

BOOKSHELF

## Two Books on Solitude: They Want to Be Alone

We seem either to mock or idolize solitaries, perhaps because perceiving them as ordinary might require us to question the cocoon of noise with which we surround ourselves.



PHOTO: STEVE MCCURRY/MAGNUM PHOTOS

*By Geoff Wisner*

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In the United States, the home of rugged individualism, more than 28% of households consist of a single person. Yet solitude continues to have a poor reputation.

Two thoughtful new books set out to change that. “The Art of Solitude,” by Stephen Batchelor, a scholar of Buddhism, takes an inward view of the subject, chronicling the author’s lifetime of meditation practice, solitary retreats and experiments with mind-altering substances. “At the Center of All Beauty,” by the Catholic author and scholar Fenton Johnson, takes a more expansive approach, offering capsule biographies of a dozen or so writers, artists and performers who drew on solitude in different ways to power their creative expression.

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## THE ART OF SOLITUDE

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By Stephen Batchelor

*Yale, 181 pages, \$23*

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## AT THE CENTER OF ALL BEAUTY

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By Fenton Johnson

*Norton, 236 pages, \$26.95*

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Elegant and formally ingenious, “The Art of Solitude” presents 32 essays on aspects of solitude. Some describe Mr. Batchelor’s experience of meditation in places as far-flung as India, South Korea and Mexico. A few are about his engagement with Michel de Montaigne, the 16th-century pioneer of the personal essay and sometime recluse. Some recount the insights drawn from his use of body-racking, vision-inducing drugs such as mescaline and ayahuasca.

The essays echo and comment on one another, and they also echo the book’s appendix, Mr. Batchelor’s translation from the Pali language of a sequence of poems that he calls “Four Eights.” Mr. Batchelor cites an earlier translator’s opinion that these four poems, each 32 lines long, make up the core of the 2,400-year-old Buddhist text “Sutta Nipāta” and “might be the earliest record of the Buddha’s teaching.”



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The book as a whole resists falling into a narrative or argument. “None of its thirty-two chapters,” writes Mr. Batchelor, “is ever preceded or followed by a chapter that treats the same theme.” To build a case for the value of solitude would, the author seems to feel, be declass  .

Finishing “The Art of Solitude,” it’s easy to feel that one must have a Ph.D. in ancient languages, a strong stomach and the money and leisure to seek out stone towers in distant lands if one wants to be properly solitary. And even then, the results may not be worth the effort.

“Over the years,” writes Mr. Batchelor, “I must have spent many thousands of hours seated on a meditation cushion, but I still get distracted, listless, and bored. . . . There can be long periods when I do not meditate formally at all. Often I feel like a dilettante.”

If this is discouraging, it might help to turn to “At the Center of All Beauty,” a more flexible and forgiving approach to the subject of solitude. Rather than suggesting that the benefits of solitude come only with suffering and deep study, this book serves up encouragement to the would-be solitary and offers examples of the many ways solitude can structure our lives.

As a seventh-grade student in a Catholic school in Kentucky, Fenton Johnson was asked to draw a picture of something from the catechism. The result was “Three Roads to Heaven,” in which three paths diverge toward the Religious Life, Marriage, and “a cloud labeled SINGLE, which our catechism offered as a legitimate calling, officially on a par with the other two options.”

If Catholic teaching suggested that being alone was OK, a real-life example came from the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani, where Trappist monks lived and worked in silence, and Thomas Merton wrote his acclaimed memoir “The Seven Storey Mountain” and many other books. Mr. Johnson decided early that he was “not the marrying kind,” a decision only partly determined by the fact that he was gay.



Mr. Johnson maintains that solitude is particularly important to the creators among us. He makes his case by sketching the lives of a select company of artistic solitaires, beginning with Henry David Thoreau, the famous hermit of Walden Pond.

Just kidding. Thoreau was no hermit, as Mr. Johnson well understands. “The notion of Thoreau as a hermit,” he writes, “is so far from the facts that what’s curious is why it developed in the first place, since *Walden* is replete with anecdotes of chatty visits from townspeople and travelers.” Thoreau surely valued the time he spent by himself. He

wrote, “I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” But it was not the only time he valued.

“I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there,” he wrote after his two years, two months and two days in the little house he built himself. “Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more time for that one.”

Mr. Johnson sheds some light on why Thoreau has taken so much flak from critics for failing to be the self-sufficient hermit that he never said he was. “The reasons for that discrediting, I argue, arise from our need to savage solitaries who so emphatically and cheerfully break social norms, because they show how easily it may be done . . . We seem either to mock (Thoreau) or idolize (Thomas Merton) those who seek and enjoy solitude, perhaps because perceiving them as ordinary folks might require us to question the cocoon of noise and artificial light with which we surround ourselves and that constitutes contemporary life.”

Though Mr. Batchelor is steeped in the Buddhist tradition and Mr. Johnson in the Catholic Church, there is considerable crossover in their thinking about solitude. Mr. Batchelor is a great admirer of Montaigne, who sought to build a bridge between Catholics and Protestants only to have his volumes of essays placed on the Index of Prohibited Books for nearly 300 years. Mr. Johnson has less to say about Buddhism than Mr. Batchelor says about Catholicism, but he does note that “the Buddha and Jesus sacrificed their comfortable and secure lives to cultivate solitude, leaving their homes and taking to the road.” And yet he warns that “as the Buddha and Hebrew biblical prophets point out repeatedly, idols are an avoidance mechanism, a place where we can park and abandon our dreams instead of accepting our responsibility to live them out.”

Both Mr. Batchelor and Mr. Johnson believe in the value of solitude for the creative life. Indeed, that is the main subject of Mr. Johnson’s book, in which we learn how people as different as the painter Paul Cézanne, the novelist Zora Neale Hurston, the singer Nina Simone and the street photographer Bill Cunningham built cells of solitude within their lives and drew out different kinds of treasure. But Mr. Batchelor, for his part, also traces the roots of artistic achievement to solitude. In John Keats’s sonnet “O Solitude!,” the poet seeks out hills “where the deer’s swift leap / Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell.” Though Keats was no Buddhist, Mr. Batchelor sees an echo of nirvana in the concept of “negative capability,” in which one “is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”



Drugs and sexuality are two areas where these authors have less in common. There is nothing in Mr. Johnson's book to set beside Mr. Batchelor's descriptions of taking ayahuasca in Andalusia: "My mind is invaded by spiraling patterns of color. I vomit diminishing amounts of a bitter liquid, my body repeatedly convulsing, sweat dripping off my face, my nostrils filled with the vegetal stench of the medicine, until I pass out."

Similarly, there is nothing in Mr. Batchelor's book to set beside Mr. Johnson's thoughtful exploration of how discovering that one is "not the marrying kind"—whether that means being gay or not—can be the path to the sort of career that Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Henry James or Eudora Welty enjoyed.

Both these books are essentially pro-solitude, perhaps in reaction to the anti-solitude prejudices of Western culture. But both authors would surely recognize that too much solitude, like too much of anything, can be just too much. As the solitary short-story writer E.I. Lonoff remarks about Nathan Zuckerman in Philip Roth's "The Ghost Writer" (perhaps remembering his Keats), "I was only suggesting—surmising is more like it—that an unruly personal life will probably better serve a writer like Nathan than walking in the woods and startling the deer."

—*Mr. Wisner is the author of "A Basket of Leaves" and the editor of "African Lives," "Thoreau's Wildflowers" and "Thoreau's Animals."*

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