AN AMERICAN FLÂNEUR
IN BERLIN

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An American Flaneur in Berlin is the stream of consciousness account of Gabi Hartmann’s visit to Berlin in the late Winter of 2018. While this is her first trip abroad, she feels a connection with that part of the world and wants to find out what that means. Her ancestors worked the land for centuries on farms outside of Eberswalde, a town 50 kilometers North-East of Berlin.

In the late 1800’s Karl-Friedrich Hartmann, a younger son with no prospect of inheriting the farm, had gathered his belongings, said good-bye and took the train up to Hamburg, there to find passage to America, never to return.

The same age as Gabi is now, he settles among the oaks in the rolling, wintergreen hills of the Salinas Valley in California. He and his descendants have prospered in the new land, though it was very different from the green pastures around Eberswalde.

There are a hundred reasons why someone leaves home, this would be one of the better ones. Visiting your ancestral land for the first time. The overnight flight from Los Angeles with little sleep was hard enough. A hundred and twenty years earlier, Karl-Friedrich had needed nearly six months to make the reverse journey. After 26 hours she’s descending from the clear blue sky, down through the blanketing clouds above Berlin’s Tegal airport on a raw January afternoon.

In the arrival hall after collecting her bag, she breaks out the instructions showing the route from airport to hotel. It is 2pm and still 2 hours before the sun, not that you can see it through the thick cloud. “That should be about enough time unless I get lost. I’m NOT getting lost!”.
First a bus, now she’s riding the U2 line, West towards the Mitte district, having gotten on at AlexanderPlatz. From a tunnel they emerge into the afternoon twilight, Gabi’s eyes adjust. She thinks of the golden light that suffuses the California landscape at sundown. It’s different from Berlin, with the same sunlight filters through cloud. Hard to believe that pale disc, there in the West, is the same sun.

There’s a comfortable silence on the train as people get on and off. It can be good to be where no-one knows you. And there’s something else that feels good on the Berlin U-Bahn today; a strong feeling of déjà vu.

She remembers TS Eliot’s line from Little Gidding about the end of exploring being to arrive where you started and know it for the first time. It started out feeling like a pilgrimage to find something, but now that she is here, she realizes what she’s been looking for has always been there, waiting to be discovered, or rather uncovered. This was her thought as the train pulls out of Stadmitte station.

And if she’s leaving Stadmitte then MohrenStraße is next, the one she knew to get off at. She’s standing at the door with her four-wheeled travel case at the ready when the train pulls in.

Out now on the platform. What is that smell -- the smell of electric trains? A mixture of axle grease and ozone. She wonders if trains smell this way in London or Paris. She would find this out later.

THE MOMENT OF ARRIVAL

As the last passenger disappears up the stairs, Gabi stands on the silent platform. In the half light, she sees the walls and columns are clad in red marble. It’s more like the arrival hall of a palace than a subway station.

She takes a deep breath, feeling this is the actual moment of arrival in Berlin. She revels in this feeling not only because
it is a goal reached, but because behind the silence she senses something intriguing. A distant resonance more felt than heard, like thunder from over the horizon.

Now down the street she goes, looking for the hotel. Passing by an ordinary looking car park, there is a discrete sign saying that this here is the site of the now destroyed Führerbunker, Hitler’s command post.

A tour group is nearby. The guide is saying that in the final weeks of the war over a million Soviet soldiers had surrounded Berlin, and were converging on this very spot. Behind them nothing but scorched earth.

And what’s that the guide is saying about the marble in the subway? Apparently, it is from the arrival hall of the now destroyed Reichskanzlei, Hitler’s Chancellery that had also stood here, now obliterated.

She is beginning to appreciate the significance of this place she had come to; once the eye of a catastrophic hurricane in human affairs, surely one of the worst of the 20th Century. And the echoes of that still reverberate.

THE DREAM OF THE EARTH REALIZED

Gabi is wide awake at 3am, her body clock not yet adjusted. Simply no point trying to go back to sleep, it’s just not happening. So she turns on the bedside light and skims through her email. Getting up, she opens the curtain revealing the view from the 7th floor down Leipziger Strasse. Oh my! It’s been snowing, and everything is white, except where the tires meet the road.

Synchronicity, she thinks. I’m looking at snow, and the email I just read had said “doesn’t stand a snowflake’s chance ...”. I love it when synchronicity happens. It feels so right.

Being from California, she knows almost nothing the transcendent beauty of fresh snow. The hypnotic movement
of the almost lighter than air flakes drifting past the window, covering the ground with a soft blanket.

At 3:00am the world out there is quiet. And so too, it would seem, is the inner world of those who are sleeping now. There is no white noise coming from a million wakeful minds.

She picks up her journal and starts to write:

Once upon a midnight snowdrift,
The big things seem so simple.
On this expanse of unmarked snow,
All the stories of life are writ.
And what is the meaning of Life?
Life is a snowdrift, one meter deep.
And what is my purpose in Life?
To turn problems into solutions,
You see how it goes,
See your questions become answers.

In the silence, there are answers,
Silence is the language of God,
All else is bad translation.
Snow is a paradox too.
How can every flake be different?
Trillions upon trillions, all different.
I walk through the snowdrift,
My footprints take ownership,
Of a thousand snowflake worlds.
Look at the sky, more coming.

Where did the poem come from, if not from her imagination? Perhaps it came from the snow-laden world outside. She remembers a Professor from college saying that in the Japanese Shinto tradition, if you are moved by the sight of say, the mist clinging to the side of a mountain, and you wish to express appreciation, it is the mist and mountain communicating that desire to you, wanting you to make real
the dream of the Earth. To bring into the world of form that which is formless. Yes, it feels right to think about it that way.

On that thought, she dozes, half asleep but awake enough to know she is sleeping. She dreams that she is swimming in a river of energy flowing like a torrent out of Berlin’s past, into the future. It feels good to be swimming in this river of time. It carries me along.

But the water is not water, it’s some kind of energy and it flows into tributaries of a mighty river from a million restless minds. And not just from human minds, from the trees and animals and from out of the fertile land itself, like spring water that people came to drink from and stayed.

A FLÂNEUR IS BORN

Gabi loves the idea of the artful traveller who wanders through a cityscape with senses working overtime. Not intent upon arriving and with no fixed plans. A mind wide-open to what comes.

She has been captivated by this idea since reading Baudelaire in college. The Flâneur is a 19th Century Parisian who strolls about the boulevards and alleys of Paris seeking a remedy for ever-threatening ennui. She can see no reason why the practice cannot be applied anywhere and is determined to try it here in this place that has been so much at the centre of world events for much of the 20th Century.

AT TEMPELHOF FIELD

Taking the U6 down to Tempelhof on the weekend, Gabi has come to see the old airport, at one time the busiest airport in the world during the Berlin Airlift. Her grandfather who was a great raconteur had been in the US Air Force and stationed there during the Airlift in 1949. Today Tempelhof
is a recreation area where people fly kites, ride their bikes and picnic.

Gabi climbs the spiral stairs to an observation deck overlooking the runways. She imagines her grandfather as the handsome young pilot he’d once been, dressed in a leather flying suit, coming in to land with less than a minute separating planes.

But in the here and now, there’s a couple in their early 20’s approaching her position. The woman is on crutches, her legs very thin, the result of a wasting disease like muscular dystrophy.

She is a good-looking woman with long fair hair and a ready smile. Her boyfriend walks patiently beside her, no hint of frustration at the painfully slow pace. They stop not far away, close enough for Gabi to see but not to hear.

Soon, a second woman approaches from the direction of the train station. The man lets out a child-like cry of joy, runs over and gives her a big hug, the kind you give an old friend you haven’t seen for ages.

His girlfriend is caught up in the moment too. For a moment she forgets that her legs will not allow her do what her boyfriend has just done. It only takes a moment for that realization to hit as she nearly falls over.

Her body language shows her frustration and the envy. And perhaps there was some despair in that downward look, wondering who could love a cripple? But then she straightens, her demeanour brightens with practiced optimism.

A few minutes later, they are joined by another couple. A guy rides up on a bicycle, pretends to lose control and career into the group. The party has started. He and one of the other guys give each other a “bro hug” with back slapping and raucous laughter. Now it is clear, this is a reunion of old school friends. The girl on crutches is standing by herself towards the edge of the group.
FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

An outsider has some advantages over insiders. They have the detached perspective of one who has little emotional investment. They can experience life in a city and have no attachment to anyone or anything. They are free to experience life without worry. And that’s a wonderfully liberating thing but there’s a downside that Gabi must reckon with. Being an outsider runs contrary to the normal instinct we all have to form social bonds. She remembers from Anthropology that we are that way because in the evolutionary past, loners usually died because predators had the instinct to go after loners.

Belonging to a group is a double-edged sword. You feel secure and protected. But it also exacts a price -- conformity to group think where you no longer think for yourself. Approval and criticism from the group are two sides of the same coin.

In everyday life, there’s a compromise to be reached between conformity and the individual. But for this trip, there is no compromise, it’s all about being an intuitively guided individual wandering the city.

It doesn’t matter. She lets her intuition guide her wherever it wants to go. She ends up “lost” in the sense that she doesn’t know where she is exactly, but she has the means to find out, thanks to the maps on her phone. When her feet have had enough and it’s time to go back to the hotel, the GPS gets her there at the press of a button. But it wasn’t always so easy.

GETTING LOST, FINDING YOURSELF

Getting lost can be a way of finding yourself. It’s a paradox that allows you to discover things about the world and yourself that you would not have known had you stayed in
your comfort zone. You cannot make these experiences happen on demand, you can only create the right conditions for them to happen spontaneously. Life has a way of giving you the experiences you need, not necessarily the one’s you want.

Gabi remembers her father telling her about an experience he had in Berlin in 2002. He had been travelling elsewhere in Europe but changed his travel plans to visit Berlin during the momentous events of November 1989. The Soviet Union was crumbling, the gates in the Berlin Wall opened and then Wall itself came down in what has been described as the cleanest demolition job in history. Gabi’s Dad and millions of others had brought a piece of the wall home with them. Though it looked like a very ordinary piece of concrete, it had sat on the mantelpiece for as long as Gabi could remember.

Returning after 13 years he wanted to see what had changed. He hired a car and went explored East Berlin. It was a little surprising at how little it seemed to have changed. After a day of driving, following his hunches, he was now thoroughly lost. The map he was relying on to get him back had lettering in gothic script and the place names made no sense.

**GUIDED ONLY BY THE SETTING SUN**

There was exasperation in her father’s voice as he told of driving around in circles, looking for a familiar landmark, but finding none. He was on the verge of parking the car, making careful note of the location, catching a taxi to the hotel, then letting the hire car company retrieve the car, no doubt for a hefty fee.

But when he stopped resisting the reality of his situation, stopped indulging in self-pity, he could see a very simple solution -- the setting sun. It told him which way West was,
just as surely as seeing the sun going down behind the Santa Lucia Mountains, back home in California.

He knew that the hotel was in the former West Berlin, he reasoned that if he drove in that direction, he might yet find the Kurfürstendamm and then the hotel. Half an hour later, guided only by the setting sun, and to his enormous relief, he found the hotel.

A LESSON IN THE BAROQUE

The Berlin Dom is one fancy piece of architecture, that is for sure. In a city of grand buildings, old and new, this one stands out for the way it proclaims its power and majesty to the world. Gabi stands before it in the wonderfully named Lustgarten and feels very small, knowing that’s the impression the architects intended.

The baroque splendour of the Dom is no small thing. Gabi stood and looked at it for a long time, waiting until it became a familiar sight, and not so imposing. But its grandeur was not diminished with familiarity. Something about the proportions, the size, the symmetry, the extravagant details. They combine to speak confidently of the awesome power possessed by the Kings and Queens of Prussia. And down deep in the crypt, a fitting resting place for their mortal remains.

Ordinarily it costs seven euros to go inside, but not if you attend a Sunday service. Gabi comes back on Sunday at 10am and takes a seat inside along with several hundred others. The service is in German, of course, and she can barely understand a word, but it doesn’t really matter because the emotional content comes through loud and clear.

The interior of the Dom is a true feast for the eyes. Even the eyes of 21st Century people accustomed to architectural marvels. Designed to draw the eye towards heaven, it is a promise of what awaits the faithful. To dwell among the
cherubim and archangels. This vision of heaven in all its splendour would have made a convincing case for people in the past. Looking at the numbers in today’s service, that message seems to still be working.

Gabi remembers from Art History 101 that the Baroque was a strategy that the Pope use to win back support for Catholicism when the Reformation was sweeping Europe. Wait a minute though, the main feature of Protestant churches is their austerity, their lack of decoration. This was a stark contrast to the opulence of your average Catholic cathedral. Yet this is a Lutheran church, it should be austere. It would be if it were not the church used by the Prussian royal family.

Riding the S-Bahn to Wannsee

One morning Gabi rides the S-Bahn 7 from Friedrishstrasse to the end of the line at Wannsee where there is lake much loved by weekend day-trippers in the summer, though less popular in the winter. Seconds after pulling away from the station a bottle crashes to the floor further down the carriage. People look at each other quizzically, the only time they make direct eye contact.

Here comes the reason. A 20-year-old guy lurching up the aisle, hand over hand, ranting in German. The seat of his pants were wet, probably from having fallen over in the wet snow. Dried blood shows through the stubble of his crew-cut. Uh oh, don’t make eye contact Gabi! She pretends to look out the window, but keeps an eye on him obliquely.

He gets off at the Hauptbahnhof. She wonders how long he will last before the Polizei scoop him up, just as she’d seen them do the day before. The other passengers did not seem too concerned, so maybe it’s a not uncommon thing for drunk and disorderly people to be riding the train at 10
o’clock in the morning. Alcohol and anger are a combination that seldom seems to end well.

So back to google maps, and the memorizing of the stations between here and Wannsee. She just wants to check them off one by one as we go, she thinks.

Cityscape, half-frozen river crossings, office buildings, apartments with curtains drawn against the cold. On one building the coat of arms of Sachsen-Anhalt, a neighboring Federal state to the West.

Then through to the suburbs with naked trees and low-rise apartments and detached houses. Family cars covered in fresh snow at the curb. Neighborhood playgrounds, no little footprints in the snow. What domestic dramas are playing out behind those respectable facades? It is better that I do not know.

Encampments on railway land, homeless folk living meters away from passing trains, a bitterly cold life but no rent to pay. People either pity or scorn the homeless, try to save them from themselves, thinks Gabi. They do not see that many have simply opted out of consumer society, refusing to be hamsters on the debt-treadmill.

They enter the wintery forest. Stations few and far-between now, the train picking up pace. The GPS app on her phone says they are going 85 kph – faster than the usual 80. But it is running a few minutes late according to google maps, the driver is making up for lost time.

Gabi loves the look of the forest in winter-time. In her mind’s eye she re-creates the emerald green forest of summer. But no less beautiful in Winter when the branches make an intricate pattern against the sky.

Why do we get such pleasure looking at Nature, Gabi wonders? It must be an instinct because all cultures seem to enjoy doing it. Maybe it’s because we look for patterns in the world. But the patterns of Nature are just too complicated to grasp and it leaves us with a feeling of awe.
Coming into Wannsee now. A handful of people get off, local folk. A contrast to the crowds of day-trippers in summer no doubt. On a hot morning in August a hundred-people might be getting off, jostling on the platform. Gabi lingers to get her bearings and allow people to wander off. She likes being alone on train station platforms.

Just then Gabi catches a faint whiff of the half-frozen lake. No need for a map, she follows the scent down to the lakeshore, past the Bismarck memorial. The ferry terminal is deserted, the half dozen tour boats made to carry hundreds under the warming summer sun are moored tight against the pier and covered stem to stern with an inch or two or snow. Nearby a few hungry hooded crows mooch about looking for something to eat. The pause and look at Gabi for a long moment before resuming.

IN THE WINGS OF DESIRE LIBRARY

Wim Wenders has made some great movies, who would disagree? Gabi has been a fan since she first saw Wings of Desire in college. The library scene, filmed in the State Library or Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin is one of her favourite scenes. It was something about the idea that here was a space in which angels and humans mingled.

She likes the ambience of the “Stabi”. It’s just how she imagined. The scene in the movie had been so compelling, part of her wanted to believe there were angels in this place now. She doesn’t see any but there is an unearthly hush. It may be that Wim Wenders constructed the scene around that hush.

Gabi was impressed by how quiet everyone is being. She cannot think of any other place where hundreds of people co-exist side by side, fully conscious but not making a sound. No-one was making any noise at all beyond the soft sounds of breathing and the sniffles of summer colds.
Even more surprising than the unearthly hush is the fact that the library is nearly full. Hardly any spare desks anywhere. Gabi eventually finds a desk over in the far corner of the main level, so far from the entrance that many visitors do not venture that far without provisions and a map. But the location is a good one.

The library is an architectural gem, much more impressive inside than when seen from the outside. There’s no obvious order to the layout, you would not know what might be in those places beyond your line of sight. In some buildings you can know this because the layout follows a familiar pattern, a template for all such buildings, but the architects of this building made it interesting.

It reminds Gabi a little of how the floorplan of casinos and shopping malls are also deliberately confusing with no obvious exit, making it difficult to leave. You’re not exactly trapped, they don’t want you to feel that way, but they do want you to be more interested in staying.

**ACTION MOVIE**

There’s a student in his early 20’s sitting to Gabi’s left. He looked like he was there to work on his thesis but he’s not working on it, he’s procrastinating. For a half hour after sitting down and setting up his books, he fiddles with his phone.

The atmosphere is so hushed, Gabi imagines an action scene from a spy movie to liven things up. It would be funny to ruffle a few feathers in a such a regulated environment. In the setup for the scene, we have one spy leaving a message for another spy. Counter-espionage agents have followed them, and when they make the drop, the agents close in for the arrest.

But the spies see the agents coming to try to get away. A furious chase ensues, with spies and pursuers running fast
through the library, knocking people and furniture over, both sides firing hand-guns with silencers because they do not want to make too much noise.

The agents shoot one of the spies who now lies next to the photocopy machine, his life ebbing away. Indignant squawks from the good folk sitting in their orderly rows.

As a diversion, the other spy pushes over a set of shelves and a catastrophic domino effect follows. By the time the last domino falls, twenty shelves have crashed to the floor, books everywhere.

**EBERSWALDE**

Visiting the ancestral home in Eberswalde is something Gabi has been working up to. A mere 50 kilometers to the North East of Berlin, it is not like it is difficult to get to. But it is not just another item on the itinerary, she wants to be in the right frame of mind to get something real from the experience.

Gabi wants to delve into what it is to be German, and how is that different from other nationalities? And more to the point, does she still have those qualities five generations after Karl-Friedrich left? She also wants to know what it simply feels like to be in Eberswalde. After all, her bloodline has maybe a thousand years of history here?

Getting there is as easy as jumping on a train from Berlin Hauptbahnhof before arriving at Eberswalde Hbf an hour later. On the journey she reads up on the local history. As the train speeds off to its terminus in Schwedt, Gabi stands a while on the platform, thinking about her next move. She sees on the map it is about a kilometer to the center of town, and she can get an 861 bus from the station if she waits 5 minutes.

On the way in, she passes some industrial buildings and then suburban houses. Not unexpectedly, the center of
Eberswalde had been destroyed in 1945. Ironically though, the destruction came not from the Russians but from the German Luftwaffe who laid waste to the town in a futile attempt to delay the Russian advance towards Berlin and the Führerbunker that she had heard about on the first day. When Hitler heard the destruction had not slowed the Russians, he is said to have declared that suicide was now the only option. The things you can find out on Wikipedia.

Downtown Eberswalde has the ambience of a carefully recreated traditional German town. Pretty much exactly what visitors might expect to see. That is until she turns a corner to the street converted for pedestrians. There was a lot of foot traffic here, people going to the American style shopping mall. She knows the kind; everything contained inside, protected from the weather. Food court with many different kinds of fast food. She thinks she might go in soon and have some lunch. Outside in the street she sees franchises like McDonald’s and Subway and Starbucks. In the shops, she sees premium American brands on sale. It all feels quite familiar, not because it has awakened some kind of race memory, but because it looks not unlike the mall in Salinas back home.

It’s something of an anti-climax. She realizes the town that Karl-Friedrich left has ceased to exist. It was transformed by National Socialism in the 1930’s, destroyed by war in the 1940’s, re-modelled by Russian Communism in the 1950’s, then changed again by American Capitalism in the 1990’s. Everything changes, nothing stays the same, she knows this in principle. The reality of this universal truth is plain to see in Eberswalde.

What it will be like a hundred years, a thousand? Hitler envisaged the Third Reich to last at least that long. Instead it lasted barely 15 years before the world rose up to neutralize him.

Am I brave enough to contact someone with the surname Hartmann living in town? The telephone listings say there a
nine people with that name in Eberswalde. She thinks about it but decides against. It would seem too weird. “Oh hi, you don’t know me, but maybe we are related”.

**DOPPELGÄNGER**

Gabi sits on a bench in the *Eberswalde* pedestrian mall, watching the people walk by. She’s been there about ten minutes when a woman about Gabi’s age walks past. She looks like someone on their way back to work after lunch. What is that about her? For a start, she walks like Gabi, the same purposeful stride. She could easily be a younger version of her father’s sister who lives in Tulsa, though her hair has more red in it.

They catch each other’s eye and a moment of recognition passes between them. It was a little jolt of recognition. At the corner, the woman looks back and sees Gabi looking back. She smiles and thinks of the old song “I was looking back to see if you were looking back to see if I was looking back at you!”

Meeting her *doppelgänger*, her lookalike, is a moment of synchronicity that Gabi will always remember. Without any words spoken or polite cups of tea in the parlor of a distant relative, her wonderings have been answered. Does she still have the family traits when she is five generations removed? It would seem so, enough to be recognized by someone who has those same qualities.

Does she have the German national character, at least in dormant form? She knows from recent reading that Germans embody a set of traits that distinguish them from other nations. They value order and clear thinking. You have to be accurate and thorough in how you go about doing things, and for goodness sake do not arrive late, even by a minute. These are all values that she had been raised with and which were deeply ingrained.
And what does it feel like in this place with so much family history? Well it feels like home, that’s what it feels like. I’m not a stranger here, even though no-one knows me.

I didn’t expect it to seem so American. I thought it would be more, well, *German*. But *Eberswalde* is the new normal in Germany of the 21st Century.

But not only does Germany feel like America, she realizes just how much America feels like Germany. So many made their way to America in the early days that they were bound to make their mark on the national character in all sorts of ways.

**COMING HOME, GOING HOME**

On the flight home a few days later, Gabi is thinking about how solo travel can be a good thing if you are using travel for an interior journey as well as exterior. You’re free to be as introspective as you want without anyone saying “*your very quiet*” (subtext you’re making me uncomfortable). Most folk cannot tolerate the solitude that is needed for the interior journey. But when you realize that everyone is connected to everyone else at a basic human level, the loneliness evaporates. I don’t need to know their name and the details of their life. Not when I know that we’re all connected at that basic human level.

There are certainly obstacles for anyone travelling in a foreign country. The lack of local knowledge; the language, the customs. And for a solo woman, there is the occasional unwanted man to deal with, a man who think that if they approach a hundred women, at least one of them will agree to sleep with him.

Then there’s the whole matter of timing; when to do what. She likes the German word *zeitgeist* – spirit of the times. For Gabi it means there is a right time to do things, and if you are tuned in, you will know when that is. Ask a philosophy
student, they will give you a grander answer while quoting Hegel.

It has been an absolutely fantastisch time, so much to think about and process.

One thing is for sure, she’s got the travel bug now, or maybe she always had it.

APPENDIX: SOLITUDE QUOTES

Flaneuring is a something best done alone, in solitude, even though you are moving among people. Idle “chit-chat” is by definition a superficial pass-time. The serious flaneur goes within and examines moment-by-moment what they are experiencing.

Many of the great artists, scientists and other creative folk down through history have done their best work in solitude. They insist upon it. Here are some of the unique thoughts they shared from their solitary experiences:

“All man’s miseries derive from not being able to sit quietly in a room alone.” ~ Blaise Pascal

“Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god.” ~ Aristotle, ‘Politics’

“The best thinking has been done in solitude.” ~ Thomas A. Edison

“Without great solitude no serious work is possible.” ~ Pablo Picasso

“If you’re lonely when you’re alone, you’re in bad company.” ~ Jean-Paul Sartre

“I am never less alone than when alone.” ~ Cicero, ‘Cicero De Officiis’

“Solitude was my only consolation – deep, dark, deathlike solitude.” ~ Mary Shelley
“One can be instructed in society, one is inspired only in solitude.” ~ Gary Mark Gilmore

“Writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself.” ~ Franz Kafka

“What a lovely surprise to finally discover how unlonely being alone can be.” ~ Ellen Burstyn

“Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company.” ~ Lord Byron

“Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius.” ~ Edward Gibbon

“Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt in solitude, where we are least alone.” ~ Lord Byron, ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’

“Solitude is the great teacher, and to learn its lessons you must pay attention to it.” ~ Deepak Chopra

“The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude.” ~ Aldous Huxley

“I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” ~ Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walden’

“When we cannot bear to be alone, it means we do not properly value the only companion we will have from birth to death—ourselves.” ~ Eda LeShan

“Talent is nurtured in solitude ... A creation of importance can only be produced when its author isolates himself, it is a child of solitude.” ~ Johann Wolfgang Von Göethe

“Every kind of creative work demands solitude, and being alone, constructively alone, is a prerequisite for every phase of the creative process.” ~ Barbara Powell

“We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and private: and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship.” ~ C.S. Lewis, ‘Weight of Glory’

“To have passed through life and never experienced solitude is to have never known oneself. To have never known oneself is
to have never known anyone.” ~ Joseph Krutch, ‘The Desert Year’

“A man can be himself alone so long as he is alone ... if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.” ~ Arthur Schopenhauer, ‘The World as Will and Idea’

“Let me tell you this: if you meet a loner, no matter what they tell you, it’s not because they enjoy solitude. It’s because they have tried to blend into the world before, and people continue to disappoint them.” ~ Jodi Picoult ‘My Sister’s Keeper’

“Our language has widely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word “loneliness” to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word “solitude” to express the glory of being alone.” ~ Paul Tillich, ‘The Eternal Now’

“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” ~ Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walden’

“... practically all creative people, and certainly most geniuses, have preferred to be alone for long periods, especially when producing their best work.” ~ Raj Persaud, ‘One Hundred Tears of Solitude’

“The mind is sharper and keener in seclusion and uninterrupted solitude. Originality thrives in seclusion free of outside influences beating upon us to cripple the creative mind. Be alone—that is the secret of invention: be alone, that is when ideas are born.” ~ Nikola Tesla

“You think that I am impoverishing myself withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis, and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society.” ~ Henry David Thoreau, journal, February 8, 1857
“It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’

“I feel the same way about solitude as some people feel about the blessing of the church. It’s the light of grace for me. I never close my door behind me without the awareness that I am carrying out an act of mercy toward myself.” ~ Peter Høeg, ‘Smilla’s Sense of Snow’

“Now, more than ever, we need our solitude. Being alone gives us the power to regulate and adjust our lives. It can teach us fortitude and the ability to satisfy our own needs. A restorer of energy, the stillness of alone experiences provides us with much-needed rest. It brings forth our longing to explore, our curiosity about the unknown, our will to be an individual, our hopes for freedom. Alone time is fuel for life.” — Dr. Ester Buchholz

“There is only one solitude, and it is vast, heavy, difficult to bear, and almost everyone has hours when he would gladly exchange it for any kind of sociability, however trivial or cheap, for the tiniest outward agreement with the first person who comes along....” ~ Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Letters to a Young Poet’

“People who need people are threatened by people who don’t. The idea of seeking contentment alone is heretical, for society steadfastly decrees that our completeness lies in others.” ~ Lionel Fisher, ‘Celebrating Time Alone: Stories of Splendid Solitude’

“Not everyone knows how to be alone with others, how to share solitude. We have to help each other to understand how to be in our solitude, so that we can relate to each other without grabbing on to each other. We can be interdependent but not dependent. Loneliness is rejected despondency. Solitude is shared interdependence.” ~ David Spangler
“The reason that extended solitude seemed so hard to endure was not that we missed others but that we began to wonder if we ourselves were present, because for so long our existence depended upon assurances from them.” ~ Doris Grumbach, ‘Fifty Days of Solitude’

“I was a man who thrived on solitude; without it I was like another man without food or water. Each day without solitude weakened me. I took no pride in my solitude; but I was dependent on it. The darkness of the room was like sunlight to me.” ~ Charles Bukowski, ‘Factotum’

“Decisive moment: the one when you will be really alone. And it is perhaps this that makes her hesitate: not the void, but the vastness of the solitude. It’s as well if you are frightened of solitude. It’s a sign that you have come to the moment of your birth.” ~ Hélène Cixous

“Find a day for yourself—better yet, late at night. Go to the forest or to the field, or lock yourself in a room ... You will meet solitude there. There you will be able to listen attentively to the noise of the wind first, to birds singing, to see wonderful nature and to notice yourself in it ... and to come back to harmonic connection with the world and its Creator.” ~ Rabbi Nahman

“We must become so alone, so utterly alone, that we withdraw into our innermost self. It is a way of bitter suffering. But then our solitude is overcome, we are no longer alone, for we find that our innermost self is the spirit, that it is God, the indivisible. And suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of the world, yet undisturbed by its multiplicity, for our innermost soul we know ourselves to be one with all being.” ~ Hermann Hesse

“It is sometimes said that each of us is ultimately alone. This idea is compelling not because of birth and death, but because so often our moments alone seem more true, more real. I need solitude like I need food and rest, and like eating and resting, solitude is most healing when it fits the rhythm of my needs. A rigidly scheduled aloneness does not nourish me. Solitude is
perhaps a misnomer. To me, being alone means togetherness – the re-coming-togetherness of myself and nature, of myself and being, the reuniting of myself with all other selves. Solitude especially means putting the parts of my mind back together, unifying the pieces of my mind back together, unifying the pieces of myself scattered by anger and fear, until i can once again see that the little things are little and the big things are big." ~ Hugh Prather, ‘Notes to Myself’

“I had told people of my intention to be alone for a time. At once I realized they looked upon this declaration as a rejection of them and their company. I felt apologetic, even ashamed, that I would have wanted such a curious thing as solitude, and then sorry that I had made a point of announcing my desire for it. ... To the spouse, or the long-time companion, or the family, and to the social circle, as it is called, the decision to be alone for any length of time is dangerous, threatening, a sign of rejection. ... Having never felt the need to be alone themselves, having always lived happily in relationships, they looked upon my need as eccentric, even somewhat mad. But more than that, they saw it as fraudulent, an excuse to be rid of them rather than a desperate need to explore myself.” ~ Doris Grumbach, ‘Fifty Days of Solitude’

The End

Email me if you have questions or comments: tuffley@gmail.com

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