

Chapter 1

A Reconnection to Self: Women and Solitude

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You quit your house and country, quit your ship, and quit your companions in the tent, saying, "I am just going outside and may be some time."

—Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

*Now she can say without shame or deceit,
O blessed Solitude.*

—Denise Levertov, "A Woman Alone"

Introduction

Everywhere I turn, I'm connected, or supposed to be: at home with my partner, children, parents, and siblings; at work with my colleagues; at leisure with my friends. My way of thinking, feeling, and behaving is bound up in webs and intricate interrelationships. My self is known to me in my experience of connection and interaction with others. It seems, according to the work of Carol Gilligan, that even my conception of morality is grounded in values of care, connection, and interdependence.

Not enough professional kudos can ever be given to Gilligan and her colleagues whose work continues to inform our understanding of differences in the lived lives of men and women that may be attributable to gender. Reading *In a Different Voice* (1982) convinced me that the way I thought about the world wasn't blunted or restricted; that my intelligence wasn't wandering aimlessly in some soft, ethereal cloud with daily changes in form and composition; that I wasn't alone.

I'm affirmed by my connective life; I nurture and savor my attachments to others; I nourish my connectedness to mother, sisters, daughter, friends. I search for histories of connections to my unknown

women ancestors. I eagerly read stories of my interdependence with other women, theirs with me. I hunger for women mentors; I mentor younger women.

Yet, I'm increasingly drawn to the idea of solitude. Days go by when I'm wearied by my interdependence, when responsiveness is mechanical and tedious. I want not just a room of my own; I want figurative space in my life. I'm slowly finding that my view of myself is not solely in relation to others, but is one that emerges in moments of impenetrable, profound silence, moments in which I am alone, moments in which I am no longer mother, daughter, teacher, wife. Anthony Storr captured who I am and who I strive to be, unconnected in these moments when one is "constantly seeking to discover [her]self, to remodel [her] own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what [she] creates. [She] finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own separate validity. [Her] most significant moments are those in which [she] attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which [she] is alone" (1988, xiv).

Storr's right, I think: while there is inherent joy for many in living a life of care and response to others, there can be a toll for the sum of minutes and hours and years of moving "to the rhythms of others" (Olsen 1989, 68). In her book *Silences*, Tillie Olsen portrays the slow burn of one's need for solitude amidst the "joys and responsibilities and trials of family life" (1983, 38). But it didn't happen, as it doesn't—can't—for many women who, through duty or choice, weave their lives around others, their selves known only within the context of human connection. Olsen's need for aloneness, for separation from others in order to create, could not be first. It could have "at best, only part self, part time....It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil.... Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be" (1983, 37). This is not to suggest that women's connectiveness is necessarily distracting or disabling, sapping energy rather than charging it up. But our energy is often beamed to and from people, not toward the singularity of creation, introspection, reflection. And I fear that, with the intense focus on and celebration of women's connectiveness, we turn away from purposefully nurturing and validating not just the wish for or need to be alone, as Olsen portrayed, but the capacity to be alone (Storr, 18).

Storr argues that this capacity to be alone “becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one’s deepest needs, feelings, and impulses” (p. 21). During these times, one is likely to discover and engage in the interests and creative work that play an important part in “defining individual identity and in giving meaning to a person’s life” (p. 73). Here is the juncture at which Storr may offer women’s developmental theories another perspective for which we need not apologize, fearing solipsism or selfishness or male-dominated patterns of relationships. Storr argues,

If it is accepted that no relationship is ever ideal, it makes it easier to understand why men and women need other sources of fulfillment. As we have seen, many creative activities are predominantly solitary. They are concerned with self-realization and self-development in isolation, or with finding some coherent pattern in life. The degree to which these creative activities take priority in the life of an individual varies with [her] personality and talents. Everyone needs some human relationships; but everyone also needs some kind of fulfillment which is relevant to [her]self alone. (p. 84)

In the following pages I examine solitude as an essential condition for intense reflection on one’s life, as a primary state for examination of one’s emotional and spiritual self, and as a site of creation. My focus is necessarily personal; my own attempt at meaning-making has been grounded in a lifelong passion for literature during times I have been alone. Thus the examples I use are those from imaginative literature in the voices of women who have experienced solitude by choice or chance, solitude that has strengthened, nurtured, startled, or awakened their lives. While the sites and conditions of solitude are as varied as those who experience it, all the women in the following stories find a different kind of connectedness from that which we have grown accustomed to expect. That is, the solitude they experience is a reconnection of their outer, interpersonal, role-saturated selves back to their hidden, inarticulate selves—the part of us often parched or atrophied when our energy is only spent outward, on others.

Images of Solitude in Literature

Alice Koller’s flight to an isolated beach house, documented in her book *An Unknown Woman* (1981), came after realizing at the age of thirty-seven that she “didn’t have a life” and was merely “using up a

number of days somehow" (p. 1). She decides to leave the familiarity of place and security of friends and acquaintances and lovers to go somewhere "quiet, without traffic or factories. Somewhere where I can be really alone, so that I don't have to be pleasant to people all day long, so that I don't even have to see other faces when I walk outside my door. Somewhere I don't have to do anything but think all day long" (p. 2). But why the *solitude* to think? She describes bits of introspective monologues she had in the presence of her psychiatrist that were helpful during her one-hour therapy sessions, but couldn't begin to unravel the difficult questions of days made up of twenty-four hours. Alone on Nantucket, she finds she doesn't have to separate that hour of introspection from the rest of her living, because there on the island "the hour has expanded to encompass the day....When I start thinking my way through some remembered torment, the only thing that stops my thinking is my endurance...no one can tell me more about myself than I already know. No one can care how it all turns out more than I do. And that's why no one is here with me now" (p. 61).

Still, Koller finds solitude to be an acquired capacity as she avoids the thinking she came to do, or loses the patience to sit down and write as she thinks, the thoughts coming too fast or too randomly. But slowly she becomes more adept at pursuing "one single thread all the way to its end" (p. 60). She begins to realize that she had never understood the meaning of what she needed or wanted, so dependent she had been on what other people said and believed: "I have turned other people into mirrors for me. I look at other people in order to see myself" (p. 69). She realizes how she had trusted what others saw, but not her own sight; thus she realizes her need for outside sources of validation—of her physical beauty, her intelligence. Yet once the sources dried up, she was set on a course of doubting herself. Without the mirrors supplied by others, she finds herself unable to know how to respond to things. No, that's not it, she writes. It's that "I don't know how *I* respond to things. I don't know how to find out what's going on inside of me" (pp. 111–12). Koller is not alone; Gilligan (1982, 16) describes women's tendencies to "question the normality of their feelings and to alter their judgments in deference to the opinion of others." Yet Gilligan presents the case that women's deference, rooted in social subordination, can also be regarded as the "substance of their moral concern. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view" (*ibid.*).

But Koller finds in herself possible dishonesty in attending to others before she understands what she thinks and feels and wants,

because being a person has to do with generosity and kindness only secondarily to being honest with myself. Suppose my generosity is the means I use to get someone to give me something. Suppose my kindness is my way of ignoring my anger. Suppose my thoughtfulness is my way of manipulating other people's lives....I feel naked and very small. But new. Nothing ever again has to be the way it was. If I can only hold back the world until I can catch up with my own unclad response to it. (p. 229)

There on Nantucket, alone without humans and mirrors, was where she set the process of self-understanding in motion. It was a process never to be completed, she believed; in fact, she didn't "even know how to begin learning how" to recognize what she felt (p. 123). But she was onto something, finally, an awareness and a yet-to-be-learned process that could deepen and magnify her experience, those lived in both separation *and* connection.

May Sarton writes of the similar challenge of her solitary confrontation with self in *Journal of a Solitude*. Living alone in her home in Maine, she describes the swings of emotion, the thinking, the tears of realization of truths, big and small, which compose the evolving story of her life. Living alone without any dependencies, she's aware of her position of privilege enabling her to ask the very questions themselves, to engage in a search for meaning, to mull and puzzle and think uninterrupted. She writes: "It is harder for women...to clear space.... Their lives are fragmented...[they] cry not so much for 'a room of one's own' as time of one's own. Conflict becomes acute, whatever it may be about, when there is no margin left on any day in which to try at least to resolve it" (1973, 56).

In Sarton's cleared space, she is able to dig deep enough to find a "bedrock of truth, however hard" (p. 150). She finds in herself not merely the capacity for solitude; she finds it imperative for finding meaning in the rest of her lived life. Yet this necessity is not without the risk of near-drowning in depths where there is nothing to "cushion against attacks from within" (p. 16). Here, alone, she is able to take up her "real" life again: "That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here and 'the house and I resume the old conversations'" (p. 11).

These essential, nourishing and maddening connections, if left

unexplored, lead to what Sartre calls “clutter” when there is “no time to analyze experience. That is the silt...that literally chokes the mind” (p. 160). Without time to analyze experience, women *have* no center, so fragmented they become with the tugs and pulls and demands of others that their conception of self is a scatter plot, a labyrinth with someone always around the corner, a diagram of competing vectors. Without solitude, Sartre describes this as feeling “dispersed, scattered, in pieces” (p. 195). She finds that she must have time “to mull over any encounter...to extract its juices, to understand what has really happened to me as a consequence of it” (p. 196).

But what does one do when self and spirit are divided, and when human connections have disintegrated? Margaret Atwood’s unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* (1972) becomes primal, as far away from human contact as possible. For her, humans—the Americans—are the enemy in her search to discover her essential self, the self without “husks.” Both the site and means to her search is the Canadian wilderness—“the truth is here”—where there is only the singularity and sacredness of nature. For her, solitude must be an inside-out, all-over, sensory experience, not merely in isolation in a room, a house, just anywhere. Her solitude is one in which her self becomes known only in connection with nature. Her search must be undistorted by humans, much like Thoreau’s well-known flight to the woods where he went “to live deliberately...to reduce [life] to its lowest terms” (p. 67).

Atwood’s protagonist lives deeply and deliberately, too, as she melds with nature: “I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning...I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (p. 210). Through her solitary experience in the wilderness, the awareness that comes to her helps her to hone and whet her humanness: she sleeps in lairs; she discards clothing and mirrors and other civilized accoutrements that restrict and blunt the authenticity of one’s living; she dissects past relationships and revisits parents with sharper, more intuitive lenses; she identifies the enemy as anyone who “will not let you have peace...(or) anything they don’t have themselves” (p. 215). She waits and watches and remembers. Finally she is able to reenter her own time with a newfound strength, awareness of self, and resolution: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless” (p. 222).

A different perspective on solitude and the ravages of its absence in a woman’s life is found in the voice of Eva in Tillie Olsen’s *Tell Me a Riddle*. Unlike the other women I’ve described who are all in the midst

of living in middle age, Eva is older, and dying. Her life has been one of continuous care for her husband and seven children, bound by a sense of unquestioned selfless duty, and confounded by the "humiliations and terrors" of poverty, leaving little time for herself. Even in those precious stolen moments when the house was quiet, nursing one baby with another on her lap, she would "try to stay awake for the only time there was to read," often to the coaxes of her husband to "put the book away, don't read, don't read" (1989, 67).

Now, in her garden and in the tranquility of an empty house "no longer an enemy, for it stayed clean," she had peace. And she was dying. But what to do with the manner of her dying? Her family thought they knew, based on the manner of her living: surround her with her children and her grandchildren, with the flurry of doing. Hiding the finality of her illness, and without asking what she wanted, her husband whisks her around the country to her children's homes. While she thought she might be able, finally, "to live within, and not move to the rhythms of others" (p. 68), she is faced with more noise, more chatter, more insistence from others to comfort, to mend, to tell stories and riddles. So what she did, instead, was pretend to nap,

and hunch in the girls' closet on the low shelf where the shoes stood, and the girls' dresses covered....For that while she would painfully sheathe against the listening house, the tendrils and noises that knocked, and Vivi's spilling memories....Blows, screams, a call: "Grandma!" For her? Oh please not for her. Hide, hunch behind the dresses deeper....But a trembling little body hurls itself beside her—surprised, smothered laughter, arms surround her neck, tears rub dry on her cheek, and words too soft to understand whisper into her ear (Is this where you hide too Grammy? It's my secret place, we have a secret now)....And the sweat beads, and the long shudder seizes. (pp. 89–90)

Even in dying she is denied solitude, so seeped was her family in the belief that her connectedness to others was what, in the end, would give her the most comfort.

Summary

Through literary descriptions of solitude, I've attempted to reveal its absence and importance in women's lives. Solitude, the voices of these women posit, is essential if they are to examine themselves critically,

deeply, and honestly, without looking at and listening to others first or exclusively for validation. While it may be that women depict “ongoing attachment as the path that leads to maturity” (Gilligan, 170), somewhere along that path should be forays into the woods, alone without companion or guide, where the “mirror of the soul” (Merton, 106) can be emptied of other images.

Yet, I’m uneasy. The women I’ve described are women of privilege, and none has the dailiness of dependents. With the exception of Eva, they are writers or academics, not bound by timecard or rigidity of being here or there for this person at that time. They are white, apparently well-educated, middle class. I worry that it is my position, like theirs, that allows me even to raise the issue of solitude. As I read Annie Dillard’s account of writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in Roanoke, I thought how strange and mysterious her schedule must sound to women whose lives are framed by lunches to pack, mountains of laundry, bills that may not be paid, and tedious or routinized jobs: “I slept until noon, as did my husband, who was also writing. I wrote once in the afternoon, and once again after our early dinner and a walk. During those months, I subsisted on that dinner, coffee, Coke, chocolate milk, and Vantage cigarettes. I worked till midnight, one, or two. When I came home in the middle of the night I was tired; I longed for a tolerant giant, a person as big as a house, to hold me and rock me” (1989, 27).

I and many others rejoice in Dillard’s solitude that allowed her to give us the gift of her craft. But to suppose that a literal escape, a place, is *necessary* for women to live reflective, creative lives is romantic, perhaps quixotic, a brass ring just out of reach, given the multiple lives many women live. Perhaps Tillie Olsen offers hope for many women wanting connection and separation, family and solitude, a life of giving and serving and a life lived within:

Bliss of movement. A full extended family life; the world of my job...and the writing, which I was somehow able to carry around within me through work, through home. Time on the bus, even when I had to stand, was enough; the stolen moments at work, enough; the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done, sometimes during. It is no accident that the first work I considered publishing began: “I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.” (1983, 38)

Through chance, oppression, or choice many women are not able to seize blocks of time in solitary places to think, reflect, or create like Sarton or Koller or Dillard, though we celebrate their lives that enable them to do so. Perhaps what some of us can do, however, is follow the example of lives like Olsen's that acknowledge, then stalk those moments of solitude often wedged in dailiness. We're far more than what we see of ourselves reflected in others; learning how and where to look for ourselves, to "dive deep" and still surface, seems to be what we can learn to do as we, too, stand here ironing.

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