



Loneliness and Aloneness— Alone Again (Naturally): A Personal View

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Abstract		Original Research Article
<p>This study is a personal view onto loneliness and aloneness, two conceptions that are viewed in ways both congenial and conflicting. We normally think of loneliness in a negative light, it being just what we expect: Feelings of estrangement, detachment from people and society, often combined with sadness at being left out by others. Aloneness may approach feelings like these, but can also be simply that: Being alone, which many people quite like and find can be very productive. Yes, the two impressions often combine into one another, and when we are lonely we are also usually alone, and often when we are alone, even if we find it to be a fairly comfortable space, we may be in some senses lonely.</p> <p>Keywords: Loneliness, Aloneness, COVID-19, Solitude, Psychology, Absence, Youth</p>		

As noted in the title of this work, this study is a personal view onto loneliness and aloneness, two conceptions that are viewed in ways both congenial and conflicting. Although I am reasonably competent in various theories and approaches in psychology and related disciplines (I will to the extent possible draw on my own skills in these areas), I will not compose this as an “academic study.”¹ I will try to refer to certain experts at times, but want to return to that which is personal in my view. After all, these subjects are deeply personal lived experience, and even academic work that has been done on them has depended on these personal views and understanding.

These two apprehensions are closely related, but also very different. We normally think of loneliness in a negative light, it being just what we expect: Feelings of alienation, disconnection from people and society, and associated sadness at being left out by others. Aloneness may branch into feelings like these, but can also be simply that: Being alone, which many people quite like and find can be very prolific (the very idea of “solitude” has been looked on favorably by many observers). Yes, the two impressions frequently blend into one another, and when we are lonely we are also usually alone, and often when we are alone, even if we find it to be a reasonably comfortable space, we may be in some respects lonely. In some senses, the words to Gilbert O’Sullivan’s famed song, “Alone Again, (Naturally)” bring this disparity into focus, indicating the shattered feelings of loneliness, combined with a visit to a location in which you can simply be alone:

I promised myself to treat myself
And visit a nearby tower
And climbing to the top
Will throw myself off

¹ I have found that most writing (often journalism, which may refer to experts as in the following), simply restates the obvious in terms of these two conceptions. Writing in *Lifehacker.com*, bioethicist and adjunct professor of ethics at Fordham University Elizabeth Yuko states “Dr. Eglantine Julle-Daniere notes in *Psychology Today* that being alone is “the physical state of not being with another individual, might it be human or animal,” while loneliness is a “psychological state characterized by a distressing experience occurring when one’s social relationships are (self-)perceived to be less in quantity and quality than desired.” This hits the nail on the head, but is not particularly revealing.

In an effort to make it clear to whoever
What it's like when you're shattered²

We might pause here and take note that with the COVID-19 pandemic, people all around the world have been forced to very much “be alone” (in quarantine, and also simply in terms of distancing oneself from others), and that this physical distancing has led to loneliness (the simple idea of “social distancing” is a separation, and may lead to feelings of aloneness and loneliness). This has been a new take on these ideas in our world, and I suppose I have felt some traces of these interacting feelings in my own experience. I myself contracted the disease, along with my two family members, and we were shut inside our apartment for three full weeks, based on Taiwan government requirements. As well, we have limited ourselves in other ways, by not seeing or socially interacting with others much at all; even when a food delivery person came to our door with dinner, they dropped the food off and would not even ring the bell (that is true to this day). Ultimately, with behavior like this and the whole social distancing ethic, I have felt myself feeling a bit of loneliness during the pandemic (much relieved now, but still present at times). My mother in fact did indeed contract the virus, and was forced into home quarantine for weeks (fortunately her case was not serious and her health and life were not threatened). She told me that it has indeed created feelings of loneliness and aloneness with her, and the way she handles it is to “get through every day” one by one.

The epidemic has struck children particularly hard, it is said, and their removal from the social and learning space of schools has struck a raw nerve. Distant classrooms may have become more of a norm in recent years, but at this level it has not been welcome, and the concern is acute for youth psychology. We hope this will be properly addressed as soon as possible.

Loneliness, it is said, is a lack, a need, an absence that is often accompanied by depression. When Pragito Dove writes in *HUFFPOST* that aloneness “is presence, fullness, aliveness, joy of being, overflowing love” I must say, I disagree. Aloneness is for the most part a *lack* of presence and fullness, and the life and joy we feel there have hints of gloom, even when they are being exercised in positive ways. And as for love, though there may be a measure of self-love occurring when we are experiencing aloneness, I don’t think it quite reaches a point of “overflowing.” Dove adds positive points in that aloneness may lend itself to feelings of completeness, and “the freedom to be utterly yourself,” which are helpful, but this idea is yet more than that. I have found myself in both of these places in fairly specific ways. My loneliness traces back to my youth, within what was a long stretch of essential depression for me, with one cause of that depression being loneliness: Feelings of alienation, being left out, disconnected from others, often not much “liked” by other people. This has in some respects extended into my adulthood, though adults often find it hard to really be lonely, because we are often engaged with others in work and other activities in very vigorous ways (this is not to say that some people do not even experience this much, in cases of clinical depression when the removal from emotion and contact with others is nearly complete). I do feel such generalized connection with others, primarily in my work, but the loneliness/depression that I have felt has extended to some extent later into my life. I have thus been treated by a psychiatrist for depression (a relatively minor variant), and taken anti-depressive medication. To be frank, when I have talked to my psycho-analyst I don’t think I went into “loneliness” as the source of my difficulties all that often—this in part true because as an adult I don’t have that much opportunity to be “lonely” all the time, and also because loneliness proper was not truly the source of my low feelings (they were more a variety of generalized anxiety). Nevertheless, I could say that there is a touch of loneliness in my life, and in fact even more than a touch. Often when I am alone (my *aloneness*, which takes up quite a lot of my time), I do feel a trace of loneliness, even if I am busying myself with certain activities that do take up my aloneness and provide me fairly constructive outlets (studying and reading primarily, but also quite a bit of time remembering certain activities in my life that have had a great impact on me; more on this below).

I should dive further into my main approaches to these ideas right now. I’ll start with “aloneness,” which as noted takes up quite a lot of time in my life—I spend a lot of time alone. My life has led in this direction in spite of the fact that I have a family with a young daughter (which no doubt prevents you from being alone a lot of the time). My aloneness takes place when I leave the house almost every afternoon (usually as my daughter begins to take her nap), and I travel into the park near our home, a cup of iced coffee in hand, in order to study Chinese. Chinese study has taken up a great deal of my time for many years (though I have to admit I am still a lot less than fluent in the language), and I suppose anyone would agree that when you are studying, you are indeed alone (most of the time). As for my Chinese study this has always been true; I have only occasionally engaged with others, interacted with tutors, etc. when I study the language. So, alone I am in the park, and if “aloneness” is defined as a disposition (and often preference) for being alone, solitary, being without friends and others nearby, reclusive—and yes at times a bit lonely—then, that is the way I am in the park.

Writing in *Psychology Today* on April 16, 2020, Eglantine Julle-Daniere stated that “We can all agree that it is not a fun thing to do, to self-isolate. Humans are a very social species: all our lives are built around a certain amount of social interactions and physical proximity.” I suppose I differ here, and although humans may be fairly social, in fact many of us (especially me) prefer *not* to socially

² *Alone Again (Naturally)* 1972, Gilbert O’Sullivan.

interact all the time, that is, we simply like being alone. It seems to be in our blood, we like the distance, the feeling of being all by ourselves, depending on and needing few if any others. As well, there is very much the possibility that certain people will in any case *still feel lonely* even when they are in the midst of a big group of people—and as well others who simply feel “alone in the crowd.”

To return to my time in the park, on the whole I have found this to be a very pleasurable experience. This takes place beneath a very large Banyan tree that provides exquisite shade in the summer, and is generally comfortable year-round. Sometimes my interludes are interrupted by the arrival of many people at this favorite location, which makes it a lot less “lonely,” and no longer allowing for “aloneness.” About that time, I leave, and make my way to second place of aloneness, which I will describe below.

What I experience in the park is just what you would expect: Pleasurable hours spent alone with my nose in a book, studying for an hour or more, and then reading a favorite book for an hour or more. This is aloneness that anyone would enjoy, and so I do. The hours spent under “my tree” have afforded me some of the best times alone I could ever ask for. And there is something else going on while I am there as well (and here I will relate the memories referred to above): In my interior thoughts, I often cast my mind back to three and four years ago when I walked with young daughter at exactly this location. For the first year she was in the stroller or I carried her in a shoulder sack, and although I chatted with her as we walked, it was even then somewhat an “alone” experience with a girl who could not speak or understand me. But they were wonderful hours, the very best of my life, and I love remembering every moment. This could make one think about the function of memory, one’s interior dialog and reminiscence, and how this too is an enjoyable place to spend time alone, with nobody else. Although I find myself in some senses doing this all the time in my life, my memories any more pretty much center entirely on the time I spent on the walks with Ariadne. And there was more. After a year in the stroller, Ari began to walk, and from that time (although she still rode in a stroller a good bit), we spent our time walking around together. The conversation became a lot livelier during this time, and the memories are every bit as precious to me. And yes, we spent much time under the tree and to this day I can see her carrying rocks to set on one bench, scampering around in the complex exposed roots of the tree, playing occasionally with another child nearby, and staring in wonder down into a drain, and tossing bits of sticks and grass there. So, even today, these thoughts appear in my mind, and make my time alone under the tree that much better. Again, we might ask: When I remember this way, am I alone at all? Or am I in fact with another person (only one), my daughter? I don’t know the answer to this question, but my feelings are that I am indeed alone again, naturally.

So, taken all together, I very much treasure my time alone under the Banyan tree, spending time with myself, doing things I enjoy. And yes, as noted, I am in some senses “lonely” when I do this, in fact sometimes I feel rather strong feelings of such isolation. Studying and reading alone can feel like I am checking out of life in general, and to be sure it is time when I am *not* interacting with others, much less enjoying their company. That is a reality of the alone times we spend in life—they are to some extent infused with *loneliness*. Though they offer much satisfaction, and a real sense of empowerment at the highest level, they do come with a sense of veritable alienation. One can feel almost bored when one has sat there with one’s nose in a book for two and three hours, and part of this is the feeling that you have departed from the world at large. The two feelings go together, like hand in glove. To this idea I will return.

To continue, after my reading and studying under the tree, I often move to another secluded, remote location. At this time, I make my way up to our rooftop, a very comfortable location that has a large roof built above it to prevent rain from intruding (this helps when the bad weather drives me out of the park). Up on the roof, other people rarely come, and I can sit there for two and three hours all alone. Often, I do exactly what I did in the park— read and study. And believe it or not, I again have memories of Ariadne up here. Almost every evening I walked with Ari in a shoulder sack on the roof, for about ten months from only two months of age. I often found that she liked the muted traffic noise from far below, and in general she slept the whole time that we walked from 8:30 to 9:30 (and yes, again her silence made it yet more alone, and to some extent lonely). I walked quietly the whole time, and loved every moment. Thus, in addition to reading and studying, I again return to memories of Ari when I am alone on the roof. But there is another feeling and behavior on the roof that might seem a bit odd. This is simply that I walk about on the roof, sometimes ensconced in memories of Ari, but at other times simply “killing time,” and not actually doing anything at all. Of course, when I do this I have abandoned my reading and studies. It’s an unusual feeling, a feeling of true aloneness, solitude and seclusion, without any sort of activity to fill my time at all. Nevertheless, I enjoy this about as much as all my other feelings when I am in my periods of aloneness. It’s a sort of reaching into myself and touching a vacant experience. Odd you might say, but I think even this is a factor in “aloneness” as we spend it—alone.

Yes, loneliness can intrude during these times, but one comes to expect that, and the loneliness that one feels does not feel terribly threatening. It’s just an understanding of the reality that, yes, at this time I have distanced myself from others, “checked out,” and don’t really expect any camaraderie or companionship anyway. It all just goes with the flow, and there is a slight feel of approbation and allowance even in this. It borders on a sort of self-approval, when one recognizes one is not surrounding oneself with others (even close, intimate people), and one is happy to just be doing that—being by oneself. This can a feeling of strength (it’s not “empowerment” at this point), and it is very much a part of this sort of aloneness.

And so, these are my two “alone times” that I spend most every day of the week. I retreat from them and reenter my family world, and to the extent possible any other relations I have. I do not “check out” permanently. I am on the whole a fairly introverted person, and not given to extensive social interactions at all. I have few friends, and am not connected to many other people outside of the two people in my immediate family. In this sense, I am a “lonely” person, which is an issue I have had to address. But all of my loneliness, whatever problems or disadvantages it may present, do not prevent me from enjoying my alone time. This is probably not very different from many other people, who also like to have some time alone, whatever sorts of loneliness may go along with it—and in fact for many people that is the time they like most of all. Loners we are, in our ways. But not “lonely” in any dangerous or threatening sense.

And so, this is my experience in terms of these two areas of experience. Personal, yes, but I think it may offer some insight into what others are also experiencing. Loneliness and aloneness, like hand in glove, they march along together without necessarily presenting any threat or undue discomfort. This may be an idealistic view, but is one I suspect that many people also feel. Thank you for listening.

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