

Solitude: The Seedbed of Self-Discovery

by Maria Popova

"A great deal of poetic work has arisen from various despairs," wrote Lou Andreas-Salomé, the first woman psychoanalyst, in a consolatory letter to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as he was wrestling with depression, nearly a century before psychologists came to study the nonlinear relationship between creativity and mental illness. A generation later, with an eye to what made Goethe a genius, Humphrey Trevelyan argued that great artists must have the courage to despair, that they "must be shaken by the naked truths that will not be comforted. This divine discontent, this disequilibrium, this state of inner tension is the source of artistic energy."

Few artists have articulated the dance between this "divine discontent" and creative fulfillment more memorably than the poet, novelist, essayist, and diarist May Sarton (May 3, 1912–July 16, 1995). In her *Journal of a Solitude* (public library), Sarton records and reflects on her interior life in the course of one year, her sixtieth, with remarkable candor and courage. Out of these twelve private months arises the eternity of the human experience with its varied universal capacities for astonishment and sorrow, hollowing despair and creative vitality.

May Sarton

In an entry from September 15, 1972, Sarton writes:

It is raining. I look out on the maple, where a few leaves have turned yellow, and listen to Punch, the parrot, talking to himself and to the rain ticking gently against the windows. I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my "real" life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone...

She considers solitude as the seedbed of self-discovery:

For a long time now, every meeting with another human being has been a collision. I feel too much, sense too much, am exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting, and tormented self. I have written every poem, every novel, for the same purpose — to find out what I think, to know where I stand.

[...]

My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge empty silence if I cannot find support there. I go up to Heaven and down to Hell in an hour, and keep alive only by imposing upon myself inexorable routines.

Art by Sir Quentin Blake from Michael Rosen's Sad Book

In another journal entry penned three days later, in the grip of her recurrent struggle with depression, Sarton revisits the question of the difficult, necessary self-confrontations that solitude makes possible:

The value of solitude — one of its values — is, of course, that there is nothing to cushion against attacks from within, just as there is nothing to help balance at times of particular stress or depression. A few moments of desultory conversation ... may calm an inner storm. But the storm, painful as it is, might have had some truth in it. So sometimes one has simply to endure a period of depression for what it may hold of illumination if one can live through it, attentive to what it exposes or demands.

In a passage that calls to mind William Styron's sobering account of living with depression, Sarton adds:

The reasons for depression are not so interesting as the way one handles it, simply to stay alive.

Perhaps Albert Camus was right in asserting that "there is no love of life without despair of life," but this is a truth hard to take in and even harder to swallow when one is made tongueless by depression. In an entry from October 6, still clawing her way out of the pit of darkness, Sarton considers the only cure for despair she knows:

Does anything in nature despair except man? An animal with a foot caught in a trap does not seem to despair. It is too busy trying to survive. It is all closed in, to a kind of still, intense waiting. Is this a key? Keep busy with survival. Imitate the trees. Learn to lose in order to recover, and remember that nothing stays the same for long, not even pain, psychic pain. Sit it out. Let it all pass. Let it go.

Art from Trees at Night by Art Young, 1926. (Available as a print.)

By mid-October, Sarton has begun to emerge from the abyss and marvels at the transformation in a beautiful testament to the finitude and transitoriness of all things, even the deepest-cutting and most all-consuming of states:

I can hardly believe that relief from the anguish of these past months is here to stay, but so far it does feel like a true change of mood — or rather, a change of being where I can stand alone.

Echoing Virginia Woolf's memorable insight into writing and self-doubt — the same self-doubt with which Steinbeck's diary is strewn — Sartre considers the measure of success in creative work:

So much of my life here is precarious. I cannot always believe even in my work. But I have come in these last days to feel again the validity of my struggle here, that it is meaningful whether I ever "succeed" as a writer or not, and that even its failures, failures of nerve, failures due to a difficult temperament, can be meaningful. It is an age where more and more human beings are caught up in lives where fewer and fewer inward decisions can be made, where fewer and fewer real choices exist. The fact that a middle-aged, single woman, without any vestige of family left, lives in this house in a silent village and is responsible only to her own soul means something. The fact that she is a writer and can tell where she is and what it is like on the pilgrimage inward can be of comfort. It is comforting to know there are lighthouse keepers on rocky islands along the coast. Sometimes, when I have been for a walk after dark and see my house lighted up, looking so alive, I feel that my presence here is worth all the Hell.

Complement these particular passages of the wholly exquisite *Journal of a Solitude* with Tchaikovsky on depression and finding beauty amid the wreckage of the soul, then revisit Louise Bourgeois on how solitude enriches creative work and Elizabeth Bishop on why everyone needs at least one prolonged period of solitude in life.