CHAPTER 2

Everyday Solitude for Everyday People

One of the authors of this book, Heather, spent eight years in Catholic school, and even back then, before she became a journalist, she asked a lot of questions. The two conditions – inquisitiveness and parochial school – were largely incompatible. Being curious made her somehow "difficult," and sincere inquiries like "Why can't the pope be a girl?" often led exasperated nuns to eject her from the classroom into the cold, hollow hallways. All by herself there, she felt alienated and misunderstood. Occasionally, she'd even miss a sugary treat someone had brought in, which was a special kind of torture. (Don't be too sad, though, she evened the playing field years later when teaching religion to schoolchildren and devoting hours to "silly" questions.) More recently, Heather has found profound relief and immense perspective in alone time in most settings.

All three of us have also felt how difficult and isolating solitude can be when moving to a new country. When Thuy-vy was fifteen, she left behind a busy household in Vietnam and moved to Dayton, Ohio, to study. In a population that was less than 1 percent Asian, she stuck out while struggling to communicate in English, which compounded her feelings of alienation. In that circumstance, solitude was more of an escape than a pleasure. But now, Thuy-vy gets up early in the morning to spend time alone in peace. Netta felt similarly at age twenty-eight, leaving America for a job at a German university. On her first night in a small apartment (which still had no appliances), she wondered why on earth she had decided to move across the world from her home, culture, and partner. Netta filled the profound emptiness of the new place by watching videos

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

online, nonstop. Later, her relationship with solitude changed entirely with her first-born child; now solitude was a dear, long-lost friend. At that time, a quiet shower or a brief walk became necessary for her to recenter and restore balance.

These are all examples of our own multifaceted relationships with solitude. For us three, like for most people, time alone has played a sometimes major, sometimes minor (and sometimes positive, sometimes negative) role, depending on our needs, desires, and personal life circumstances. We three span decades in age and can reflect meaningfully on the role solitude can play from early adulthood to middle age, both while single and partnered, with children or without. We have navigated several languages and cultures and were raised within different family structures, under different economic conditions. Still, we share one thing: we deeply value solitude as a common condition in our daily lives. By reflecting on our own experiences, and in recording those of our research subjects, we now recognize that we can access solitude in many places, under diverse conditions, and use it in myriad ways to achieve a range of goals (more on this in Chapters 3 and 4).

For us, solitude is about much more than simply being alone. Its meaning and qualities differ substantially, depending on who's doing the defining, but for most of us in the modern world, it doesn't generally take the extreme forms we've seen in the past. We have found that almost all moments of solitude today reside in the middle ground, in the huge space between zero and total solitude, which we researchers think of as garden-variety solitude happening every day to regular people. This is the important but neglected space we have been exploring in our work.

What exactly we mean when we say the word *solitude* is still up for debate in the research world. That's a problem for scientists who study the topic because sharing and comparing research findings requires agreeing on a common language. Imagine two physicians who take a patient's temperature but don't agree on what number constitutes a fever. Based on their two different assessments of the same number, one doctor will treat the patient as sick and one will not. If the patient is burning up and goes untreated, they could die. In this instance, as in most, physicians and researchers must use specific words and definitions

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to communicate clearly about shared problems and to identify solutions. The stakes may not be quite as high when we talk about solitude, but there is ground to be won and lost, depending on how we're programmed. One person may be able to go days without any time to themselves without hating life, whereas another may become crabby and unproductive (ahem, Heather) if not left alone for at least some portion of each day.

Defining solitude using the experiences of ordinary people – and not just the musings of the poets and prophets we met in Chapter 1 – became one of our most important objectives. To create a definition of solitude that we and other researchers could share, we had to pin down its basic components, at least, to build a better picture of the nature and conditions of solitude as many people experience it. When and how does it happen? Where does it happen, and why? When is it good or bad, or neither? We hoped that answering these questions, among others, could help us describe solitude in an accurate and inclusive way that allows researchers to evaluate its potential benefits and costs. With the generous input of many people around the world, we could do that, and much more. We were able to begin to distill the essence of solitude and what lies at its heart for many people. Some data we gathered didn't represent entirely new ideas to us, or to other researchers of solitude, but a lot of data truly surprised and inspired us.

During one phase of our research, we began each interview with the question "What comes to mind when you hear the word *solitude*?" We asked that basic question because we knew that solitude often has a negative connotation; even the dictionary definition conflates it with being "alone," "lonely," or "uninhabited," which are three completely different states objectively unrelated to each other or to solitude. We wondered if that undertone affected our participants' experiences with it. We didn't realize just how illuminating that simple inquiry would be until the answers started rolling in.

Initially, some people we asked gave a definition of solitude that differs from how they experience it in their own lives.[1] Some of the sixty participants with whom we did in-depth interviews during our "narrative study" mentioned monks in hushed monasteries and some of the other stereotypical images we've already talked about. Others thought

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immediately of isolation, remoteness, and loneliness. But when we encouraged them to define alone time in *their* lives, most descriptions were much different and overwhelmingly positive. It seems that solitude is still often mistaken as having an uppercase *S*, even by people who see themselves as wanting or needing solo time.

We learned from the people we interviewed that solitude is in the eye of the beholder. It is as simple or complex, as freeing or confining, as our own perceptions and circumstances. We want to shine a light on their stories because they help us pull solitude in from the margins and clarify the fact that lowercase *s* solitude can be meaningful on a regular basis for all kinds of people. We hope that understanding that alone time takes many forms will open up a world of possibilities for those who don't yet see how they can make a place for positive solitude amid busy, happily social lives.

We sought to be global in our understanding of solitude, which ultimately comes from thousands of research subjects from around the world – from the United States and Europe and from nations including (but not limited to) Bangladesh, India, Iran, Mexico, Egypt, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and central and sub-Saharan Africa. We spoke to struggling single moms, "starving" students, comfortable retirees, prolific artists, and budding Wall Street tycoons. We got dozens of colorful and inspirational takes on solitude in response to our questions. And that was wonderful, but it also posed a problem.

As we mentioned in the Introduction, Netta and Thuy-vy came to the study of solitude as *quantitative* researchers, meaning they were focused on what statistics can tell them about the aspects of human behavior we are studying. This means they design studies in which they can measure human experience in terms of numbers. That helps them test theories, which, if accurate, result in consistent patterns. It's the way of doing science they're most comfortable with because they were taught early on in their careers that conclusions they draw from those types of data are generally reliable and trustworthy. Numbers *can* tell us some things about solitude, of course, and help us group subjects together in some ways, but Thuy-vy and Netta quickly realized that those data are far from the full story. If they wanted to capture the nuances of everyday solitude, they knew they'd have to get off the beaten path. So, we three

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researchers then waded into the waters of *qualitative* research, which aims to capture how people behave and experience the world in a more subjective way. Doing this means accepting that each person experiences reality in their own way – an exciting and sometimes mind-bending proposition for scientists.

We were fascinated to hear about the experiences of our research subjects but, frankly, somewhat taken aback at first by the individuality and richness of the replies. For example, one person told us he can tap into solitude on a busy crosstown bus in Reykjavik. Another sets an early-morning alarm in Oxfordshire to get a few minutes to herself before her home stirs to life. One participant needs a silent hour on the beach in Waikiki to reap the benefits of alone time, whereas another can dip into its positive effects during a ten-minute lunchtime walk in Central Park. How could we hope to generalize such diverse findings to explain solitude in a way that would benefit a larger population?

In short, we had to earn some new researcher chops. Qualitative research and analysis is a dynamic way to do science, and it requires adhering to a different rule book than when dealing solely with numbers. When analyzing the lengthy conversations we had with our subjects, we had to recognize recurring themes, categorize them based on that learning, and build our own models to explain the phenomena being described to us.[2] By talking about participants' attitudes and activities in solitude, and what is desirable for them about that state, we were able to reflect on how those experiences shape their personal definitions of solitude and how they characterize what goes on there.

Some of what we found supported some basic assumptions about alone time, but we were caught off-guard by other findings. We discovered that not only does everyone have their own definitions of solitude but we each also have our own set of conditions and expectations that make alone time a positive experience. That said, when recording stories of people in positive solitude, we identified several overall themes regarding how people achieve that state in their daily lives. To begin with, those themes address if a person needs to be physically alone for solitude to be gained and whether they need to be mentally or psychologically apart from others. Many people said, perhaps predictably, that physical separation was important, but interestingly, there was no consensus around needing

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it to achieve positive solitude. There was, however, strong agreement that solitude requires a mental independence from others. As a result, we came up with a conceptual model that recognizes both physical and mental separation as legitimate forms of solitude.

Our study subjects shared their experiences so richly and openly, helping mold our definition of solitude as "a state in which the self is intentionally placed at the center of one's attention and, if not physically alone, then mentally distanced from others." This definition is intentionally open-ended, allowing for a range of experiences, but is also very direct in its requirements. In our conversations, we also saw four distinct "forms" of solitude take shape: complete, private, companionate, and public. Each category offers a fascinating window into how we each move between and within our solo and social worlds.

COMPLETE SOLITUDE; OR, BUDDHA-STYLE SOLITUDE

As researchers, we struggled to name this "whole enchilada" type of solitude, which is characterized by being physically *and* psychologically separate from others and devoid of outside stimuli. *Pure*, *total*, and *perfect* are some of the terms other researchers have used to describe this alone state in which one is willing and able to focus entirely on oneself with zero distractions, other than one's thoughts.[3] This type of solitude has a deep, uninterrupted, focused quality. It may be the most obvious description of solitude that springs to mind, and understandably so, owing to the legacy of seeing solitude as practiced in very physically and mentally restrictive ways (as discussed in Chapter 1). This Buddha-style solitude didn't resonate widely with our research subjects, and it doesn't agree with our own experiences of solitude, so we don't include an extended discussion of it here. Instead, we focus on the other three types of solitude most often experienced.

Still, it's helpful to consider briefly what that drastic version of alone time means today, because it is still sometimes lionized in the mainstream. The media loves "modern-day hermit" stories,[4,5] which all seem to consider similar questions: what do they *do* with all that time alone, and why do they do it? The implication is that solitude itself is extreme, and that creates confusion. We may think, wow, I couldn't live in the

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woods for thirty years and not talk to anyone, so I must not like – or be able to endure – "real" solitude. Or people may think that if that's what solitude amounts to, they'll take a hard pass.

"Pure" solitude is also used as a benchmark by certain researchers who try to simulate those "clean" conditions within a lab to assess whether it's substantially different from other ways aloneness is experienced.[6] Many researchers cling to this description of solitude simply because it's practical and straightforward. If we consider that solitude could include any social elements or distractions (like playing a video game while on your own), that begs the question from other researchers if we're really studying solitude at all. Complete solitude is an understandable go-to for researchers, and we three authors can accept it as an absolute state achieved and/or required by some people, but we have found that such a narrow concept precludes us from talking about other ways of being alone that may be rewarding and satisfying.

In our recent process of gathering people's stories of solitude, we did hear about the need to be psychologically *and* physically separate from others (what we call "private" solitude below), but only, on occasion, did we hear about the need for the extreme conditions that define complete solitude. Some of our participants talked about requiring that kind of "nothingness" at times, with total silence and complete isolation from others, to achieve positive aloneness. Most often, however, solitude seems to happen along a continuum, meaning that all kinds of experiences, under many conditions, "count" as solitude.

By interviewing regular people who spoke meaningfully about their daily solitary experiences, we gained insights into more normative views of solitude as neither a struggle nor a triumph over extremes. As a result, we don't subscribe to the complete "solitude is the only 'real' solitude" model. As we have heard from many people, and experienced ourselves, other forms of solitude are real and achievable without taking draconian measures.

PRIVATE SOLITUDE; OR, DOWN-TO-EARTH SOLITUDE

This commonplace brand of solitude is the kind described by most people in our research. There's a lot of variation within this more

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middle-of-the-road state of aloneness, but the hallmark of "private" solitude is, as the name suggests, the state of being physically separate from others. For many people we spoke to in our research, regardless of the reason they choose to spend time on their own, positive solitude can be achieved only when they are alone in their own physical space. Think of private solitude as a more down-to-earth version of complete solitude. It is a space in which we can do anything we like – read quietly, blast music, stream Netflix, and for as short or as long as we like – as long as we do it solo. Run-of-the-mill solitude doesn't require waxing philosophical about the meaning of life. It doesn't insist we think about or do much of anything, really, if we don't want to.

Some people told us that they couldn't fully retreat or relax, that they couldn't get into the depth of mind they like or be wholly themselves, with others around. One participant described a need to "secure the physical environment," somewhere they wouldn't be disturbed, to be able to tap into "[their] own sphere in [their] own head." For some, even the idea that an outsider may interrupt their private solitude – family members returning from a trip or the postal carrier ringing the doorbell – derails some positive moments of solitude.

Among our study participants who described themselves as empathetic, or as caretakers, the desire for solitude, and, specifically, the need for private solitude, seemed more prevalent. They described carrying others' emotional baggage and needing to balance the weight of others' feelings and needs (and opinions and noises) by carving out a time and place where they could be free. One of our study participants, Ella, age forty-nine, told us, "I think empathy, in general, is one of the reasons that I need solitude. . . . What I crave partly from solitude is some respite from people's needs and their problems, because I think I kind of take them on in some way. I think it's only when I'm on my own that I can ditch [others' feelings]."

Similarly, Rebecca, age forty-eight, from Iceland, talked about the need to escape the role of mother, wife, sister, and manager, even for a brief time, to focus on herself. "I'm empathetic, in fact, I think that's one reason I need some time alone. . . . [Solitude] is more about those moments where I can let go even if it's for a moment and not have the constant thinking about work or family, or somebody else's needs," she

said. Sam, age thirty-nine, from the United States, described a relationship in which he and his partner are acutely aware of needing time away from everyone – including each other. "I think we really pick up on the emotions of the other person. And so, if the other person is in a bad mood or stressed out, we're a bit too empathic, we can really feel it," he said. Sam also emphasized the intentionality with which they step away from each other and toward alone time and how that's achieved without taking offense.

Among our subjects, the desire for physical aloneness was especially appealing to those who were caregivers, either as a result of life circumstances or because their work, as therapists, nurses, and stay-at-home-parents, keeps them tapped into others for prolonged periods of time. Scott, age sixty, from England, was a longtime caregiver to a spouse with multiple sclerosis. "Most of the time, you have to consider other people, whether they be partners, whether they be somebody in the street. . . . But if you're just sort of sitting and contemplating . . . then that's just you, and so you don't need to consider anyone else," he said. Terry, a sixty-eight-year-old former vicar in a small English village, described a life in which – even after retirement – "normally, there's somebody else wanting something from me." But in retirement, she has chosen to intentionally lean away from caregiving and toward self-care. Terry described carving out one day per week spent in her home without contact with anyone else, doing whatever she wanted. "I was coming to terms with all sorts of things at the same time, and I wanted to reflect," she said.

We also heard about private solitude being important for people who want to use that time to be uninhibited in their actions – to sing loudly or dance wildly without the fear of disturbing others. Elliott, age twenty-eight, told us he needs a private space where he can be open, free, and wholly himself. "I'd go and practice guitar or put on headphones and sing and awkwardly dance around in my room, that's not something that I want to do when everyone else is watching," he said. Private solitude is necessary for people like Elliott because it's impossible for them to disconnect from the presence of others, even strangers, because they believe they are being noticed or judged. Social psychologists call this the "spotlight effect," or the sense some people have that there's a beaming bulb shining down on them, illuminating all their flaws. This self-

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conscious way of moving through the world, which can range from mild to severe, can make it difficult to feel alone, even when surrounded by strangers.

This is a fairly common phenomenon, but the truth is that, while people may be noticing you on some level, likely nobody is scrutinizing that obvious-to-you baby barf stain on your pants. Two fascinating studies highlight this point – one published in 2000 by Thomas Gilovich at Cornell University with colleagues at Northwestern University and Williams College[7] shows that most of us overestimate the extent to which others notice what we do or how we look. In one part of that (somewhat hilarious) study done at Cornell, a recruited "target" student was asked to wear a shirt with an image of Barry Manilow on it. (Despite having sold nearly one billion records as a solo artist, Manilow was unpopular among college students at the time, and those asked to wear the shirt among their peers recorded feeling "embarrassed" to do so.) The target had to walk into a room where "observers" were already sitting and take a seat. Later, researchers asked the target and observers who noticed what. Confirming the spotlight effect, the targets overestimated – by double – the number of people whom they thought would notice their mortifying attire. In the following four parts of the experiment, the researchers tested the spotlight effect on targets with "cooler" shirts, including some subjects who did and said things they perceived were hard to ignore. No matter the context, the observers consistently failed to award the target with the attention they expected. The researchers concluded that "people tend to believe that they stand out in the eyes of others, both positively and negatively, more than they actually do."

A second set of studies done at Yale University by Erica Boothby and colleagues, published in 2016,[8] replicated the Cornell findings, but with an interesting twist. The spotlight effect seemed to be in play when, again, researchers asked a target to wear a specific shirt, this time depicting notorious Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. Those wearing the shirt again overestimated the impact it would have on others. But the study also revealed another phenomenon that researchers called the "invisibility cloak illusion," under which people actually *underestimate* how much others are paying attention to them. It sounds contradictory, but the two states exist at the same time – we assume others' attention is

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on the same thing we're focused on (an offensive shirt, a bad haircut), but that's rarely true. We are both more *and* less anonymous to others than most of us generally perceive, but importantly, others likely are not focused on our perceived flaws.

Why do some people feel this way, and is there any way to get over it, to access types of solitude that don't require physical separation from others? Like many ways we feel when alone or in the presence of others, the spotlight effect likely has evolutionary origins. In a 2013 study, researchers in Britain and Australia showed images of faces to their subjects and asked them to report whether the images' eyes were looking at the subject or off to the side. They determined that "humans have a prior expectation that other people's gaze is directed toward them."[9] This preconception dominates perception particularly when the faces are difficult to see, meaning that subjects assumed they were being looked at if they couldn't be quite sure. In terms of evolution, at a time we were preyed upon by large carnivores, we assumed that a predator was looking at us even if it wasn't, because that was the safer bet. While not applicable to most of our daily lives now, that wiring can be tough to ignore – but not impossible to overcome.

The findings of these studies could help some of us – who feel like we're not truly alone unless we're physically alone – to think differently about how and when we can access solitude. There are ways to combat the spotlight effect and blunt self-consciousness (that's a whole other book),[10] but it may free some people to know that they are likely more alone in the presence of others than they think. This may help people living in busy households, crowded cities, or both to put positive solitude within reach even if they find it impossible to break away from others. And even if one cannot overcome the spotlight effect, understanding one's need for private solitude is also important. Knowing that we may require physical aloneness to benefit from solitude can prompt us to carve out that individual space, if only for a short time.

COMPANIONATE SOLITUDE; OR, PARTNERS-IN-SOLITUDE

The two types of solitude we've talked about so far – complete and private – rely on being physically apart from others. The second two –

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companionate and public – perhaps surprisingly do not. By "companionate," we mean partners and spouses, of course, but also any other person with whom we have a familiar or close connection. We heard positive solitude stories from our research subjects who achieved that state with family members and friends. In that company, many of our participants felt they had the freedom to turn inward and connect with themselves. Essentially, they have an ability to be psychologically separate from others even when sharing the same airspace.

This opened our minds as researchers to the idea that companionate solitude is just as legitimate a form of solitude as any other. In some cases, the presence of people even enriched rather than detracted from solitude. Those occasions have often lived long in the memories of some of our participants. "My father was very into fishing – and we would often go with him. Just sitting at the riverbank dangling my feet in the river Thames, just next to my father in perfect peace and quietness. That's a very, very vivid memory . . . just sitting next to my father perfectly quiet, not because I had to but [because] I enjoyed it," said Scott, age sixty, from England.

"Partners-in-solitude" also describes enjoying peaceful activities in nature, at home, and even while traveling. We heard from Kaitlin, age forty-eight, about the meaningful solitude she has achieved while seeing new things, like a sculpture in a museum, with a friend. "I was traveling just with one other person and there were plenty of times where we would go see something and we were together, but we were quiet and separate in some way and we were . . . basically having different experiences. . . . So there was a sense of obtaining that solitude but I wouldn't have said I was alone." Experiences of companionate solitude are akin, in a way, to monks in a monastery "sharing" solitude and vows of silence.[11] Austro-German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) considered his wife the "guardian of his solitude."[12] In a letter to a friend, he wrote, "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other."[13] Whether a monk or a museum buddy, the key is a tacit agreement to give one another the psychological space to achieve solitude while in each other's company.

In our research, companionate solitude was achieved by people with children at home (generally teens or older), but it was most often

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

described by those in long-term relationships. Colleen, age sixty-nine, from England, told us that she's very rarely alone at home but that she's often "totally relaxed . . . in a little bubble in myself." She can even be in the same room where her husband is watching television yet feel completely apart. "I'm not actually *with* him because I'm immersed in my book," she said. Sometimes finding solitude in the company of another was a learning process. Claire, an American widow in her eighties, came to understand the value of solitude over her long marriage. Whether in a small Manhattan apartment, or later in a larger home, she and her husband found ways to retreat into their own psychological spaces when necessary.

Although half Claire's age, thirty-nine-year-old Sandra shared something similar. She told us that she and her husband can be in their flat together but also be content to give each other the mental space to be entirely separate in their thoughts and actions. That was something entirely new to Sandra. "[Solitude] is not something I really experienced before, and it's kind of something that I didn't really understand very well when he would explain it to me," she said. "That's actually a gift he's given me, learning how to get in touch with my own needs and my own solitude and appreciation for time alone."

Companionate solitude became evident, and perhaps more prevalent, during pandemic lockdowns with work- and school-from-home setups, when sharing physical space with loved ones over longer periods of time than usual was a common condition. For some of our participants, moments of solitude were formed when each person was free to have their own experience and perspective despite sharing the same general area. At times, these were even described as the most memorable experiences of solitude during that time. Rebecca, age forty-nine, a mom of teenage girls, told us about working side by side with them on art projects. They all sat at the same table but didn't talk or interact in any significant way. All three were inhabiting their own worlds, in a way, while being aware and comforted by the presence of the others. "I was with my two daughters, and that for me was very special because we were somewhat in solitude but with each other, rather than . . . in three different places around the house. . . . We wanted to create together," she said.

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PUBLIC SOLITUDE; OR, ALONE IN A CROWD

Our participants talked about another form of solitude that involves psychological but not physical separation: being alone in public, in the presence of others. This is very different from companionate solitude because the only person you know there, or care to acknowledge, is you. (On this point, solitude historian David Vincent talks about an in-between kind of aloneness experienced when another person is not a "partner" in solitude but not a "stranger" either.[14] In the past – and perhaps still in some places – subordinates may be treated as invisible by their "employers," who may access solitude by dehumanizing those workers.)

Public solitude is sought in a less secure environment than the companionate kind. Those around you don't necessarily know you want to be on your own, and intrusions can happen at any time, directly or indirectly engaging you and bursting your solitude bubble. On the other side of the coin, public solitude could be easier to access in some ways because there is less investment to be made in those around you. "If you're walking along with a partner you have to talk, or you don't have to, but you tend to talk, if you're walking by yourself you're just enjoying the view," one of our research subjects, Peter, explained to us.

Our subjects offered a lot of other interesting examples of when they are out in the world and in solitude. Silent retreats were a popular example of one activity in which people were surrounded by strangers but felt secure about delving deeply into their own psychological spaces. But a silent retreat wasn't required for most people. Again, Peter: "Sometimes, it's nice just to sit, like, if you're on holiday, just to sit and watch the world go by. That's solitude, as well, because you're just sitting there, maybe on the seafront or something, and you're people watching, but you're actually sitting there quite quiet and relaxed."

Being able to access solitude in public may be particularly beneficial for city dwellers. Two of our participants – though separated in age by more than twenty-five years – described having lived in north London at some point in their lives and having taken advantage of some public swimming holes in a park there. Grace, age sixty-five, described the experience of swimming in the "silkiness of an open pond," where she

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does a slow breaststroke, enjoying the "deliciousness" of the activity and feeling alone even among others. Alex, who is originally from a much warmer climate than the United Kingdom, nevertheless enjoys outdoor swimming in winter, calling it an "exhilarating" experience (we'll take his word for that!). During that time, he focuses intensely on his own connection to the environment. "You just feel, you don't need to talk there, you just become part of nature," he said. (More on solitude in the natural world in Chapter 7.)

Whether in solitude or not, people are often wrong when predicting what they'll enjoy or hate. Imagine you and a friend have tickets to the opera and he cancels at the last minute. You hesitate, imagining an empty seat next to you, and consider not going. But you were looking forward to the performance, so you go anyway and end up having a great time. You missed your friend, but you didn't miss the way he normally whispers commentary in your ear during a show. So why did you assume you'd have a bad time going solo? Some research findings demonstrate that social norms play a part in shaping our perceptions of what is acceptable to do alone in public spaces.

The pursuit of solitude in spaces traditionally designed for communal activities, like parks and restaurants, might come with unique challenges. The fear of being judged or watched, of boredom and loneliness, distracts many people in those settings and stands in the way of positive solitude. One consumer survey including individuals in the United States, India, and China showed that people often anticipate less enjoyment and fear others' judgment more when asked about engaging in "fun" activities alone in public, such as going to a restaurant or movie theater.[15] Those participants expressed concern that others would think they were alone because they had few friends with whom to enjoy those activities. By contrast, if the primary goal of the activity is utilitarian, like shopping for groceries or walking in a public park (presumably for exercise), fear and hesitation were diminished because those were perceived as more "acceptable" solo activities.[15]

Eating, which we argue is both fun and utilitarian, presents a particularly complex picture of public solitude. The social history of eating with others is so ingrained in our collective psyche because, since the time humans first cooked with fire, we've been gathering.[16] Consider festivals

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

like Chuseok in Korea, Iri-ji in West Africa, Thanksgiving in America, and it's clear that food brings people together.[17] Alternatively, supping solo can seem like an aberration. One recent experiment shows us why this is the case. Researchers[18] asked 248 US adults who had dined in a restaurant in the past six months to imagine eating a meal in the presence of other customers and subject to one of the following conditions: (1) with other customers dining alone or (2) with others in groups, and when the restaurant was (3) full or (4) empty. Participants were asked how lonely they'd be given the various scenarios and if they would anticipate others looking down on them. Those who imagined themselves eating alone surrounded by other customers in groups anticipated more loneliness and negative evaluation from others, especially in a busy restaurant, and said they would be less likely to eat alone under those circumstances.

To mitigate those negative feelings, even people who love traveling alone sometimes attempt to deflect potential negative judgment from others by using "props" (books, smartphones) to show they are engaged during meals and not "missing" a companion.[19] Those subtle cues might be strategically used to communicate the purpose of their aloneness while other people are around. (Those props are also sometimes used to communicate that they want to be left alone.) Eating alone still gets such a bad rap that scientists from Australia are designing a robotic table mate, Fobo, that behaves like a fellow human.[20] (No word on whether it's programmed to burp and then, of course, excuse itself.)

Whereas some people are turning to mechanical meal mates, there are many people rejecting the perception that "fun" things shouldn't be done alone. The growing "table for one" phenomenon is a great way of tapping into what is wonderful about public solitude.[21] Say someone leads a hypersocial life, always dwelling and working in the presence of others with few solo moments possible. Maybe breaking away for lunch and dining alone offers them an opportunity to have an enriching experience on their own. "I'll go into a café or whatever, order food or order a drink, whatever it may be. And it's not that it's not possible to have conversations with people, I choose not to. I just enjoy the experience of being there," said Cliff, who is in his sixties and lives in the United Kingdom.

And consider the case of Finnish "foodies" who extol solo dining as a way to fully experience food and the atmosphere in which it's served.

The authors of a 2022 paper on "recreational eating out" in Finland talked about the growing cultural phenomenon of solo dining spawned by a desire to better appreciate the aesthetic qualities of food and drink, akin to how one would experience objects in a museum (ah, if only one could crack open one of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans).[22] Whereas some people enjoy discussing works of art, or how their steak tastes, others find that doing so detracts from their experience, whereas being on their own actually enhances it. The phenomenon is not just a Western one. A study of nearly 500 Chinese diners in Macao showed the appeal of dining alone was commonplace in China and questioned the assumption that dining should be group based.[23] Similar positive emotions were associated with solo dining in Japan, where singletons did not anticipate negative evaluation from others.[24] The exception in the research literature is Taiwan, where solo diners saw the activity as a lonely one.[24]

Other positive solo diners have expressed righteousness in the face of judgment. In a study of Instagram posts, researchers extracted posts hashtagged #tableforone and looked for recurring themes.[25] What they found was a sense of empowerment expressed by those who enjoyed eating alone and a recognition that it's valuable to them because of the pleasure of being with oneself. Like the Finnish foodies, they found that going solo gave them the space to savor the tastes and experiences of high-quality restaurants. The posts expressed "the importance of valuing alone time," said the researchers, and the idea that eating alone is a form of self-care, legitimate in its own right. Some of the social media posters also rebelled against the stigma of eating alone and against the assumption that they *had* to do it with someone else if they wanted to enjoy the experience.

As compelling as we three researchers find our subjects' descriptions of public and companionate solitude, others who study time alone disagree that those are legitimate. They contend that any time spent in the presence of others, even if they aren't interacting with us, makes us vulnerable to social influence, to subtle nudges to behave in certain ways. For example, while sitting in a restaurant, we may notice how others are ordering and eating, and this might influence us to do the same. These researchers also suggest, as earlier, that we may feel outsiders'

affirmations or judgments, and our feeling and thinking at that moment may be colored by that stigma. They contend that this "noise" adversely impacts the quality of solitude, if they consider it that at all.[26]

But many people, including some of our participants, can deflect negative attention, or they are simply not susceptible to it. Among our research participants are several people who seem to be able to secure a space around themselves, at least mentally, in which they are insulated from what's going on externally. "I can just lock into what I'm doing, and I'm alone in my head anyway without it being an issue if there's things that are happening on the periphery. And I can sort of dip in and out if asked a question or something like that, but often, I'm just absorbed," one person told us. (Heather's mom was like that; she could do crossword puzzles despite a fire alarm shrieking overhead.)

By examining the rich, lived experiences of our research subjects, we have been able to offer an alternative narrative to the narrow idea that solitude is only for certain kinds of people in particular places and in defined ways. For this reason, we're able to legitimize forms of alone time dismissed by other researchers. With that new knowledge in hand, we can turn our attention to *why* solitude can be such an abundant space and to its many possible benefits.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009256599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press