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Dr Marie-Claude VINCENT

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Translation : Kathy WEBB-PEPLOE

From a feeling of isolation to a life lived alone

How isolation and solitude are experienced.

Isolation: feeling distanced from the community of mankind

I was confronted with solitude as something imposed on a person rather than as an internal state when I met some inmates in an isolation wing of a prison. A prisoner kept in isolation may often have contact with other human beings for no more than half an hour a day. This comprises contact with a prison guard while being given their meals, while being accompanied as they go to the narrow exercise area when they come out of isolation or when they are transferred to the hospital wing.

I was able to observe many different reactions depending on the reason for their isolation, its duration and of course the prisoner's inner mental equilibrium. For some, the memory of failures when outside becomes more intense in isolation and some tolerate badly having lots of time to contemplate their darker side. Others subconsciously project their inner malaise on the guards and nurture resentment or violence which frequently results in multiple incidents and sometimes an interminable lengthening of their punishment for attacks on staff or against authority. Others end up by becoming very withdrawn and I remember a tricky consultation at the end of the afternoon in an isolation wing. I am called to see a prisoner because the prison authorities want me to determine whether it is dangerous to keep them in their cell. I have little information about the case. This man has been in isolation for more than two weeks following a violent incident with a guard on returning from a walk. For the last few days, he has been talking less and less and on the afternoon in question, he undressed himself completely in the exercise area where he was on his own and he had to be brought back to his cell completely naked.

In this type of situation, because prisoners can react in a very unpredictable way in isolation, we cannot see prisoners on our own in a consulting room, so we see them in a narrow corridor in front of the bars of their cell with them inside.

That day, I see a very tall man, lying down, whose bare feet hang over the end of the bed, with a blanket pulled up to his face. He has fairly long hair, brown in colour, he is hirsute, with an emaciated face and a beard that looks several days old. He takes no notice of me and doesn't reply to my 'hello' or to any of the questions I put to him.

Everything was lost in a silence which I interpreted as being a mixture of tension and despair. Most of all, I remember the intense distress which I felt rising in me as I paced to and fro in this narrow corridor while trying to find a way of making contact. I talked to him in a loud voice, saying to him it was important that he speak of what he was feeling, of what had happened etc… Then I started to speak of other things as well without posing questions but to give him clues as to my intentions, the reason for me being there that evening.

That feeling of impotence only intensified as time went on and it was difficult to envisage leaving him overnight without knowing his mental state. It was completely impossible to recommend hospitalisation for a refusal to talk without any other clinical symptoms. And it is then, as I do yet another circuit in that narrow corridor, that I notice a book in a corner of his cell. The book is by an author that I know, and which falls in the category of books of wisdom. When I saw the book, I exclaimed both my astonishment and my keen desire to talk about the book with him since I find this author fascinating as he has interesting reflections on the meaning of life. I then noticed that this man came out from under the blanket, opened his eyes and looked at me questioningly albeit also with an air of suspicion. I said to him I wasn't messing around, and that I had developed a limited library service within the prison, in the area where I had my office, and that I would be really very interested to have his opinion on this book. And with relief, I saw him wrap himself up in the blanket like a loin cloth, grab the book, crouch down on the floor, and look at me. He stayed silent but we made eye contact and I asked him if he would lend me the book for a few minutes. He slid it along the floor, and I started reading aloud a page opened at random and then commenting briefly on what I had read. He seemed more and more interested and while pointing out it is late, I offer to see him the following day under other conditions. He replies in a choked voice and using very short words that he is willing to do that. I was to go on and exchange a few more words with him as I gave him a timetable for our consultations, saying that I would ask for special permission for him to be escorted to my office out of isolation the following day and importantly making him promise that he would agree to come to the appointment I was proposing and that I needed him to give me his word. I remember having scribbled the time of his appointment on a piece of paper, as I needed to seal a pact in writing with him. The encounters with him which followed were very fruitful. This young man, sent to prison because of a crime linked to drugs, was a very sensitive soul, with no protective layer, like someone who had been flayed. He had been put in isolation after refusing to come back in from his daily exercise while throwing insults at those who were supervising him. Soon after being placed in isolation, his partner and mother of their son had written to him to end their relationship and he had had no further visitors at all. Our discussions brought to light the fact that the loss of this relationship had provoked a feeling of isolation much more painful than the solitary confinement itself. The fact that this solitude was no longer just a deprivation of liberty but a solitude resulting from the absence of this particular relationship meant that he had the feeling of having been totally forgotten, of no-one knowing that he was there, that he didn't exist for anyone other than as his prisoner number. And bit by bit, starting with the loss of this relationship he had slipped into losing the relationship with himself. He described a sensation of emptiness inside which became worse and worse with a withdrawal into himself and the loss of any desire to communicate with others. Weeks later, I understood that, during his exercise session on the day that we met, he had felt acute anguish and had felt a complete loss of any feeling of even being himself. And it was, as it were, to give a physical accompaniment to that feeling of abandonment, that he took off his clothes until he was naked.

I had the impression that this young man had relived one of the most acute experiences of solitude in life, that experienced by the new-born. A baby has an urgent need for relationship. It has no notion of time or of duration, or of how things relate to each other. This means that, for them, the absence of contact has an absolute value. At that moment of lack of contact, the solitude is profound. These are certainly the first experiences of solitude. This prisoner described very well losing all notion of time and of how long he had been in solitary confinement. He even lost all sense of the reality of the external world.

In the weeks which followed his emergence from his mute state after our first encounter, his guards told me that he behaved rather curiously in his cell, staying crouched for hours at a time. He confided in me during one of our sessions that it calmed him, that he needed to get closer to the ground. This man was an

intelligent and discerning reader, and it was mainly thanks to the loan of several books and what he was able to learn from them that he was able gradually to experience solitude without distress, with a period of mourning for the relationship with his partner, and a more positive attitude towards his present state, as he sought another meaning for his life.

A few weeks later, his return to normal prison quarters had not been easy, as, although he was relieved to be with the other prisoners again, he observed that he was quickly bored by the chatter and the empty or meaningless comments, which seemed to saturate a world which he found already extremely noisy with the constant shouting of those imprisoned, something which had not bothered him three months previously. He had come to realise that the psychological experiences which he tried to find by taking drugs were linked to his quest go higher and deeper within himself.

Once he had returned from solitary confinement, he described a completely different way of being alone, saying that now it had become an interior refuge in the context of over-crowding which was sometimes intrusive.

He gradually discovered an interior space within himself and a new capacity for insight and introspection. This new space, according to him, was born of successive realisations achieved thanks to books suggested to or prescribed for him and to numerous conversations that we had, sparked by reading these books.

This 'library therapy' in prison has been a precious resource as I treat people. Reading is a solitary activity but the interaction with what is read attenuates the feeling of being alone and gives a universal dimension to the emotions experienced by the reader. The account offers the possibility of identifying with certain personalities or of experimenting with other ways of thinking. This choice allows a space for freedom and space to find a small bit of autonomy in this very constrained environment. It is even possible to find the ability to escape within. Time spent reading also allows a regular re-orientation of one's attention away from the grooves of recurrent ruminations and allows the possibility of distancing oneself from them. Lending the books and talking about them reduces the asymmetry of the therapeutic relationship and represents a very important support for those who cannot bring themselves to confide what they are experiencing in so many words. I found these effects so powerful that I suggested it firstly in prison, and then with patients who had been victims of torture within specifically chosen groups, reading short texts about self-knowledge.

Other clinical cases have taught me a lot about isolation and solitude, but this time within the heart of society.

I am going to talk about those who feel totally isolated and rejected by society even though they are in full view: those who are completely excluded from society, homeless people and those who are afflicted, one might say, stigmatised by severe psychiatric illness and those we label as 'vulnerable adults'.

Extreme isolation: self-imposed exclusion from human society

Vulnerability (*la précarité*) refers directly to otherness by reason of its very etymology: the Latin 'precari' means 'beseech someone else to have'. There is possibly no greater suffering than that of feeling completely excluded from human society. There is a gradation of suffering for someone who is becoming ever more profoundly excluded, which I won't go into in any detail here and which results when an individual loses one by one those social objects such as work, housing, relationships, health. But there is a very specific phenomenon described by the psychiatrist Jean Furtos when the social exclusion is prolonged or severe; that of auto-exclusion. This neologism is derived from the semantic duplication which is both psychological and sociological. In fact, while experiencing exclusion from his environment and from society, the individual will at the same time exclude himself from his situation until he has made himself disappear on several levels. By using the capacity to exclude even himself, the subject will thus try to avoid suffering and to actively transform their exclusion by making it worse rather than just enduring it. In these situations, we observe very marked signs of the person themself as it were disappearing; they 'move out' from themself with, for example, an indifference to their own deterioration and a lack of sensation of physical pain even if there are

major health problems. These situations can last a long time and can take as many years to reverse as they took to establish themselves. Often, witnesses, passers-by, companions, social workers and health care workers are made to feel acutely uncomfortable, and it can provoke antagonistic reactions which can cause iatrogenic harm. I've lost count of the number of times I have seen vulnerable, alcoholic patients thrown out or not examined by paramedics or in accident and emergency departments in hospitals, because of the reluctance of the health care workers to treat them. They view them as hopeless cases, without any willingness to help themselves, as they confound the central problem of this syndrome with an individual's so-called lack of will-power. This tendency for auto-exclusion can also be found in a much more insidious form in people afflicted by severe psychological difficulties, in some people, particularly older people, isolated for many years, in some people who live as recluses in their homes, or in victims of persecution or prolonged torture in a political context or in a context of violence. The thing which all these people have on a phenomenological level is a very particular feeling of no longer being part of humanity, of preferring to withdraw oneself from the world without however resorting to suicide.

These people are often both alone and isolated, even from their community or social group, when for example we are dealing with homeless people or migrants.

This is about a true disappearance of the subject from society. More than any other patient, these people require special care when interacting with them; trust, a lot of patience, and for the caregiver, the ability to tolerate the total absence of any sign of progress in the relationship. Very often, there are even constant efforts to destroy any relationship which might be established. It is as though that solitude, which is so painful amid the crowd, that intense pain of no longer being part of those who have something to exchange, or that pain of no longer being at the heart of a group, must have been anaesthetised because it was unbearable. And in its place comes a void, where one no longer feels either one's body or any emotional anguish, but which cuts us off from others and from the world. In encounters with such people, I have often felt myself that almost physical sensation of emptiness, of inner desertification, the absence of the capacity to think and to explain, and I've come to value the importance of not remaining alone 'with' these feelings. I have noticed that it was essential to place them somewhere, to confide them to someone else in the team, not only with the aim of providing another point of view but also to, as it were, recreate the ability to respond to as many of the sensory details that I'd seen, heard, or felt in the person and their environment. I also observed that it was better if I prepared myself in a particular way before meeting these excluded individuals by doing exercises to feel rooted, be mindful and build my inner resilience. I had the impression that I needed to create and maintain space for two of us during the encounter, not only psychologically but almost physically. It is often only a long time afterwards that these people, 'apparently' indifferent or even hostile, talk about how important that continuity of care was for them and that they even remembered details about how we paid attention to them which we have completely forgotten.

I am now going to talk about a situation which is the complete reverse. The confrontation, however brief, with solitude for people who are completely integrated within society.

Representation of solitude or exploration of solitude?

For the last ten or so years I have been involved in the training of groups for professionals who are encountering problems with stress. These professionals come from different settings, but the majority are care-givers or personnel working in hospitals. The levers used during the training are those of emotional intelligence, of conscious communication and exercises of natural meditation or of full awareness which are about becoming attentive to what is being lived in the present moment.

During these training sessions, the first of which lasts three days, I suggest on the second day, that the trainees do an experiment where they remain silent and alone as a group for about four hours, asking them to not read, to avoid looking at their phone and just to be present to themselves.

During these four hours, there are two hours of guided movement in the room (conscious movement, conscious walking) and a meal shared in silence in the room where each is invited to bring a simple meal. During the two-hour lunch break, they are also free to go outside the room, to go for a walk etc.

About a third of the participants experience a certain anxiety, even anguish before the experiment.

Then at the end of the day each is invited to say, if they wish, how they experienced that period of silence.

Each time, it is an opportunity for most of the participants to make some important discoveries.

For many, they rediscover through their five senses quite simply the fact of feeling 'alive' and say that they haven't felt that since their childhood, if ever in their life. For others, giving themselves time just to take notice of themselves is revolutionary and many young mothers who never have enough hours in the day to do everything start crying as they tell the group of the importance of finding a space for themselves. Some people find the first two hours very distressing with intense frustration at not being able to speak, or with the emergence of a sadness or intense internal agitation which then calms down as these feelings settle and are transformed.

Every time, without fail, this short experience of silence is a revelation, even for those who live alone and think they are used to solitude or enjoy it.

For many people solitude exists only as an image or as fantasy. This fear often only exists because they have never experienced the reality of solitude as an adult.

It is interesting to ask yourself: how many of us dare sometimes or regularly to experience silence even just for a couple of hours without yielding to the temptation to look at the news, to pick up our phone to check that someone is thinking of us or that we are indispensable to someone?

For many young people nowadays, the absence of noise and stress create a sort of panic; they're caught up in a vicious circle - as if under the influence of drugs - where the absence of stress becomes an additional stress to flee from by diving into yet more stress. In fact, it is the equivalent of being addicted to adrenaline. If you look down the street, on the train, the underground, so many people grip their telephone in their hand to send messages, to take in images, sounds, news etc. This shows the power of that need for connection, but is it really that sort of connection which we are seeking? Absolutely not! That false connection is never done, it never satisfies. On the contrary it is addictive, and we know that the most lucrative market is that of our attention – every second of it is sold at great price. The fear of emptiness remains, evidenced by that compulsion to fill our time.

Most of the time, in the world, are we not fleeing from ourselves? The pleasures offered by consumption, professional identity, desires, the neurosis of social status, even those actions which seem a priori generous and noble when viewed from the outside, are very often pretexts to avoid confronting ourselves.

The ego is constantly strengthened by the game of relationships. The raison d'être of the ego, its first manifestation, is to prove that I exist in relation to others, or to prove that I am superior to others. When I am alone in nature for several hours, all this game of illusions falls away. The ego settles and those elements which characterise it fall to the bottom, like the mud at the bottom of the sea when you stop stirring it up.

In those moments, it becomes evident that the suffering and agitation which we are experiencing comes exclusively from our mind, and that becoming aware of this is essential. It allows us to become acutely aware of the absurdity of that interior circus which clouds the underlying joy of life which exists and is always present.

Basically, we are alone. The fact of being in company doesn't take away that solitude, but it allows us to forget it, to distract ourselves from it. It is rare that we enjoy this confrontation with solitude. We try to run away from it, to turn away from it. Silence is similar, we prefer to populate it with some reassuring speech or sounds. Solitude brings us back to ourselves.

Solitude which is chosen

Nonetheless, choosing to accept and bear that feeling of solitude, allows us to explore the extent of our resources, our frontiers, and our limits. It's all about maintaining dignity when face to face with ourselves.

We must take notice of this conscious choice not to accept solitude. To see how we are constantly seeking to put it off, or to change what happens. If we find ourselves alone, we feel our stomach, our throat or our chest react, feel tense, so we immediately try to telephone a friend, read a book, switch on the radio or the television, in short 'do' something or run away. We will do anything rather than accept the moment for what it is.

When we first encounter solitude, let us see how we go about seeking to fill it and we will be able to experience that desire for escape separate from the feelings we are experiencing. It is essential to be aware, and we cannot experience this except in moments of complete solitude. In fact, solitude brings with it a destabilisation of our reference points and rather than welcoming the unknown, letting it, little by little settle within us, we try to seize something because we are afraid to experience fully that transformational insecurity. Hiding behind that fear of solitude are other fears, principally that of accepting that our existence is built within constraints that we cannot predict.

But let us observe from much closer the reason why mankind finds it so difficult to plumb that essential depth within himself.

The emotions which result from a feeling of isolation, of solitude, of separation or of emptiness are dark and often sad, accompanied by negative thoughts. If we look closely at the nature of this experience, do we ask ourselves why we have been overtaken by such thoughts, and why we are overcome by that malaise which we try to escape from as soon as possible?

Maybe, it is simply because the me-ego which makes up our apparent identity cannot manage to attach itself to that confusion and to that pain. The mind is always trying to attach itself to something, but it can't do it when faced with the void. On this very particular path, it is essential to look inside oneself at that feeling of emptiness, that feeling of loss and above all that feeling of being alone. It will be interpreted by the mind as a negative experience. But it is nonetheless a key moment where it is possible to arrive at the threshold of a transformation. And it is because of this that it is essential to remain open to those moments of pain which bring us closer to the void or to the emptiness. Acknowledging what is happening and accepting the need to pause in those moments allows us to observe that the mind will, without cease, go to and fro between what is inner and what is exterior to seek solutions which it won't find.

Living in solitude

Trusting this process is very important. By accepting it, the feeling of being alone will become a friend and no longer something to run away from. During these episodes, it is essential to be kind to ourselves, and to accept that which we interpret as distress. The feeling of emptiness cannot become a source of support and even sometimes completeness unless we really continue to look within ourselves and don't turn towards what is outside ourselves. It's really about finding an inner home.

To learn to live with oneself is really about inhabiting one's solitude.

Once you understand this, you will progressively realise that it is truly precious. There is that delicate feeling of being at home with one's inner self which has always been there and will remain always. That secure foundation can only be found within oneself. By looking for it outside ourselves we lose our self, while at the same time losing our energy since we can't stop our minds from continuing to try to find it. There is a veritable wellspring deep within us and if we trust that inner source and lean on it, we can recharge ourselves and feed from that space. We can spend a great part of our lives looking for that house which in fact was always within us, we just need to learn to pay attention to it.

Present-day society, under the pretext of hyper-connectivity, also tends to make us completely forget the awareness of a much more essential presence. Returning to awareness of body and breathing is very important by way of finding again an interior dwelling.

In these moments of solitude, we can listen how the millions of cells in our bodies are interconnected. Becoming aware of the way they exchange information allows us to discover a much more subtle sensation and to discover knowledge of the Infinite and of Life. In reality, there is not a single moment where we are alone and of course that links us to something much greater than us.

Those first steps into solitude are only the beginning of a path on which it is possible to pick numerous fruit which I am not going to list since they are so well described by the monks, mystics, or adventurers who have made solitude an essential treasure.

Solitude is an indispensable condition for awakening a transcendent dimension, which avoids all that is viewed as our due and the baggage of our ego. The indestructible kernel of being is associated in all the religious and spiritual traditions with the Spirit.

Surely, it is in our inner being, in the secrecy of solitude, and in the most profound silence within ourselves that we can embark on this path towards the Spirit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the acceptance of solitude is a sign of maturity for us and an absolute necessity for anyone who wishes to really know themselves. This absolutely does not mean we should retreat into ourselves, if anything the opposite. To enter into solitude does not mean running away from relationships but equally it doesn't mean alienating yourself in relationship with others. Allowing oneself moments of solitude on a regular basis, even if only for a few hours, days or years, offers an inner liberty and the discovery of essential resources and our capacity to achieve an inner maturation. It also makes us freer in our relationships, liberating us from debilitating beliefs in order to more openly accept the inevitable trials of our existence. It is a way of remaining faithful to ourselves while also being linked to other people by a mutual respect for each person's uniqueness, and for each person's solitude which is perhaps the mortar that keeps our friendship together. Finally, of course, it allows us the possibility of opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, that deepest dimension of our being.

Marie-Claude Vincent
Psychiatrist
F - Dijon

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