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THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOLITUDE

by

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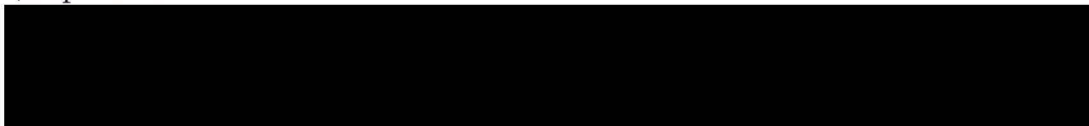
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experience of solitude. The research methodology is phenomenology, which focuses on the meaning and experience of a phenomenon in a very personal sense and is discovery oriented. The author interviewed people that live in a remote community; people that have careers that necessitate that they work alone; and people in an educational organization that include "solo" experiences in its curriculum. The author combines the descriptions that she obtained from the interviews with her own lived experiences and with photographs as well as with related literature in order to provide a deeper understanding and awareness of solitude and its importance in people's lives.



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I dedicate this study to John, Gamelle, and Fletcher,
who carried on while I wrote in the attic room.

We live together, we act on, and react to, one another, but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena; they are crucified alone. Embraced, the lovers desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude.

Aldous Huxley

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: FINDING THE CENTER

Choosing the Interest

The process of choosing an area of interest was a difficult one. I knew that writing the thesis would dominate my life. I felt that it would invade my mind, relationships, and living quarters. I was warned: "Be sure to choose something you are really interested in; otherwise, it will be pure *hell*." What was it that I was deeply interested in? What would propel me through the invasion?

Why do I look at the process as an invasion? Is being preoccupied with a topic; isolating myself from family and friends; and having an accumulation of papers, books, and drafts spilling past my desk an invasion? I seek topics that are intriguing and consuming, so I cannot claim that a preoccupation would be an invasion. Neither can I claim the process would invade relationships. As a parent, wife, daughter, sister, neighbor, and friend I recognize that the need and time for personal involvement is in a constant state of evolution as interests, health, and schedules change. The overflow of research materials and equipment is annoying at times, but can hardly be classified as an invasion either. Why, then, do I use the word, "invasion"?

The Oxford dictionary defines "invade" as "to enter by force with the intent of conquering or plundering; to trespass upon; intrude upon; to invade *privacy*." What was going to be invaded? What could be robbed from me or encroached upon? I searched my memory as if I was digging for the last potato of the season. I dug and pulled at deep rooted thoughts. What was so important to me that I feared losing it? I reflected on my questions. I wrote about what interested me. I searched my notes and papers from courses to uncover passages that were significant. I reviewed quotes copied from novels. Eventually, the digging and pulling freed the roots from the soil and my interest was revealed. I realized that I had been thinking, reading, and writing about my interest in a variety of forms throughout my post-graduate studies. Now I understood the fear.

I am frightened that once I have exposed the interest, shaken off the dirt that clings to it, examined it for spots and worms, washed and scrubbed its form, tossed it into the pot to be boiled, and then eaten it-- that it will be gone. It will have lost its significance. I do not want to do this with something I treasure. I do not want to examine the interest, pull it apart, and discuss its importance until I have "beaten it to death." Simpson writes, "I had a premonition that my privacy and self-possession, which harmed nobody and were my only important treasures, would be things of the past the day after tomorrow" (Manguel, 1993, p. 619). I am afraid that in choosing something that deeply matters, my constant "digging and pulling" will eventually

destroy the mystery and power that it has; like Simpson's premonition, it will be a thing of the past.

Defining the Thesis Topic

The interest, that I fear an intense examination could destroy, is solitude. At this point, nothing has or can take away its importance. What will happen to my memories and future experiences with solitude? In undertaking a study on solitude, I realize that I chance an irrevocable loss. Will I conclude the process with a deepened appreciation and understanding? Or will the enormous amount of time spent alone and the constant examination of the subject tarnish the experience of solitude and make it repugnant?

Why do I risk this loss by choosing "solitude" as the topic of my thesis? I realize the fear is still there, but it has not grown. What has grown is the interest in wanting to understand the experience of solitude. The "do not want" statements have been replaced by "I want." I want to continue "digging" at understanding the power of solitude. I want to "explore" the mystery of solitude. I want to come to know its essential qualities.

My struggle, though, is just beginning. My "I want" statements are significant, but do not get to the center of my interest. Van Manen (1989) suggests that writing a personal description of a lived experience

helps to give "a more precise sense of what we are attempting to obtain" (p. 59). The following "description" begins when I was 11 years old:

My family moved to Vernon (a village near Ottawa, Ontario) when I was entering grade six and lived there for a year and a half. During that time, I belonged to the C.J.I.V. Club, the 4-H Club, and the church choir. I walked or bicycled every day after school to deliver The Ottawa Citizen to the scattered farm houses on my route. I achieved high marks and still have my orange exercise books. I was well liked and was one of the leaders of the two-room school. I won a prize in a community public speaking contest. My speech was on astronomy. It was not the top prize--the fellow that got chased by a bull and played dead achieved that honor. I won the "best costume" at Halloween each year. I skated alone after school in the open fields behind our house. I had a cat. I played with dolls in my small bedroom. I baby-sat four children under the age of six while their mother took courses at university to become a teacher. I took piano lessons. I got up early each morning before anyone else was awake, sat over the hallway heat register in my nightie, and read or studied. Then on October 8, 1965, my thirteen year old brother was killed.

The months after Bob's death are a blur. We moved to Victoria in February 1966. I never recall being popular again. I do recall not fitting in at school. I remember many small, but cruel acts that were directed at me during the second half of grade

seven. I did not sit over the heat register to study nor did I listen in class. I did poorly in my course work and failed most subjects. I chose the non-academic program in junior high school. I recall my mother's anguish over the loss of "her son." I did not deliver a newspaper or belong to any club. I remember my purple bedroom and never wanting to get out of bed until I had to. I remember that I did not feel any sense of being alive then--just a lot of nothingness. I felt entombed. I do not recall, however, being lonely.

Why have I chosen this traumatic description as an example of a personal lived experience? How does it help me to get to the center of my interest in solitude? The first paragraph describes an idyllic and full existence. I was successful and popular; yet also enjoyed playing and doing activities on my own. It appears that I was independent, self-confident, and energetic. The description suggests a balance of sociability and solitariness. The second paragraph's description is as dark as the first's is bright. It is also the one that brings me closer to my questions. My parents had three sons and one daughter. As the only daughter I had always been assured of being a focal part of the family. After my brother's death, everything was pushed aside. Everything changed. I lost my grounding. I had nobody to turn to. A child seeks a parent, relative, or close adult friend to discuss anxieties with and to ask for advice. Our move from Ottawa to Victoria denied me any such support. My father came home from work only on the weekends; my

older brother had stayed in Vernon to complete his grade 13; my younger brother was nine years old; and my mother's grief was impossible to penetrate. I had only myself. I went into exile. I chose solitude. Like a wounded animal that slinks away to lick its wounds, I crawled into solitude.

My reflection steers and pushes me towards the center. It grabs at the guts of my interest until I am gasping for breath. The pressure tightens. What am I looking for? When a fuller sense of my interest is revealed, my shoulders slump forward as if to keep the awareness centered--centered in my stomach. I inhale deeply and write what has been revealed: I want to understand why, like an animal, I instinctively sought solitude. I want to look at how this instinct enabled me to survive. I want to understand why something that I sought and continue to seek also frightens me. I want to grasp what solitude has come to mean.

What purpose would a study on solitude serve? How can a personal examination be meaningful to others? The experience of solitude is common to each of us, and my experiences are the possible experiences of others. My exploration, examination, discussion, and writing will center on interpreting what the nature of the experience is like. I will endeavor to deepen my understanding of solitude and in the process become thoughtful about the significance of lived experiences. If my study resonates with the experiences of others, then it is possible that it may provide them with insight and a deeper understanding as

well. Hopefully, this reflective awareness will help to guide each of us towards a more thoughtful and sensitive approach in pedagogic interactions.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Deciding on the Methodology

Writing is sometimes compared to weaving a tapestry in which each thread of the fabric is a thought or piece of information. My struggle with defining the importance of solitude does not seem like the first thread of a tapestry's pattern. It seems more like a plait of unruly hair that has been woven with sweaty hands. How can I attempt to make a meaningful interpretation of an inquiry that focuses on a lived experience in a personal sense? What research methodology will do it justice?

I chose phenomenology as the methodology because it focuses on the meaning and experience of a phenomenon in a very personal sense and because it is discovery oriented. I want to live, research, and write about an inquiry with my own pedagogic uniform on--that of a teacher and a parent. I do not want an inquiry that is a trajectory aimed at a specific group of people. Each of us have and will have experiences with "being alone." Phenomenology acknowledges the world of lived experiences. It encourages us to attempt to understand the deeper meaning of a phenomenon, so we are able to live our pedagogic life

with children more sensitively and with a deeper appreciation of what they may be experiencing.

Phenomenological research emphasizes that a genuine interest is critical. "The starting point of phenomenological research," van Manen (1984) writes, "is largely a matter of identifying what it is that deeply interests oneself" (p. 43). Terlep (1991) agrees and emphasizes that "Phenomenological inquiry demands that what is selected for investigation be radically and subjectively important to the investigator" (p. 384). This type of research explores lived experiences that are common to each of us, and presses us to attempt to describe such experiences. When I discovered the difficulty of defining what the experience of being alone was really like, I began to wonder about my understanding of other people's experiences--especially students'. Van Manen (1989) points out:

Yet, in the field of curriculum we confidently talk about "selecting, planning or organizing learning experiences." This confidence begs a question--the question whether we know what it is like when a child "has an experience" or when the child "comes to understand something." Husserl's phrase "back to things themselves" means that the phenomenological attitude is mindful of the ease with which we tend to rely on a reconstructed logic in our professional endeavors. We read theories into everything. . . . In our efforts to make sense of our lived experiences with theories and hypothesizing frameworks

we are forgetting that it is living human beings who bring schemata and frameworks into being and not the reverse. (p. 43)

Doing Phenomenological Research

There is nothing easy about doing phenomenological research. It demands a rigor that is not readily evident in the written work. "The work of phenomenology," Merleau-Ponty says, "is as painstaking as the work of artists such as Balzac, Proust, Valery, or Cezanne" (van Manen, 1989, p. 166). The researcher embarks on a mental and physical journey, attempting to understand the essential meaning of the lived experience. The analogy of digging the last potato of the season comes to mind in trying to explain "how to do phenomenological research." A person digs in the dirt, wipes their brow, and then continues to search. Nobody can tell a person exactly how to dig for a potato. You learn by "digging" just as you learn to do phenomenology by "doing." There is no step-by-step procedure to guide the investigator:

There is no real method offered here that one can follow blindly. Although spelling out the various aspects of the research process may help a reader, the critical moments of inquiry are ultimately elusive to systematic explication. Such moments may depend on the interpretive sensitivity, inventive thoughtfulness, scholarly tact, and writing talent of the human science researcher. (van Manen, 1989, p. 33)

The researcher's tool is the work of writing. The work is painstakingly slow at times and often frustrating. A great deal of written material may reveal nothing. The writer may be guilty of theorizing about experiences or of losing the essence of what is being authentically sought. Sometimes the researcher thinks that something significant has been unearthed; however, upon examination it turns out to be a rock. "All that digging," sighs the investigator, "and all I have to show for it is a rock." The stone is thrown away, but the search has not been in vain. The ground has been broken. It can be dug now with the sensitivity of the fingers. A potato will no longer be mistaken for the impermeable surface of a rock. Sometimes the written passage, like a small potato dug up, hardly appears worth the effort. Phenomenology, however, encourages the researcher to be "thoughtfully aware of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for granted" (van Manen, 1989, p. 59). If the writer has been thoughtful and the writing is authentic, then its value will be revealed. By reflecting and writing, the researcher begins to "peel away" the skin of illusion and the unique meaning of the lived experience is revealed.

Importance of the Question in Phenomenological Research

It is impossible to undertake a phenomenological study unless the question that drives the inquiry is meaningful and significant to the researcher. Phenomenological research stresses the importance of being

genuinely animated by the question of what something is “really” like (van Manen, 1984, p. 44). The researcher begins to feel the question's force drawing her deeper into the inquiry. Van Manen says, "Even minor phenomenological research projects require that we not simply raise a question and possibly soon drop it again, but rather that we 'live' this question or, better, that we 'become' this question" (p. 45).

Once I had identified my interest and research methodology, I began to search for a phenomenological question. "It is not until I have identified my interest in the nature of a selected human experience," van Manen feels, "that a true phenomenological questioning is possible" (1984, p. 44). I read a considerable amount about the subject of solitude. I wrote and thought about my own experiences. I discussed the topic with others. What was my question? I began to wonder about the wisdom of choosing an inquiry on the experience of solitude. I thought about my question, "What would propel me through the invasion?" I knew that my interest in solitude was authentic and that I was wrong to doubt it. What I was doing wrong was attempting to squash my interest and methodology into a sequential pattern. I was hung up in finding the perfect question. I was trying to formulate a problem to be solved instead of a meaning to be inquired into. I pushed away the search for "the" question and got on with the task of writing and reflecting. Nothing of importance, however, revealed itself. I wanted to throw my hands up and quit. It was reassuring to read van Manen's (1989) passage about the process:

The text says less than we want, it does not seem to say what we want. We sigh: "Can't we do any better than this?" "This is no good!" "We are not coming to terms with it." "Why do we keep going when we are not getting anywhere?" "We need to scrap this." "Let's try it again that way." (p. 116)

I did as the last sentence in the quote suggests, "Let's try it again that way." I tried it again many times until I found the question that interrogated "something from the heart of my existence, from the center of my being" (van Manen, 1984, p. 45).

What is the experience of solitude and why is it important in the lives of people?

The question inspires my interest and imparts new life to the inquiry. I find myself wondering about other people's lived experiences with solitude. Are they similar to mine? I begin to let go of what I believed to be its importance, and to open myself up to discovering a deeper awareness of the experience of solitude. "The essence of the question," Gadamer says, "is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities" (van Manen, 1984, p. 45).

Working with the Question

The phenomenological question focuses the inquiry. In this type of research, the data are often other people's lived experiences.

Descriptions of these experiences are gathered because:

They allow us, in a vicarious sort of way, to become more experienced ourselves. We are interested in the particular experiences of this child, this adolescent, or this adult since they allow us to become "in-formed," shaped or enriched by this experience so as to be able to render the full significance of its meaning. (van Manen, 1989, p. 57)

Ultimately, the phenomenological question guides the researcher to the data. I was drawn first to people who live in a village on the north-west end of Vancouver Island. I chose the community because of its geographical isolation which provides physical solitude to the residents. A person cannot drive to it. You can hire a private water taxi, but there is not a public ferry. You cannot buy any groceries because there are no stores. There is a privately owned retreat where locals can dine if they reserve several days in advance. Cancellations are frowned upon because of the necessity of "getting in food." There is also a post office with enough space for two customers to stand up in. It is open two days a week. Other than that, there are no pubs, cafes, or theaters. If the community wants a meeting, they schedule it in the school gym or the church.

The other reason I choose the community is the admiration I have for one of its residents. Anne and I had never met before researching my thesis. I knew her only through her responses to a

questionnaire I had mailed to teachers of one-room schools. I remember reading her description of first seeing the village school:

I wasn't intending to apply for the one-room school job--but when I saw what became "my" school on the hill at the head of the bay, I knew that's what I wanted--had always wanted but didn't know existed anymore. (personal communication, February 1992)

Anne's answers were thoughtful, eloquent, and poetic. I hoped that someday I would get to meet her and see the "school on the hill at the head of the bay." I telephoned the school in the hopes of talking with Anne about solitude. Her replacement, Heidi, informed me that Anne had a child and was no longer teaching. However, Heidi was enthusiastic about my topic, volunteered to contact Anne, and invited me to visit the community. She also agreed to be a participant and to be an introductory "ice breaker" to other community members.

My approach in the interviews with community members was "conversational." I was aware that in using this approach "it is important to realize that the interview process needs to be disciplined by the fundamental question that prompted the need for the interview in the first place" (van Manen, 1989, p. 61). I ensured that I had ample tape and time so that the participant could decide when the conversation was over. I felt it was important that I did not pre-determine the direction, time, or place of the discussion. I wanted each person to feel comfortable in an environment of their choice. I also

wanted them to be aware they could talk as long as they felt they had something to say, and that they could stop at any time if the conversation became too personal for them. I informed each participant that confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

The interviews helped me to develop a conversational relationship with each person (van Manen, 1989, p. 61) and enabled me to talk with them in different settings. I was invited into their homes for tea or a meal, greeted at a community gathering, and hailed along the roadside. Each encounter added to my understanding of another's lived experiences with solitude.

The participants were also invited to write about their personal experiences with solitude. I felt that a written response would give each participant an opportunity for further reflection on their lived experiences and would deepen my understanding of their descriptions. I was aware in the interviews that discussing the phenomenon of solitude was a difficult thing to do. In inviting each person to further explore their lived experiences by reflective writing, I worried that I might be asking too much. I was honored that all but one participant responded to my invitation. One person, however, gently reminded me of the special relationship and trust that had developed. She wrote:

It may be easy for people to read between the lines of your quotes or descriptions to discern who said what. As solitude is something we tend to guard, you have the added challenge of sending your report back into the community of its subjects. It is

difficult to remain a private person in a small community--please be aware of the treasures with which we are trusting you.

(personal communication, May 1993)

My second source of research material was obtained from what started out as a polite exchange between two strangers that somehow sparked and led into an animated discussion about solitude. My understanding of the essence of solitude was enriched through these chance encounters. Other material was obtained from people that I selected. I chose the writers, Timothy Findley and W. M. (Bill) Valgardson, because of their strong statements about solitude. Findley's assertion, "Solitude is the purgative by which we rid ourselves of the present" (1990, p. 83), "grabbed" my attention. When I discovered he was coming to Vancouver for a reading on April 18, I immediately reserved a ticket. Valgardson's description about the advantages of writing in an isolated mining town also captivated my interest. He writes, "Such an isolated place is good for a writer because one becomes aware in the silence of thoughts one is not aware of in the city. The unique voice begins to develop" (Funke, 1993, p. M1). Findley's comments on writing are from his responses during the question and answer segment of the presentation. Valgardson spoke about his thoughts on solitude during a 45 minute conversation on the telephone. The conversation was manually recorded by shorthand and then transcribed. The other people that I chose were David Flaherty, the Privacy Commissioner for British Columbia; and Ruell Smith, a public librarian and writer. David Flaherty was chosen because of his

knowledge on the subject of "privacy" which is often used as a synonym for "solitude." Ruell Smith was selected because of her knowledge of the literature on solitude and of its place in her personal and professional life.

My phenomenological question on solitude also guided me to the Outward Bound educational organization. The organization's executive director, Andrew Orr, states that the school emphasizes the importance of "solo" experiences for its students. The courses balance action with reflection. The following questions were asked and answered in our written communication: What is the reason for including "a solo" in their curriculum? What does this educational organization hope that the student will learn from an encounter with solitude? Is it an unique experience for each person; or do students experience similar emotions, personal growth, and fears?

The third source of my research material was my own lived experiences. In order to grasp the essential meaning of a phenomenon, it is important to be aware of the structure of my own experiences with solitude. A human science researcher believes that "one's own experiences are the possible experiences of others and also that the experiences of others are the possible experiences of oneself" (van Manen, 1989, p. 53). Writing and reflecting on personal experiences could provide clues for orienting myself to the phenomenon and to all the stages of the research. An understanding that is derived from my descriptions could yield a significant interpretive base, and provide a

platform for exploring meanings from the interviews, discussions, readings, conversations, and observations.

The last research source was from the literature on solitude. The literature influenced my initial understanding of solitude. "Literature and other artistic sources can provide us with powerful experiences and insights normally out of range of the scope of our personal everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1984, p. 65). I did an ERIC search on solitude and requested journal articles that were relevant; I bought or borrowed books that were recommended; I re-read books that dealt with the experience of being alone; and I "chanced" upon others. Most of my reading was completed before the methodological approach to the study had been decided. I felt that it was important to sort out my own feelings about the experience of solitude before deciding on a research method. I was, therefore, unaware of the importance of descriptions of lived experiences and did a literature review that consisted of five categories: psychological and psychiatric; child development and education; self-knowledge and individual development; legal; and technology. I discovered that the categories broadened rather than deepened my inquiry. They prevented my phenomenological question from moving and stopped my understanding at their perimeters. I put the literature review away and returned to the pages of copied quotes from my readings. It took many re-writings before I could discard the influence of the categories and let the power of the lived experiences shape the inquiry.

Working with the Lived Experiences

There is a crooked willow tree that I can see from my desk. The branches intertwine and give the tree its shape. When I use my hands to separate the tendrils, I discover their hidden strength. Each branch is resilient and resists breaking. When I let go of them, they spring back into their woven form. My research descriptions, like the branches, also intertwine and have powerful qualities. I need to draw out the essential descriptions and separate them so their strength can be revealed. I can then use their power to weave a meaningful inquiry on the experience of solitude.

What tool could help me search through the research material and separate the descriptions that seem to get to the core of solitude? What could help me "to unearth something 'telling,' something 'meaningful,' something 'thematic'" (van Manen, 1989, p. 79)? The tool I select is a graphite sketching pencil. The pencil's soft carbon allows me to freely express the description's connection to me. I shade some passages so darkly that the words are barely visible; others have black ragged edges and gray inner middles. The shading goes beyond the typed descriptions and into the white, blank margins. I circle words, underline some heavily, and surround others with a cloud-like formation. I do not have to change highlighter colors, look up symbols, or write down statements. I am able to completely immerse myself in other people's lived experiences through the pencil's creative

connection. This immersion prevents me from unreflective categorizing and looking for descriptions that support my assumptions about solitude. Instead of interpreting what I think the people might have been trying to say, I “listen” to their words. The pencil gets me inside the experience and enables me to indicate that something meaningful is there.

There is motion and life in my search for descriptions that brings the inquiry closer to an understanding of the experience of solitude. However, I am impatient to increase the speed of the methodology. I want to package what I have just uncovered and push it forward. My impatience begins to confuse me. I begin to look at the research material as pages of darkness, lightness, shapes, underlining, and circles.

The motion stops; the life is taken away.

What happened? When I was shading and listening to the words, the methodology worked because I believed in it, understood why I was doing it, and it was authentic. Instead of recognizing the significance of what been accomplished and giving myself the necessary time to reflect on the uncovered discoveries, I pushed the study forward and began to package it. I organized and equipped the descriptions for combat. I used reoccurring words as themes and composed chapter titles to fit them. I did a flowchart to ensure a smooth transition from theme to theme, from chapter to chapter. Only there was no flow. I changed words, moved chapters around, and still it felt lifeless. I

switched from a flowchart to a pyramid structure. The more effort I extended, the more holes that seemed to appear. I rushed from one chapter title to another trying to plug them with supporting themes. The inquiry's momentum halted because I stopped asking, "How does this descriptive experience deepen our awareness of solitude?" Instead of allowing the words to speak for themselves as I had listened, I took the wonder out of the descriptions and replaced them with a familiar method of organizing data--a system. The willow tree's branches return each time they are separated. Their strength gives the willow its woven shape and permits the branches to continue their upward growth. It is important that my inquiry encourages the natural growth and strength of the selected descriptions to weave an interpretive understanding of the lived experiences.

My reflections help me understand the importance of warding "off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project" (van Manen, 1989, p. 28). However, they do not seem to be able to quiet the voice that keeps asking, "What happened?" The question resonates until I am able to grasp what has happened. I have been approaching time alone with anxiety and resentment. I have been fighting against listening to my children's laughter; trying not to see the weeds and the dry, cracked ground of the garden; and attempting not to see the bewilderment in people's eyes when I cut myself off from them. I have allowed myself to become alienated from the important things in my life in order to write about the importance of solitude. I feel like

screaming, "Leave me alone!" I am not sure, however, who or what the plea is intended for. I begin to be repelled by what I perceive to be the qualities of solitude and become confused about its meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING AND EXTRACTING THE BLACK SEED EXPERIENCES

Releasing the Seeds of Meaning

One of the mysteries of solitude is how the phenomenon eludes being clearly defined. Each time I attempt to "pin" down a possible meaning, I find it breaks loose. I question and wonder about this quality of solitude and of the confusion that surrounds it. The elusiveness and confusion have made me aware that it is necessary to attempt to describe what the essence of solitude is and to distinguish it from other experiences of being alone. If my struggle is successful, it will deepen our awareness of solitude and enable us to continue our exploration with awakened sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

I look at the broken pins which attempted to tack down the selected lived experiences. I thought the strength of the pins would keep the descriptions separated until I could make sense out of them. However, I have misjudged the power and the life of the graphite shaded words. Each experience struggled against the constraints of being considered as "the" meaning. I look at the crooked willow tree. Using the analogy of separating its intertwining branches helped me to understand how to draw out the descriptions that seemed to get to the

core of solitude. Is it possible for the tree to inspire me again? Can it help me to find a method to make sense out of those selected passages? The tree is swaying in the July wind. The branches move as a whole, and even a sudden gust is unable to divide them. The following lines from the Tao te Ching remind me of the importance of quiet contemplation:

Do you have the patience to wait
 til your mud settles and the water is clear?
 Can you remain unmoving
 til the right action arises of itself?

I watch the tree for a long time. The tree bends with the wind, not against it. The wind's force exposes its center, and I notice that some of the tendrils are thicker and sturdier than the others. The graphite pencil enabled me to rid my mind of its thoughts and prejudices, and to immerse myself in other people's lived experiences. Writing and rewriting about my reflections and struggle have helped me to construct meaning from my method and the passages. Every effort, every struggle is equally important in moving me to a deeper level of awareness. Van Manen (1989) states:

This depthful writing cannot be accomplished in one straightforward session. Rather, the process of writing and rewriting (including revising or editing) is more reminiscent of the artistic activity of creating an art object that has to be approached again and again, now here and then there, going back and forth between the parts and the whole in order to

arrive at a finely crafted piece that often reflects the personal "signature" of the author. (p. 121)

I return to my own understanding of solitude. The time has come to allow the strength of my thoughts to intermingle with other people's conceptions of solitude. The weight of this enriched understanding starts to bend the descriptions of the lived experiences, and I am able to glimpse the seeds which are embedded in the center. When I am close enough I reach out and pluck a seed. The seed's release frees others. I continue to pick until the wind resumes and the tree starts to sway in another direction. I hook my basket over one arm and hang on with both hands. I glance down at the wicker basket and see that its bottom is covered with the hues of the meaning of solitude.

The seeds glisten in their coverings. The swaying motion gradually shifts the heavier seeds to the bottom and brings the lighter ones to the surface. In the beginning of my research, I endeavored to find a common meaning for solitude. What was the use of presenting a multitude of hues? As I begin to think, work, and live in a phenomenological way, I accept that they all represent understandings of people's lived experiences. People approach the experience of solitude differently and they have different experiences with it; therefore, they have different meanings for it. Acknowledging and becoming sensitive to those meanings helps us to understand the experiences of other people. When we are able to immerse ourselves in their meanings, we emerge with an increased awareness of our own

meaning; and consequently, our perception and understanding of the experience deepens significantly.

The Source of the Black Seeds

My research has given me a fuller understanding of what solitude is and what it is not. This appreciation is vital to the study. It enables me to focus on the experience of solitude and not be distracted or confused about other "being alone" experiences. People speak and write about "solitude" when they are actually describing experiences of loneliness, isolation, rejection, alienation, maladjustment, withdrawal, anxiety, and inattentiveness.

Words Rising

Blessings then on the man who labors
In his tiny room, writing stanza on the lamb;
blessings on the woman, who picks the brown
seeds of solitude out of the black seeds of loneliness.

Robert Bly

I encountered the black seed experiences and can now "see" the color differentiation. People seek the brown seeds of solitude. They do not seek the experiences that are the black seeds.

Why are the black seed experiences linked with the experience of solitude? For some people the experience of being alone is connected

with a negative image and deficits in an individual's life situation (Barer & Johnson, 1990, p. 10). It is difficult for them to believe that a person may want to be alone. This stigma influences even the people that understand and believe in the experience of solitude. The following excerpt is from the taped and transcribed interview with Julia. The identification coding is found at the end of the passage. The "#" represents the assigned interviewee's number; the "P" number is the page on which it is to be found; and the "L" is the line where the passage begins. Julia says:

When I was a teenager, I felt conspicuous whenever I would sit by myself. If I did something that wasn't much...that didn't appear normal. So for the reason that when I go by myself...I like going into restaurants...I like eating in restaurants; but when I'm by myself I always want to read or have a newspaper because I don't like to look so conspicuously solitary. (#3,P12,L34)

Julia does not want to be "conspicuously solitary" because she feels that being alone "appears not to be normal." Where has this image originated from? Weinstein and David (1987) found that children in schools, who find privacy by daydreaming, are called inattentive or disinterested. Children in psychiatric facilities, who choose not to interact at a time selected by the staff, are described as withdrawn (p. 106). Weinstein and David discovered that children in these institutions are given few, if any, opportunities to be alone. Any attempts by the children to achieve physical privacy were devalued and seen as inappropriate and anti-social. However, in interviews with the

researchers, the students and patients spoke of their need to be alone (p. 109). Byrnes (1983) feels that many teachers do not understand or appreciate a child's preference to be alone, quiet, or inactive. She writes:

For their appearance of *doing nothing*, children are reprimanded and often labeled as lazy or unproductive. "Get busy, Mike"; "Quit dawdling, Shari"; "Charles, you haven't done a thing"; "Hurry up and get started, Jayne." If a child prefers to be alone, quiet, or inactive, she or he is thought of as weird, alienated, or maladjusted. "Cathy, why are you by yourself"; "Tom, come over and join us." Most of our school experiences appear to put an inordinate amount of emphasis on action and sociality. We rarely consider the importance of solitude and silence. (p. 96)

If a pre-schooler is misbehaving, we isolate them from the interactions of others by sitting them on a chair facing the wall. We send a child who is "beside himself" to his bedroom to "come to himself" (Langeveld, 1983, p. 15). Students who break the rules or are unruly have their desks placed in the cloakroom or sit alone in the classroom after school. We can still hear the echo from our childhood, "Nobody will play with you if you are like that." The term "wallflower" suggests the shame of being left alone--of not being chosen. We are pressured to join groups and are made to feel that there is something wrong if we desire to be left alone. Caroline feels:

There is so much pressure on people to be together and to be um...they talk about that so much that, "Oh you've got to live

with other people and you should be getting along with all these people." There is so much emphasis on that. When in fact you don't need that at all. (#4,P11,L31)

We learn gradually to associate the experience of being alone with punishment or rejection. A comparison of two brothers, by George Sand, is a good illustration of how the experience and the desire to seek solitude becomes entangled and associated with the black seeds:

This brother learned easily, was gifted in all the arts, had a sparkling wit and face that was more expressive than Ralph's even if less conventionally handsome. He was also affectionate, eager, lively--in a word, he was lovable. Ralph, on the other hand, loved solitude, learned slowly, did not make much of what he did know, was awkward, undemonstrative, and melancholy. When his parents saw how different he was from his older brother they treated him badly and--even worse!--humiliated him--which only made him a gloomy, daydreaming child whose every faculty was paralyzed by an unconquerable timidity. They managed to instill in him such deep feelings of self-hatred and self-contempt that he became discouraged with life, and when he was fifteen years old he began to show signs of melancholia. (1993, p. 120)

We want to "run away" and be by ourselves when we are grieving. Perhaps we feel that distance will keep us from falling into the deep sorrow--a fall that we can never escape from. When Kobe ter

Newzen learnt that she had tested HIV-positive, she said, "I wanted to fade away in a little corner or be out on a deserted island all by myself" (Godley, 1992, p. 71).

The etymological origin of "solitude" suggests a final reason for the connection with the black seeds. The word "solitude" comes from a combination of: "sole" and "tude." The prefix, "sole," is a late Middle English word. It is derived from the French Latin word, "solus," which is a combination of the Old French word "soule" and the Latin "sola." The original meaning of "only" or "exclusive" is similar to one of the meanings of "sole" today--"being alone or the only, existing or acting without another, only, individual." However, in the 14th century the definition was altered to mean specifically "having no husband or wife." This meaning is used today in legal contexts and usually refers to women. Dictionaries connect being an unmarried woman with "spinster" or "old maid." These two terms usually conjure up a negative image of existence. For example, MacIntyre (1968) groups the term "old maid" with pitiful images of existence in his description of Rainer Maria Rilke: "He was a man of vast sympathy for the unfortunate and the disinherited: the blind, the cripples, the beggars, the suicides in the morgue, the harlots, the old maids, the animals in captivity" (p. 5).

In transcribing the interviews and reading the participants' written responses, I noticed the warnings that were woven in between thoughts and experiences:

I think that you would get very self-centered, and narrow minded probably, unless you were really doing something that is expanding your mind. Wouldn't you? A human being who is solitary for too long at a stretch may develop eccentric tendencies. I wonder if that is how the word "bushed" came about? (#3,P2,L22)

Too much solitude is not healthy. (#2,P4,L18)

There is a danger in isolation. People do not develop the skills to protect themselves when they are in society. They are inclined to become eccentric; develop certain quirks that are not softened by social contact. (#5,P1,L11)

Solitude serves many needs. It is both constructive and destructive. (#5,P1,L28)

I'd stay up...I'd stay up really late and ah...and ah just dress up and...very weird. I'm sure they will make some kind of weird psycho movie about my life. But very strange things. Um...but it was all fantasy and was all things that I couldn't do in my regular life. (#1,P4,L37)

I was kind of an oddity to be alone. (#4,P7,L12)

As a parent, I worry about my daughter or son being alone on a school playground during recess or lunch. I ask them why they are alone. They assure me it is because they want to be alone, but their words are not able to erase the last trace of anxiety that still remains. Like the unpopular brother, Ralph, I love my solitude and I believe in its value. Yet, I too remain uneasy about my children's experiences with it. We are taught to question why people are alone and to be wary or uneasy when we are by ourselves. Lindbergh (1975) says, "How one hates to think of one-self as alone. How one avoids it. It seems to imply rejection or unpopularity" (p. 41). We have learnt to associate the black seed experiences with a "pitiful existence", and to look upon the experiences with suspicion or distaste.

CHAPTER FOUR

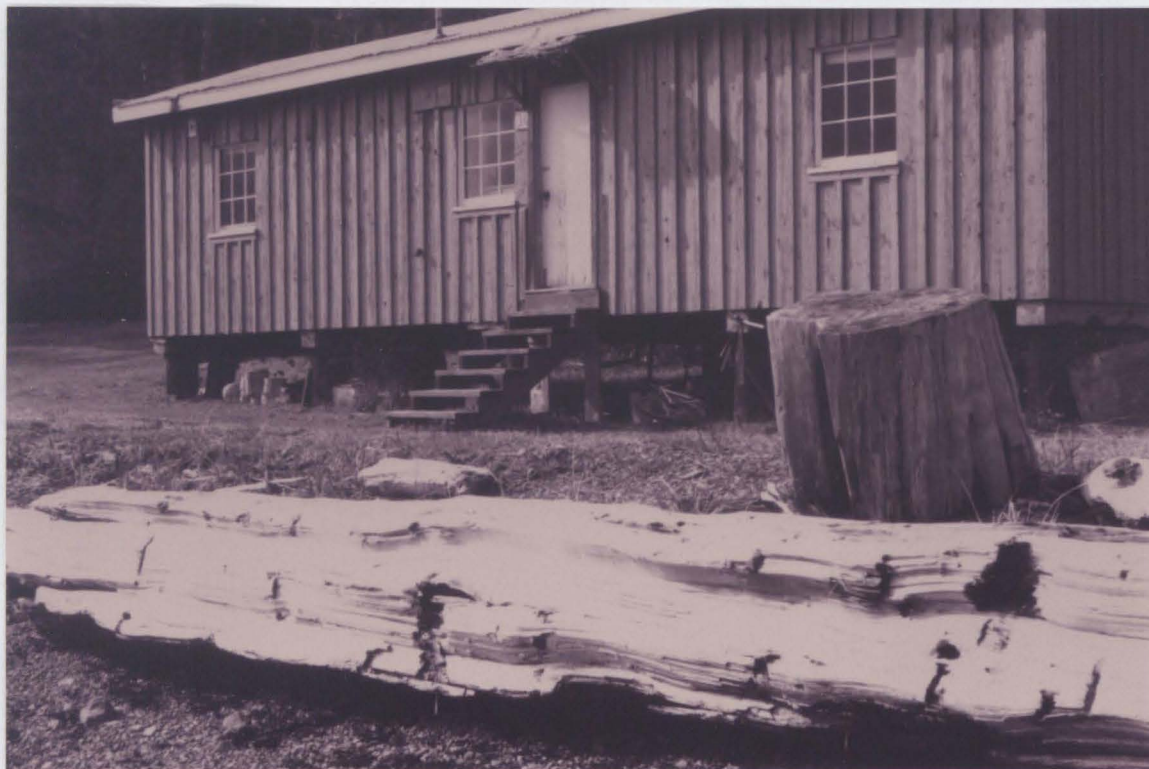
EXPERIENCES OF SOLITUDE

The seeds invite my understanding of solitude to dive into their depth. However, I must first go and live among my own experiences and attempt to understand them before plunging into the experiences of others. What is solitude to me? Can I describe what it is like and why it is important? Ueland (1987) believes, "The only way ever to have an intelligent understanding of anything, and a true interest in it, whether it is writing or art or aviation, is to do it yourself" (p. 73).

Leonard Cohen says:

I have to go to the place where the song is. I have to inhabit it and allow it to have its way with me. . . and it takes time and patience and tears to get there. I have to get ripped apart in the process. (Jurek, 1993, p. 6)

The following three experiences are from "going to the place where the song is" and "doing it myself." They are based on notes that I wrote in my journal while living in a remote area on the north-west end of Vancouver Island. During my stay, I rented a cabin that was originally built by a logging company. The cabin is now privately owned and has been hauled down to a beach, where it stands alone and weather-beaten on wooden stilts.



Experience One

Silent friend of many distances, feel
 how your breath enlarges all of space.
 Let your presence ring out like a bell
 into the night. What feeds upon your face

grows mighty from the nourishment thus offered.
 Move through transformation, out and in.
 What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?
 If drinking is bitter, change yourself to wine.

In this immeasurable darkness, be the power
 that rounds your senses in their magic ring,
 the sense of their mysterious encounter.

And if the earthly no longer knows your name,
 whisper to the silent earth: I'm flowing.
 To the flashing water say: I am.

Rainer Maria Rilke
 from THE SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Friday, April 9

I open a cupboard and notice dried black seeds. The seeds are mouse droppings and remind me of Robert Bly's black seeds of loneliness. They are everywhere--in drawers, dishes, the couch, and the bed. I pull out the bed's frame to see if there are any nests under it. I do not find a brood of hairless pink offspring; but I do find several magazines addressed to the previous resident, who has recently died. I put a brick against the outside door to secure it for the night, turn off the lights, and get into bed. The night is free of any noise from humans or machines. There is no sound of waves because the cabin is near an inlet. There is no illumination from the moon or from street lights. The night is inky black and I cannot see my hand when I hold it in front of my face. I think about mice; the dead man's magazines; the unlocked door; and that I am alone in a remote cabin in an unfamiliar area. There is no telephone and nowhere for me to run to. I lie on the bed and listen. The stillness of the darkness forces me to face my fears and superstitions about death. Nothing disturbs or interrupts my thoughts. Gradually, the reality of the moment surfaces. My thoughts are relieved of their bondage and begin to roam. I am free to think in the silence of the night until sleep overcomes me.

Silence

Many people expressed concern over my being alone for a week in a remote area. They asked: "What happens if someone breaks in at night? What if you get ill or have an accident? Won't you get scared being by yourself? Can't you find someone who will go with you?"

Julia, Audrey, and Sabina remark:

I can see why some women don't like being alone. Some have overwhelming fears, and others need human involvement to function. (Julia, personal communication, May 1993)

One can feel quite desperate on one's own. (Audrey, personal communication, May 1993)

I have a fear of loneliness. Could I stand being with myself? Who is this self that I have made up? My personal demons--having to face them--could be quite fearful. (Sabina, personal communication, July 21, 1993)

The following passage from the Outward Bound Western Canada's "Instructor's Handbook" (1990) points out that many of us fear the experience of being alone:

Many students fear solo. You may want to have a mini-solo at some time to prepare the students for the feeling of solitude. It is important that students do not go into solo feeling that they are going into a survival test. (p. 38)

I remembered the questions that people asked when I turned off the lights, and soon my own were swarming in front of my face. Would an intruder force "himself" into the cabin? Were mice going to run over my sleeping body? Had the dead man been frightened in the stillness of the night and used the magazines to fall asleep? The silence brought the words and fears closer and then closer still. "Silence is like that," emphasizes Bill, "it allows those thoughts and fears to surface" (#5,P2,L35). They smacked against my face. The weight of the words began to smother me. I tried to push them away. "Grab them," commanded silence, "and stare into your understanding of them." No noise broke the intensity of my gaze; no interruption scattered my thoughts. I began to work with what is around me rather than with what might happen. Bill says:

Silence carries potential for growth. That's why the whole idea of monasteries or religious hermits have potential because it gives them time in silence. During that time, the world doesn't get in touch with them. (#5,P2,L39)

I dug at my center of understanding. I examined what was important to me. I questioned my responses to people and to situations. Silence is important because it "encourages or demands the confrontation of the self by the self, which is solitude's true vocation" (Halpern, 1992, p. 202). I threw out a shovel full of fear, bent down, and combed through it for understanding. I shoveled out my reactions and examined those. Audrey explains:

Solitude is a time to ponder, evaluate, question, compose, assimilate and accommodate information and insights I have gathered from others through listening, discussion, and reading. It is a time during which my own thoughts form and are challenged, molded, perhaps changed. (personal communication, May 1993)

I kept digging until sleep laid the shovel at my side.

Thomas Merton, considered by many to be the foremost authority on the subject of solitude (Cashen, 1981, p. 173), believes that silence in solitude forces us to confront our fears and thoughts and to recognize what is reality. He states:

The solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things. In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. And yet we find that the nakedness of reality which we have feared is neither a matter of terror nor of shame. It is clothed in the friendly communion of silence, and this silence is related to love. The world our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it. (1985, p. 85)

The word "silence" suggests peaceful surroundings where the door is closed against distractions or interruptions. Merton says,

"Silence is the proper atmosphere for inner seeking. It shuts out the noise and tension of a busy world as it relaxes the mind and body. It is healing" (Cashen, 1981, p. 88). "Any interruption, any intrusion of the social, any obligation," says writer and poet May Sarton, "breaks the thread on my loom, breaks the pattern" (1973, p. 79). Anne Tibble says, "I can hear what I think and say what I see when I go back to the quiet of the wood and field" (1979, p. 105). In Tales of Solitude, Naubert writes:

Needing more silence and solitude, he rented a completely isolated chalet beside a lake. He spent his days wandering in the woods or sleeping but at night he spread a cover out in the bottom of a boat, lay down on it, and let himself drift about on the lake, staring at the star-studded or cloud-covered sky, listening to the light sound of the water lapping at the boat. (1978, p. 119)

Christopher Burney (1984) relates how he grew to prize his silence during the 18 months he spent as a prisoner of war in solitary confinement. He found that silence brought him peace and a sense of freedom. A fellow prisoner tried to contact him by tapping on their connecting wall, but Burney ignored his attempts at communication:

I had no wish to hurt him if he was in earnest, but I was selfish and prized my silence, especially the silence of night. For the night, to those who have used it for privacy and sleep rather than as a trysting-place for ghosts and demons, is by instinct and experience a peaceful time, when your surroundings disappear

and you may go where you will, and even the deadliest fear is tamed and may be touched and played with. (p. 32)

Alice Koller (1990) explains in Stations of Solitude that silence is her solitude:

I surround myself with silence. The silence is within me, permeates my house, reaches beyond the surfaces of the outer walls and into the bordering woods. It is one silence, continuous from within me outward in all directions: above, beneath, forward, rearward, sideward. In the silence I listen, I watch, I sense, I attend, I observe. I require this silence. I search it out. The finely drawn treble song of a white-throated sparrow is part of it. Invasion of it by the noise of engines are torments to me. This is my solitude. (p. 23)

In discussions on the experience of solitude, Audrey and Bill express the importance of "silence" or "quiet time":

Time on my own has always been pretty precious to me. In fact, when I think back to even when I was growing up...um...I was very jealous of my time, and resented the fact....resented the fact that somebody was taking up too much of my time or some project was...and I wasn't able to take time to be quiet. (#2,P3,L10).

One of my favorite places to hike is Mount Finlayson. It isn't the fact that it's Mount Finlayson. It is its silence. I love its

silence. One has to be strong enough, so silence becomes a journey. Silence is a journey. (#5,P2,L18)

It is often difficult to find a location where a person can be assured of silence--whether it is a moment, an hour, or a day. "No matter how far I go into the forest today," remarks Halpern (1992), "that plane will still be grinding overhead" (p. 200). Audrey explains the difficulty of finding silence:

I do not enjoy such invasions as telephones, clocks, or doorbells that people have been conditioned (like Pavlov's dog) to respond to regardless of the fact they may be busy, resting, nursing the baby, talking, or enjoying a meal. It's hard to find solitude in such a demanding world--where T.V., magazines, radio, deadlines, etc., all shout for your attention. (personal communication, May 1993)

The psycho-analyst, Anthony Storr (1988), suggests that techniques like transcendental meditation may represent an attempt to counterbalance the absence of silence and solitude. He states that it is getting impossible to get away from the noise of motor traffic, aircraft, or railways; and that the general continuous level of noise in cities is constantly increasing despite the attempts of legislation to curb it (p. 34).

If I had heard the sound of an airplane or boat while lying in the bed, my solitude would have been disrupted. I may have been able to

regain solitude again or I may have eventually fallen asleep. If I had heard a noise within the cabin or movement around it, however, my solitude would have been replaced by fear. Most likely, I would not have found solitude again during that night--neither would I have probably gotten much sleep. In his essay on solitude, Thoreau (1960) says that people who knocked at his door always left before darkness; and believes that "men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced" (p. 92).

Experience Two

Saturday, April 10

Noise stabs my sleep and rips me awake. I throw back the covers and leap out of bed. Loud scratching and scrambling sounds are coming from inside the wood paneled walls of the bedroom. I imagine rats scurrying around inside them. I slap a wall with my hand which temporarily stops the noise. After breakfast, I bicycle along the dirt road to an interview. I am cautious as residents have told me there are bears, cougars, and wolves in the area. It is raining and the bike does not have any mud fenders. The hand-drawn map that I was given, with land marks such as "wonderful farm--cows," becomes wet and illegible. I get lost. I arrive soggy and late for the interview. When I leave, it has stopped raining. I look in a mirror when I

get back to the cabin and see that my face is covered with splotches of mud and there is a wide line of dirt down my back. I think about the interview and how the person never said a word about my appearance. The vegetable broth I prepare boils down into a slime colored mush. There is no store, pub, or restaurant to get anything better. I am depressed, lonely, embarrassed, cold, and hungry. I go outside and stare at the grayness of the day.



The dullness gradually eases to the background as reflection moves closer. A familiar sensation that sleeps in the center of my being awakes and stretches itself. I shudder and its strength springs upwards to my chest and arms. Its tingling energy feeds my thoughts and warms my body. Some of the clouds part and light reflects off the water. I photograph five

deer on the beach's rocky surface. I count the number of feet from the cabin's steps to the water's edge. I notice the number and variety of ducks that are paddling in the shallow water of the inlet's shore.



I see the glimmer of sunlight, the moving pattern of the clouds, the alertness of the deer, and the wrinkles in the water. I hear the splashing and diving of the ducks and the sound of birds from the forest. I feel the coolness of the rounded rocks and the rough surface of the logs. I smell the saltiness of the damp air.

Surroundings

I stood alone at the edge of the water with the outline of the rain forest in the distance and felt a dull emptiness, not solitude. I stared at the grayness of the water, the sky, and the outline of the forest. I held my body tightly with my arms in an attempt to squeeze out the dampness that clung in the air. I thought about having mud on my face during the interview, and bent my head in embarrassment. I saw the gray rocks at my feet and the silver beached log that was bedded on them. I remembered getting lost and the discomfort of my wet clothes. My body began to close into itself--my arms encircled it, my head was bent towards my chest, and my legs were pressed together. The strip of gray film continued to reel in my mind.

The serenity of my surroundings and aloneness prompted the "familiar sensation" to awaken. I remember its energy and how it cut the reeling of the film. Another replaced it, one full of awareness. It is remarkable that I was standing in the midst of movement, noise, odors, and textures and had only noticed the gloominess of gray. Yeats' poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," gives a wonderful description of being alone and of being aware of the color and life that surrounds us:

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

lively, our application more indefatigable, our perseverance more firm" (1797, p. 111). Sartre (1984) at the age of seventy says being alone "fills" her personal and professional life:

And in these weeks of work and silence, when I see only two or three people in seven days, I am never lonely. I feel well, so full of ideas, and "things to do," so fully conscious, so centered in work, that this is as close to happiness as I can imagine. (p. 252)

We open ourselves to what is around us and within us in solitude. Carroll calls this awareness, the beginning of our "going down":

There are times when we stop. We sit still. We lose ourselves in a pile of leaves or its memory. We listen and breezes from a whole other world begin to whisper. Then we begin our "going down." (Gress, 1978, p. 526)

We throw ourselves in the leaves and become a part of them. We breathe in their smoky aroma. We toss the leaves in the air and then sit still as they fall on and around us. We touch their wet leathery surface and look at the stain they leave on our fingers. Sabina says:

Solitude is a place and time to reconnect with some kind of simplicity about my place in the world--about being in the moment. (personal communication, July 21, 1993)

Awareness cuts the tightly pulled strings around our mind. It unwraps the brown paper wrapping that is packaged around our thoughts, feelings, and understanding. Kurt points out:

And you notice things more. You notice small things that...that...don't really have an effect on you or anybody else. You notice a small bird that will come and sit on your boat and you are ten miles out at sea, and the fact is, "What is it doing there?" (#3,P3,L35)

Needing Solitude

Never allowing ourselves time or not making the effort to find the silence and the surroundings that help us to experience solitude, robs of us life giving energy:

When from our better selves we have too long
 Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
 Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
 How gracious, how benign, is Solitude.

William Woodsworth

Byrd (1938) says:

We are caught up in the winds that blow every which way. And in the hullabaloo a thinking man is driven to ponder where he is being blown to and to long desperately for some quiet place where he can reason undisturbed and take inventory. (p. 3)

We keep ourselves in constant motion. We seldom ask why we are doing what we doing. Koller (1981) says, "It has to stop. Can't I

stop, right now, and try to figure out what I'm doing: What I should be doing" (p. 2)? She writes about her intense longing to be alone:

If I could only go away somewhere. 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 where I don't have to do anything but think all day long. (p. 2)

Sabina expresses her feelings of being overwhelmed:

So many choices. Constant pull of things to do and people to see and entertainment and potential involvements and I should do this and I want to do that. Confusion. Lack of focus.

Information. Sickness. (personal communication, July 21, 1993)

Andrew Orr, executive director of Outward Bound Western Canada, says that people in today's world rarely give themselves time just for themselves; and if they do get time alone, they usually fill it with chores or television. Orr relates that "many students have said how, even though they had spent so many days in the mountains up until that point, it wasn't until the first day of solo that they really took the time to observe and listen. They were just too busy to notice" (personal communication, May 7, 1993). Carroll remarks on our frenzied pace:

We spend most of our time and energy in a kind of horizontal thinking. We move along the surface of things going from one quick base to another, often with a frenzy that wears us out. We

collect data, things, people, ideas, "profound experiences," never penetrating any of them. (Gress, 1978, p. 526)

Audrey, Julia, and Helen explain what happens if they need time alone and do not get it:

If I don't get my time alone, all my bad traits come out--impatience at other people in particular. I don't have a "social affinity" and being with others demands a lot of energy--more so if my resources are already drained. (Audrey, personal communication, May 1993)

There was a time of lots of moving and there wasn't any solitude and I was really stressed out. (#1,P8,L5)

I tend to get nervous, depressed or frustrated, sometimes all three. These symptoms are usually relieved by finding a little time alone. (Julia, personal communication, May 1993)

Sarton (1973) admits:

There is no doubt that solitude is a challenge and to maintain balance within it a precarious business. But I must not forget that, for me, being with people or even one beloved person for any length of time without solitude is even worse. I lose my center. I feel dispersed, scattered, in pieces. I must have time alone in which to mull over any encounter, and to extract its

juices, its essence, to understand what has really happened to me as a consequence of it." (p. 195)

I only noticed the grayness when I first stood by the water's edge. The serenity of the surroundings stirred my awareness until it merged with the experience of solitude. I began to wonder, question, and think about what was occurring around me and what was happening within me. I remembered what my daughter said when she was five years old:

"We see some things with our eyes; others with our heart."

Experience Three

Solitude

How still it is here in the woods. The trees
Stand motionless, as if they do not dare
To stir, lest it should break the spell.

A. Lampman

Sunday, April 11

I bicycle to a wood, leave my bike at the edge of the road, and begin to walk through a thick grove of trees. I have been told that the path through the wood leads to a lake. As I walk, I find that the image of a cougar poised on a limb of a tree keeps "leaping" into my mind. I start singing "Waltzing Matilda" and

pick up a sturdy branch. I imagine the black rounded back of a bear, the bright eyes and slender haunches of wolves, and the open snarling mouth of a cougar. Why am I here? I force myself to keep walking. I feel vulnerable. I am frightened. I "will" myself not to run--either forwards or backwards.



I reach the lake and look at it.



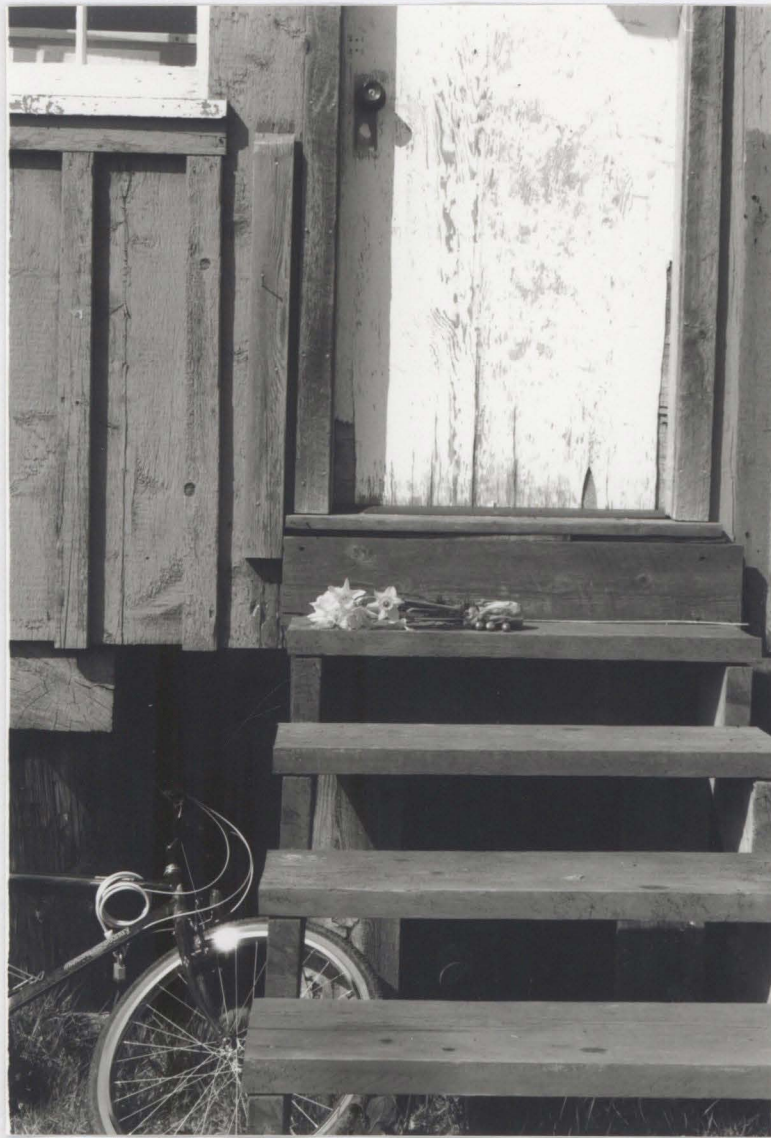
Then, I turn and face the darkness of the woods. If I am to get out of here, I have no other choice but to enter it. I stride forwards, yelling, "Who'll come a waltzing Matilda with me," and holding the stick in an upright position. I see a movement in the trees and stop. A teenage boy appears. He does not remark on my singing, and he ignores the threatening position of the stick. He says he is going to the lake to lie down and think. As we talk, the noise of a chainsaw erupts. "Listen," the boy says, "to the bird." I look at him. Should I explain what it is? Instead, I listen.

I feel the sunshine that has found its way through the leaves of the trees.



After I have left the boy, I stop and lay the stick on the ground. I walk and listen. Another movement catches my attention and the sound of "chainsawing" begins again. I look in the direction of the noise and see a grouse with its head down, feet stamping, and wings flapping. A whizzing sound comes

from the whir of its wings. I remember watching a program on the mating dance of the grouse. The documentary mentioned that few have witnessed the bird's courting ritual. Solitude surrounds me. Solitude is within me. I start to sing again, but this time there is music in my voice. When I return to the cabin, I find that someone has left five daffodils and three foil covered Easter eggs on its steps. This is my solitude.



Valuing the Experience

Sometimes it takes something other than silence or awareness of the moment to lead a person to solitude. It seems ironic, but sometimes it is other people that help us to find it. I spoke about my journey through the woods with Bill who lives in the city. He gave me this advice:

When you were carrying your stick in the woods, you were scaring everything. You should take a lesson from the Indians and go as quietly as possible. I take my lessons for walking in the woods from them. Cougars will never bother you. They will not mistake you for a child. A child is like a poodle to them. Wolves will never bother you either. If you are fishing, they may hope that you leave some fish behind, but they will not bother you. The only animal that may attack is a bear and that is because you have surprised it. They are unpredictable. We are all afraid of the unknown--that's why it is important to make it known. (#5,P3,L4)

Go quietly and surprise an unpredictable bear? The advice would not have helped me find solitude had I heard it before my walk, during my walk, and neither will it help me in the future. It was the boy that enabled me to find solitude. He spoke quietly and did not seem to be in a rush to get to the lake. He kept his black eyes focused on me and did not fidget. There were long pauses between our questions and answers. I did not feel like a coward standing beside his

strength. A feeling of calmness began to emerge during our conversation. The boy offered respect and understanding. I took them both and began to experience a feeling of solitude. Helen says:

I can share solitude sometimes which is sort of a bizarre idea because we usually think of solitaire and solitary. I think that you can share your solitude with some people if you really trust them" (#1,P6,L19).

The boy had chosen to be alone in the woods and so had I. We each approached it differently, but that did not matter. It was more important that we had both walked on the same path and recognized our individual needs to do so. We each believed in the value of being on our own. The boy's respect and understanding helped me to lay down the stick and be a part of the woods.

People choose the experience of solitude because they believe in its value. However, many of us feel guilty about taking time away from our families and our careers for time alone--no matter how much we value it. Lindbergh (1975) states:

If people were convinced that a day off or an hour of solitude was a reasonable ambition, they would find a way of attaining it. As it is, they feel so unjustified in their demand that they rarely make the attempt. . . . If one set aside time for a business appointment, a trip to the hairdresser, a social engagement, or a shopping expedition, that time is accepted as inviolable. But if one says: I cannot come because that is my hour to be alone, one is considered rude, egotistical, or strange. What a commentary

on our civilization, when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it--like a secret vice! (p. 48)

Audrey believes that:

You should not feel guilty about needing or wanting it. You may need support to allow you to find solitude, the time for it, if your life has become too busy. Gradually, you learn not to let other demons crowd out your solitude. The busier, more demanding your days, the more important a bit of solitude becomes. (personal communication, May 1993)

Halpern (1992) considers that the experience of solitude, "is essential not only to the souls of painters and poets, who thrive in solitude, but to the rest of us, too--individuals whose canvas is our lives" (p. ix). The participants in my study agree with Halpern's statement, and state that they make or insist on time for solitude because they believe in its value. Each person's belief about the value of solitude seems unique, yet the value that they speak of is interwoven in the words of the others:

I think for some of us who believe ourselves to be overly influenced by the ideas and dictums of other people, solitude brings a feeling of freedom to sort out our own thoughts and opinions. It also gives us a chance to practice a lifestyle we would not do otherwise because we can't contend with censorship from others, or we prefer to bow to other's people's customs rather than make ourselves conspicuous or obnoxious

by pushing our preferred lifestyle on other people. (Julia, personal communication, May 1993)

In solitude we have to deal with our own fears. It gives you a sense of competence that does not let panic control you. I pick mushrooms by myself. It is very easy to get lost. When I'm lost I say, "Oh, I'm lost. What is the very worst thing that could happen? What would happen if I panic? What would happen if I don't panic?" Solitude makes me aware of my own capabilities. It makes me aware of my real limits. . . . In hiking with others, you let them be responsible for you. (Bill,#5,P2,L4)

I like being independent and in order to be so, I must be on my own. It seems to me that many women have been raised to be helpmates, to take care of others, to be "good" and not to think of themselves. (Caroline, personal communication, May 3, 1993)

When you are alone you can be yourself, you know. I think that's the most important part of solitude is that, you know...rekindling your dream for yourself. And ah...just trusting yourself. (Helen, #1,P2,L16)

Time alone offers me freedom: freedom to experiment without interference or judgment from others. Solitude is my means of re-establishing balance in my life. I am very conscious of my own thoughts and the thinking process during my times of

solitude. Solitude, because it involves an awareness of God's presence, has a healing effect on my moods. Solitude is restorative, and gives me courage, humbleness, determination, and hope. (Audrey, personal communication, May 1993)

In this chapter, I have explored and discovered that silence, peaceful surroundings, and other people can help a person find solitude. However, it is important to remember that they are only paths to the experience and none of them have to be taken to find solitude. Ultimately, solitude is dependent upon whether or not a person has come to value solitude. Andrew Orr states, "For some students the solitude that they experience in solo is the absolute highlight of the course. For others, it is a rest, nothing more" (personal communication, May 7, 1993). Audrey emphasizes, "You have to believe in solitude and know its worth" (personal communication, May, 1993).

CHAPTER FIVE

LEARNING TO BE ALONE

The most severe sentence for a prisoner, other than the death penalty, is solitary confinement. Some people find the forced isolation unbearable, while others find it therapeutic (Halpern, 1992; Storr, 1988; Winnicott, 1958). Winnicott, a psycho-analyst, states that a person forced to be alone may not have the capacity to cope with such an existence. He adds, "A person may be in solitary confinement, and yet not be able to be alone. How greatly he must suffer is beyond imagination" (p. 416). Another psycho-analyst, Anthony Storr, reports that some people in enforced isolation complain of inexplicable fatigue, become almost totally apathetic, or lose control of their emotions to the point of believing that they are going mad (p. 45). One prisoner says that "Isolation is like having hell all to yourself" (Halpern, p. 53). Another remarks, "You want to know about my life here. To picture to oneself a cell does not need much imagination--the less you use, the nearer the mark you will be" (p. 54). Inmates have nicknamed the cells for solitary confinement as "the hole" and report that the days "pass in a slow blur of excruciating tedium" (Corwin and Ferrell, 1993, B3).

Some prisoners, however, say that physical isolation helps them to sort out their ideas and attitudes, get in touch with their deepest

feelings, and come to term with loss (Storr, 1988, p. 62). Burney (1984) writes of his confinement:

I knew that so many months of solitude, though I had allowed them to torment me at times, had been in a sense an exercise in liberty. For, by absolving me from the need either to consider practical problems of living or to maintain the many unquestioned assumptions which cannot conveniently be abandoned in social life, I had been left to drop the spectacles of the near-sighted and to scan the horizon of existence. And I believed that I had seen something there. But it was only a glimpse, a remote and tenuous apprehension of what lay behind the variety and activity of life, and I was afraid that I would lose sight of it as soon as I was forced to turn my attention back to my immediate surroundings. (p. 133)

Julia thinks that she would be able to cope with solitary confinement. She says:

I've often thought that, you know, reading about solitary confinement, I think it would be wonderful. There'd be some great things--if you could get books, if they'd allow you to read. I read about people in solitary doing yoga, meditating. I think that solitary confinement for some people would be a marvelous thing. But for others, I can see where it wouldn't. (#3,P8,L5)

The physical conditions of a person's aloneness does not seem to be the determining factor of whether or not a person can experience solitude. Although, as I point out in the previous chapter, silence,

surroundings, and other people are beneficial. It is hard to imagine, for example, a more adverse condition to solitude than the one that Burney endured for 18 months. The only contact he had was when he was tortured for information and threatened with the death penalty; and when his guard brought his ration of a bowl of watery soup and piece of bread to his dark and unheated cell at noon each day. Burney had nothing to watch, read, or write with and was always hungry, and cold; yet, in Solitary Confinement he writes:

Solitude is liberty indeed, bounded only by the obsessive appetite and the animal lust to roam. But liberty itself is a rare and refund spirit, so strong that Providence in its wisdom has arranged that there shall be little of it, making men live in a society to which solitude is repugnant. Its dilution by the invisible but constant companionship of an active world make these eighteen months an exercise rather than a transcendence. (1984, p. 6)

Why does one prisoner call solitary confinement "isolation" and compare it to hell, while another calls it "solitude" and refers to it as an exercise? Winnicott (1958) believes that, "The capacity to be alone is a highly sophisticated phenomenon and has many contributory factors. It is closely related to emotional maturity" (p. 419). Storr (1988) suggests:

It appears, therefore, that some development of the capacity to be alone is necessary if the brain is to function at its best, and if the individual is to fulfill his highest potential. Human beings

easily become alienated from their own deepest needs and feelings. Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one's own inner world are all facilitated by solitude. (p. 28)

Julia adds:

It's what's inside that counts--no matter where you are. If you've got it inside of you, well you're not going to suffer too much by the exteriors. (#3,P8,L22)

Solitude's Foundation

A parent or caregiver contributes significantly to a child's ability to be alone; and consequently, to the child being able to experience solitude. In "The Capacity to be Alone," which is considered by many to be a psycho-analytic classic (Storr, 1988, p. 18), Winnicott writes that "the ability to be truly alone has as its basis the early experience of being alone in the presence of someone" (1958, p. 418). He feels that when the child's immediate needs have been met, such as food, warmth, and physical contact, then the infant is able to be alone without frequent reference to the mother or mother symbol. He adds:

It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the

equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing. The infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement. . . . In the course of time there arrives a sensation or an impulse. In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience. (p. 418)

Ruell Smith, a public librarian and writer, explains that as a child she was alone a great deal. She believes her mother's recognition of the importance of solitude helped her to value the time spent on her own. Her mother attached the following poem to the letter that Ruell mailed to me:

stars melt in the dawn
creative dreams take wing in
silent solitude

M.J.R. Smith

Ruell writes:

Mom was ill for much of the first ten years of my life, so when I was a little girl I spent a great deal of time alone. I was also an only child with very little contact with other children, even after I started school. However, I was never lonely and I was never really alone--I was usually surrounded by a constantly changing group of imaginary people with whom I interacted. Most of

them were children, but not all. This only happened when I was alone and they changed constantly (as in daily, weekly), so it wasn't the usual "imaginary playmate" situation. I now realize that when I write anything the same thing happens. The characters come to life in much the same way, along with settings and dialogue, except that now I have the role of observer. (personal communication, March 1993)

In 1797 Zimmermann, who was a physician, wrote that solitude was particularly useful for the young as "it is during this time that we acquire a fund of useful information, to form the outline of the character we mean to support, and to fix the modes of thinking we ought through life invariably pursue" (p. 66). Two hundred years after Zimmermann's Solitude Considered with Respect to its Influence Upon the Mind and the Heart was published, Minot writes that solitude offers a stabilizing quality to the lives of adolescents, whose identities and understanding are in a constant mode of change (Manguel, 1993, p. 455).

Parents or caregivers influence and encourage children's ability and desire to be alone in a variety of ways. When adults take, demand, or seek time to be alone, they are reinforcing the concept that time on your own is important. If they discuss what they do or think about while being alone, they help children to understand the range of experiences that are possible. A parent or caregiver can also suggest ways or places where a child can go to be alone, and ensure that the

child is given opportunities when he or she is comfortable with being alone to "try" them out. Julia suggests, "It is best if parents can see that each child gets a little time to himself in safe surroundings each day" (personal communication, May 1993). Audrey discusses the family's influence and responsibility:

Children who have been shown that quiet time is valued and has a purpose and place, will find it. They do not need to sit by a stream or in the forest to do so (though they are blessed if they have such experiences). Parents and other siblings have to respect the quiet times and places in their homes--that a closed door is a request to knock, that if a person is reading or writing, or sitting in a quiet room, they should first be asked if its okay if you turn on the T.V. (personal communication, May 1993)

My children get "quiet time" each day because I believe it is important--for them as well as for myself. "Every person," Lindbergh (1975) says, "should be alone sometime during the year, some part of each week, and each day" (p. 48). Some examples of the places my son and daughter go to are: their bedrooms which have "Do Not Enter" signs on the doors, their clothes closet, behind the couch, or in the basement which has a comfy soft chair in it. It is their time and they can read, lie on the bed, do art work, play with their toys, or look out the window. My daughter, Gamelle, discovered the following poem in Dilly Dilly Piccalilli Poems for the Very Young (Livingston, 1989, p 19) during one of these "quiet times" and asked if it was important enough to be included in my study. The poem is written below a sketching of a

child in a tree house. The child is lying in a hammock. His feet are bare, his arms are behind his head, his eyes are closed, and his mouth is smiling. Yes, Gamelle, it is important--very important:

Solitude

I have a house where I go
 When there's too many people,
 I have a house where I go
 Where no one can be;

I have a house where I go,
 Where nobody ever says, "No";
 Where no one says anything--so
 There is no one but me.

A. A. Milne

Langeveld (1983) says that children are naturally drawn to special places such as attics, deep closets, tucked-away corners in the basement, or the space behind the full and heavy curtains. He believes it is important to encourage their "alone-ness":

During all stages leading to adulthood, the secret place remains an asylum in which the personality can mature; this self-creating process of this standing apart from others, this experiment, this growing in self-awareness, this creative peace and absolute intimacy demand it--for they are only possible in alone-ness. (p. 17)

While a parent or caregiver can influence a child's ability and desire to be alone, they cannot teach them how to find solitude or what it will be. They can only hope that their own belief, practice, and

encouragement will help the child to discover and eventually value the experience for themselves. Ventura (1993) points out:

You cannot teach the demands of solitude. Even if you talk about it, you're not teaching it--the surroundings contradict the lesson. Nobody can teach you how you, in particular, are going to behave when you're alone: who you are, what you have to express, what experience your expression draws on, how that experience relates to the solitude necessary for its expression; the form in which it comes out, and how that form changes as it progresses; and, first and last, who you are. (p. 12)

Winnicott (1958) stresses that "many people do become able to enjoy solitude before they are out of childhood, and they may even value solitude as a most precious possession" (p. 416).

Langeveld (1983) states that a child, who is forced to be alone because he is being punished or the situation demands it, may experience panic and become frightened or disturbed. However, if that child has learnt to associate being alone with positive experiences, the feeling of anxiety will eventually vanish and the child will be able "to come to oneself." Langeveld explains that "'to come to oneself' means to be ready to adopt an attitude, ready to give oneself in trust to the place where one finds oneself" (p. 15). Winnicott suggests that a child can be alone because the experience has become "linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses" (Storr, 1988, p. 21).

"Often it is only in solitude," Pinar (1975) believes, "that one's personal reality can be preserved, and its preservation is nothing less than the preservation of sanity" (p. 377). He says that the schools make it impossible to have seclusion or quiet, and feels that their absence "forces us to ignore ourselves and eventually to empty ourselves out" (p. 377). Merton warns:

There is a natural laziness in man which urges him to avoid the difficult task of working through his own identity. He flees his own solitude by accepting others' answers to the problem of life. This is easier, less threatening and precarious, than entering the darkness of his own solitude to search there. The result is the surrender of what is deepest and most essential in oneself, the conformity to a societal image, a "collective identity." (Cashen, 1981, p. 59)

Byrnes (1983) study, "Life Skills in Solitude and Silence in the School," finds that education is more concerned with supplying the contents believed to be necessary for survival in our culture, than with nurturing the silent processes that are the underlying strengths of a full-functioning individual. She asks:

Of what human worth, however, is a person who may have mastered the prescribed academic contents, but has never learned to question and evaluate his or her own values and actions? Of what significance is a person who has not learned to handle real conflicts within and without, who has not developed a sense of adequacy that enables one to grow from

both failures and successes, or who has never found peace within, and is never at peace with, oneself? (p. 97)

Bill observes, "We are never taught how to be alone and thus we never develop the skills to be alone. When fear is educated then we have an artificial limitation to one's education" (#5,P2,L25). Stroppa (1993) wonders:

What happens to children's personalities after years of such intense peer contact? What happens to their attitude towards learning and their personal learning and problem-solving style? What happens to their uniqueness when they are constantly in large groups and comparison is pervasive, despite everybody's best intentions? (p. 8)

In his acceptance speech for New York's "Teacher of the Year," John Gatto (1990) said that our children need time to be alone because that is the key to self-knowledge. A curriculum that Gatto favors and tries to incorporate in his own teaching as much as possible is used, he says, by the ruling classes of Europe:

At the core of this elite system of education is the belief that self-knowledge is the only basis of true knowledge. Everywhere in this system, at every age, you will find arrangements that place the child alone in an unguided setting with a problem to solve. Sometimes the problem is fraught with great risks. . . . Can you imagine anyone who has mastered such a challenge lacking confidence in his ability to do anything else? Sometimes the

problem is that of mastering solitude, as Thoreau did at Walden Pond, or Einstein in the Swiss customs house. (p. 99)

Kirstin (1993) remarks, "We are taught that we can't make it alone, that if we're 'good' enough we won't have to, and above all else, that we shouldn't want to" (p. 13). Pinar (1975) states:

The student's relationship to the teacher is often a transference one, continuing and usually strengthening the initial dependence upon the parents. Thus the child comes to depend upon validation from these significant others, and his identity resides outside himself, in some related to those who have taken him from himself. (p. 367).

Caroline agrees and says:

People are taught to look to others for guidance or to have someone else tell them what to do. Unfortunately, they need somebody to validate their existence. Thus they cannot be alone. Individuals are taught to look outside themselves for identity. (personal communication, May 3, 1993)

Pinar adds that Kierkegaard viewed the ability to be with oneself the supreme test of the individual and believed that those who could not tolerate solitude were reduced to mere social animals (p. 377). Byrnes (1983) concludes, "The accepting and valuing by school of silence and solitude as an experience indispensable to human maturity may well be the needed catalyst for healthy development of children" (p. 99).

Unfortunately, the message that we seem to be giving to our children about being alone is that it is not desirable or safe. Kerouac (1976) relates that on, "Sunday afternoons my family would want me to go driving with them but I preferred to stay home alone and they'd get mad and say, 'What's the matter with him anyway?'" (p. 142). One person, who is a school counselor, said during a casual conversation, "I talk so much about the dangers of being alone to my kids that they won't even stay in the house on their own while I put out the garbage." A few days ago I heard a person say to her young daughter, who was walking ahead of her and another adult with a child: "Danielle, why are you walking all alone? There must be something wrong. Danielle?" Barker (1993) feels that, "We have an obligation to protect our children in any way we can. That means arming them with information and making them wary of strangers" (p. D2). I have expressed the same concerns to my children, but I am just beginning to hear the messages that we are giving to our children: "It is not safe to be alone;" and "If you are alone, there must be something wrong." Byrnes (1983) says, "Seldom do we encourage, or provide the time for, children to look carefully inward, and examine their own feelings and thoughts" (p. 96).

Solitude is possible when we are comfortable in our aloneness and discover positive experiences while being alone. When people begin to seek more time alone, they often discover that their need and value of solitude heightens rather than diminishes. Sartre believes,

"Solitude, like a long love, deepens with time" (Hunting, 1982, p. 62).

Einstein says:

I am truly a "lone traveler" and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends or even my immediate family with my whole heart. In the face of all these ties I have never lost a sense of distance and a need for solitude--feelings that increase with the years. (French, 1979, p. 61)

Thoreau (1960) emphasizes, "I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (p. 95). Tibble (1979), who writes about wrestling with loss, solitude, and extinction, advises: "Learn to be alone. It is not like anything I have experienced before" (p. 19).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: A DEEPER AWARENESS

The process of researching, reflecting, and writing on solitude has deepened my understanding of what the experience is and why it is important in the lives of people. Did the enormous amount of time spent alone and the constant examination destroy the mystery of solitude and make it repugnant as I had feared? I had no idea of the journey that was ahead of me when I chose to do a phenomenological study on solitude and asked that question. I wrote the following passage when I was about halfway through writing:

The odd thing is that I have to be alone to do my work about being alone and I need to be alone in order to keep my understanding grounded on the experience of being alone.

My words indicate the different levels of aloneness that I was working on and from. I do not believe, however, that they capture the sensation that I experienced while writing this thesis. I became so immersed in my work that I found it difficult to distinguish what reality was. I worked alone and wrote about being alone. I had to take time to be alone in order to remain aware of what it was to be alone. When I pushed away from my desk and came down the stairs from my attic room, I felt like I was falling into an abyss of disorientation. A sheen of acidic moisture clung to my body, each movement made the

cords in my neck ache, and my head felt like woolly fuzz had been wedged into it until it was incapable of holding anything else. My eyes had difficulty in focusing on what was in front of me. I was unable to comprehend what was happening beside me. My world was in writing about "being alone" and gray waves of confusion swept over me when I stepped into the presence of others. Van Manen (1989) states:

Writing distances us from lived experience but by doing so it allows us to discover the existential structures of experience. Writing creates a distance between ourselves and the world whereby the subjectivities of daily experience become the object of our reflective awareness. The writer's immediate domain is paper, pen or keyboard on the one hand and language or words on the other hand. Both preoccupations have an alienating effect. (p. 117)

I remember attempting to explain how to do phenomenological research and using the analogy of digging for the last potato of the season: "A person digs in the dirt, wipes their brow, and then continues to search. Nobody can tell a person exactly how to dig for a potato. You learn by 'digging' just as you learn to do phenomenology by 'doing'." I did not know how far that potato was embedded in the earth. I had no conception of the strength and the perseverance that it took to get a part of it out. I no longer expect to get all of it out. I am satisfied with what I have gained. I struggled to write as thoughtfully and authentically as I could about the lived experiences, and to let them shape the journey rather than forcing a planned itinerary. The

work was frightening at times because I never knew where it would lead. I did not know if I would always be prepared to go in the direction it might head, or whether I had the ability to handle its pace.

Ventura (1993) says:

Working with words is not like working with color or sound or stone or movement. Color and sound and stone and movement are all around us, they are natural elements, and those who work with them are servants of these timeless materials. But words are pure creations of the human psyche. Every single word is full of secrets, full of associations, every word leads to another and another and another, down and down, through passages of dark and light. Every single word leads, in this way, to the same destination: the soul. Which is, in part, the soul of everyone. Every word has the capacity to start that journey. And once you're on it, there is no knowing what will happen. (p. 13)

The research methodology, which was writing, reflecting, and rewriting, began to weave with the experience of solitude until they were intertwined--like the branches of the crooked willow tree. My writing helped me reach a deeper level of awareness about solitude; and this awareness, in turn, helped my writing to search deeper still.

Van Manen (1989) states:

Writing is a reflexive activity that involves the totality of our physical and mental being. To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense. To write

phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself. (p. 121)

The understanding that I gained from researching and writing has surpassed my expectations. I wrote the following passage at the beginning of my thesis:

If my study resonates with the experiences of others, then it is possible that it may provide them with insight and a deeper understanding as well. Hopefully, this reflective awareness will help to guide each of us towards a more thoughtful and sensitive approach in pedagogic interactions.

I hope that my study is able to help others in their own understanding of solitude and in their pedagogic relationship with children for I believe as May Sarton does that:

Growing into solitude is one way of growing to the end.

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