A profoundly original exploration
of solitude and its role in the lives
of creative, fulfilled individuals

SOLITUDE

A RETURN TO THE SELF

"An excellent book. . . . *Solitude* is humane,
well written, equally distinguished by
scholarship, insight and common sense."
The New York Times

ANTHONY STORR

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

'Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius; and the uniformity of a work denotes the hand of a single artist.'
Edward Gibbon

Gibbon is surely right. The majority of poets, novelists, composers, and, to a lesser extent, of painters and sculptors, are bound to spend a great deal of their time alone, as Gibbon himself did. Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psychoanalysis, assumes that man is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness. Yet the lives of creative individuals often seem to run counter to this assumption. For example, many of the world's greatest thinkers have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This is true of Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Some of these men of genius had transient affairs with other men or women: others, like Newton, remained celibate. But none of them married, and most lived alone for the greater part of their lives.

Creative talent of a major kind is not widely bestowed. Those who possess it are often regarded with awe and envy because of their gifts. They also tend to be thought of as peculiar; odd human beings who do not share the pains and pleasures of the average person. Does this difference from the average imply abnormality in the sense of

psychopathology? More particularly, is the predilection of the creative person for solitude evidence of some inability to make close relationships?

It is not difficult to point to examples of men and women of genius whose interpersonal relationships have been stormy, and whose personalities have been grossly disturbed by mental illness, alcoholism, or drug abuse. Because of this, it is easy to assume that creative talent, mental instability, and a deficient capacity for making satisfying personal relationships are closely linked. Regarded from this point of view, the possession of creative talent appears as a doubtful blessing: a Janus-faced endowment, which may bring fame and fortune, but which is incompatible with what, for the ordinary person, constitutes happiness.

The belief that men and women of genius are necessarily unstable has been widely held, especially since the time of Freud. It cannot possibly be the whole truth. Not all creative people are notably disturbed; not all solitary people are unhappy. Gibbon, after his initial disappointment in love, enjoyed a particularly happy and equable life which anyone might envy. As he wrote himself:

> When I contemplate the common lot of mortality, I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life . . . I am endowed with a cheerful temper, a moderate sensibility, and a natural disposition to repose rather than to activity: some mischievous appetites and habits have perhaps been corrected by philosophy or time. The love of study, a passion which derives fresh vigour from enjoyment, supplies each day, each hour, with a perpetual source of independent and rational pleasure; and I am not sensible of any decay of the mental faculties . . . According to the scale of Switzerland, I am a rich man; and I am indeed rich, since my income is superior to my expense, and my expense is equal to my wishes. My friend Lord Sheffield has kindly relieved me from the cares to which my taste and temper are most adverse: shall I add, that since the failure of my first wishes, I have never entertained any serious thoughts of a matrimonial connection?[1]

As Lytton Strachey wrote in his essay on Gibbon:

> Happiness is the word that immediately rises to the mind at the thought of Edward Gibbon: and happiness in its widest connotation – including good fortune as well as enjoyment.[2]

Some might allege that Gibbon, by renouncing his love for Suzanne Curchod at the behest of his father, had cut himself off from the chief source of human happiness, and should be labelled pathological on this account. Sexual love may have played little part in Gibbon's life, but Gibbon's other relationships were rewarding. Although the immense labour of composing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* necessitated long periods of solitary study and writing, Gibbon was equally happy in company. When he was in London, he led an active social life, was a member of Boodle's, White's, and Brooks's, as well as of The Literary Club, and was appreciated everywhere as a fascinating talker. In addition, he displayed a touching affection toward his aunt, Mrs Porten, who had largely been responsible for his upbringing, and a gift for friendship which was most clearly manifest in his long and close relationship with Lord Sheffield. Gibbon occasionally laments his solitary state in his correspondence, and toyed with the idea of adopting a female cousin. But the prospect of matrimony was a daydream which he soon dismissed.

> When I have painted in my fancy all the probable consequences of such an union, I have started from my dream, rejoiced in my escape, and ejaculated a thanksgiving that I was still in possession of my natural freedom.[3]

Modern insistence that true happiness can only be found in intimate attachments, more especially in sexual fulfilment, does not allow a place for characters like Gibbon. It is clear that, although his friendships were many, his chief source of self-esteem and of pleasure was his work, as the famous sentence which closes his autobiography makes plain.

> In old age, the consolation of hope is reserved for the tenderness of parents, who commence a new life in their children; the faith of enthusiasts who sing Hallelujahs above the clouds, and the vanity of authors who presume the immortality of their name and writings.[4]

Gibbon was a classical artist whose style embodies an attitude toward the follies and extravagances of mankind which is both ironic and detached. Romantics, like Rousseau and Coleridge, detested him for this reason. In his writings, Gibbon's human sympathies certainly appear as limited: sex is generally treated as a subject of amusement; religion dismissed as superstition. But the immensity of the task he set himself demanded such a stance. To impose order upon the turmoil and confusion of so long a period of history required an Olympian perspective. Gibbon's humanity did not, and could not, manifest itself in his great history; but the warmth of his feelings towards his friends and the affection which they showed him demonstrate that the man himself possessed a human heart. By most of the standards adopted in the past, Gibbon would be rated as exceptionally well-balanced. It is only since Freud advanced the notion that heterosexual fulfilment is the *sine qua non* of mental health that anyone would question Gibbon's status as a more than commonly happy and successful human being.

It is not only men and women of genius who may find their chief value in the impersonal rather than in the personal. I shall argue that interests, whether in writing history, breeding carrier pigeons, speculating in stocks and shares, designing aircraft, playing the piano, or gardening, play a greater part in the economy of human happiness than modern psycho-analysts and their followers allow. The great creators exemplify my thesis most aptly because their works remain as evidence. That mysterious being, the ordinary man or woman, leaves little behind to indicate the breadth and depth of interests which may, during a lifetime, have been major preoccupations. The rich may accumulate great collections of the works of others. Enthusiastic gardeners can be notably creative and leave evidence of their passion which lasts for years, if not for as long as a book or a painting. But nothing remains of a passion for windmills or cricket. Yet we must all

are common to us all but which, in the case of ordinary people, escape notice. Perhaps the need of the creative person for solitude, and his preoccupation with internal processes of integration, can reveal something about the needs of the less gifted, more ordinary human being which is, at the time of writing, neglected.

1

The Significance of Human Relationships

'In solitude
What happiness? Who can enjoy alone,
Or all enjoying what contentment find?'

Milton

The current emphasis upon intimate interpersonal relationships as the touchstone of health and happiness is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Earlier generations would not have rated human relationships so highly; believing, perhaps, that the daily round, the common task, should furnish all we need to ask; or, alternatively, being too preoccupied with merely keeping alive and earning a living to have much time to devote to the subtleties of personal relations. Some observers, like Ernest Gellner, suggest that our present preoccupation with, and anxiety about, human relationships has replaced former anxieties about the unpredictability and precariousness of the natural world. He argues that, in modern affluent societies, most of us are protected from disease, poverty, hunger, and natural catastrophes to an extent undreamed of by previous generations. But modern industrial societies are unstable and lacking in structure. Increased mobility has undermined the pillars of society. Because we have more choice as to where we live, what society we should join, and what we should make of our lives, our relations with the other people who constitute our environment are no longer defined by age-old rules and have therefore become matters of increasing concern and anxiety. As Gellner puts it, 'Our

environment is now made up basically of relationships with others.'[1]

Gellner goes on to affirm that the realm of personal relations has become 'the area of our most pressing concern'. Our anxieties in this field are compounded by the decline of religious belief. Religion not only provided rules of conduct regarding personal relationships, but also offered a more predictable, stable alternative. Relationships with spouse, children, or neighbours might be difficult, unfulfilling, or unstable; but, so long as one continued to believe in Him, the same could not be said of one's relationship with God.

Although I am far from agreeing with everything which Gellner has to say in his book about psycho-analysis, I think he is right in alleging that psycho-analysis promises a form of salvation; and that this kind of salvation is to be attained by purging the individual of the emotional blocks or blind spots which prevent him from achieving fulfilling interpersonal relationships. Gellner is also right in thinking that psycho-analysis has exerted so widespread an influence that it has become the dominant idiom for the discussion of human personality and personal relationships even by those who do not subscribe to all its doctrines.

Psycho-analysis has changed considerably during the course of the twentieth century. The main change has been the increase in emphasis upon the patient's relationship with the psycho-analyst. Psycho-analysis now insists that analysis of transference, that is, of the patient's emotional response to, and attitude toward, the psycho-analyst, is the most essential feature of psycho-analytic treatment. Indeed, recognition of the importance of transference has been a main factor in creating common ground between psychotherapeutic schools like those of Freud and Jung which in other theoretical ways are still poles apart. Although the status of psycho-analysis as an effective method of curing neurotic symptoms has been questioned in recent years, the influence of concepts derived from psycho-analysis is pervasive. In most varieties of social work, for instance, consideration of the client's capacity to make human relationships is thought to be a vital part of case-work; and attempts are often made to improve this capacity through the agency of the client's relationship with the social worker.

In the early days of psycho-analysis, the emphasis was not so much

upon the analysis of transference as upon retracing the course of the patient's psycho-sexual development. The patient was primarily regarded as a separate individual, and his emotional attitude toward the analyst was considered as secondary, or indeed as an obstacle to psycho-analytic investigation. When Freud began his investigation of the origins of neurosis during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, he invariably found disturbances in the sexual lives of his patients. The edifice of psycho-analysis came to rest upon the foundation of the theoretical scheme of sexual development, from infancy onward, which Freud postulated as a consequence of his investigations.

In Freud's view, the various types of neurosis were related to the patient's failure to progress beyond the early stages of sexual development; to fixation at the 'oral', 'anal', or 'phallic' stage, which prevented progress toward 'genitality', as Freud named the stage of sexual maturity. Freud believed that mental life was originally directed by the 'pleasure principle'; that is, by the need to avoid pain and to obtain pleasure. He also believed that the nervous system, and hence the mental apparatus, had the function of reducing the level of intensity of the instinctual impulses which reached it, by finding ways of expressing, and therefore of discharging, those impulses. The idea of psychological health and happiness became linked with the existence, or achievement, of sexual fulfilment.

It became widely assumed that, if a person was happy and healthy, he or she must be enjoying a satisfying sexual life; and, conversely, that if a person was neurotically unhappy, there must be a disturbance in his or her capacity to find sexual release. During Freud's lifetime, the main emphasis was upon instinctual satisfaction; that is, upon the capacity for orgasm. It was tacitly implied that, if partners were able to give each other satisfaction in this way, other aspects of their relationship could be taken for granted. Sex was the touchstone by which the whole relationship could be evaluated. If a patient could overcome the blocks which had caused fixations at immature stages of sexual development, and attain the genital stage, there would then be no obstacle to the establishment of relationships with others on equal and mutually rewarding terms.

provided by such relationships are neurotic, immature, or in some other way abnormal. Today, the thrust of most forms of psychotherapy, whether with individuals or groups, is directed toward understanding what has gone wrong with the patient's relationships with significant persons in his or her past, in order that the patient can be helped toward making more fruitful and fulfilling human relationships in the future.

Since past relationships condition expectations in regard to new relationships, the attitude of the patient toward the analyst as a new and significant person is an important source of information about previous difficulties and also provides a potential opportunity for correcting these difficulties. To give a simple example, a patient who has experienced rejection or ill-treatment is likely to approach the analyst with an expectation of further rejection and ill-treatment, although the patient may be quite unconscious of the fact that this expectation is affecting his attitude. The realization that he is making false assumptions about how others will treat him, together with the actual experience of being treated by the analyst with greater kindness and understanding than he had expected, may revolutionize his expectations and facilitate his making better relationships with others than had hitherto been possible.

As we have seen, Freud discounted any feelings which the analysand expressed toward the analyst as unreal, and interpreted them as belonging to the past. Today, many analysts recognize that such feelings are not merely facsimiles of childhood impulses and phantasies. In some cases they represent an attempt to make up for what has been missing in the analysand's childhood. The analysand may, for a time, see the analyst as the ideal parent whom he never had. This experience may have a healing effect, and it can be a mistake to dispel this image by premature interpretation or by calling it an illusion.

As we saw earlier, Freud considered that the psycho-analyst's task was to remove the blocks which were preventing the patient from expressing his instinctual drives in adult fashion. If this task could be accomplished, it was supposed that the patient's relationships would automatically improve. Modern analysts have reversed this order. They think first in terms of relationships, second in terms of

instinctual satisfaction. If the analysand is enabled to make relationships with other human beings which are on equal terms, and free from anxiety, it is assumed that there will be no difficulty in expressing instinctual drives and attaining sexual fulfilment. Object-relations theorists believe that, from the beginning of life, human beings are seeking *relationships*, not merely instinctual satisfaction. They think of neurosis as representing a failure to make satisfying human relationships rather than as a matter of inhibited or undeveloped sexual drives.

Transference, in the sense of the patient's total emotional attitude or series of attitudes toward the analyst, is therefore seen as a central feature of analytical treatment, not as a relic from the past, nor as 'a curse', nor even, as Freud later regarded it, as 'a powerful ally', because of the power which it gave him to modify the patient's attitudes. Today a psycho-analyst will usually spend a good deal of his time detecting and commenting upon the way in which his patients react to himself, the analyst: whether they are fearful, compliant, aggressive, competitive, withdrawn, or anxious. Such attitudes have their history, which needs to be explored. But the emphasis is different. The analyst studies the analysand's distorted attitude to himself, and by this means perceives the distortions in the analysand's relationships with others. To do this effectively implies the recognition that there is a real relationship in the here-and-now, and that analysis is not solely concerned with the events of early childhood.

The analytical encounter is, after all, unique. No ordinary social meeting allows detailed study of the way in which one party reacts to the other. In no other situation in life can anyone count on a devoted listener who is prepared to give so much time and skilled attention to the problems of a single individual without asking for any reciprocal return, other than professional remuneration. The patient may never have encountered anyone in his life who has paid him such attention or even been prepared to listen to his problems. It is not surprising that the analyst becomes important to him. Recognizing the reality of such feelings is as necessary as recognizing the irrational and distorted elements of the transference which date from the analysand's childhood experience.

This concentration upon interpersonal relationships and upon transference is not characteristic of all forms of analytical practice; but it does link together a number of psycho-analysts and psychotherapists who may originally have been trained in different schools, but who share two fundamental convictions. The first is that neurotic problems are something to do with early failures in the relation between the child and its parents: the second, that health and happiness entirely depend upon the maintenance of intimate personal relationships.

No two children are exactly alike, and it must be recognized that genetic differences may contribute powerfully to problems in childhood development. The same parent may be perceived quite differently by different children. Nevertheless, I share the conviction that many neurotic difficulties in later life can be related to the individual's early emotional experience within the family.

I am less convinced that intimate personal relationships are the only source of health and happiness. In the present climate, there is a danger that love is being idealized as the only path to salvation. When Freud was asked what constituted psychological health, he gave as his answer the ability to love and work. We have over-emphasized the former, and paid too little attention to the latter. In many varieties of analysis, exclusive concentration upon interpersonal relationships has led to failure to consider other ways of finding personal fulfilment, and also to neglecting the study of shifting dynamics within the psyche of the isolated individual.

A number of psycho-analysts contributed to the rise of 'object-relations theory' as opposed to Freud's 'instinct theory'. Amongst these analysts were Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and Ronald Fairbairn. But the most important work in this field has been that of John Bowlby, whose three volumes *Attachment and Loss* are deservedly influential, have inspired a great deal of research, and are widely regarded as having made a major contribution to our understanding of human nature.

Bowlby assumes that the primary need of human beings, from infancy onward, is for supportive and rewarding relationships with other human beings, and that this need for *attachment* extends far beyond the need for sexual fulfilment. The ideas which Bowlby is

expressing derive from a welcome synthesis between ethology and psycho-analysis. By emphasizing attachment, which is distinct from sexual involvement, although often associated with it, Bowlby has widened the psycho-analytic view of man and human relationships, bringing it more into line with the findings of workers in other disciplines.

Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* originated in his work for the World Health Organization on the mental health of homeless children. This led to subsequent study of the effects upon young children of the temporary loss of the mother and to a far greater appreciation of the distress suffered by young children when, for example, they or their mothers have to be admitted to hospital.

Human infants begin to develop specific attachments to particular people around the third quarter of their first year of life. This is the time at which the infant begins to protest if handed to a stranger and tends to cling to the mother or other adults with whom he is familiar. The mother usually provides a secure base to which the infant can return, and, when she is present, the infant is bolder in both exploration and play than when she is absent. If the attachment figure removes herself, even briefly, the infant usually protests. Longer separations, as when children have been admitted to hospital, cause a regular sequence of responses first described by Bowlby. Angry protest is succeeded by a period of despair in which the infant is quietly miserable and apathetic. After a further period, the infant becomes detached and appears no longer to care about the absent attachment figure. This sequence of *protest*, *despair*, and *detachment* seems to be the standard response of the small child whose mother is removed.

The evidence is sufficiently strong for Bowlby to consider that an adult's capacity for making good relationships with other adults depends upon the individual's experience of attachment figures when a child. A child who from its earliest years is certain that his attachment figures will be available when he needs them, will develop a sense of security and inner confidence. In adult life, this confidence will make it possible for him to trust and love other human beings. In relationships between the sexes in which love and trust has been established, sexual fulfilment follows as a natural consequence.

However, attachment varies in quality and intensity, partly depending upon the mother's reaction to, and treatment of, her infant; and partly, no doubt, upon innate genetic differences. Although the overt response of an infant to the mother's departure may appear to be similar in different instances, the consequences of her prolonged absence may vary considerably from case to case. Research indicates that children brought up in institutions are more disruptive and demanding than children reared in nuclear families. It is likely, though not absolutely proven, that such children are less able to make intimate relationships when grown-up than those who have had the advantage of a close-knit, loving family. Experiments with separating infant monkeys from their mothers indicate that it is not difficult to produce an adult monkey which is incapable of normal social and sexual relationships. However, human beings are extraordinarily resilient, and even children who have been persistently isolated and ill-treated may be able to compensate for this if their environment changes for the better.

In Chapter 12 of the first volume of *Attachment and Loss*, Bowlby discusses the nature and function of attachment from the biological point of view. From his extensive knowledge of attachment behaviour in other species as well as in man, he concludes that the original function of attachment behaviour was protection from predators. First, he points out that isolated animals are more likely to be attacked by predators than animals which stay together in a group. Second, he draws attention to the fact that, in both man and other animals, attachment behaviour is particularly likely to be elicited when the individual is young, sick, or pregnant. These states all make the individual more vulnerable to attack. Third, situations which cause alarm invariably cause people to look around for others with whom to share the danger. In the case of modern man, the danger from predators has receded, but his response to other forms of threat remains the same.

This biological interpretation makes good sense. Modern man seems pre-programmed to respond to a number of stimuli in ways which were more appropriate to the life of a tribal hunter-gatherer than they are to urban Western man at the end of the twentieth century. This is notably so in the case of our aggressive responses to


image
not
available

support from the group, they still complained of loneliness. No amount of friendship was enough to compensate for the loss of close attachment and emotional intimacy which they had experienced in marriage.

But, however crucial such relationships are for most people, it is not only *intimate* personal relationships which provide life with meaning. Weiss also studied married couples who, for one reason or another, had moved a considerable distance from the neighbourhood in which they had been living. Although their intimate attachments to their spouses were unimpaired, they were distressed at no longer feeling part of a group.[5]

In other words, whether or not they are enjoying intimate relationships, human beings need a sense of being part of a larger community than that constituted by the family. The modern assumption that intimate relationships are essential to personal fulfilment tends to make us neglect the significance of relationships which are not so intimate. Schizophrenics, and other individuals who are more or less totally isolated, are rightly regarded as pathological; but many human beings make do with relationships which cannot be regarded as especially close, and not all such human beings are ill or even particularly unhappy.

Social structures of the kind found in the army or in a business may not give individuals the same kind of satisfactions which they might obtain from intimate relationships, but they do provide a setting in which the individual feels he has a function and a place. Gellner's contention, referred to above, that modern society is so mobile and fluid that it has made many people feel disorientated and insecure, is to some extent countered by the fact that many workers are reluctant to abandon a familiar setting even if offered more rewarding opportunities. The fact that a man is part of a hierarchy, and that he has a particular job to carry out, gives his life significance. It also provides a frame of reference through which he perceives his relation with others. In the course of daily life, we habitually encounter many people with whom we are not intimate, but who nevertheless contribute to our sense of self. Neighbours, postmen, bank clerks, shop assistants, and many others may all be familiar figures with whom we daily exchange friendly greetings, but are

generally persons about whose lives we know very little. Yet, if such a person disappears and is replaced by another, we feel some sense of loss, however transient. We say that we have become 'used to' so-and-so; but what we miss is mutual recognition, acknowledgement of each other's existence, and thus some affirmation, however slight, that each reciprocally contributes something to life's pattern.

Relationships of this kind play a more important role in the lives of most of us than is generally recognized. When people retire from work in offices or institutions, they miss the familiar figures who used to provide recognition and affirmation. It is generally accepted that most human beings want to be loved. The wish to be recognized and acknowledged is at least as important.

In Western societies today, a large number of people live lives in which intimate relationships play little part, however much they recognize the lack, or attempt to compensate for it in phantasy. Instead of being centred on spouse and children, their lives are based upon the office where, although they may not be loved, they are at least recognized and valued. People who have a special need to be recognized, perhaps because their parents accorded them little recognition in childhood, are attracted to office life for this reason. Although some types of work may require short periods of solitary concentration, most office workers spend relatively little time alone, without human interaction, and, for the majority, this seems to be an attractive feature of office life.

The importance which less intimate, comparatively superficial relationships play in the lives of most of us is also attested by the kind of conversations we have with acquaintances. When neighbours meet in the street, they may, especially in England, use the weather as an opening gambit. But if the exchange is at all prolonged, the conversation is likely to turn to talk of other neighbours. Even the most intellectual persons are seldom averse to gossip, although they may affect to despise it. It would be interesting to know what proportion of conversation consists of talking about the lives of other people, as compared with talking about books, music, painting, ideas or money. Even amongst the highly educated, the proportion cannot be small.

Failure to make, or to sustain, the kind of intimate attachments

which the object-relations theorists maintain are the main source of life's meaning and satisfaction does not imply that a person is necessarily cut off from other, less intimate human relationships. Whilst it is certainly more difficult for most people to find meaning in life if they do not have close attachments, many people can and do lead equable and satisfying lives by basing them upon a mixture of work and more superficial relationships. Edward Gibbon, from whom I quoted in the Introduction, is a good example. We should also remember that exceptional people have suffered long periods of solitary confinement without coming to feel that their lives are meaningless, whilst others have deliberately sought weeks or months of solitude for reasons to which we shall return.

Bowlby, in the penultimate paragraph of the third and last volume of *Attachment and Loss*, writes:

> Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age. From these intimate attachments a person draws his strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes, he gives strength and enjoyment to others. These are matters about which current science and traditional wisdom are at one.[6]

I have been a consistent admirer of Bowlby's work since I first encountered it. Because of his insistence that psycho-analytic observations must be supported by objective studies, and because of his use of ethological concepts, he has done more than any other psycho-analyst to link psycho-analysis with science. But attachment theory, in my view, does less than justice to the importance of work, to the emotional significance of what goes on in the mind of the individual when he is alone, and, more especially, to the central place occupied by the imagination in those who are capable of creative achievement. Intimate attachments are *a* hub around which a person's life revolves, not necessarily *the* hub.

2
The Capacity to be Alone

'We must reserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude.'

Montaigne

In infancy and early childhood, attachment to parents or to parent substitutes is essential if the child is to survive, and secure attachment probably necessary if it is to develop into an adult capable of making intimate relationships with other adults on equal terms. Although broken homes are deplorably common in Western society, parents who are concerned about their children's well-being try to provide them with a stable, loving background which will promote secure attachment and the growth of self-confidence. In addition, most parents will try to ensure that their children have plenty of opportunity to encounter and to play with other children of the same age. In both sub-human primates and in human beings, secure attachment between mother and infant encourages exploratory behaviour. A child who is sure of his mother's availability will generally want to explore his immediate environment, play with toys, and come into contact with whatever else may be in the room, including other children. There is some evidence to suggest that children as young as eighteen months old benefit from being allowed to mix with their peers. It is certain that interaction with children of the same age provides opportunities for learning social skills which are not provided by interaction between parents and child.

For example, rough-and-tumble play, which is important in

learning how to handle aggression, is common between children of the same age, but rare between parent and child. Attitudes to sex are generally acquired from other children rather than learned from parents. The study of adults who complain of sexual difficulties often discloses that, as children, they were unusually isolated. Because they did not learn from other children that sexual curiosity and sexual impulses are universal, they grew up feeling themselves to be different from others; perhaps uniquely evil.

In Chapter 1, we saw that most adult human beings want both intimate relationships and the sense of belonging to a community. In childhood, secure attachment to parents or to parent-substitutes is vital; but relationships with other children also provide social experience of a kind which is irreplaceable.

There has been, and continues to be, a great deal of research on these two aspects of child development; but virtually no discussion of whether it is ever valuable for children to be alone. Yet if it is considered desirable to foster the growth of the child's imaginative capacity, we should ensure that our children, when they are old enough to enjoy it, are given time and opportunity for solitude. Many creative adults have left accounts of childhood feelings of mystical union with Nature; peculiar states of awareness, or 'Intimations of Immortality', as Wordsworth called them. Such accounts are furnished by characters as diverse as Walt Whitman, Arthur Koestler, Edmund Gosse, A. L. Rowse and C. S. Lewis. We may be sure that such moments do not occur when playing football, but chiefly when the child is on its own. Bernard Berenson's description is particularly telling. He refers to moments when he lost himself in 'some instant of perfect harmony'.

> In childhood and boyhood this ecstasy overtook me when I was happy out of doors. Was I five or six? Certainly not seven. It was a morning in early summer. A silver haze shimmered and trembled over the lime trees. The air was laden with their fragrance. The temperature was like a caress. I remember – I need not recall – that I climbed up a tree stump and felt suddenly immersed in Itness. I did not call it by that name. I had no need for words. It and I were one.[1]

> I am trying to justify the paradox that the capacity to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of someone, and that without a sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop.[4]

Winnicott goes on to make the extremely interesting suggestion that

> It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his personal life.[5]

Infants, because they are immature, need the support of another person if their sense of being 'I', that is, a separate person with a separate identity, is to develop. Winnicott conceives that this begins to happen when the infant is able to be in the relaxed state which is constituted by the experience of being alone in the presence of the mother. After being in this state for a while, the infant will begin to experience a sensation or impulse. Winnicott suggests that

> In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience.

Winnicott contrasts this feeling of personal experience with what he calls

> a false life built on reactions to external stimuli.[6]

Throughout most of his professional life, Winnicott was particularly preoccupied with whether an individual's experience was authentic or inauthentic. Many of the patients whom he treated had, for one reason or another, learned as children to be over-compliant; that is, to live in ways which were expected of them, or which pleased others, or which were designed not to offend others. These are the patients who build up what Winnicott called a 'false self'; that is, a self which is based upon compliance with the wishes of others, rather than being based upon the individual's own true feelings and instinctive needs. Such an individual ultimately comes to feel that life

is pointless and futile, because he is merely adapting to the world rather than experiencing it as a place in which his subjective needs can find fulfilment.

Although Winnicott's suppositions about the subjective experiences of infants are impossible to prove, I find his conceptions illuminating. He is suggesting that the capacity to be alone originally depends upon what Bowlby would call secure attachment: that is, upon the child being able peacefully to be itself in the presence of the mother without anxiety about her possible departure, and without anxiety as to what may or may not be expected by her. As the secure child grows, it will no longer need the constant physical presence of the mother or other attachment figure, but will be able to be alone without anxiety for longer periods.

But Winnicott goes further. He suggests that the capacity to be alone, first in the presence of the mother, and then in her absence, is also related to the individual's capacity to get in touch with, and make manifest, his own true inner feelings. It is only when the child has experienced a contented, relaxed sense of being alone with, and then without, the mother, that he can be sure of being able to discover what he really needs or wants, irrespective of what others may expect or try to foist upon him.

The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses.

Psycho-analysis is also concerned with putting the individual in touch with his or her deepest feelings. The technique employed could be described as encouraging the individual to be alone in the presence of the analyst. This analogy particularly applies to the procedures used in the early days of psycho-analysis, before the analysis of transference became of such central importance (see Chapter 1). The use of the couch not only encouraged relaxation but also precluded eye contact between analysand and analyst. This prevented the analysand from being too preoccupied with the reactions of the analyst to what he was saying, and thus made it easier for him to concentrate upon his own inner world.

Some analysts still believe that providing a secure milieu in which the patient can explore and express his most intimate thoughts and

feelings is at least as important as any interpretations which they may offer. One analyst whom I knew personally illustrated this point with the story of a patient whom he saw three times per week over a period of a year. At every session, the patient lay down upon the couch and plunged straight into free association. At the end of the year, the man pronounced himself cured, and proffered his grateful thanks. The analyst declared that, during the whole of this period, he had offered no interpretations whatever. Even if this particular story is slightly exaggerated, the analogy with what Winnicott postulates as taking place between the secure infant and the mother is striking.

As we have seen, patients in analysis can be helped to form better relationships with other people in the outside world by working through and understanding their relationship with the analyst. When a person is encouraged to get in touch with and express his deepest feelings, in the secure knowledge that he will not be rejected, criticized, nor expected to be different, some kind of rearrangement or sorting-out process often occurs within the mind which brings with it a sense of peace; a sense that the depths of the well of truth have really been reached. This process, which in itself contributes to healing, is facilitated by the analyst's providing a suitably secure milieu, but is not necessarily dependent upon the analyst's interpretations. The story of the patient who said he was cured despite, or because of, the silence of the analyst can be seen to contain a strong element of truth. The process of healing, in such cases, is very like the healing which may occur as part of the creative process in solitude.

Integration also takes place in sleep. We are all alone when we are asleep, even though we may be sharing a bed with a loved person. When faced with a problem to which there is no obvious answer, conventional wisdom recommends 'sleeping on it', and conventional wisdom is right. Most people have had the experience of being unable to make up their minds when faced with a difficult decision, and of going to bed with the decision still not taken. On waking in the morning, they often find that the solution has become so obvious that they cannot understand why they could not perceive it on the previous night. Some kind of scanning and re-ordering process has

taken place during sleep, although the exact nature of this process remains mysterious.

Another example of integration which requires time, solitude, and, preferably, a period of sleep, is the process of learning. Students find that they cannot easily retain or reproduce material which they have tried to commit to memory immediately before taking an examination. On the other hand, material which has been learned at an earlier stage and 'slept on', is much more easily recalled. Some kind of reverberation around neuronal circuits must be linking new material to old material, and committing new material to the long-term memory store.

Although we spend about a third of our lives asleep, the reasons why we need sleep are not fully understood. That we do need it is certain. As interrogators long ago realized, depriving prisoners of sleep is a relatively quick method of breaking them down. Although a few exceptional people can, without deterioration, survive without sleep for quite long periods, the majority of previously normal human beings exhibit psychotic symptoms like delusions and hallucinations after only a few days and nights without sleep. It is also worth noting that many episodes of mental illness are preceded by periods of insomnia.

The integrating function of sleep may be linked with dreaming. In 1952, Nathaniel Kleitman discovered that there were two kinds of sleep, which can be shown by recording the electrical activity of the brain during sleep to follow a regular cycle. As subjects relax and fall asleep, the fairly rapid electrical waves which are characteristic of the brain's waking activity are replaced by slower, more ample waves. These slower waves are accompanied by slow, rolling eye movements which can easily be seen through the closed eyelids of the sleeper, and which are entirely involuntary. It is possible to record these eye movements at the same time as the brain waves. When people first go to sleep, they enter quite quickly a stage of deep sleep from which it is difficult to rouse them. After about thirty or forty minutes, they begin to sleep more lightly; the sleeper's breathing becomes faster and more irregular; there are small twitches of his face and fingertips, and his eyes make rapid movements as if he was actually looking at something. This phase of rapid-eye-movement sleep, or REM sleep