

A LINE ON LIFE

11/14/93

Positive Solitude *

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Although we admire rugged individualists, we don't seem to feel comfortable about people who keep to themselves. We often distrust contemplation and are suspicious of solitary people and their pursuits. However, solitude can be positive.

Positive solitude can provide greater self-discovery and growth by giving us the opportunity to identify our more cherished goals and to find ways to achieve them. It can give us a sense of inner peace and make us feel more in control of our lives.

Even so, it takes some effort to find time to reflect on our lives. If we live with others, the daily demands of family life may push us to only define ourselves through those who are close to us. In this case, we need to find time to retreat alone to a quiet place to find out what is important in our lives. On the other hand, if we live alone, we might compulsively seek company or fill our time with "*busywork*," so we don't feel "*left out*." Living alone does not have to be *lonely*. It can be a rewarding life style.

Unfortunately, many of us use the easiest, but probably the least-satisfying way to occupy our time – *television*. Watching television does not usually help us to relate to ourselves or others better. Typically, it bombards us with the values and agenda of TV programmers and advertisers. Because TV encourages us to let others decide what is interesting, we are discouraged from looking inward to develop original ideas or support ideas of others. Spending too much time in front of the TV feeds our feelings of loneliness.

We can use our solitude to free ourselves from the expectations of others and develop our own life plan and personal philosophy. This difficult and exciting task can be accomplished by asking ourselves basic questions about our lives.

"What gaps are there in my life?"

"What contributions do I want to make to the world?"

(You can probably think of other questions.)

To help in answering these questions, we can write down 10-20 activities that we used to love but haven't done in a long time. On the other hand, we can list activities we have always wanted to try – but we never did. Looking over our lists, we can pick one activity and actually do it. To actually do the activity requires some planning and effort. (*Any* change requires extra effort.) Mark a specific time on the calendar and then engage in that activity. If we don't plan to make a concentrated effort, we will fall into the same routine again – probably in front of the TV.

The goals of others are expressed in "*should*" statements, while our own goals are indicated by "*want*" statements.

In answering your questions, **beware of "*should*" statements**. "*Should*" statements indicate that the behaviors mentioned follow the expectations of *others*. If you can comfortably substitute "*want*" for "*should*" – then this is also your goal. For example, rather than saying, "*I should become a physician*," you need to feel just as comfortable declaring, "*I want to become a physician*."

Because of the added effort needed for any change, using solitude in a positive way may be very uncomfortable at first – especially if we don't make dramatic discoveries immediately. It takes a while to learn about ourselves – to challenge and reexamine some of our cherished assumptions. The effort we take will be worthwhile. It will give us deeper understanding of our values and needs, more confidence in our capabilities, a richer enjoyment of our lives and a greater receptivity toward others. (Try it – you'll like it!)

* Adapted from Rae Andre's "The Importance of Solitude," *Bottom Line: Personal*, October 30, 1993, pages 13-14. More information can be obtained from Dr. Andre's book, *Positive Solitude: A Practical Program for Mastering Loneliness and Achieving Self-Fulfillment*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.