

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE IN THE ROOM OF THE SOUL

Translation by Achille Cattaneo / Gordon Leonard Symons

For most people, loneliness seems to be a painful and even terrifying experience from which they try to protect themselves at all costs. For Sullivan, a researcher on the phenomenon of “loneliness” in the ‘50s, loneliness is the only one of all human experiences that stands out for the inadequacy of what is said when trying to describe it.

Avoiding being alone, especially feeling alone, leads people to eliminate empty times, seeking new commitments and contacts, becoming for many a compulsive need in order to escape the confrontation with the void. But loneliness is above all the need for an internal space, sheltered from invasiveness, an intimate place where it is possible to keep environmental stresses at a distance and take care of oneself, following one’s own deeper voice.

Roberto Assagioli in the early ‘70s gave a lecture on loneliness, suggesting as a solution to suffering the establishment of fruitful relationships interwoven with communication and understanding.

A few years later, in 1981, one of his most significant students, Caldironi, psychotherapist and neuropsychiatrist, gave a very acute and accurate lecture entitled “Depression and Psychosynthesis” that I recommend everyone to read.

Let us listen to what Assagioli writes about silence at the end of his *Decalogue of Wisdom*: “Always remember that silence is necessary for the best success of what you undertake and that the most powerful forces and wills work in silence. Your individual existence will find itself well oriented with a steady hand on its course towards the port of good and a path of unlimited progress will open in front of you.”

Unfortunately, for man of today, silence requires courage and often one prefers not to think, or even to be stupefied, in order not to be alone with oneself.

Silence and solitude are, in a certain sense, the bed of the river where thoughts flow. And if language is essential to man, it can be said that silence is essential to language.

It is also true that it is noise that lives today inside and outside of us. Unfortunately, we prefer to live superficially, without thinking, without listening, without reflecting, without meditating in ourselves.

The exploration of a garden and its secrets, for example, is accepted only if it becomes a collective, didactic experience, with guide and timetables ... We are, that is, *immersed in an extroverted culture model, turned outwards, towards activities.*

Silence, unscheduled looking around, have become taboo, sometimes they are also considered symptoms of discomfort.

But concentration arises precisely from non-activity, as knew well the Latins knew well, and who considered **Otium** to be the time of profound discoveries and **Negotium** that of exchange.

The continuous development of extroversion and organized behaviors marginalize introversion and spontaneity and make that part of the psyche linked to activity and socialization grow and shrink the one oriented to listening and research.

How can our children grow up, if they are never left alone, in silence, perhaps in the presence of their mother as Winnicott would suggest, immersed in that precious boredom, from which all reflection is born?

Being silent helps to escape the external noise and the internal turmoil, allowing us to pass from the exterior to the interior.

The Assagiolian triad *know, accept, transform yourself*, is moving away from us, since our growth can only take place through acts of listening in the most intimate recollection.

Man, in fact, having reached a certain point in his evolution, naturally tends towards internalization, that is, he feels the need to come into contact with higher and superconscious dimensions of himself, aspiring to the world of intuition, of internal hearing, of lighting, of the stimulus to action.

It is then that the journey into our interiority coincides with the immersion in the experience of solitude, a place of silence, where our best parts can emerge, where

we feel the presence of the Self, where we process experiences and metabolize stimuli coming from the outside world.

It is the inner resonances that allow us to know ourselves, to reflect, to be creative.

E.F. Nietzsche, the philosopher-poet, for his part, invites us:

*My friend, escape into your solitude.
There, where loneliness ends, the market begins.*

Loneliness, therefore, is a spontaneous evolutionary need that aims to overcome the obstacles of excessive extraversion, excessive rationalization, excessive activism to aspire to the world of internal hearing. And we cannot do without the interior resonances which are so important for a dialogue with ourselves, which is often precluded from us due to an overestimation of our social being. Loneliness that allows us to understand ourselves, reflect, create.

An interesting note by an artist of the last century, Berberova: *If a man does not enjoy or is deprived of this right to a life that belongs only to us, one day he will discover that in life he has never met himself.*

Not being able to tolerate loneliness and obsessively feeling the lack of those who love us is synonymous with primary *deficiency*, caused by an imprint of *distrust* for a not very reassuring relationship with the *mother*.

What does all this mean?

The child learns to accept loneliness through the various stages of growth ranging from feeling the absence of the Mother, the object of love, to the ability to keep her memory, feeling pain for the absence and nourishing the hope that she will return. Of course, a good adaptation of the mother to the needs of the child generates **Trust** which is the basis on which the ability to relate and the acceptance of solitude, fundamental for every human being, is established.

Throughout childhood, attachment to parents is essential for the child's survival and researches suggest that the child, already at 18 months, gains benefits from the companionship of contemporaries.

However, the structuring of the ability to tolerate the absence of the mother will last until adolescence. It is interesting to note how in the child the ability to accept loneliness goes hand in hand with the ability to feel pain due to the absence of the love object, the mother, to remember it and to cherish the hope that it will return, a hope that has something of the sacred.

Only if a *positive internal presence of the mother* has been formed and a strong trust that has been nourished, only then, will the child be able to afford to cultivate a creative solitude not populated by maternal requests.

Let us not forget that man is a relational being ... and that our integration process unfolds over the entire span of life and that takes place following the development modalities of each of us. Existence, then, becomes a place / space to be torn from the darkness of unawareness, with a continuous search that keeps us safe from prolonged transaction with others, an area of secrecy and non-communication.

There are those who argue that our whole relationship life tends to a union and that this union turns into tenderness and sexual love when the protagonists are a man and a woman.

There is, it seems, the *unconscious aspiration to restore the original symbiotic state* experienced by the child in the womb and immediately afterwards the *fusional* condition, a sort of paradisiacal situation, in which satisfaction immediately follows the need.

It is therefore a question of *nostalgia moved to the future*, rather than a realistic goal. But, the more our human desire for fullness becomes concrete in an external object, the less it manages to satisfy us as we unconsciously feed of a ghost, that of symbiotic unity.

And, then, we can affirm that the desire that unconsciously pushes us to reproduce the *primal fusion* is nothing more than a sterile repetition of what we call - after Freud - the compulsion to repeat.

Modern scholars have assumed, as a criterion for evaluating the affect maturity, the ability to be alone besides that to establish deep bonds based on effective equality.

It was D. Winnicott, the scholar of loneliness, who in 1958 published an essay entitled "Capacity to be alone"

on the positive aspects of the ability to be alone.

From the baby's early attachment to the mother, the baby gradually learns to endure longer and longer periods of separation. Therefore, knowing how to be alone in the adult corresponds to the outward manifestation of an *intimate security that was formed during childhood*.

Of course, the constant presence, in times of need, of the attachment figures, accustoms the child to expect their availability for the future. Let us keep in mind that the child is not self-sufficient, so he needs a "go-between", another person who allows him to be himself, without however needing to please.

Father Barban, the young Prior General of the Camaldolese Monks, writes: *"Since I was a boy I have loved the gift of silence in my life. I remember the warm silence of summer when exhausted cicadas stopped their shrill song. The silence of winter is extraordinary: the fields sown, but empty; the time broken by the patter of rain, all covered by the silence of the snow.*

And now that I am a monk, I guard the silence existentially and spiritually. It keeps me company, it educates me to live my solitude; it allows me to be attentive to my neighbor; it brings me closer to God ... I think that silence is the primordial door to get in touch with the many voices ... today that in society there is chaos, not only light pollution, but even more the acoustic one which is devastating for the soul.

We are not made only of muscles and bowels: within us, we feel that there is an interiority and this interiority is the abode of God, where we feel the need to be in contact with our soul.

I would like to say that we must learn again to speak with the soul, inadequate, as we have become, to live with our depth. "

Etti Illesum in her diary waiting to be sent to Auschwitz, where she will die, writes that each of us is a different soul for our singularity, and highlights the *old soul*, richer in humanity thanks to the stratifications of spiritual experiences deposited inside.

It is then that the depth of the soul can turn into prayer and, if we were more attentive to our interiority, we would be a continuous prayer. Over the years, then, we go through different types of prayers as we go through

different spiritual itineraries, transforming the prayers of request into those of thanks. True prayer is one with the depth of the soul.

The young Dutch woman responds to her alarming and desperate situation, "resting in herself", feeling the protection of her cell, whose walls isolate her from the world that has become hostile and protect her soul, which is able to express joy and thanks to God even in that context. The shining response to the life of this young Jewish woman and how she managed to transform the condition of excruciating isolation, to which she had been consigned in the Westerbork lager camp, allows her to transform her inner condition into spiritually saving solitude.

She writes: *"I raise myself around the prayer, like a wall offering shelter. I withdraw in prayer, as in the cell of a convent, and I come out collected, concentrated, strong."*

In the profound relationship of prayer with God she encounters that saving Love of which Caldironi speaks to us in his writing on loneliness, that reimbursement of Love that allows her to feed on hope. It is also in silence that good music is heard; you read a good book; dialogue with a person; you are enchanted in front of a work of art

...

We could say together with Jung that our Center consists of two aspects: the *historical man*, with his precise temporal location and the *eternal man*, representing our most intimate side, the one facing the most mysterious phenomena of the psyche.

Someone wrote that loneliness is an "indefinite virtual space", in which disturbing presences converge, not least the very profound and disturbing experience of being in front of the most mysterious and incommunicable part of ourselves, part that, making us unique and unrepeatable, separates us from others. And man seems to be afraid of his own uniqueness.

Also C.G. Jung wanted to underline what constitutes our most intimate and profound core of solitude, what we are for and not others for, which is incommunicable, and causes disturbance.

As many patients attest through memory, all childhood is a lonely age. Jung himself talks about it and

confesses that he has experienced the impossibility of communicating his own experiences.

Of course, this difficulty in communicating one's thoughts belongs to any age. But in childhood it is more burdensome due to the scarce capacities to contain consciousness.

Jung writes in his autobiography: "Those years were the most important of my life, when I pursued my internal images ... In those years everything that was essential was decided.

It all began then. "

And now I would like to quote Victor Frankl, psychiatrist and creator of Logo therapy, who became famous with his book "A psychologist in the camp", where he attempts the difficult task of making sense even of situations at the limit, when isolation, being alone, suffering are such as to nullify any presumption of humanity.

Life in the camp was at the mercy of such adverse forces as to preclude any type of choice, which is the typically human act of using the will. But even in such circumstances Frankl experiences firsthand the possibility of finding a thread that guides our steps:

- 1) in the Acceptance of suffering
 - 2) in giving a profound Meaning to the situation
- since there is no age in which psychic evolution and personality maturation stop.

At this point, we can affirm that *knowing how to be alone* represents a precious resource as it allows to get in touch with one's own intimacy and to know each other; to reorganize ideas; process pains; and even the forced isolation of the prison can be a boost to growth, collaborating with the inevitable, as many have testified.

At this point, however, I would like to take a look at *history*.

What we can observe is that it was women who strongly felt the need for solitude, even making striking gestures to obtain spaces and times to free themselves from too many imposed dictates and we can identify women who, timidly or even blatantly, have denounced their condition to the world, perhaps with works of art, such as Gentileschi, or by writing

books and short stories, such as Austen and Bronte, reaching up to the '20s, when V. Woolf and K. Mansfield dare to raise pen to claim space and time for oneself.

It must be recognized that woman has never been mistress of managing her time, having always been tied to the house, which has always been filled with burdens concerning others, without being able to allow herself the solitude necessary to know herself.

Isolated, alone, but never in control of her solitude.

At the end of the '20s, a high bourgeois Englishwoman, V. Woolf, wrote a book with the emblematic title "A room all to herself", in which she addressed her right to a space, where she could imagine herself as a "woman all to herself", freeing herself from that *anonymity* imposed by the introjection of a dominant female model dedicated exclusively to others.

Also in the same years from distant New Zealand, K. Mansfield wrote two short stories, "A cup of tea" and "The fly" which are two extraordinary analyzes of loneliness, from which I extract a reflection: "*It seems to me that what we aspire to is to work with our mind and soul together. It is only when the soul illuminates the mind that what we do matters... For me the only way to get there is solitude.*"

Well, such experiences can be understood as the *metaphor* of immersion in the depths of our being, in that virgin land of the psyche not contaminated by external requests.

The "room" is the experience of retreat, of the desert to which all religious traditions and even fairy tales refer, where we are witnessing the condemnation to a period of solitude, often in places of difficult access, such as the forest.

After many years, Assagioli invites each of us:

"Study your most intimate SELF, discover your true "I" hidden in the depth of your Soul, learn your wonderful potential."

And Loneliness is no longer scary. It becomes a sacred place; the most secret depths of our Soul, the space of freedom, where creative energies are born and nourished from childhood; *an intimate place where to take care of your Self.*

Knowing how to be alone therefore represents a precious resource that allows us to get in touch with one's intimacy, to reorganize ideas, process pains, and even forced isolation and conditions at the limit of endurance can be a boost to growth, collaborating with the inevitable, as many have testified, including our Assagioli, author of "Freedom in Jail".

"The art and technique of silence" which invites us to counter the civilization of noise that leads us to no longer bear silence, not to talk nonsense without first thinking and reflecting and to consider the internal silence, of emotions, of desires, of thoughts, of imagination that aim to slow down the activity. Silence is, therefore, *positive spiritual energy* and it is therefore that we are advised to practice silence, as Aurobindo and Gandhi did, through the various stages of meditation, passing from recollection to elevation towards the Soul, obtaining regeneration of all personal aspects, and I conclude.

It is from our inner sanctuary that our prayers can flow, like this poem by Tagore with which I close my reflections.

*I do not want to pray to be protected from dangers,
but to challenge them fearlessly.*

*I don't want to beg for relief from pain,
but to have the heart to conquer it.*

*I do not want to seek allies in the battles of life,
but my invigoration.*

*Grant me, my God,
to acknowledge the help of your hand
even in defeat and suffering.*

LONELINESS AND HOPE

Translation by Damiano Pagani / Gordon Leonard Symons

Loneliness is really an ugly beast, in many ways. I would have liked to write only about this feeling, because we live it largely on a physical level (feeling far away, distant, separate), but there is also a mental loneliness ("no one shares my ideas", for example), an emotional loneliness (anguish, fear). There can also be a desire for solitude, as well as images, intuitions that can arise from introspection, the result of a moment of meditation and an act of will. These different forms of loneliness offer a call to psychic functions, and in addition to those mentioned, there is also a spiritual one.

Precisely referring to this inner loneliness, I wanted to add the term hope to the title, because it is very close to the word faith, trust, close to the noetic dimension of life, as Viktor Frankl⁽¹⁾ would say, true nourishment of the soul. But in reality, the one who caused me to reformulate the title was Roberto Assagioli himself, in particular what he wrote about the experience of loneliness. I remember that in Psychosynthesis we always talk about verifiable and observable experiences, this is the true scientific attitude.

His last writing, the first lesson of the 1974 Annual Course of Psychosynthesis, a few months before his death, is entitled 'Loneliness and its overcoming through communication and understanding'⁽²⁾; in it he describes it as 'an experience, neither definitive nor essential. It is a stage, a temporary subjective condition. It can alternate and eventually be replaced by a genuine lived experience of interpersonal and inter-individual and between groups communications (...).'

At the beginning of the lesson he reports a news story linked to the suicide of two teenagers. Their evil consisted of psychological loneliness, in the total lack of any communication and understanding, not only on the part of the parents, but also of the teachers and