



Unitarian Universalist
Small Group Ministry
Network Website



Wednesday Evening Small Group (via ZOOM!)

Spiritual Practice of Solitude

Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church, Hayward, CA, Kathryn LaMar, March 2020,

CHALICE LIGHTING

0.5 min

We must become so alone, so utterly alone, that we withdraw into our innermost self. It is a way of bitter suffering. But then our solitude is overcome, we are no longer alone, for we find that our innermost self is the spirit, that it is God, the indivisible. And suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of the world, yet undisturbed by its multiplicity, for our innermost soul we know ourselves to be one with all being.

Hermann Hesse

SILENT MEDITATION / CENTERING

2 min

The first sound of the gong brings us to silence. Please take time to center yourself, and temporarily push aside whatever might be preventing you from participating fully in tonight's session. The second sound of the gong returns us to each other's presence.

OPENING WORDS:

0.5 min

As we progress on the spiritual path, periodic withdrawal from the world, in time, becomes a necessity. The occasional retreat from the world will benefit us, we will come out stronger and clearer. If we desire to find the highest within ourselves we must separate ourselves from the clamorous atmosphere of the world, in search of the quieter places within. Most often our inner voice will speak to us in absolute quietness. When we cultivate time for silence we begin to learn the art of being still, the art of being alone, the art of communion with God. This discipline will help balance us and ground us.

Natasha Dern

CHECK-IN (2 ROUNDS)

36 min

Please share some thing(s) about your life since last we met. How are managing your life, and how has it been affected by the Corona virus "shelter in place" policies?

INTRODUCTION:

5 min

All human beings are alone. No other person will completely feel like we do, think like we do, act like we do. Each of us is unique, and our aloneness is the other side of our uniqueness. The question is whether we let our aloneness become loneliness or whether we allow it to lead us into solitude. Loneliness is painful; solitude is peaceful. Loneliness makes us cling to others in desperation; solitude allows us to respect others in their uniqueness and create community. Letting our aloneness grow into solitude and not into loneliness is a lifelong struggle. It requires conscious choices about whom to be

with, what to study, how to pray, and when to ask for counsel. But wise choices will help us to find the solitude where our hearts can grow in love.

*Henri J.M. Nouwen in Bread for
the Journey)*

There is a world of difference between solitude and loneliness, though the two terms are often used interchangeably. From the outside, solitude and loneliness look a lot alike. Both are characterized by solitariness. But all resemblance ends at the surface. Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely--perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness.

Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company. Solitude is a time that can be used for reflection, inner searching or growth or enjoyment of some kind. Deep reading requires solitude, so does experiencing the beauty of nature. Thinking and creativity usually do too. Solitude suggests peacefulness stemming from a state of inner richness. It is a means of enjoying the quiet and whatever it brings. It is something we cultivate. Solitude is refreshing; an opportunity to renew ourselves.

We all need periods of solitude, although temperamentally we probably differ in the amount of solitude we need. Some solitude is essential; It gives us time to explore and know ourselves. It is the necessary counterpoint to intimacy, what allows us to have a self worthy of sharing. Solitude gives us a chance to regain perspective. It renews us for the challenges of life. It allows us to get (back) into the position of driving our own lives, rather than having them run by schedules and demands from without.

Solitude restores body and mind. Loneliness depletes them. *Hara Estroff Marano*

It is all very well to insist that man is a "social animal"--the fact is obvious enough. But that is no justification for making him a mere cog in a totalitarian machine--or in a religious one either, for that matter. In actual fact, society depends for its existence on the inviolable personal solitude of its members. Society, to merit its name, must be made up not of numbers, or mechanical units, but of persons. To be a person implies responsibility and freedom, and both these imply a certain interior solitude, a sense of personal integrity, a sense of one's own reality and of one's ability to give himself to society--or to refuse that gift.

When men are merely submerged in a mass of impersonal human beings pushed around by automatic forces, they lose their true humanity, their integrity, their ability to love, their capacity for self-determination. When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love: and consequently it is held together by a violent and abusive authority. But when men are violently deprived of the solitude and freedom which are their due, the society in which they live becomes putrid, it festers with servility, resentment and hate. *Thomas Merton*

HOW TO PRACTICE SOLITUDE

5 min

A first step in practicing solitude is learning to take advantage of "mini retreats" or "little solitudes" that comprise our days. Ideally, these moments of solitude will also be silent, such as when you first wake up or while you sip your coffee before work. More likely, they'll include the noise of everyday life as you make your way through traffic or ride in an elevator or wait on hold for someone on the other end of the phone. The point is to make the most out of these moments by quieting the noise within yourself and being present to the here and now rather than becoming impatient or getting lost in to-do lists and worries.

Additional steps in practicing solitude include setting aside a small block of time each day to rest and recharge, limiting how much you speak (try to go an entire day without speaking!), and designating a quiet place (inside or outside your home) and a time when you can retreat there for a regular period of solitude and silence. One of the hardest things about the practice of solitude is to do nothing except be still and listen. Practice is the key.

To take your practice of solitude further, try to get away for a few half- or full-day periods each year. Or, if possible, go on a retreat for two days or more. Take little more with you than a change of clothes, a Bible, and a journal. Use this time to reevaluate where you are in life: Where do you want to be in three years? In five years? In seven years?"

*Jeremy Langford, in
Healthy Spiritual Life*

From the NIV (new international version) blog on *How to Practice Solitude*.

Three things to consider when practicing solitude:

Solitude doesn't require silence. Silence and solitude are complementary disciplines that aid our communion with God. But while silence almost always requires solitude, solitude does not necessarily require silence. We can use our time of solitude for prayer, verbal meditation, singing psalms or hymns of praise, or any other form of "noisy" activity. Solitude doesn't require either silence or a hushed solemnity.

Solitude requires planning. Our lives tend to be filled with people and events, making it unlikely we'll accidentally stumble into solitude. Choose a place where you can be intimate with God and free from distractions. This "special place" doesn't need to be special--it just needs to be a place where you can remove yourself from the world for as much time as needed.

Solitude requires time. On most days the best we can do is to get away alone for a few minutes, or even an hour. We should cherish these times and guard them carefully. Yet while these solitary moments are necessary, they're hardly sufficient to meet our need for closeness with our creator. Commit to finding creative ways to be alone with God for extended periods of solitude, ranging from a few hours to a few days.

QUOTES TO PONDER

5 min

Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you. For those who are near you are far away ... and this shows that the space around you is beginning to grow vast be happy about your growth, in which of course you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind; be confident and calm in front of them and don't torment them with your doubts and don't frighten them with your faith or joy, which they wouldn't be able to comprehend. Seek out some simple and true feeling of what you have in common with them, which doesn't necessarily have to alter when you yourself change again and again; when you see them, love life in a form that is not your own and be indulgent toward those who are growing old, who are afraid of the aloneness that you trust.... and don't expect any understanding; but believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.

Rainer Maria Rilke

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, / There is a rapture on the lonely shore, / There is society,
where none intrudes, / By the deep sea, and music in its roar: / I love not man the less, but Nature more.

Lord Byron

Loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude.

Paul Tillich

Cherish your solitude. Take trains by yourself to places you have never been. Sleep out alone under the
stars. Learn how to drive a stick shift. Go so far away that you stop being afraid of not coming back. Say
no when you don't want to do something. Say yes if your instincts are strong, even if everyone around
you disagrees. Decide whether you want to be liked or admired. Decide if fitting in is more important
than finding out what you're doing here. Believe in kissing.

Eve Ensler

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 Wordsworth

Solitude is not something you must hope for in the future. Rather, it is a deepening of the present, and
unless you look for it in the present you will never find it.

Thomas Merton

Solitude is very different from a 'time-out' from our busy lives. Solitude is the very ground from which
community grows. Whenever we pray alone, study, read, write, or simply spend quiet time away from
the places where we interact with each other directly, we are potentially opened for a deeper intimacy
with each other.

Henri Nouwen

In the tumult of men and events, solitude was my temptation; now it is my friend. What other
satisfaction can be sought once you have confronted History?

Charles de Gaulle

Man is alone everywhere. But the solitude of the Mexican, under the great stone night of the high
plateau that is still inhabited by insatiable gods, is very different from that of the North American, who
wanders in an abstract world of machines, fellow citizens and moral precepts.

Octavio Paz

Life is the desert, life the solitude, death joins us to the great majority.

Edward Young

Since the time of St. Jerome, it was mandatory for any kind of scholar or thinker to spend time out in the
desert in solitude. It's no coincidence that the desert has been a major part of the visionary or mystical
experience from the beginning of time.

Bill Viola

Being solitary is being alone well: being alone luxuriously immersed in doings of your own choice,
aware of the fullness of your won presence rather than of the absence of others. Because solitude is an
achievement.

Alice Koller

Time spent alone returns to you a hundredfold because it is the proving ground of the spirit. ...

Loneliness is small; solitude is large. Loneliness closes in around you; solitude expands toward the infinite. Loneliness has its roots in words, in an internal conversation that nobody answers; solitude has its roots in the great silence of eternity. ...

In solitude silence becomes a symphony. Time changes from a series of moments strung together into a seamless motion riding on the rhythms of the stars. Loneliness is banished, solitude is in full flower, and we are one with the pulse of life and the flow of time. ...

As always, look at the world around you. The mountain is not restless in its aloneness. The hawk tracing circles in the sky is not longing for union with the sun. They exist in the perfect peace of an eternal present, and that is the peace that one finds only in solitude. Find this peace in yourself, and you will never know another moment of loneliness in your life. *Kent Nerburn, in Simple Truths*

Solitude bears the same relation to the mind that sleep does to the body. It affords it the necessary opportunities for repose and recovery. *William G. Simms*

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness.

Richard Foster

POEM SOLITUDE, SINGING (Rani Turton) 1.5 min

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/solitude-singing/>

SONG SOUNDS OF SILENCE (Paul Simon) 3.5 min

Cover recording by Celtic Thunder <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HNHKvtjoj8>

PREPARATION FOR GROUP REFLECTION 1 min

Read the questions for reflection, one by one.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON SOLITUDE

- ◆ Most of us experience loneliness at times. Are there certain times of the day, certain days of the week, or particular occasions on which you feel most lonely?
- ◆ Do you find it easy or difficult to distinguish loneliness from solitude?
- ◆ Describe a time when you were alone and felt lonely and unhappy, and a time when you were alone and felt peaceful. What was helpful to you at these times?
- ◆ How do you try to deal with feelings of loneliness when they arise?
- ◆ When is solitude most important to you? Do you seek out times for solitude or do you suddenly find yourself in it?
- ◆ What do you find in solitude?
- ◆ How does the experience of solitude contribute to your spiritual growth and development?
- ◆ Did any of the quotations in this session plan strike a chord with you? Explain.

BREAK 10 min

GROUP REFLECTION / FEEDBACK

36 min

Two rounds. Take a moment of silence and consider your response to one or more of the questions above.

SONG: THE VOICE THAT LIVES INSIDE YOU (Leon Rosselson) 6 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUQdQ474oa8>

ANNOUNCEMENTS, FUTURE SESSIONS, SERVICE PROJECT

5 min

SESSION FEEDBACK

5 min

How did the session go for you? Speak especially with regard to doing the session via ZOOM. Do we need to make any changes to the format to make it more useful to you?

EXTINGUISH CHALICE / CLOSING WORDS

1 min

Take courage friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth: You are not alone.

Rev. Wayne B. Arnason



LYRICS TO SONGS FOR SGM SESSION 58, *SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF SOLITUDE*

SOUNDS OF SILENCE (Paul Simon)

Hello darkness, my old friend I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping Left it's seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain still remains
Within the sound of silence

In restless dreams I walked alone Narrow streets of cobblestone
'Neath the halo of a street lamp I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of A neon light that split the night
And touched the sound of silence

And in the naked light I saw Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share and no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

Fools said I, you do not know Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you Take my arms that I might reach you
But my words like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed To the neon God they made
And the sign flashed out it's warning In the words that it was forming
And the signs said, 'The words of the prophets Are written on the subway walls and tenement
halls'
And whispered in the sounds of silence

THE VOICE THAT LIVES INSIDE YOU (Leon Rosselson)

When you're new in the world, you've a dream that is wild,
And they tame you and mould you, 'til one day, behold,
You're obedient soldiers, commuters, consumers,
Reality rules, and there's no room for dreamers,
They teach you your place in the obstacle race
With a prize that you chase, always just out of reach,
And you're urged on by megaphone voices that offer you
Choices that are not your own.

CHORUS:

Only listen for the voice that lives inside you ["us" in last verse];
Like a songbird in a cage, it waits in silence.
Find the key to set it free and soaring skywards;
Now the sky is filled with voices, hear them sing beside you.

If the powers that be in their wisdom decree
That you're no longer needed to feed the machine,
The wheel turns, you're dismissed; if you dare to resist,
There are walls, there are laws to confuse you and bruise you.
They'll label you scroungers and wasters and spongers;
They'll call you subversives, reds, traitors, and worse.
If you don't fit the norm, if your ways don't conform
To the rules, then you're out of the game.

CHORUS

The way they've arranged things, you think you can't change things;
You're one, you're just you; but whatever they do,
Don't forget to remember, you're a name not a number,
And no one can think for you, dream for you, speak for you.
Don't let them bind you down, don't let them grind you down,
Don't let them mould you, 'til one day, behold,
You're obedient tools, you're commuters, consumers,
And reality rules out your dreams.

CHORUS