

Death of Innovation: Solitude as the Silent Killer

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Recently, I have been exploring the idea of solitude at a depth slightly beyond the thick upper crust of superficiality attempting to understand the quintessential value of aloneness. My curiosity stems from (as per usual comparison) students I have in my classroom. What has become a pattern, turned into an identifying characteristic, of my students is their unwillingness to be alone. There seems to be a growing fear of solitude and a dark shadow hides over the word alone. Asking my students, the reasons for avoiding solitude span an ideological bank of “it is boring” to “I feel unsafe” when I am alone. Other students highlighted too many demands on their schedule from a fulltime work schedule, full time course load and the need to sleep – explaining that it isn’t that they don’t want to be alone, but they just can’t fit



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'alone' into their schedule. One young woman, somewhere in the realm of 19 years old, said, "I'm never alone. It makes me all nervous when I have to be alone. If I think I'm going to be alone, I try and find someone to come with me or stay with me. I guess I just get bored. Alone is weird."

Let's go with that.

"Alone is weird."

How have we socially gotten to a place where not only do we strive to not be alone, get nervous when we are alone, but we think that alone is inherently weird? Merriam Webster defines the word weird as "of related to, or caused by witchcraft or the supernatural: magical." Or "of strange or extraordinary character: odd, fantastic." Other words or phrases that are intrinsically linked to weird include: eerie, uncanny, mean, strange, uneasy, fearful consciousness where malign powers are at work, disquieting strangeness, mysterious or odd.

In a past not too long ago, the idea of solitude was seen as a social value. It was recognized as being an essential aspect of religion, meditation and introspection. In fact, early studies of philosophy and historical periods of thought, Christian Solitude was seen and celebrated through Augustine's Confessions and continued to be touted through the Humanist Traditions as outlined by philosophers such as Petarch, Montaigne, and Gibbon to Rousseau's Myth of Solitude as illustrated in Reveries of the Solitary Walker to one of my favorite's written by Thoreau at Walden: "Soliloquizing and Talking to All the Universe at the Same Time." It is during the period where the words and thoughts of Rousseau and Thoreau came into light where the value of solitude garnered a more stringent role in cultural foundations of the 'average' man. No longer was the Christian solitude kept within the higher practicing ranks of religious groups, but solitude was

taken from the connection of self-to-God to solitude in nature. Self at this transitional point was found in nature and not only in connection to the meditation made in conjunction with a Christian God.

Our historical value of solitude suggested that clarity of thought, clarity of identity and social roles and recognition of purpose were found in these periods of individual solitude. When solitude was only celebrated by religious leaders, it became recognized as something people with existential powers and purpose performed. It was a luxury and an honor and reserved for a specialized few. When nature became the new ideal of where one could connect with self, it was still seemingly designed for the deep philosophers and thinkers of the time, but also was a link between the specialized few seeking solitude to self-actualize to self-actualization becoming accessible to the common man.

Solitude, in the recent past (i.e. within the last 50 years) has been recognized as imperative to human creativity and individual satisfaction with oneself. Authors ranging from academic researchers to psychologists to investigative reporters have touted the importance of solitude for productivity, creativity and overall satisfaction with life. Time alone allows people to focus on what is important to them as individuals and not on the needs or ideas of others. When we lose focus on the demands of others, we free up mental space to focus on what is important to us. Solitude also allows us the opportunity to focus on one task at a time. The speed and mandates of day-to-day living requires us to expand our attentions across multitudes of platforms and people almost incessantly – and quite frankly, our brains are not really hardwired for such extensive and extreme multi-tasking. When we are overstimulated, we end up diminishing the quality and efficiency of what we are working on. Solitude creates a bubble of space to focus on one uninterrupted concept at a time and develop it. This is how creativity is given life and productivity increases. In fact, we can identify the number one habit of creativity is solitude. Creativity

flourishes in solitude. It is not until we are alone, disconnected from social media, computers, emails, tablets and phones can we hear our thoughts, think past our daily grind, and focus on the ideas that lay hidden in the chaotic schedules and mandates of life. Others who focus on the need for solitude for creativity in their writing emphasize that not only is the act of being alone necessary, doing nothing is also vital. Doing nothing except thinking, again, allows us to strip away the details and demands of life and really synthesize what is important or interesting in life and work and find internal inspiration. The common thread is creating emotional and mental space by withdrawing into a quiet physical space. We need to create space for creativity and innovation to fill our brains.

Through this miniature adventure of history, the significance of solitude to create clear and clean mental space to think beyond the present chaos to exist in a present place of thought is noteworthy. From early Christian philosophy to a modern belief of solitude for creativity, there is a clear line of connection of the necessity, value and purpose of solitude.

Let's jump to modern life style and demands of more work, more productivity, more money, more friends...well, more of anything – you can fill in the blank. We have too much going on to find these moments of solitude that lead to creativity and innovation. In some regards, solitude is a long lost luxury.

Now, let's jump to our [Millennials](#).

Solitude is actively avoided: feared in some aspects, perceived as 'weird' or 'unnatural' in others. Furthermore, we use social media and other forms of mediated technology to avoid solitude – fearful, perhaps of being alone, bored or having to listen to the pounding, often scary or overwhelming, thoughts that fill our heads in quiet moments.

This begs the question of the future of innovation.

If we are missing out in solitude due to life – what does the future look like?

If we are actively avoiding solitude – what does the future look like?

Yesterday I spent some time listening to a TedTalk by a particle physicist, Harry Cliff, who spoke about the fact that due to our inability to think, conceptualize beyond the levels of conceptualization we currently have on a particle level; physics might be coming to an end. He explained that we are coming to this place of exploring physics where we will have to stop. We are a hitting brick wall because without someone being able to think outside of the current realms of our thinking, thinking past what may be considered the unthinkable to those who are not particle physicists, there is no way further thought can continue past where we are today.

Although his 'talk' was focused on intricate details of physics, even someone like me, a social scientist could understand where he was coming from – and quite frankly, his main points are overwhelmingly relevant long past the barriers of physics.

Cliff emphasized that without creativity, there is no more innovation.

Creativity stems from solitude.

Solitude is becoming a thing of the past. No longer seen as something for the elite or as something for everyone, it is a practice that is actively avoided and seemingly feared by the next generation in line to take over.

The United States is a country founded on the idea of innovation and advancement. For decades, we have been the leader in education, technology, medicine, finance and even in military. We have risen through the international ranks as a leader because we have had

such a strong economy, military, education system and health system. This did not happen by accident or happenstance. Our ability to stand-out from the rest is embedded in the idea that as a culture, we value creation, innovation and advancement. We are not a culture to sit still and not pursue change and improvement. We thrive on advancement. We thrive on individual achievement. Neither which are accessible without solitude.

Yet, things are changing. If we connect the dots, it is clear that until we begin to recognize the power of solitude, the need for quiet, un-interrupted contemplation and time with unstructured thought, the importance of slowing down and celebrating, not fearing, being alone, we are in for a shock.

There is a blindingly obvious link between solitude and innovation. There is also a clear disconnect between solitude and the next generational cultural norm. Until we start bringing back in the need of innovation, our industry (not to mention the direction of our country) is in peril. Our industry is based on innovation, which stems from creativity – which is born of solitude. Many people argue that the hard sciences are disconnected from the arts – as art and science lay on opposite side of the production spectrum. However, they really aren't that far apart. Science, especially in STEM fields such as ours, requires deep creativity. No creativity means no innovation. In many ways, we are artists – only our canvas is technological in nature and requires different tools for development than a sculpture or a painting. Until we begin to recognize that we must foster a desire of creativity and a desire for solitude, we may be killing our industry – and more obtusely, draining an economy based on innovation.

At all levels in education, currently, in the United States, academic programming that develops and highlights creativity are being cut as funding becomes scarce. Students are not being exposed to music, art and

creative writing as they once were. In college, the humanities and fine arts are being espoused as useless degrees that lead to nowhere except the unemployment line. From a young age we are developing an anti-creativity and anti-art mindset in our children – a mentality that is reinforced in higher education environments. With the cultural norm of using social media and technology as a place to avoid, even hide, from solitude, we are creating a black hole. If we kill creativity – we are killing innovation.

That is the path we are on. Already, we fear solitude. Without solitude we lose innovation. Without innovation, we've got nothing but what is already known.

We are facing the eminent death of innovation and there is little question that fear of solitude is the silent killer.

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Brad Wood · a day ago

The title of this presented in the email from Medical Design Technology is "Death of Innovation: Solitude as the Silent Killer". I wonder who wrote it, as the author's point is that it is the shunning and absence of solitude that will end innovation, with which I agree.

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