Can It Be Done Alone? Solitude and Personality Maturation

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At 47 she was happily married with an 11-year-old daughter and expressed much satisfaction with her work as a masters-level psychotherapist. Her adolescence and young adulthood, however, were different stories, filled with chaos. She described impulsive, promiscuous behaviors beginning at age 13. Heavy drug use began in her late teens, and her parents kicked her out of the house. She fended for herself as a waitress and had a series of relationships with abusive men. As age 30 approached, she began to get herself under control, stopped using drugs, and married a musician she described as “very straight.” With his encouragement, she attended a community college, majored in psychology, and ultimately obtained a masters degree in counseling. Currently she is employed at a public agency for abused women.

A woman came to me for a mandated psychiatric evaluation as part of the ordination process in her church. During our several interviews, she seemed poised, direct, and comfortably self-disclosing.

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Her religious involvement began with her marriage and involved joining her husband’s church. Later she began to work in the church’s outreach program and when I saw her, she was taking courses to qualify for the role of an ordained deacon.

When I asked her how she had turned her life around so dramatically, she smiled and said, “I think it was several things. My marriage has been a real source of stability. Being a mother also brought me
something, maybe a kind of strength. The church has also been a big part of it—finding myself spiritually. Most of all, though, it involved a series of silent retreats I went on—you know, those in which you can only talk with yourself or God. Each retreat lasted 2 or 3 days, and that’s a lot of time to get in deeper touch with yourself.”

I asked her to help me better understand what kind of getting in touch with herself seemed most helpful. She paused and then responded, “Mostly, it had to do with all the contradictions in my life. Hurting those I loved, not using the talents I had, not being really in charge of what was going on in my life—rather than just reacting to whatever situation I found myself in—all those were a part of the conversations I had with me during those silent retreats.”

This woman’s account of how she turned her life around demonstrated her capacity for complex thinking in that she noted multiple factors. It is likely that all factors played roles, but the focus of this essay is on her experience of solitude as one avenue of adult personality maturation. This view is emphasized because it is seldom mentioned in the study of adult development. Healing relationships, the internalization of those we love, and the formation of new self and object representations (internal working models, relationship schemata, and so forth) are believed to be the major pathways of maturation of the self. This seems apparent but should not exclude attempts to understand better those avenues that are not relational. Solitude involving certain types of conversations with oneself, I believe, deserves greater systematic psychological attention than it has been given.

Of course, great works of literature have emphasized the importance of solitude in human affairs. Think of Jesus and his struggle about how to use his power during his 40 days in the wilderness as an example. The attempts to study solitude systematically, however, have been too often flawed by equating solitude with simply being alone, without regard to how the aloneness is experienced. There have, however, been those who have emphasized theoretically a connection between certain forms of solitude and personality maturation. For reasons of the length of this essay, I shall note only several of these contributions.

Winnicott wrote his classic paper 50 years ago and was one of the earliest to emphasize that the capacity to be alone had positive implications for adult functioning. Twenty years later, Storr wrote: “The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one’s deepest needs, feelings, and impulses.”

Buckholz published her classic text on solitude as both a normal need and a pathway for personality growth. She emphasized the nature of the internal dialogue as crucial for both a clearer realization of one’s separateness and reunion with important others. Furthermore, and from an early developmental perspective, solitude is an important component in the emergence of self-regulation.

These 3 psychoanalytic writers are important in their emphasis on the positive aspects of solitude in personality maturation. What needs closer scrutiny, however, is the nature of the internal dialogues during solitude that may be central to that maturational process. In this regard, we are without data, and what follows can best be considered suggestions that will need systematic investigation.

There are a number of types of thinking when alone and not focused on something external to the self, which are probably not related to personality maturation. One is operational thought in which the focus is on concrete problems and how to solve them. Another is recollection, and a third is rehearsal. In none of these types of thinking is there a primary focus on the self or important relationships with others. If operational thinking, recollection, or rehearsal leads to an inner inquiry about self or others, it may usher in a type of internal dialogue that may prompt maturational
Fantasy appears to have a higher probability of leading to a dialogue with oneself that can lead to change. What would seem necessary is the ability to examine the theme of the fantasy in terms of the needs, wishes, fears, or other central cognitive-affective states. From this perspective, it is the examined fantasy that has the potential to be productive.

The type of internal conversation with oneself that appears to have the strongest propensity for inducing maturational changes during solitude is that in which one’s contradictions are examined. “Why did I say something hurtful to one I love so much?” “Why didn’t I tell my friend what I really thought about his remark?” “Why do I often push myself beyond my current level of endurance?”

These and other questions can be the beginning of a dialogue with one’s self about internal contradictions. Levinson has suggested that there are 4 fundamental contradictions: young-old, separate-connected, masculine-feminine, and loving-hurting, but his list is almost certainly not complete. It is the ability to recognize that one’s self is complex and contains such opposites that is a basic developmental challenge of the adult years. Solitude offers a context in which such a challenge may be faced.

Several other issues need to be raised. Facing one’s complexity with its contradictions must alter brain circuitry in order to lead to lasting changes in the self. Contemporary neuroscientific research suggests that repetitions are crucial for synapto-genesis. Thus, internal dialogues focusing on contradictions would have to occur on multiple occasions.

Another issue is that psychological maturation arising from periods of solitude may be similar in some ways to that responsible for growth through relationships. The internalization of those we love may be facilitated by the formation of an intense bond, its rupture, and the repair. Is it possible that growth that may come from the type of solitude described here also involves the experience of a period of deep connection to one’s self (the bond), facing the inevitable contradictions (the rupture), and coming to accept that one is both—and not either/or (the repair)?

It seems clear that we need to better document and understand that periods of solitude in which certain types of mental activity occur may lead to lasting and positive changes in the self. The evidence that such does occur is anecdotal but, I believe, compelling. What is needed are systematic approaches to its study, particularly in longitudinal designs. This would enable us to better understand the multiple factors that determine in whom this maturational change occurs and how it comes about.

References: