

VIBRANT SOLITUDE

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"Remember: the time you feel lonely is the time you most need to be by yourself.
Life's cruelest irony."—Douglas Coupland, *Shampoo Planet*

My past seventeen dental appointments, all for the purpose of filling cavities, have begun in the same way: "You're going to feel a pinch." The bite of the anesthetic is brief. Its acidic flavor assaults my mouth, tasting much like I'd imagine tile cleaner would. I am instructed to open wide, as the dentist's blue latex hands insert the drill. The drill's metal body should feel frigid and foreign against my blood-warmed cheek. I should feel the acute ache as it nips at my sensitive tooth. But it doesn't, and I don't. I am calm. I am numb. My eyelids flutter closed. I allow the worn leather of the chair to gently caress my head, and I succumb to the dull, monotonous whirr of the equipment.

The anesthetic will inevitably fade, and the filling will throb. I predict that, two months from now, it will either fall out or I will find myself with an eighteenth cavity. Dr. Filer will schedule me an eighteenth appointment. I will get yet another decaying hole filled. I will endure the same agony. But I have to wonder if this is really my best option. Should I just continue filling these voids, hoping to temporarily stifle my aches, even if I know that the source of the decay has not truly been eradicated?

Poet and essayist Mark Doty reminds me that we have voids beyond the physical. His essay "Souls on Ice" makes me see that human beings have figurative holes stemming from emotional lacks, holes that create loneliness and emptiness. Doty begins his piece by recalling a mesmerizing display of mackerel that he encountered while shopping in his local Stop 'n Shop. The fish call out to him; "Look at me," they seem to say (1). Doty cannot explain the immediate significance of the fish, but feels pulled in by them, and drives home to explore their symbolic possibilities at his desk. Perhaps it is the silence of his newly empty house that leads him to relate the fish to the recent death of his partner. Like everything he witnessed or wrote at that time, this

poem is "informed by that loss, by the overpowering emotional force of it" (3). Doty was forced to analyze his feelings of bereavement and loneliness to create the piece. Not only did this rumination produce a brilliant poem, "A Display of Mackerel," and essay, "Souls on Ice," but it also allowed Doty to cope with his loss. His poem unveils his notion that "our glory is not in our individuality . . . but our commonness," an idea that Doty doesn't seem to like, but finds "consoling, strangely" (4). He believes that this poem is "an attempt at cheering [him]self up," which is presumably much needed after facing such a great loss (4). Through his emotions, Doty is able to endure the loneliness that he faces after the death of his lover.

Although Doty's essay develops inquiries into individuality, life, and death, its indisputable base is his initial examination of the fish. Doty discerns that anything is capable of being read, of having a deeper meaning, when he senses an extraordinary metaphor lurking beneath the surface of the mundane fish. Doty allowed his "imagination to grope forward, feeling its way toward what it need[ed]," knowing that, eventually, he would be able to comprehend the significance of the fish, even if he didn't at the time (1). The mackerel waited to expose their metaphorical potential, as if they were reading Doty just as Doty was reading them.

In a similar fashion, George Steiner explores the idea of being "read by that which we read" in his essay, "The Uncommon Reader" (193). He proposes the idea of a quintessential, eternal friend: a book. He claims that when a reader becomes captivated by a text, he or she "enters into an answerable reciprocity with the book being read" (193). When entirely engrossed in a novel, it seems as if the book is conversing with us, revealing to us its story. Through this communication with a text, Steiner proposes that we enter "a vibrant silence and solitude" (195). The muted isolation that he describes is the required environment for any type of focused reading. In the same manner as Steiner suggests, Doty finds himself detached from the chaos of the food store when he is focused on "reading" the fish, so much so that he forgot "where [he] was and realized that [he] was standing in someone's way" (1). This would seem to convey that, to be truly focused on reading, you must abandon other senses; you must feel alone, despite being surrounded by others.

Perhaps this is what makes people of my generation perceive reading as a reclusive experience. I'd imagine that in a society where being socially connected is a necessity for most, the solitude that is associated with books could be frightening. The process of reading takes time, but I know people who cannot stand to be alone with themselves for more than a few minutes. I've had to wait outside a door while a friend takes a shower, shouting conversations over the roar of the water and the dense wood. I've spent hours in silence as I watch someone do their homework, because when they look up, they have to see a friendly face. I cannot comprehend what drives this compulsion to have an ever-present companion because I have never experienced this need myself. However, I assume that this inability to be alone would make it difficult to enter the secluded environment of reading a book.

Unfortunately, the apprehension that many of my peers express toward reading robs them of its potential joys. The silence and isolation that are required to read a book might be too stark a contrast to their everyday world of ringtones and boisterous, multi-person conversations; some of them might be ill-suited to the environment that reading demands. But the reward of a book hides in the depths of its hushed, solitary atmosphere. Reading is much like the Evening Primrose, a spectacularly beautiful flower that only blossoms at night. It shies from the commotion and bustle of the day, only revealing its beauty when ensconced in the silence and privacy of the moonlight. Only those willing to lose sleep can discover its loveliness. Reading and the Primrose feel exclusive in this way; you must be alone to allow the magnificence to unfurl. You must be willing to bend to the native environment of the source of the beauty, forgetting how uncomfortable or unusual it may seem to you.

Much to my dismay, it is rare for me to meet people my age who are willing to adapt to the seclusion that a book requires. I cannot seem to find a willing audience to listen to my rambling about the brilliance of the novel that I most recently read. The excitement towards reading that I express is a foreign concept in the eyes of my friends. It seems that they would much rather be surrounded by virtual companions and games than live inside the pages of a book. Because of this, reading has become an isolating experience, mentally and physically—not only during the act, but even after I finish a book.

In many ways, my peers' quest for perpetual friendship has been made easier by the flourishing world of social media. New technology ensures that people are "never lonely, because [their] friends are always reachable," as Eric Schmidt, Google's executive chairman, claims in Evgeny Morozov's article "Only Disconnect" (34). And never being lonely definitely has its appeal: it makes a person feel popular, even loved, albeit superficially. Getting a friend request on Facebook or having a high Snapchat score could surely make someone feel well liked. But the way that people are achieving this companionship, through a filter of plastic and glass, concerns me. It seems like the convenience of all these social networking applications robs people of genuine, in-person relationships. The magic of an online conversation is the unlimited amount of time that we have to craft a witty response that we hope will make its recipient like us better. But, this technological time lapse comes at the cost of truth. In the physical world, you cannot hide behind a computer screen. You cannot pause an in-person conversation to Google "13 flirty things to say while talking with your crush" or "what to do when you feel socially awkward." You have to be able to rely on yourself for the correct, socially acceptable response. Although trusting yourself may be difficult, this vulnerability builds an honest foundation for a friendship. Both parties know who the other person really is because neither has the mediated space to create an alternate persona. In contrast, online, we can effortlessly become whoever we want to be. This brings into question the accuracy of calling these 5,394 people whose Facebook requests that you have accepted "friends." Can you really consider these people companions, or are they virtually strangers?

Having a socially accepted number of "friends" could make or break your social media profile, but, don't be fooled: perfecting your own "wall" to appear attractive to others is not your only concern. It is considered crucial that you stay up to date on everyone else's profiles as well. I know this firsthand. At a ridiculously traumatizing party, I attempted to listen in on a conversation that my friends were having. The sentences were all the same: unfamiliar names intertwined with scandalous events—I couldn't understand a word they were saying. I made the mistake of inquiring who "Sofie Check"—a repeated character in their story—was. Hesitant giggles turned into quizzical expressions as my peers realized that, no, I was not joking. How could I not know the name of the popular, beautiful Sofie Check? Suddenly, I found

myself being led by Michelle, her grip rigid and inescapable as she shouted, "Hannah doesn't know who Sofie Check is!" As everyone laughed, I just stood in the damp grass, utterly confused. How did everyone but me know who this girl was? Why did they care? When I voiced my question, I was merely handed multiple iPhones, each with pictures of the same striking blonde girl encased in the blue and white layout of Facebook, as if this explained her importance. But I still didn't understand. Sure, she was undoubtedly beautiful, but was this cause for such commotion? My friends seemed fascinated by a shiny object for no other reason than its attractiveness. There was no hint of Doty's mackerel experience—of Sofie Check's surface yielding to something deeper lurking beneath it—that I could see. I couldn't uncover something brilliant when I focused less on her skin-deep value. She seemed uninteresting and average to me, and I couldn't comprehend why she and her "wall" were significant to my life in any way.

This constant pressure to be familiar with the lives of strangers seems like a time-consuming, unproductive job. People are so preoccupied with analyzing other people's social networks that I wonder how they could possibly have time to ponder their own emotions or thoughts. And without any reflection on our feelings, is it possible to know who we are? In his essay, Morozov expounds upon this idea. He promotes the importance of solitude, how it allows us understand ourselves and, through this understanding, accept ourselves. Siegfried Kracauer, whom Morozov quotes frequently in his essay, suggests that one "stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa," which was not only "a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly," but would also allow us to become "content to do nothing other than be [ourselves]" (33). Although Doty would admit that isolation is the best setting for personal reflection, he might disagree with the "bliss" that Kracauer associates with emotional contemplation. Doty's exploration of his feelings of bereavement and loneliness was mostly a painful experience, and it was only after analyzing his emotions that he experienced the pleasure that Kracauer describes.

We must also learn to account for our emotional losses and gaps instead of simply filling them in with mindless distractions. Too often, if we detect a "bad" emotion rising, we immediately try to replace it. But by ignoring our feelings and filling our voids, we obliterate what makes us who we are. We

become so consumed by our placeholders that we don't remember to remember ourselves, to consider how we truly feel. And so I question why we feel so determined to fill these holes. These placeholders and fillings are so ephemeral; they can so easily break. Like my cavity fillings, they will fall out. And so I wonder why we can't just bravely endure our feelings. What if we're meant to face our emotions—however horrid and unseemly they may be—instead of seeking distractions? Maybe then we could learn that being alone doesn't automatically translate to being lonely, and that solitude doesn't have to have negative connotations. Perhaps instead, we would be able to see isolation as a blessing, using it as a time where we plumbed the depths of our souls in contemplation and for self-discovery. But more importantly, our isolation could allow us to escape from some of the emotional confinements of our society. Solitude is where our barriers can tumble down—when we don't have to feel ashamed about who we are. When we are alone, we get to experience the purest version of ourselves.

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