

In our solitude: Fenton Johnson discusses 'At the Center of Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life'

by Brian Bromberger
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With shelter-in-place extended till at least May 3, Fenton Johnson's new book on what it means to be solitary, whether chosen or not, befits these days of city and state-imposed isolation. Johnson offers the hope that despite becoming temporary secular hermits we can learn from those artists who saw it as a calling, and that it might serve as a fountain spring for creativity in our lives.

Johnson believes solitude can be learned from the silent disciplines of reading and writing, so stuck at home the virtues of being a solitary can be accessed, not only through spiritual/psychological practices, but also via your nearest book.

For Johnson, his vocation as a solitary began early growing up in the rural Kentucky hills near the Trappist Gethsemani monastery, the home of famed monk/author Thomas Merton. Johnson in his seventh grade Catholic school class was the only one to pick single as his vocation depicting it in a picture with the caption 'Party Time.'

He defines solitaires as "individuals who through a combination of temperament, chance, and choice, of discipline, fate, and free will, chose solitude as their means of giving themselves to others." Johnson claims his married parents were solitaires.

Despite little money they created sacred space where they could each retreat, his father pursuing carpentry and wood sculpture, while his mother tended her greenhouse growing orchids and cactuses. He suggests they were good parents to nine children and provided service to the Trappist community, because they spent quality time alone.

When I emailed Johnson for a definition of solitude, he replied, "Solitude is not loneliness, but the opposite of loneliness. Solitude arises from mindfully cultivating a rich, complex interior life. It goes hand in hand with silence. A solitary practice —meditating, praying, memorizing poetry, studying the natural world, studying other people, studying oneself— provides consolation and stability in difficult situations, especially in a crowd. On a gurney in a hospital emergency room, standing in line amid passengers fighting for seats after a cancelled flight, sitting with a dying friend, or stranger, driving long distances alone, solitude teaches us to value silence."

Johnson believes writers/artists must develop some relationship to solitude, with their final goal not the end product but the process to devise visionary strategies as they traverse their own originaive path.

He excavates the work of Thoreau, Paul Cezanne, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, Eudora Welty, Rabindranath Tagore, Zora Neale Hurston, Rod McKuen, Nina Simone, and Bill Cunningham, for clues on how these role models cultivated the interior life.

It's not surprising that 80% of these 'case studies' are LGBTQ people, with Johnson noting a long history of queer isolation that made solitude their homeland. He grew up thinking he was the only gay person in the world, with reading and writing becoming acts of survival, but claims this suffering solitude prepared him in realizing the importance of friendship and love.

He found refuge in San Francisco, a home for 'bent' solitaires who comforted and supported each other in their solitude. For Johnson solitude teaches LGBTQ people to say to themselves, "I'm happy being quiet with you," and from this foundation of self-respect, one can learn to love others.

Drawing evidence from the profiled lives in his book, solitaires serve the larger community, a caring for the world, by dissolving the self into the work at hand so their subject's essence can gleam. The artist/writer doesn't impose harmony on reality but uncovers the harmony always there, hidden by societal status quo and fears about the consequences of truths unearthed, such as Whitman and Dickinson transcending gender duality.

Such honesty can cause solitaires to blunt intolerance for social niceties in their search to take risks, be vulnerable, and resist the way things have always been done. They aspire to reveal the human condition by showing how fear of solitude is an illusion preventing us from seeing we are all in this boat together, we are all one, an insight the Coronavirus pandemic has disclosed from a different vantage point. In solitude we discover there is no separation between self and other, only an unending becoming.

The book is a fluid pastiche of memoir, social critique, literary criticism, mystical insights, and philosophical reflections with certain figures, depending on one's propensities and interests, more enticing than others, though the chapters on Cezanne, Tagore, Simone, and Cunningham seemed particularly insightful.

The writing is poetic yet accessibly profound. When I asked Johnson, what relevance his book might have during COVID-19, he responded, "I'm uneasy with those who say, 'Shelter-in-place is an opportunity to enjoy your solitude!' Instead, it's an opportunity to begin a constructive encounter with solitude. Solitude is tough. Be kind to yourself. Don't underestimate the challenge. Demons are real, and they live in our hearts. In your silence and solitude, they will appear. They have no choice. Once they show their faces, you see

how puny they are, and you have the pleasure of slaying them, using their bones to construct an architecture of self-respect. That takes time. No better moment to begin than this moment."

As involuntary solitaries, we can be grateful Johnson has given us a roadmap and exemplars on our compulsory journeys to solitude providing inspiration to persevere, perhaps mature, notwithstanding the difficult struggles ahead.

At the Center of Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life by Fenton Johnson. W.W. Norton & Company, \$26.95.