

Solitude is the state or situation of being alone. Spending time alone with one's self can be enjoyable; purposeful solitude has been shown to experience cognitive benefits. Although solitude can be great to do, it must be voluntary to be attractive; involuntary solitude is unpleasant, sad, and painful. Even before my arrival at The Oxbow School I felt isolation from leaving my home behind. I was depressed and frequently stressed with work and my social life back home. I secluded myself from social interaction voluntarily, but it felt as if it was forced upon me. Through my experience at Oxbow I have turned my involuntary solitude into a time of self-reflection where I have connected to myself on a level I have never accomplished before. My stress and depression turned into realizations about who I am. I also turned to question how I can embody my emotions into my work and make my art more expressive.

Connection between people is needed to live a healthy life. In early human history humans required the protection of family and tribes to survive, and in modern society it is hard to live without other people. In the 1950's, scientist Harry Harlow conducted an experiment with baby monkeys to test maternal deprivation. He set up a cage with two mothers; one mother fed the baby but was made with cold wire and the other mother had no purpose but was made with wool cloth. The baby monkey spent a few seconds feeding from the wire mother and then ran to cuddle with the cloth mother for the majority of the time. Harlow concluded that the chimp preferred the cloth mother because it needed physical contact more often than food. Harlow showed that mother love was emotional, rather than physiological, "substantiating the adoption-friendly theory that continuity of care nurture was a far more determining factor in healthy psychological development than nature" (Harlow). Personally, I find this true to myself after experiences in social solitude. At home, I have close relationships with friends who are persistently interacting with me and making me happy. I also have a girlfriend who is my best friend and, when with her, I feel extremely relaxed. I became grumpy and frustrated with almost everything after being pulled away from my life that was full of physical connection and thrown into a foreign place full of mysterious people. I immediately secluded myself out of spite. My life had changed dramatically from the time I applied to Oxbow from the time I left and everything had become seemingly "perfect." Early in the semester, I wished I never came to California and sat alone in my room doing work and stressing about non-essential problems, like writing college papers years before I need to and studying for a Spanish class that I won't have until next semester.

"Contact" and "connection" differ in the fact that contact is the state or condition of physical touching, while connection is a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else. I had lost both of these things. Solitude is the state or situation of being alone. Susan Cain, author of the book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* says that research done by Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, a Hungarian psychology professor, found that exceptional creators are more likely to be introverted. She also has research that shows it takes approximately ten thousand hours of solitary practice to become an expert and she has argued that this is a prerequisite for a creative life.

Solitude is a time of self-reflection, reflection on past experiences, and reflection on situations that may have passed unnoticed. Part of solitude is to calm down, "reimagining" life in a sensible way and enjoy it more fully. Solitude must be voluntary to be helpful in any sense. Involuntary solitude is almost identical to isolation and it is distasteful, miserable, and agonizing. Such solitude can seem endless and cause health problems, such as high blood pressure, obesity, lack of exercise, and smoking (Elkin). Loneliness shows up in measurements of stress hormones, immune function, and cardiovascular function. Having "a solitude" is very different from

seeking solitude. Seeking solitude is just to be alone for a shorter amount of time and reflect, whereas “a solitude” is deliberate on a much more massive scale, such as what Thoreau did at Walden Pond in the mid 1800’s. Though he did have occasional visitors, he kept himself in his own personal solitude in his mind. The value of solitude lies in what comes from within, usually in a form of self-reflection. Thoreau separates himself from society, but says he is not alone; he asserted that nature offers better society than humans do: “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (Thoreau). He says that loneliness can still happen in the presence of other people if your heart is not open to them. When Thoreau says “solitude” he does not mean he is lonely or isolated; he means he is connected to himself and nature. Solitude is “more of a state of mind than an actual circumstance.”

Self-reflection is the capacity of humans to exercise introspection and the willingness to learn more about their fundamental nature, purpose, and essence. Around the time of my “Walden Experiment” where I secluded myself from all human interaction—including but not limited to touching, talking and looking at others—I began to think about my situation and reflect on my actions over the past month. My attitude towards society had changed drastically. I had isolated myself from all human interaction and I found that I wasn’t bothered much by not talking to other people; however, it was very bothersome to not be able to communicate for more important things than socializing that actually could impact my health or mental stress. I learned what interaction is worth actually having. I thought of more productive things that could be done during time wasted with meaningless chitchat about the latest ASAP album. I thought of a way to try and balance the two and allow myself to have enough time to work, as well as satisfy my individual needs for relaxing and socializing. After the experiment concluded I began to interact with others more often and I also began to think deeply about my experience here and what it was doing for me personally. Through self-reflection we can learn from our mistakes, release attachments, and increase our enlightenment (Brahm). I had begun to realize the pros in coming to California for five months and how they had outweighed the cons. Sure, I was missing half of my junior year with my friends back home, but I had seized the opportunity to do something very few people have. I lived away from my parents, moved across the country, met with kids around the world, and immersed myself in a new environment. I improved my evaluation skills and gained experiences that deeply influenced my thoughts. I stopped worrying about non-essential factors in my life. I began to feel much “lighter” as a whole and I began to really delve into the curriculum here at Oxbow.

While researching self-reflection through meditation I stumbled upon “The Noble Eightfold Path.” The Eightfold Path is a teaching of the Buddha that is made to achieve self-awakening through suffering. The Eightfold Path includes eight teachings, the first one being “Right View,” which is to try and see things from others’ perspectives without bias. This played into the Philosophy and History class here at Oxbow very well; during that time, I set my mind far away from everything I previously knew and looked at all of the ideals and governments as if they were all brand new ideas to me. The Right View explains the reasons for our human existence, suffering, sickness, aging, death, and the existence of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The second being “Right Thought” (or intention) is to reflect on the waves of thoughts that enter our mind and remove attachments to it; the practitioner should constantly aspire to rid themselves of any qualities they find immoral. I used to find the “artsy” kids very odd and didn’t like to associate with them as much; even going to an art school I never understood their

perspective. With Right View and Right Mind I completely discarded this thought from my mind.

The third is “Right Speech,” which is to reflect on your speech throughout the day and try to avoid abusive words, flattery, and deceit. I began to watch what I said, not that I was constantly swearing previously. I just really began to think before I acted in general. The fourth is “Right Action,” which is to behave in the context of modern life and fully work with all your heart and soul, as well as not acting in ways that would be corrupt or bring harm to oneself or to others. Even before my research began, my work ethic had increased dramatically upon my arrival at Oxbow. Most likely because the new environment encouraged me to do something different than before or become more motivated.

The fifth is “Right Livelihood,” which means to lead a decent, honest and moral life in the context of modern society. Following this rule the practitioner cannot engage in trades or occupations, which could either directly or indirectly, result in the harm of other living beings. The sixth is “Right Effort,” which means to take effort to advance higher, step-by-step towards enlightenment, abandoning all wrong or harmful thoughts. The seventh is “Right Mindfulness,” which indicates the direction of a strong will that is projected into the future; practitioners should constantly keep their minds alert to phenomena that affect the body and mind. The eighth is “Right Concentration,” which is to go through all the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path and enter a deep meditative state of absorption (Allan).

I have connected the process of meditation to my art. When I make art, I enter a therapeutic state. The process of my mark-making gives me time to reflect and think, as well as become mentally closer to the object and myself as I am drawing. Over years of this tedious mark-making, my patience has dramatically increased. Using my therapeutic pattern, I have had moments of deep reflection on past events as well as current experience. When frustrated, my mark-making gives me therapeutic release from my stress and anxiety and the ability to relax and resolve my problems from a new perspective. Through my solitude at Oxbow I began to work in many other mediums after being drawn away from my comforting niche. While I did this, my self-awareness increased dramatically. When I returned to my therapeutic mark-marking I began to see it as a new world of possibilities leading to many new options, branching out into different mediums and styles. I also realized I hadn’t been taking advantage with the time I spent alone working; now I realize the advantages and potential I have while spending time with my art and how they can lead to so many new grounds and possibilities.

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