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## At the Center of All Beauty

"The secret to contentment is low overhead." —Fenton Johnson



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Photo: Pedro Robredo — Personal files of Fenton Johnson

Award-winning writer Fenton Johnson explains that this advice in his new book, *At the Center of All Beauty, Solitude and the Creative Life*, is a variation on Marianne Moore's version, "The cure for loneliness is solitude." His book is balm, validation, even celebration of all "solitaries," his description for those of us who, like him, actively

cherish and thrive in solitude. We solitaries draw our creative and artistic juices from within ourselves, from the boundless field of empty space with which we love to surround ourselves, an open corral in which to let our muses romp and run wild, unfettered, uninfluenced by external stimuli or others.

Not to be confused with only recluses or hermits, we solitaries love and delight in our own company *and* we are often avid social beings. I was reminded of the results of my Meyers-Briggs test (taken in the '80s before it was dumbed down to psychobabble). I was mildly surprised to place on the spectrum toward introversion, believing myself outgoing and friendly. But the moderator explained that what this metric meant was that I felt drained after some time among people. I needed to recharge my mental and physical energies all by my lonesome. I realized how true that had been all my life. As often as I indulge in my social communities, my many urban tribes, my intimate friendship circles, I need to retreat to the silence of my own little nest.

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*“Silence and solitude set the imagination free to roam, which may be why capitalism devotes itself so assiduously to creating crowds and noise.”*

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Johnson fans will already know what he reveals early on, that he enjoyed the love of his life, a man who died of AIDS in Paris years ago. Since then, Johnson has cherished his rich literary life and as a writing professor been gratified to nurture aspiring writers and to be an icon for the worldwide writing community.



Fenton Johnson

*At the Center of All Beauty* encompasses an engaging weaving of Johnson's own life as a life-long solitude-lover with the lives of nearly a dozen artists in various disciplines, including Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Paul Cézanne, Walt Whitman, Eudora Welty, Nina Simone, Zora Neale Hurston, Rod McKuen, Rabindranath Tagore, and Bill Cunningham. Johnson illuminates the cultural prejudice toward loners and the societal pressure, sometimes counterproductive, to engage in coupling. Note that some of his subjects — Cézanne, Simone, Hurston, Tagore — did couple in marriage, yet still fit the profile of *solitary*, each fiercely protective of her/his interior space. Of Whitman and Cézanne, Johnson writes, "Each preferred the world of their vast and fertile imagination over the confining world of fact."

Describing what his subjects have in common, Johnson, a Zen Buddhist devotee, says, "each lost the self to find the self," referring to Thoreau in the woods, Cézanne to his painting, Welty in her art, Tagore in his music and poetry, Simone in her music.

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*"Perhaps . . . what defines my solitaries — a reluctance to sacrifice openness to all for openness to one."*

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While his book is a torch-bearer for solitaries, it is not a diatribe against coupling/marriage. It merely shines a bright light on the prevalent blind faith in those cultural assumptions, "the avalanche of messages telling us that marriage is our most noble means of self-sacrifice." Like his subjects, he says, many solitaries "sacrifice ourselves . . . not for our individual wealth but for the common wealth." Dickinson, for example, had an offer of marriage that she turned down, one can argue to humanity's benefit, given the body of lofty work she left us. She demonstrates, as Johnson proposes, that "solitude, not marriage, is the more selfless choice."

What I personally loved about *At the Center of All Beauty* was learning more about the author. Wikipedia describes Johnson as the last of nine children in a whiskey-making family. (I wrote him to say I am the fifth of ten in a pasta-making family.) Like me, Johnson was raised in a Roman Catholic family, in his case right next to the Trappist Monastery Gethsemani in Kentucky. I envy his having known Thomas Merton, the Catholic convert whose writings on mysticism are still influential. Johnson acquaints us with his blood family, the rural setting of his youth, the southern foods at their table, much of which they cultivated. He gives us the sense that his parents, notwithstanding a

large brood, had solitary lives, as well as an open-door policy, including lots of social activity with the neighborly monks.

In his defense of solitaires, Johnson delves skillfully into the hidden subtext of our notions of love being fused to coupling. Commenting on the lifelong bond between Cézanne and the writer Émile Zola, he writes, “That such ecstatic friendship has fallen from our lives and art is due in part to our obsession with labels (gay, straight, married, single), and partly due to our elevation of church-designed, government-sanctioned marriage as the apogee of human relationship. Somewhere, in part in service to capitalism, the notion took hold that to be worthy of celebration, love must be certified by government or church edict, when my experience has that love does not submit itself to logic or reason, calendar or clock — that one may love differently perhaps, but as intensely in a moment as across a lifetime.”

As Johnson trains our eye on the artist’s work one hears his religious breeding: “In Cézanne’s painting the sacred becomes flesh and dwells among us.” We hear his mystical vision as he notes how solitaires are some of the most agile at transcending the artifice of time: “Long before quantum physics, Cézanne understood that all moments are present to this moment.”

Perhaps only the bona fide solitary can know the opiate-high of the zone, the flow, the gratifying choice of *aloneness*, where time is irrelevant or as Johnson quotes Albert Einstein: “This distinction between past, present, and future is an illusion, however tenacious.” He writes, “Only the marathon runner, high on endorphins, or the heroin addict, or the besotted lover in the presence of the beloved . . . can understand . . . what it means to live outside time — to live, in fact, not in the past or future but in the mystic eternal now.”

Tipping the balance of prejudice toward pro-friendship is crucial, Johnson says, because “. . . the very survival of the species depends on our transcending ties based on blood and marriage . . . the ties of blood which perpetuate and reinforce conflict — recognizing instead the bonds of love, with friendship, not marriage, as the tie that binds.”

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*“. . . to understand only biological offspring as our children is to shortchange the great human impulse toward magnanimity, toward altruism.”*

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Revealing that he practices “celibacy not as negation . . . but as joyous turning inward,” Johnson gives us a pearl to that end from famous solitary Dickinson who poeticized herself as an “Inebriate of air, debauchee of dew.” Johnson lyrically describes the Belle of Amherst as the “most promiscuous of celibates.”

In these times of enforced solitude, what better book to shelter in place with, than this one, which squarely places you *At the Center of All Beauty*.

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