

Aloneness and Inner Peace

“The worst loneliness is not to be comfortable with yourself.”

- Mark Twain

One of the foundations for finding inner peace is the ability to be alone with ourselves – the art of turning loneliness into solitude. As philosopher Paul Tillich wrote, “Language ... has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.”

When I first tried to meditate several years ago, my anxiety in the face of lonely feelings, along with my inner, self-critical voices, made it impossible for me to be alone in my own company. I saw then that I needed to become better friends with myself. After all, how could I spend intimate time alone when I could barely tolerate my own internal, subjective experience? Loneliness was the place from which I started to build an inner relationship, and to develop a sense of self along with a new supportive voice as my companion.

During this period, in a long dark night of the soul, I was in more emotional pain than I thought I could bear. I asked despairingly, “What *is* this place?” A deep voice answered, “Your depths.”

This answer sustained me during that time. It enabled me to better sit in my inner void, with all its terror and emptiness. It infused my conscious delving into my own loneliness with richness, dignity, meaning, and nobility. In my view, this is one of the most important explorations a person can make, and a crucial basis for inner peace.

Lack of inner relationship creates a deep loneliness. Some of us will go to great lengths to find an “other” who we believe will magically take it away. The other could be a person, substance, activity, work, idea or cause. Anything can be used to escape our feelings of aloneness. Enneagram teacher Sandra Maitri says that even our stories can keep us company. They enable us to constantly be “in relationship” with something. Fertile terrain for drama, obsession, compulsion, and addiction.

On the other hand, being able to be quiet with ourselves, we can “turn the volume down,” and get to know what is really going on inside of us. In so doing, we can cultivate a haven, an internal resting place, and eventually even experience ourselves – *on our own* – as delicious.

What is it about aloneness that is so scary? One aspect is an “existential” aloneness. We are born alone and we die alone. No one completely knows what it feels like to be us, and likewise we can’t entirely know what it feels like to be someone else. Despite this, we can be led to a spiritual understanding of the paradox of being alone as a separate individual and yet being a part of all that is.

Another aspect is that our aloneness is often filled with “the monsters under the bed,” our shadow sides, what we fear and abhor about ourselves, reinforced by those inner, self-critical voices. We don’t want to be alone with these companions, and yet, until we befriend them, they are always there lurking, something to guard ourselves against.

Fear of being alone can motivate us to stay in less than optimal situations – settling for relationships (or jobs or places) that may be less than optimal for our well-being, illness-inducing, or at odds with who we really are. Carl Jung defined

“individuation” as the process of becoming our authentic selves and all that we can be. Fear of aloneness can impede this process, compromising our movements towards living a life in the integrity of what is true for us. One main question in relationship is “Can we be ourselves and live side by side?” Sometimes we compromise those things which are essential in us in order not to be alone, forgetting that our primary relationship is with ourselves.

It is through living in and through our loneliness that we discover the depths of our being. It is through our solitude that our authentic self seeks and finds us, creating inner peace.

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