

Isolation

by Shawn Nevins

Isolation is a period of time spent completely alone, cut-off from the world's distractions, for gaining self-knowledge. People have ventured into deserts, forests, and mountains for thousands of years to escape their fellow men, to find peace, and to find answers to their deepest questions. Such time alone may be an undistracted attempt to delve within in search of the truth of our being. Such time may also be an escape into daydream and fantasy. For me, a few days or weeks alone each year allowed a clearer perspective on the rest of my life and was a time to pursue meditation with full intensity. At the very least, it was an amazing adventure into a tradition few modern people dare to explore. What follows are some suggestions for the process.

First, you need a reason for a stint in isolation -- something you wish to think about or investigate. I remember the first time I chose to spend a day alone. I sat on a blanket by the edge of a field. Shortly, I realized I had nothing to focus on. I simply had heard that it was good to spend time alone. My mind wandered from one thought to the next for half a day. Finally, I packed up and went home. Of course, it wasn't a total waste. You learn something from any experience if you take time to ponder what happened and why. I am trying to save you a few steps, though.

Perhaps explaining more of the benefits will help clarify your reasons for undertaking an isolation. Many people like taking a few minutes at the end or beginning of the day to review and plan. Isolation is an opportunity to review and plan for months or years of your life. Sometimes in my isolations, I reviewed my journals from the past year. This was a priceless opportunity to see how I changed, how I spent or wasted my time, and what my actions said about my priorities. In short, to learn from my history. Next, I planned for the coming year, and developed a strategy for how I wanted to live my life.

You can use isolation for reviewing and planning, or for creating and discovering. Think about the scientist working late at night in his lab, the artist in their retreat, or the Native American on a vision quest. This is isolation as meditation. Eliminating distractions so we can look within and see what arises. For a moment, we put the demands of society on hold. No cell phones, no bills to pay, and no class or job to attend. Just you and the universe -- you and life at its simplest. In this case, your reasons may be harder to articulate -- taking the form of a feeling or intuition.

Once you realize a reason for isolation, the question becomes how long to spend alone. I've spent anywhere from a half a day to thirty days in isolation. I know others who spent up to sixty days. Avoid the thirty-day marathons for your first time. Best to start out too short rather than too long, since the ramifications of extending your time are clearer than those of shortening a stay.

Life is a sticky business, so you'll need to reserve a block of time and prepare to cut the cords of responsibility. Get your life in order so you won't worry whether or not your dog is starving while you are supposed to be contemplating the meaning of life. The older you get the harder this becomes, as not only your dog, but your kids also might wind up starving. Few students realize the luxury of time the college age provides. One's twenties are a window of opportunity for the grand adventure of spiritual seeking.

Where to go is the next consideration. There are numerous spiritual retreats and even a book or two listing them (such as Sanctuaries: The Complete United States). Make sure you will be left alone. It is best to not even see another person for the duration. Having to dine with others, or listen to singing and chanting can be distracting. There are options besides official retreats. Maybe a friend or friend of a friend with land where you could pitch a tent. Parks and National Forests are possibilities. I know people who simply holed up in a cheap motel room for the weekend. What is wrong with using your own home? Many reminders of your life in the everyday world, easy to be disturbed by friends or family, and too many distracting temptations like the television.

Wherever you go, plan to keep your life simple while you are there. Food preparation can become a time-consuming chore or a major distraction. Some people simply choose not to eat. Fasting is worth a try. Over-eating will make you sleepy, as will lack of exercise. The more primitive your housing situation, the more planning it may take to keep things simple -- how will you cook, clean, use the toilet? Beware of too broad a focus for your isolation. Don't plan to read ten books in two days. Or plan to decide on a career, a mate, and to discover the source of thoughts. Plan a major thrust for your isolation time and let all other actions be in support of that goal.

So you found a reason, a place to go, and a plan to make your isolation happen. Now you are there, so what are the unexpected hurdles? Typically, people find reasons to leave. You decide isolation was a stupid idea, or you are not prepared, or now is not the best time, you feel weak or sick, you have too much nervous energy (can't focus), or there is some emergency at home. My advice is to not shorten your isolation. If you said you would stay a week, stay a week. However, use your best judgement. If you vomit blood once (I've seen it happen), don't panic and leave. If you vomit blood for two days, and are unable to identify and correct the cause, then you've got a problem.

Generally, decisions to leave can be negated by changing another aspect of the isolation. Once, I meditated so long that my knees hurt day and night, so I kept changing up my sitting style so I could continue. Another time, a book I thought would be inspiring was a dud, so I used another book. I could have said my knees hurt too much or that the book was uninspiring and I might as well go home. Adapt the details of your plan in mid-stream, if necessary to preserve the whole.

There is knowledge and change that will come from the isolation experience. The answer to your deepest question may not come during isolation and you shouldn't expect it to. On a long afternoon of the twentieth day of a thirty-day isolation, as you are wishing you could sleep away the rest of time, this will seem solely an exercise in

determination. That may be one value, but other values are not realized until far in the future.

Richard Rose gave me the best description of the attitude one should take. He said not to approach isolation as challenging God or the universe for an answer. Don't draw a circle in the sand and say you won't come out until you are enlightened. Instead, and this is my interpretation, work as hard as you can and be thankful for whatever happens.

Isolation is an invaluable experience, but even it may outlive its usefulness. Eventually, I felt isolation was no longer useful for me. Perhaps the focus of my isolations had so permeated my everyday life that I was always alone; always looking for an answer even in the midst of an outwardly typical life. Along this line, I do not recommend a cloistered life. Escaping the world through permanent isolation will become another cage from which we must escape.