



# Yearning for Solitude

Finding focus in a distracting world

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

The landscape along Lake Michigan is speckled with large metropolises, like Chicago and Milwaukee, and small, charming towns. If one travels east from my second home in New Buffalo, Michigan, on the Red Arrow Highway for about seven miles, you will be greeted by a signalized stoplight, which forms the entrance to one of those small towns, Three Oaks. Turn left at the stoplight on Elm Street, and as you drive down the street, you'll be transported to a scene worthy of a Saturday Evening Post cover illustration by Norman Rockwell. Three Oaks, Michigan, is an example of Americana at its height. Mature trees line Elm Street, and at the peak of their fall foliage create a kaleidoscope of autumn colors. Locally owned, quaint shops and restaurants in historic structures line both sides of the road. On weekends, particularly in the summer, throngs of tourists can be seen meandering in and out of the array of these shops and restaurants.









My favorite restaurant in Three Oaks is located in an edifice that housed a bustling department store about one century ago and later a family-owned pharmacy. Today, the inside of the building has been maximized to create industrial chic décor for the restaurant that occupies part of this building, along with a store that sells delectables. The mammoth HVAC pipes are exposed, and the ancient brick walls have been painted.

### **Indulging in the guilty pleasure of solitude.**

One of my guilty pleasures on any given Saturday, particularly a rainy or gray day, is to escape from my responsibilities to this Three Oaks' restaurant for brunch. Although activity is a buzz around me, I create a cocoon around myself to feel invisible to everyone other than my husband. Typically, I speak only with the restaurant host to put our name on the list for a table or send an abrupt salutation to the bartender, who has an expansive personality and delightful laugh. An occupational hazard as an attorney and student of journalism, every now and then, I'll sometimes ask total strangers questions about where they are from, what they are drinking or eating or, if they are visiting, how long they are visiting southwest Michigan. I revel in being an observer and not a participant. I watch, I listen and I think intently. The limited conversation with anyone is purely discretionary. No decisions need to be made other than what to order from the menu. I do not have to be anywhere else at any particular time. My cell phone is on silent mode and tucked away in my purse. The feeling in this state is like a beautiful, long exhale.

I crave, and even need, this escape and indulgence in my version of solitude. (It is "my version" because technically solitude means being completely alone, and I am with my husband in a busy restaurant.) Admittedly though, guilt accompanies my escape. It is as if satiating this need to effectively be alone is a mortal sin. Guilt aside, I wonder if this behavior is normal. After my scrumptious meal has been consumed, and it is time to leave, I want to linger a little longer in this dreamy atmosphere. By occasionally seeking solitude, am I being lazy, selfish or even antisocial as a leader?

### **Solitude is not only consistent with, but is necessary for, leadership.**

What is confounding is that leadership and solitude seem to be incongruent. In his published lecture "Solitude and Leadership," William Deresiewicz observes, "Solitude and leadership would seem to be contradictory things. But it seems to be that solitude is the very essence of leadership. The position of the leader is ultimately solitary . . ." His view of solitude is not about being physically alone but rather being alone with your thoughts or focusing. The Journey to Leadership blog's entry "The Importance of Solitude in Leadership I 7 Reasons Why Leaders Embrace Solitude" validates the importance of solitude for leaders: "They [leaders] are constantly surrounded by people and immersed in a flow of information. Ultimately, they make decisions alone and have to take time off [from] people to gather themselves."





Deresiewicz explains that, from a leadership perspective, solitude is the ability to think for oneself, liberated from the massive information that inundates us every day, which impairs one's ability to hear and understand one's own thoughts. He further expounds that a leader's independent thinking results in the best decisions, though often challenging, for an organization, even when those decisions are unpopular.

History proves that solitude is an integral part of leadership. In Spencer Levine's review of "Lead Yourself First, Inspiring Leadership Through Solitude," written by Sixth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Raymond Kethledge and Character and Leadership Center President Michael Erwin, Levine notes that many impactful leaders in history have embraced solitude as part of effective leadership, including "Dwight D. Eisenhower, Dr. Jane Goodall, T.E. Lawrence, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Aug San Suu Kyi, Winston Churchill, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Paul II."

One of those historic leaders, primatologist and anthropologist Dr. Goodall, studied chimpanzees in their natural habitat in the remote Gombe Stream Chimpanzee Reserve starting in Tanzania in 1960. After significant hardship and initial failure in being able to observe these elusive creatures, she altered her process and spent significant solitary time on the peak of a mountain in her pursuit of the chimpanzees. The transition in her approach proved to be fruitful because she was not only able to closely watch the chimpanzees but also interact with them. In recalling her experience, Dr. Goodall noted, "The first step on the road to experiencing true awareness is the cessation of noise from within." According to Kethledge and Erwin, Dr. Goodall's immersion in solitude was the cornerstone of her trailblazing leadership in convincing countless people to see animals as human companions.

### Leaders need solitude now more than ever.

As leaders in today's hectic world, we strive to lead highly productive lives, constantly juggling our numerous roles with our families, friends, clients, colleagues and our volunteer activities. Our calendars are congested with professional and personal meetings, conferences and appointments. We are bombarded constantly with emails, text messages and phone calls. Time alone, strictly or effectively, seems impossible, and if it is not impossible, it seems impractical, a waste of valuable time or an unaffordable luxury.

Today's fast-paced, technology driven world, which creates accessibility 24 hours a day, has impaired independent thinking and forced us to dangerously multi-task. Think about when you put gas in your vehicle at the gas station. Often, messages are auditorily blared over an intercom system, and once the gas pump is activated, you are assaulted with more information in a video of the news or another program with

a tickertape message broadcast along the bottom of the screen. Even the most mundane tasks, such as putting gas in a car, are fraught with information overload and diverting our attention from the task at hand.

Contrary to popular belief, effective multitasking is a myth. Deresiewicz is a harsh critic of multitasking and its effect on independent thinking. He corroborates his position with the results of research on the subject. "[P]eople do not multitask effectively. And here's the really surprising finding: the more people multitask, the worse they are, not just at mental abilities, but at multitasking itself."

More fervently stated, multitasking may not just merely impair independent or critical thinking but be its very antithesis. Deresiewicz explains that you cannot think for yourself "in bursts of 20 seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube." He submits that, "It's only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea." Solitude for leaders to allow for deep thinking is needed now more than ever. But unfortunately, the world we live in does not foster time for contemplation.

### Creating solitude in a world that does not foster it.

Given the necessity for solitude in a world that does not accommodate it, leaders must consciously work to prioritize alone time. Levine discusses the four recommendations in Kethledge and Erwin's book for creating solitude: "schedule quiet time, find a quiet space, prepare, and focus on your core principles." In their first recommendation, Levin explains that Kethledge and Erwin promote devoting part of every day to contemplation. Realistically, leaders in the right of way industry may not be able to schedule time for solitude every day. My own experience has been that, when a significant decision needs to be made, I am protective of creating the time that I need to do so. For me, the location is one that is comfortable and devoid of interruptions by others that disrupt my thoughts. It does not matter if other people are around as long as I can raptly focus.

Like others, my most meaningful thoughts come to mind during quiet, peaceful moments. I encourage leaders to carve out time needed for complete thinking. If you do, your organization and team will prosper. 🌟



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