Better Off Alone
A writer examines seclusion as a way of life.

By KATHRYN HUGHES

When the writer Fenton Johnson was in the seventh grade in 1960s Kentucky, the class was asked to draw posters illustrating some aspect of Roman Catholic catechism. Johnson chose “Three Roads to Heaven,” representing the three church-designated paths from which a good pilgrim must make an adult choice. The first road led to the religious life — a calling to be either priest or nun. The second ended in the self-explanatory “Marriage,” with procreation tacitly assumed to be part of the deal. The third possible vocation, per-

haps surprisingly, was to stay “Single.” As far as the Roman Catholic God of postwar rural America was concerned, choosing to live on your own while remaining at large in the community was an entirely estimable thing to do. Yet when the room of 12-year-olds was asked in a follow-up session which path they would choose, only young Johnson responded “Single.”

This is hardly surprising, either then or now. Johnson, who in “At the Center of All Beauty” reveals that he has remained largely uncoupled in his adult life, is exquisitely alive to the bad chatter that “solitaries” — his term for those who are solo by choice — attract. In many parts of the globe, being a single adult is seen as temporary at best, a transitory phase through which you progress on your way to the social goal of heterosexual coupledom. To marry as a “bachelor” or “spinner” past the age of 35 is to enter a doubtful, dreary no man’s land. The fear is that you will be stuck there forever, eventually attracting that pitiable label “not the marrying kind,” which contains within itself the ghost of another, crueler designation: “unmarriageable.”

In this lyrical yet finely argued book, Johnson sets out to show that being alone — so different from loneliness, its direct opposite, in fact — is absolutely essential to the creative life. Taking a dozener or so historical examples, from Emily Dickinson in Amherst to Bill Cunningham in New York via Paul Cézanne in Provence, Johnson reveals how artists have always removed themselves from the noise and clutter of enforced sociability in order to live closer to the sources of their inspiration. Dickinson turned down an offer of marriage late in life, while Cunningham, the society photographer, insisted on living on as little money as possible so that his employers, which included The New York Times,

How to live fully and usefully, without the ‘social fiction’ of coupled togetherness.