Solitary Lessons
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My brilliant and famous colleague, Robert Fulghum, wrote that all he really needed to know he learned in kindergarten. He seems to be a good man and a successful minister, so I have no doubt that that first year of schooling served him well.

Myself, I have needed a little more education. There were, of course, years of school, which you know I think is a dicey prospect at best, but there have been other, stronger possibilities. Going to camp, for example, especially Unitarian Universalist camp. Working on tech crew for the drama club. Working on tech crew in college. Comparing the two. Singing in choirs. Shoveling snow. Learning to stay in a small boat in a very big ocean.

Of course, this is hardly the season for kayaks. But recently my partner Janine and I have taken up a new hobby: playing solitaire.

We've gotten sucked in before—what started as Microsoft's built-in mousing lesson has got to be one of the more addictive pastimes around but this time we've been playing a version that I hadn't known before, called Spider solitaire. My old version of Windows didn't have it.

Spider solitaire is just slightly different from other versions, but what has us hooked is that every game seems winnable. There are so many possibilities for how to play that every game seems to have at least one combination of moves that will win.

We love that—the pervasive scent of possible success. So we've started watching the statistics that come up at the end of the game, percentage wins and number of moves and so forth. And we have relinquished any pride in number of moves to keep our win percentage as high as possible. So when we get the message that says "no more moves, would you like to end the game or return and try again?" we return. and return. and return. We have been known to "undo" all the way back to the beginning to start over—multiple times.

We've only given up occasionally, usually after several good tries. But playing the same set of cards over and over, looking for a solution, is its own education, and not just in statistics.

It's rich with possibilities—my original list has thirty lessons—but for today I've whittled it down to five.

The five major lessons of solitaire.

The first rule is true of any game of strategy: just because you can doesn't mean you should. Often the winning choice involves more restraint than anything else, a series of decisions not-to that wins the day.

When I was very young my parents had a wall hanging with Khalil Gibran's popular poem on marriage. The original reads:

> You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.
> You shall be together when white wings of death scatter your days.
> Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.
> But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
> And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
>
> Love one another but make not a bond of love:
> Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
> Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
> Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
> Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,

Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.
Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.
For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
And stand together, yet not too near together:
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

But the wall hanging in the upstairs hall began with the second stanza: *Love one another, but make not a bond of love.* I always wondered at the ideal of distance; now I think that somewhere between the caution of space and the selfish abandon of romantic love is the balance that makes a lasting union. When people come to me for premarital counseling, I will often suggest that they keep dating well into old age. To me, dating implies a kind of wonder and attentiveness to each other sharpened by time alone—that time when you go home and think of the next time, do your own dishes, make your own art, go for long walks by yourself, see your own friends. The right separation whets the appetite. And one of the possibilities, if you really seek your own counsel, is this: turn off the TV, radio, internet, let the paper pile up outside your door. After the mental chatter dies down, you may catch yourself staring past the tops of the trees into your own head, for space is really round and if your vision goes far enough it will come back to where it began. When it comes back, when you peer into your own head from behind, you begin to find the secrets you keep even from yourself. You cannot be solitary and be afraid to start over; most of what you will find will lead back and back from one to the other until you are curled at the end of a long and twisty corridor with no apparent exit. It is from there you must begin, making your way out from the center, a modern minotaur in sheep's clothing.

Solitude, true solitude, is the parachute drop into the maze. Petrifying at first—but without it, you cannot begin—you cannot begin the walk out, and you cannot choose to retrace your steps and begin again.

That's the second lesson, the beginning again, the starting over. When we undo and undo to get back to the beginning, we are allowing ourselves the gift of ongoing life—the chance to have another go. If we were only allowed one chance at everything we would never learn. In the game, starting over allows the problem to be resolved before it happens. The biggest challenges are best solved by working around them, and the best solutions start before you know you need them. I'm convinced that what our conscious mind does not see our subconscious whittles at until the problem is a manageable size or has been resolved altogether. Sometimes we're wiser than we know.

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My aunt has been studying yoga for a number of years. Part of her practice is regular attendance at ten-day silent retreats.

Ten days of silence.

It sounds wonderful. Intimidating. Frustrating. Challenging. Enlightening. Boring. Scary.

Even in the company of others, silence suggests isolation. Without the stimulation of others' thoughts we are left to confront ourselves.

The discipline of solitude forces us into ourselves. Left with nothing else to distract us, we must attend to the only thing left, in joy and admiration, or in something harsher, grittier, harder to swallow. We seldom like everything we see, but there is something in being alone that, at its best, allows us access to deep truths. Like a well-designed science experiment, there is only one variable left, and so it is the condition of that variable that, we are forced to conclude, is causing things to be what they are.

or not.

And if we are not causing whatever is holding our attention (for that is all feeling is, is holding our attention) then we are well and truly able to release ourselves from responsibility for it. If we are to follow the serenity prayer, then we must have not only the courage but the ability to know the difference between what we can change and what we cannot. Solitude gives us that clarity.
I'm tempted by the retreats, but what if I can't stand my own thoughts? What if I don't like what I see? Maybe silent retreats are like marathons and must be worked up to. First, an hour of silence, no speaking, no singing, no writing. Then two. By six months, perhaps I could work up to a day. In five years, a ten-day retreat. Except silence piles on itself exponentially, not one day plus one day but one day times one day, somehow echoing out to an infinite pool of awe-inspiring stillness enclosed in less than two weeks. The fatigue builds up as inexorably as any runner's. At some point, it is almost certain to become too much—to become impossible huge. What then?
Solitude can be very noisy—the racket in one's own head can be one of the greatest distractions there is. In Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* she describes taking each clamoring voice, listening for a minute, then turning the volume down so she can work. That is one way. But every so often it behooves one to make time to listen, listen, listen
until the voice runs out
the tape unspools
the breath expires
for the last time
and you are left holding
the very empty and precious shell
of what was once vital and real
knowing that what was valuable
has been given to the world
and what you hold
is mere reminder
of its beginnings.

What we seek in solitude is the awareness of the shell, the shape that holds the absence of all that draws us away from our true selves.

In Plant Dreaming Deep, her 1968 memoir about life in an old New Hampshire farmhouse, May Sarton writes of her extensive flower gardening:

> "One of the things gardening does for me is to provide a way of resting without being bored; a day divided between writing in the morning and gardening in the afternoon has a good balance; it is possible to maintain what might be called perfect pitch, total awareness, for a good many hours of such a day. And gardening is so rich in sensuous pleasures that I hardly notice its solitariness."
> --May Sarton, Plant Dreaming Deep 1996 (1968) p. 124.

Sarton's "perfect pitch" requires a kind of training, practice at turning one's attention firmly one way and then another. If we have company, even if it is the finest possible, this kind of disciplined rehearsal becomes impossible. We can still live with attention, but a quality of ease (borne of repetition) is missing, for in company each time is different. A tremendous possibility for appreciating life is in our hands—your hands for your life, and my hands for mine. There are tasks of living that we cannot hand off, no matter how we want to.
Solitude is supposed to be good for us. Faiths of all kinds have clusters of their most observant who have withdrawn into isolation. Cloistered monks and nuns decline contact with the outside world; the Desert Fathers of early Christianity kept solitary counsel in caves just out of reach of civilization.

People have experimented with asceticism of food and drink, of sleep, of body, but the recurring theme is isolation. Even those religious who do not seek ongoing solitude have times set aside for rest, for study, for contemplation. Before he retired UU minister Brian Kopke used to withdraw to the desert each winter for a month's reflection. Somewhere in the wind-carved sandstone and the February chill he found a kind of peace and wisdom that fed him as nothing else did. It touched his spirit—he did things that he left unattended the rest of the year.

The desert has always beckoned those seeking their own counsel: observant religious of all eras, young people coming of age, even the Burning Man festival—a city created for a week in pack-it-in-pack-it-out fashion, and functioning on a gift economy--has the air of a culture seeking a wholeness it cannot conceive in everyday surroundings.

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These third and fourth lessons are about resource and obstruction. What can we do? What can be done? What stands in our way?

The January issue of Harper Magazine has an article about the religions of the desert; in it, author Richard Rodriguez writes, "Islamic architecture attempts the sublime feat of emptiness. It is the sense of emptiness enclosed that is marvelous". If we can learn to embrace the vast emptiness, to love it for how it pushes us past our edges to a raw version of ourselves, then there is nothing to run from, although there is still everything to fear. Lighting is beautiful; admiration is right. So is respect, and a safe approach.

Rodriguez continues, musing on the sense of vast emptiness that is the desert, and how the god of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism "demands acknowledgement within emptiness", as in the seat of god in the Ark of the covenant, which is empty. (p. 39 vol 318, no. 1892, Jan 08). His musings remind me of Elijha's chair at the Seder, the empty seat, the goblet, waiting for the expected but uninvited guest, always caught in that space of expectation, of hope, of welcome. The empty at that table implies possibility.

All kinds of possibility.

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When we are alone with nothing, then we discover miracles we cannot pawn off on anyone or anything except the generosity of this vast and glorious world—manna from heaven for a people alone in the desert is no less a grace than a lifesaving tablespoon of water squeezed from a handful of leaves (Harper's) –and no more. But how would we know the miracle if we were not forced to balance between it and death? Desperation heightens awareness like nothing else, and it forces us to consider possibilities we might not allow otherwise.

Returning to soliltude is a *return*—it is where we begin and we thus find ideas folded in on themselves: in solitude we learn to start over and over—but solitude contains the re-beginning; it contains the rebirth, the renaissance. Birth is the first moment of separation, and it is ever afterward the place we go to clean the slate, to get perspective, to begin again.

It is in the alone place that our usual forms of thinking come apart and are reconfigured. Then, the abundance comes. Writer and teacher Julia Cameron in her guidebook to creativity *The Artist's Way,* describes flow, that space where nothing exists but the writer and the page, or the singer and the music, or the painter and the canvas. Even the tools of creation: pencil, voice, brush become invisible, less than secondary, mere avenues to the magic. Regardless of the number of people in the room, I have never reached that state of oneness with creativity except in total isolation. The art and the focus demand it. When solitude gives rise to inspiration, we can barely capture it all before it flies out to make itself real in the world. We become conduits for something great, something enormous, something fantastic in its impossibility. How unlikely, that all this would come together by great cosmic accident! How marvelous, and what a gift. Just the thought stuns us into that vacant-eyed silence which wraps us in a world of our own for at least a few precious moments.

It's a world of miracles.
The lessons of being alone are whatever lessons we find for ourselves. They are the lessons of beauty in winter, the lessons of comfort with little, pleasure with nothing. They are, ultimately, the lessons of abundance—that we alone are enough, no matter how convinced we are otherwise.
Solitary lessons: just because you can doesn't mean you should.
Start over as often as you have to.
Your greatest resource, and your greatest opponent, is yourself.
Remain open to possibilities.
Miracles do happen.
Blessed be, and amen.