at least intellectually – between society and solitude with remarkable intention.<sup>53</sup>

In that way, anchoresses represent an interesting anomaly in the history of solitude for women, and they illustrate the extremes to which women were willing to go to be left alone to think. At the same

time, the reality of women being voluntarily locked in cells as their only acceptable way to achieve significant periods of solitude (and to escape the uneven landscape of legal and social rights afforded only to men) is a grim one, at least to us in the modern day. Still, unlike most of their female contemporaries, anchoresses had a degree of autonomy over their physical bodies – they weren't expected to marry or to bear children, for example – and they were encouraged to read and write. Julian of Norwich, also known as Mother Juliana, is arguably history's most famous anchoress. She spent decades in her chosen confinement and, during that time, wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love*, which describes being on (what she thought was) her deathbed at age thirty – while not yet an anchoress – and experiencing a series of celestial revelations. The book, written in the mid- to late 1300s, is the first work in the English language that scholars are certain was authored by a woman.<sup>55</sup>

Women have taken greater risks in seeking solitude throughout history (and some argue we still do, be it physical and/or psychological) and by living in unconventional ways. A good example of this are the *beguines*, who came on the scene around 1200 in northern Europe and later spread south. The beguines were laywomen unaffiliated with any religious order who had nevertheless devoted their lives to poverty and service (in vocations like teaching or nursing).<sup>56–58</sup> Some lived solo, while others chose a more communal setting, but regardless, they were often investigated, suppressed, and even persecuted by those suspicious of women living without direct male oversight. If a woman and her body weren't governed by someone other than herself, if she wasn't under constant surveillance, then she seemed useless and potentially dangerous to men. (Despite attempts to shut down the beguines, they persisted in some form until the late twentieth century.) One exception to this harsh reality was Mugai Nyodai (1223–98), born into a noble samurai family in -modern-day Japan. After being widowed and raising her daughter, she chose to study with monastery abbots and eventually take her own monastic vows. After years of meditation, she attained enlightenment, becoming the first female Zen master, and (after being

denied leadership of her teacher's monastery) founded the first Buddhist convent in Japan.<sup>59</sup>

Historian Naomi Pullin at the University of Warwick has studied how experiences of solitude and society have differed for women and men, historically. She has written that, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, following others' guidance and example was customary, and departing from the norm could be a profound act. Bearing the weight of relentless domestic responsibilities, women's time was rarely their own, but occasionally, they carved out a way to be with their own minds. Pullin tells the story of Lady Elizabeth Anne Dormer, a gentlewoman from Oxfordshire who (unhappily) married Robert Dormer in 1668 and wrote revealing letters to her sister about her relationship – with solitude. “She extolled the emotional and domestic benefits of her private closet, ‘a safe shelter,’ where she could read and write in privacy. She contrasted this with the chaotic and overbearing domestic situation ‘out of it,’ where she could find ‘little quiet,’” wrote Pullin.<sup>60</sup>

Skip ahead to the mid-eighteenth century, and some remarkable women were also expressing their thoughts on solitude. Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles (a.k.a. the Marchioness de Lambert) hosted intellectual salons in her Paris home from 1710, where hot topics of the day were debated. She wrote about the importance of women carving out periods of internal shelter for independent thought. (Lambert could appreciate the paradox of espousing the Enlightenment-era philosophy of individual sovereignty in a parlor crammed with people.) In one of her most famous works, “Advice of a Mother to Her Daughter” (1729), she talks about solitude as a virtue to be cultivated. “Secure then a retreat in your own mental acquisitions, whither you may at any time return and be yourself,” she wrote. “You should therefore from time to time retire from the world to be alone.”<sup>61</sup> Lambert and similar writers around that time accepted that women were confined to a particular sphere (mainly the home) but argued that there were some choices still inherent within, or despite, that domestic confinement. Independent thought in solitude was one of them.

Later female writers had a more complicated relationship with solitude and saw it as a place of reflection and growth, but a precarious one – like wild-spirited, London-born, pioneer feminist and writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote about solitude as both a gateway to heaven and a woeful retreat to take when she was rejected by lovers or strangers alike. “Solitude and reflection are necessary to give to wishes the force of passions,” she wrote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft died at age thirty-eight, eleven days after giving birth to her second daughter and just six months after marrying William Godwin. Both were societal misfits; Wollstonecraft had affairs and advocated for women’s rights, and Godwin was a known anarchist. Their daughter, Mary Shelley, went on to write *Frankenstein* – the story of a creature feared and spurned for being “different” and doomed to the loneliest solitude.<sup>8,62,63</sup>

Nineteenth-century women talked about and used solitude in a way we might today better recognize as feminist. Kate Chopin’s fictional Marianne in the “Maid of Saint Philippe” (1892) is a strong, self-sufficient seventeen-year-old French American (and skilled hunter) living in present-day Louisiana on the cusp of a British takeover of her village. As an only child and newly orphaned, Marianne rejects multiple suitors, pursuing solitude instead and the independence she feels when she’s on her own. Chopin writes of Marianne, “At once she felt that she was alone, with no will to obey in the world but her own. Then her heart was as strong as oak and her nerves were like iron.”<sup>64</sup>

In that same year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), by then a famous suffragette agitating to gain the women’s vote, addressed the US Congress on the “Solitude of Self.” “In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe with her woman Friday on a solitary island. Her rights under such circumstances are to use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness,” she said.<sup>65</sup> Essentially, Stanton was arguing that what women did in solitude – indulge the sovereignty of their human souls – proved that they are equal to men. “To guide our own

craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel; to match the wind and waves and know when to take in the sail, and to read the signs in the firmament over all. It matters not whether the solitary voyager is man or woman,” she said.<sup>65</sup>

Twentieth-century women picked up that baton, arguing further that women needed their own spaces to feed their intellectual hunger. “A Room of One’s Own,” a now-classic feminist text based on two lectures given by Virginia Woolf to undergraduates at Cambridge University in 1928, was just one of Woolf’s works alluding to the power of solitude.<sup>66</sup> That “room” was literal and figurative, and Woolf argued that it was one of the many advantages men had over women at the time. Having the place and the time to enjoy solitude – whether to work or just to think – was key, especially for writing. Woolf sometimes experienced loneliness in solitude and depicted her characters in both positive and negative relationships with it, but she also capitalized on those moments, which seemed to fertilize her thinking. She wrote in “The Waves” (1931), “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 with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.”<sup>67</sup>

That concept was well understood by the prolific Belgian American poet, novelist, and diarist May Sarton. In her 1973 book *Journal of a Solitude*, she wrote that time alone was her “real life.” In solitude (both literal, on the windswept coast of New England, and figurative, as a lesbian female artist born in 1912), she wrote, “I hope to break through into the rough, rock depths, to the matrix itself.”<sup>68</sup> Sarton went in search of solitude in her mid-forties, when she felt societal demands were tamping down her inner fire. Her youth had been filled with many friends, lovers, coworkers, and correspondents, but she felt she had to reach inside for something more. In her work, Sarton explored universal themes, such as the quests for inner peace, self-knowledge, and individual satisfaction. In her collection of poems called *Inner Landscape*, Sarton wrote in “Canticle 6,” “Alone one is never lonely; the spirit adventures, waking / In a quiet garden, in a cool house, abiding single there.”<sup>69</sup>



Women are no longer seen as the devil's playmate if they steal away by themselves, but there still seems to be special scorn reserved for women wanting to fly solo today. Choosing solitude is often associated with the negative stereotypes of being difficult, selfish, pitiful, or sad. Oftentimes, those negative stigmas can be internalized, leading single women to form a negative impression of their own lifestyles.<sup>70</sup> For example, in an in-depth interview study of thirty-two Norwegian women age thirty-five to fifty-five years, researcher Bente Heimtun explored how it felt to travel alone. She asked her subjects to reflect on their best and most difficult moments, and they reported feeling inhibited and suppressed by the "tourist gaze" when on vacation or eating out alone. Her participants felt lonely and self-conscious when they couldn't hide from perceived social judgment. "It's not nice to sit in the middle of things and be stared at, then you really are alone, no matter how many books you've got with you," elaborated one interviewee.<sup>71</sup> (Sociologists have argued that conquering dining alone, in particular, is important for women's ability to claim their public space, shake off the fear of negative evaluations by others, and embrace their own solitude.)

Choosing to spend time in solitude continues to be viewed as a somewhat radical act, and some women are still compelled to make some extreme moves to stake a claim to alone time. Today, we have the "hermettes," a term coined by Risa Mickenberg, head of a quasi-clandestine society of women and a *New Yorker* demanding for women the respect normally reserved only for male hermits.<sup>72</sup> In a rare radio interview on the subject in 2022, she said, "I'm feminizing it because I feel like female aloneness is such a taboo." Instead, Mickenberg (now retired from a career in advertising) and others are bucking the stigma of being seen as hags or old maids, stereotypes that persist for women who have chosen to spend their lives solo and are hoping to shape a new feminine ideal. "I've seen now, there are so many women who really love being alone. And instead of it being a shameful or embarrassing thing, or kind of a secret, I think it should be the thing that we really all want to do," she said.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time in Continental Europe, the Romantic era was getting ready to launch, bringing with it more mainstream recognition of a potential upside to solitude. Johann Georg Zimmermann, a renowned German physician, wrote a four-volume tome, *Solitude* (1784–85), about how time alone offered moments for self-regulation and self-reflection and, for those reasons, provided a space to actively cure what ailed one's soul.<sup>32</sup> Zimmermann was critical of the picture of the pious, navel-gazing hermit completely removed from others as the only or true form of solitude and instead embraced the idea that solitude could be a collection of moments that complemented social life.

Zimmermann discussed solitude with nuance – he understood that there were risks as well as rewards – and he emphasized the importance of having the right mind-set, the right amount, and even the best context for time alone. Still, his writing caused discord at the time, according to David Vincent. Some people read *On Solitude* as a blanket “positive stamp” on solitude and reacted with hostility, as if Zimmermann's work was threatening the established social order. “There was all the difference between the withdrawal to the closet or the countryside for the purpose of self-collection, and the retreat to the same spaces because of emotional defeat or misguided passion,” wrote Vincent.<sup>24</sup>

On the heels of Zimmermann's unusual take on solitude came Romanticism, an intellectual and artistic movement characterized by its rejection of Enlightenment ideas and its embrace of emotion, transcendence, and the individual. The Romantics of the late 1700s and early 1800s and their American counterparts, the Transcendentalists, couldn't have been more different than the Enlightenment folks. During that time, poet William Wordsworth walked in the Lake District as “lonely as a cloud”<sup>33</sup> and in the “bliss of solitude,” and Ralph Waldo Emerson strolled in the hemlock, red oak, and white pine woods of Concord, Massachusetts, engaged in thinking about self-acquaintance, independence, and self-reliance.<sup>34</sup> Both groups held a certain suspicion about society and the masses and didn't desire the constant company of others, preferring instead a solo space to figure out who they were, often using the natural world as a guide. (Much more on the science behind the impact of nature on humans in Chapter 7.)

Solitude also found its place at the time in the carefully designed “self-reflection” gardens of Great Britain. In the mid-eighteenth century, it

became fashionable to stroll around one's property seeking spirituality and wisdom. Again, solitude was only for wealthy families who found themselves with more time for "thinking."<sup>35</sup> During this time, some rich families even employed "garden hermits" to occupy remote spots on their properties (some landowners also used the huts or grottos themselves from time to time for meditation and self-reflection). The hired hermits – picture a living, breathing lawn gnome – lived in artificial caves or hermitages and were visited for an occasional reminder of what spiritual transcendence through solitude could look like. Some were asked to dispense advice to visitors; others were told to stay quiet, not to bathe or cut their hair or nails, and to don robes like Druids (members of the learned class of ancient Celts).<sup>35</sup>

The hermits may seem to us now like a bizarre carnival act (and a somewhat inhumane one at that), but the introspection they were meant to encourage – however cultivated – was prized by elites at the time, and the hermits were meant to be revered. The popularity of gardens and grottos and the spectacle of "pet" hermits illustrate people's complicated relationship with solitude: those with more leisure time increasingly tried to reconnect with wisdom in a way previously only accessible to spiritual figures. But, still, solitude was a curiosity, a fringe element.<sup>24,35</sup> Many people seemed tantalized by it, understanding that there was something there worth exploring, but they failed to connect with the concept that it was fully open to them, whenever and wherever they chose.

### SOLITUDE WITH A LOWERCASE *s*

So far, we've looked at the history of solitude with a capital *S*, which seemed largely reserved for prophets, priests, poets, and the like, or at least, they are the ones privileged with enduring stories. But solitude with a lowercase *s*, the kind experienced every day by most folks, is tougher to pinpoint. It's difficult to know what the experiences of most people were, say, roaming the landscape in prehistoric times or dodging the plague in the fourteenth century, but it's likely most ordinary folks were too busy trying to stay alive to think much about the meaning of solitude in their daily lives. That doesn't mean they didn't desire more time on their own, and at least from a modern perspective, it's hard to imagine they didn't

long for alone time when living and working (and infrequently bathing) in cramped quarters. They may also have had a kind of alone time – in the company of others – that we researchers find particularly interesting: while kneading bread in the kitchen, washing clothes in the river, or sowing crops in the fields, side by side in easy silence, many people may have been experiencing a variety of positive solitude without even knowing it.

We know a little more about the experience of “empty” time as civilization progressed and the somewhat universal perception of being stuck doing something more recently described as “dull” or “monotonous.” Social historians tell us that, up to the mid-nineteenth century, people accepted “downtime” as part of the human condition. They didn’t necessarily love it or embrace it, or hate it for that matter. It was just part of living.<sup>36</sup> But some portion of society was beginning to recognize that a period of time could be differentiated as hollow or meaningless, and the word “boredom” first appeared in print in the 1820s.<sup>37</sup> In the following decades, writers portrayed tons of bored dilettantes and debutantes, some of whom even took pride in a social standing that allowed them to do nothing in particular – and to be cranky about it.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, the American artist Edward Hopper became famous for painting solitary figures in everyday scenes. In contrast to the hypersocial Roaring Twenties, his images of people looking intently out a window, sitting casually on a bed, or sidled up to a counter in a diner (not physically alone but certainly caught up in their own thoughts) became synonymous with the loneliness of modern life. Hopper was celebrated for capturing poignant moments experienced by people hovering on the edge of whatever American dream was supposed to be within their reach. Outside observers saw sadness and defeat in his subjects because that’s what most people believed was supposed to happen when one was alone. But that’s not what Hopper was getting at; instead, he was depicting people who were largely content in their own space, engrossed in a task or a thought.<sup>39</sup>

Then as now, misinterpretations of Hopper’s work continue to illustrate the false correlation between *alone* and *lonely* that still dominates overall perceptions of solitude. A good example of this occurred recently when Hopper’s work dominated social media as the COVID-19

pandemic forced most of the world to isolate to varying degrees. “We are all Edward Hopper paintings now,” one writer quipped in a tweet gone viral.<sup>40</sup> But decrying the state of being alone doesn’t seem to be what Hopper, a taciturn, self-contained man himself, had in mind at all. “The loneliness thing is overdone,” he once said. It is just as easy to see him as a chronicler of solitude – with a lowercase *s*, the more accessible kind we all experience.

In our research, our subjects have given us countless snapshots of moments in their daily lives spent in quiet contemplation while cutting the grass or hanging the laundry – which align well with Hopper’s images. The voyeuristic feeling we may get when looking at one of his paintings – like one that peeks into a single woman’s bedroom – is natural, not because we’re peeping on her physical state but rather because she is experiencing the intimacy of solitude, in heart and mind. It’s a pseudo-sacred space where her singular self – in what Hopper called an “elation of sunlight” – is purposefully set apart and distinct from others.

Despite our take on Hopper’s work depicting empowered solo spaces, much of early 1900s society held tight to the idea that solitude meant sadness. The perception of “alone” as something largely undesirable evolved in earnest when the word *loner* was first used in 1940 in a pejorative way. *Solitude* fell by the wayside as the term *loneliness* took center stage. In the mid-twentieth century, American industry regarded being bored or lonely as shameful or treacherous, as something bad for our health because, well, it helped companies sell more cheerfully sociable stuff like telephones and movie tickets – and it still does.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, in the aftermath of World War II, social psychologists were looking at the ill effects on the human psyche of constantly marinating in other people’s thoughts, needs, and desires (more on this, in depth, in Chapter 6).

In the 1950s, particularly in America, millions fled cities for the barbecues, block parties, and coffee klatches of the hypersocialized suburbs, which were considered a salve for boredom and loneliness. The 1960s were marked by a backlash “hippie” exodus from the suburbs (which paradoxically also extolled communal thinking and activism), and “loneliness” was pathologized in the mainstream media.<sup>42</sup> The

January 1960 issue of *Maclean's* magazine looked at that “commonest and least examined social problem of our times.” The article led with the line “Loneliness, according to the psychiatrists, is born with each and every one of us at the moment when we are thrust into the cold world from the warm comfort of the womb. It threatens man from the cradle to the grave.” As if that weren’t alarming enough, the article continued, “It seems that man is born with a need for contact and tenderness. If he is removed from his fellow men, his mind may become confused and deranged.”<sup>43</sup>

Twenty years later, calling out this prolonged hysteria, Alfred Kazin wrote in the *New York Times*, “Apparently, to be alone for a minute in this country is to seem ‘lonely’ – at least to others.” In fact, Kazin was writing about a Hopper retrospective that regurgitated many of the same tired impressions of the artist as a purveyor of lonely hearts. “What obviously obsessed him was not ‘loneliness’ but the taut surface of some deeply engrained solitude,” wrote Kazin.<sup>39</sup>

So far, these glances at how alone time has been experienced by people throughout history have shown us that society, by and large, has always been a mix of people who thought being on one’s own was either a tragedy, critically important to spiritual development, or simply out of reach. And, while it may have been entirely commonplace to spend time alone, or to want to, at many points throughout history, we see solitude relegated to the extremes. That’s because of the enduring sense we have that only special people could, or should, choose to be alone, and for very specific reasons.

Consequently, many of us still have a sense of solitude as something peripheral to our daily lives and as exceptional and/or extreme – both in good and bad ways. It’s still synonymous with privilege – with tech elites like Bill Gates, with the time and money to purposely seek out wisdom in the style of spiritual leaders – or seen as the domain of cranky wilderness militants like Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire* (1968)<sup>44</sup> or troubled people ejecting themselves from society to fight demons and find themselves, such as Chris McCandless in *Into the Wild* (1996)<sup>45</sup> or Cheryl Strayed in *Wild* (2012).<sup>46</sup>

Looking at solitude and how it’s been treated throughout human history is enlightening and a little frustrating, but, we believe, it can also

be freeing. As researchers, we, too, can feel the inertia that has positioned solitude as negative over time, but we're also focused on contrasting that entrenched social dogma with new understanding. Enduring mystique and misconceptions around solitude energize us to show what solitude *really* looks like today. Our work draws the solitude experience in from the margins of history and, with the help of our many research participants, unmask it and puts it smack in the middle of our busy, evolving, and promising lives.