SSW EDGE EFFECTS READING GROUP #2
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'Solitude' by Anthony Storr, 1989
(Harper Collins, 1997 Edition)

TWO EXTRACTS FOR CLOSE READING:

EXTRACT ONE: Introduction, page ix-x

EXTRACT TWO: Chapter Two 'The Capacity to Be Alone', page 18-21

INTRODUCTION

'Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius; and the uniformity of a work denotes the hand of a single artist.'
Edward Gibbon

Gibbon is surely right. The majority of poets, novelists, composers, and, to a lesser extent, of painters and sculptors, are bound to spend a great deal of their time alone, as Gibbon himself did. Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psychoanalysis, assumes that man is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness. Yet the lives of creative individuals often seem to run counter to this assumption. For example, many of the world's greatest thinkers have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This is true of Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Some of these men of genius had transient affairs with other men or women: others, like Newton, remained celibate. But none of them married, and most lived alone for the greater part of their lives.

Creative talent of a major kind is not widely bestowed. Those who possess it are often regarded with awe and envy because of their gifts. They also tend to be thought of as peculiar; odd human beings who do not share the pains and pleasures of the average person. Does this difference from the average imply abnormality in the sense of

psychopathology? More particularly, is the predilection of the creative person for solitude evidence of some inability to make close relationships?

It is not difficult to point to examples of men and women of genius whose interpersonal relationships have been stormy, and whose personalities have been grossly disturbed by mental illness, alcoholism, or drug abuse. Because of this, it is easy to assume that creative talent, mental instability, and a deficient capacity for making satisfying personal relationships are closely linked. Regarded from this point of view, the possession of creative talent appears as a doubtful blessing: a Janus-faced endowment, which may bring fame and fortune, but which is incompatible with what, for the ordinary person, constitutes happiness.

The belief that men and women of genius are necessarily unstable has been widely held, especially since the time of Freud. It cannot possibly be the whole truth. Not all creative people are notably disturbed; not all solitary people are unhappy.

Modern psychotherapists, including myself, have taken as their criterion of emotional maturity the capacity of the individual to make mature relationships on equal terms. With few exceptions, psychotherapists have omitted to consider the fact that the capacity to be alone is also an aspect of emotional maturity.

One such exception is the psycho-analyst, Donald Winnicott. In 1958, Winnicott published a paper on 'The Capacity to be Alone' which has become a psycho-analytic classic. Winnicott wrote:

> It is probably true to say that in psycho-analytical literature more has been written on the *fear* of being alone or the *wish* to be alone than on the *ability* to be alone; also a considerable amount of work has been done on the withdrawn state, a defensive organization implying an expectation of persecution. It would seem to me that a discussion on the *positive* aspects of the capacity to be alone is overdue.[3]

In Chapter 1, I referred to Bowlby's work on the early attachment of the human infant to its mother, and to the sequence of *protest*, *despair*, and *detachment*, which habitually occurs when the infant's mother is removed. In normal circumstances, if no disastrous severance of the bond between mother and infant has occurred, the child gradually becomes able to tolerate longer periods of maternal absence without anxiety. Bowlby believes that confidence in the availability of attachment figures is gradually built up during the years of immaturity; more particularly during the period from the age of six

knowing you can easily re-attach!

months to five years, when attachment behaviour is most readily elicited. However, sensitivity to the presence or absence of attachment figures continues until well into adolescence. Many middle-class English children who had experienced total security in early childhood have had their expectations rudely shattered when sent to boarding school at the age of seven or eight.

It is generally recognized that clinging behaviour is indicative of insecurity. The child who will not let the mother leave, even for short periods, is the child who has no confidence in her return. Conversely, the child who has developed trust in the availability of attachment figures is the child who can increasingly experience being left by such figures without anxiety. Thus, the capacity to be alone is one aspect of an inner security which has been built up over the early years. Although there are children who shun company and are pathologically isolated, that is, who are in the 'withdrawn state' referred to by Winnicott, a child who enjoys some measure of solitude should not be confused with such children. Some children who enjoy the solitary exercise of the imagination may develop creative potential.

Have you a lonely child?

Building up a sense of security can be seen as a process of conditioning. Repeated confirmation of the presence of attachment figures when needed conditions the child to favourable expectations of their future availability. Psycho-analysts usually refer to this process as *introjecting a good object*; meaning by this that the attachment figure has become part of the individual's inner world, and therefore someone on whom he can rely even though the person concerned is not actually present. This may seem far-fetched, but most people can think of times at which they have said to themselves, 'What would so-and-so do in this situation?' They are then relying upon someone who, although not there in reality, has been incorporated into their imaginative world as someone to turn to in a dilemma.

Winnicott suggests that the capacity to be alone in adult life originates with the infant's experience of being *alone in the presence of the mother*. He is postulating a state in which the infant's immediate needs, for food, warmth, physical contact and so on, have been satisfied, so that there is no need for the infant to be looking to the mother for anything, nor any need for her to be concerned with providing anything. Winnicott writes:

> I am trying to justify the paradox that the capacity to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of someone, and that without a sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop.[4]

Winnicott goes on to make the extremely interesting suggestion that

> It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his personal life.[5]

Infants, because they are immature, need the support of another person if their sense of being 'I', that is, a separate person with a separate identity, is to develop. Winnicott conceives that this begins to happen when the infant is able to be in the relaxed state which is constituted by the experience of being alone in the presence of the mother. After being in this state for a while, the infant will begin to experience a sensation or impulse. Winnicott suggests that

> In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience.

Winnicott contrasts this feeling of personal experience with what he calls

> a false life built on reactions to external stimuli.[6]

Throughout most of his professional life, Winnicott was particularly preoccupied with whether an individual's experience was authentic or inauthentic. Many of the patients whom he treated had, for one reason or another, learned as children to be over-compliant; that is, to live in ways which were expected of them, or which pleased others, or which were designed not to offend others. These are the patients who build up what Winnicott called a 'false self'; that is, a self which is based upon compliance with the wishes of others, rather than being based upon the individual's own true feelings and instinctive needs. Such an individual ultimately comes to feel that life

is pointless and futile, because he is merely adapting to the world rather than experiencing it as a place in which his subjective needs can find fulfilment.

Although Winnicott's suppositions about the subjective experiences of infants are impossible to prove, I find his conceptions illuminating. He is suggesting that the capacity to be alone originally depends upon what Bowlby would call secure attachment: that is, upon the child being able peacefully to be itself in the presence of the mother without anxiety about her possible departure, and without anxiety as to what may or may not be expected by her. As the secure child grows, it will no longer need the constant physical presence of the mother or other attachment figure, but will be able to be alone without anxiety for longer periods.

But Winnicott goes further. He suggests that the capacity to be alone, first in the presence of the mother, and then in her absence, is also related to the individual's capacity to get in touch with, and make manifest, his own true inner feelings. It is only when the child has experienced a contented, relaxed sense of being alone with, and then without, the mother, that he can be sure of being able to discover what he really needs or wants, irrespective of what others may expect or try to foist upon him.

The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses.