

“What Is Loneliness, Anyway?”
Solitude and Creativity in a Post-Covid Age

by Marc Lowe

I.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the subject of what it means to be — or, should I say, to feel? — “lonely.”

This is only natural for me, as I have been living alone in a tiny one-room apartment (without a single closet) located in a city of 14 million (Tokyo) for nearly four full years now.

Additionally, and with great “thanks” to the algorithms used by YouTube and other similar SNS sites, as a result of having in the past clicked on videos dealing with this topic, or some other similar subject, I have been not-so-subtly nudged in the direction of cogitating even more intensely on this too-obvious fact of my life here in Tokyo since the summer of 2020, which marks the time/season that I broke up with/moved away from my then-girlfriend of nearly four years.

Along with videos that have headings such as “Tucker Carlson Interviews Vladimir Putin,” “Why Sigma Males Sometimes Suddenly Just Disappear,” various David Bowie interviews from different points in his career (I just finished teaching a seminar on his music and philosophy at two different universities, so I have frequently accessed such content over the last several months, especially), etc., I have also been getting videos with titles such as “Why Your Spiritual Journey Must Be Made Alone!” or “The Loneliness Pandemic” or, then again, in a similar, yet subtly different, vein, “The Reason You Currently Find Yourself With No Friends,” and so on.

Indeed, less than six months after arriving in Tokyo from Fukuoka, together with my then-girlfriend, back in October of 2019, and just two months after the start of the Covid pandemic, I found myself living in this small apartment here, quite alone.

I am still here today.

And I am still, if nothing else, rather alone, and also rather “single.”

But, does this mean that I am also “lonely”?

Well, my answer is this.

“It depends.”

Sometimes yes.

Sometimes no.

(Ahem.)

So, getting back, for a moment, to my YouTube feed, which I tend to access fairly often (I have a subscription to “Premium,” both because I myself am a user of the site — I have an official channel with nearly 500 videos uploaded at present — and also because I use it in my classes at university), I cannot help notice that one type of video that frequently tends to appear on my algorithm-determined YouTube front page has been, and has continued to be, talks by “experts” discussing, often with an air of “I know because I have been there” certitude, the stark distinction to be made between the related terms/concepts of “loneliness” and “solitude.”

These “experts,” who wax so poetically on this apparently very popular topic around “solitude vs. loneliness” generally appear in one or another guise: They are either spiritual/meditation teachers, psychologists/psychiatrists (assuming these individuals are not lying about having a license in said field and/or having an actual practice somewhere), or, finally, self-professed “talk gurus” (you know the type, right?), most of whom are actually just popular YouTubers faithfully monetizing their talks (hence, the algorithm favors them and pushes them onto my “For You” page, I assume, since I had never searched for them nor clicked on any of their videos before learning of their existence, at least online...). In other words, this latter group consists of people with a silver tongue who also (apparently) well understand how to attract attention to their videos and to make a profit from them via YouTube’s monetization system, which is all about clicks, likes, and subscribers. Or, in yet *other* words: they are essentially savvy businesspeople, or marketing experts, with a bit of knowledge about the topic of “solitude.”

And so, well... As I myself am neither such a self-professed “expert,” a monetizing YouTuber (I am not making any profit from any of my nearly 500 videos, as I do not have enough followers or hits to make it worth my while to monetize — and then have to pay taxes on my measly profits), a spiritual “master,” a world leader of any kind, a philanthropist (one needs a lot of money for that, which I definitely do not have), nor really a respected *anything* (please keep in mind that I am sitting alone here in a cafe on my sole day off this week, writing an essay on *loneliness*...). And so you, dear reader, should and indeed *must* take everything I say with a proverbial, not to mention a “healthy,” *pinch of salt*.

(Note that, although I am nominally/officially a “professor,” which some might say ought to elicit some form of formal “respect” from others outside of the university, I no longer have the fancy title of “Associate Professor” I once had while a full-time employee of Kyushu University. The irony is that, at the time I did have such a title, I was on an unrenowable contract that, when it reached its expiry date, would bring me here to Lonely Planet Tokyo in search of work. I now divide my teaching duties between 2-3 schools at any given time, occasionally four or more, and I also do private lessons whenever I can get the work so that I can pay all of my months bills, which keep climbing higher and higher, while my payment does not. Currently, by the bye, my title is “part-time instructor” or, in Japanese, *Hijōkin-kōshi* [非常勤講師], which does have quite the same impressive ring to it as “Associate Professor,” or *Junkyojū*, does. And so, what’s in a name? Well, for some *a lot*, apparently...)

In any case, despite what I may perhaps lack in titles or awards or in any other outward form of “respected [fill in the blank with any/all of the following: professor, musician, artist, etc.]” I can perhaps make up for in terms of personal knowledge and/or “life experience” — or, well, certainly as far as the subject at hand is concerned: *experience being alone*. Indeed, I have spent rather long periods of time quite alone since coming to this city, in some cases passing both my days and nights in almost complete “isolation” for a period of several months, as during the Covid pandemic of 2020 and 2021 (most especially during the summer of '21, as I will discuss a bit later on in this essay). I also think rather deeply about such things on a regular, even a daily (to be honest), basis, so I have decided to put some of my current thoughts on the matter down on paper (or, well, onto *virtual* paper, anyway) in order to *not* keep it bottled up inside my head any longer.

II.

Today, coincidentally, is Valentine’s Day (it’s February 14). But, is this, too, a coincidence? Jung, whose *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* I just revisited for the first time today since I was around 12 years old (my grandmother had bought it for me that year as a birthday present: How’s that for a Jungian memory?), via the Kindle app on my iPad, would have said: *Nothing in life is ever coincidental*.

I happen to have the day off because the fall semester is finished. It ended at the end of last month (January), and now that my fall semester grades, too, are (finally) finished and have been submitted officially to my respective universities, I have some time. Further, the intensive course I yesterday started teaching is held this week only on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, skipping over Wednesday (today), for some reason I haven’t quite figured out, so I did not and do not need to go to the university campus this afternoon/evening.

It’s nice to have a “day off” once in a while, isn’t it?

I had initially considering spending the better part of today practicing and/or recording one of my instruments at home — either my Guild acoustic guitar or my 88-key Korg electric piano, or perhaps a bit of both — but, as I had just been in the studio for three full hours two days prior, both rehearsing and improvising and recording on various instruments, including the drums, I decided instead to work on writing something today. Hence, the present essay.

I left my apartment room at around noon with my computer and iPad in tow, got on a train... Initially I was going to go to another, slightly farther-from-home part of Tokyo, but instead I ended up right where I am now, in a city called Tachikawa, which is actually not so far for me. And so here I sit at this lovely coffee shop on this Valentine’s Day Wednesday afternoon. I have access to free Wifi and to two power outlets below the counter at which I type, so that I can conveniently recharge my computer or phone as necessary without having to move my seat, not to mention that it has really large windows with some rather welcome sunlight flowing into this cafe space today (my apartment is not South-facing, so I only get good sunlight in the morning, unfortunately).

The fact that it's Valentine's Day would be completely unrelated to the topic of this essay, or really to anything at all (I don't think my classes *weren't* scheduled today simply because it's "St. Valentine's Day," right?) except that, ironically, this fact could very well have served — and perhaps subconsciously *has* served, at least to some extent — as the spark that decided me to write about this particular topic today. Perhaps it's all a sort of Jungian *synchronicity*, this, rather than simply "a coincidence," after all? Certainly Valentine's Day has continued to "serve" as a blunt reminder to me of my aloneness for the last three years in a row (today is no exception) or, to put it another way, of my *still being single* for so long after my having left my ex-girlfriend and moved into my current place of residence...

In any case, this essay was begun as an inquiry into what the word "loneliness" might imply, or, to put things another way, what I am asking here, firstly, is: "What *is* loneliness, anyway?" How to define it. And so, therefore, let us also inquire into the question of how this word/concept differs nuance-wise from other similar words/concepts, such as *solitude*, the most common or popular word with which it is frequently paired and/or compared by the gurus of YouTube SNS world and in bestselling (and also perhaps in some that *aren't* bestselling!) self-help books the world over...

For comparison's sake, then, in Japanese the word "lonely" is generally translated as *sabishii* [寂しい], alternatively pronounced *samishii*. The term closest to "solitude" in Japanese, on the other hand, would perhaps be *kodoku* (孤独), which means something like "alone" — indeed, the second character in the compound, "*doku*," is also found in another compound dealing with the concept of aloneness, *dokushin* (独身), which literally means "single," as in "I am/he is/she is single." So, as you can see from this very simple illustration I've just given, different languages express such terms and concepts in somewhat different ways...

I have a disclaimer to make here: I am not a linguist. I focused, both as an undergrad and later as a graduate student, on the study of Japanese literature, and then, a few years later, I also completed an MFA degree in Creative Writing. I was never, however, a "Linguistics major," though of course, and nonetheless, language itself is exceedingly important to what I do professionally, both as a teacher of English and also as a teacher of American and Japanese literature, and a careful consideration of the way that language functions, its usefulness as well as its limitations, is constantly present in my mind whenever I am looking at issues revolving around language.

Please bear in mind, as well, regarding my relationship to languages, that I spent *I-have-no-idea-how-many-hours* of my undergraduate years in what used to be called, anyway, a "language lab," practicing Japanese grammar via my mouth/ears with no more than a practice cassette tape and headphones via which to listen to these tapes (I generally did this while others were out partying or dating and/or just enjoying the freedom — or perceived freedom — of being a college student; I was, and still am, perhaps, a too-serious student [today I would add "of life" to the end of the phrase!], and so, again...this is an essay about loneliness and solitude, correct?). The times I wasn't studying in the language lab, I was likely to be found instead reading and/or writing Chinese characters on sheets of paper, for practice, or maybe just listening to music in my dorm or reading

Japanese literature in translation... (By the bye, the Chinese characters employed for reading Japanese are referred to in Japan as *kanji* [漢字], or, literally, “characters/letters of the ‘Han’ people.”)

Language is essentially my “second home,” not only English, but also Japanese. (My first home would be music/creativity, I guess, a topic I will return to in a few moments.) By the bye, and just to present a fuller picture of my academic background to the reader, I also completed all of the requirements for a Master’s Thesis in Buddhism and Daoism apart from the final thesis paper (i.e. as part of a dual-degree with Japanese literature), but in the end I gave it up in order to write the thesis paper I in fact wanted to write on the novels of Japanese author Kōbō Abe [安部公房]. Let me just add, too, that as a “creative writer” of fiction and also sometimes of poetry, music lyrics, etc., the nuances found in language when describing concepts such as, in this essay, “loneliness” or “aleness” or “singlehood,” etc., are not lost on me, despite my never having received an official sheet of paper that reads “Linguistics M.A.” (mine instead reads “Literature M.A.” — *Japanese* literature, that is.)

So, now that that’s out of the way...

I returned to Japan two years before my 40th birthday, in the year 2011 (shortly after the 3.11 incident, in fact), and have been here ever since, having duly obtained permanent residency when I was 42 or 43, if memory serves... It all seems so distant now, really, almost like another lifetime entirely, one lived, too, by someone that no longer resembles the me who is now sitting here at this cafe in Tokyo writing these words. Indeed, I was still married when I arrived in Fukuoka, less than a year after graduating from Brown with an MFA in Creative Writing, my then-wife pregnant with our daughter, who would be born in July of that same year. I was happily employed full-time, with a full and rather generous benefits package to boot: this, too, now almost seems too-unreal to have been really *real*... Did I actually have such a cushy teaching position once-upon-a-time, a generous salary, full benefits (including bonuses twice a year, though my wife always put 3/4ths of it into her own account as part of the “family savings”), my own office with plenty of bookshelves, research funds I could spend on (more) books and on “educational” gadgets, such as the iPad Mini I had bought at the time (my first “Retina-screen iPad Mini”), both for class-use and for use at home and “on-the-road”, not to mention a partner who waited for me at the end of every day, cooked meals we daily ate together, and all of that sort of thing?!

Apparently, yes. But, again: that doesn’t sound at all like my life today. It rather sounds like some alternative version of it, authored (or perhaps “remixed”?) by someone else...

If I take my story back even further than this, well, my first girlfriend (as in “ever”) was the same woman who became the wife I just mentioned in the last paragraph, above, and she remained “my wife” for nearly 17 consecutive years... I was married to her at the still rather young age of 26, with basically no experience of ever having been in any romantic relationships before (as I said, I spent most of my college years studying, rather than

dating, and the few dates I had never actually went beyond “the first date”...). Our marriage began, you might say, rather “prematurely” as well (it’s a rather long story, but the short version is that her father, a rather traditional Japanese *o-tōsan* [お父さん], wanted us to get married “immediately” if we were to cohabit, and so, after considering it for a rather too-brief time, we did — oh how young and naive we both were!). That relationship eventually ended, after several years of its having deteriorated further and further, especially after I began making music again (which saved me from *the worst*, I now believe) and coming home late at night, etc., etc. This situation itself led to my finally coming to the extremely difficult decision, in the summer of 2016, finally, to separate and thereby to try “turning a page” for myself/my life. I was right around 40 at the time, a time when many men are said to have a “mid-life crisis,” so perhaps the timing was not accidental. Very fortunately, in any case, I was also still able to see my daughter regularly for the duration, and I did weekly: taking her out to the mall and treating her to lunch or dinner, going to the park/playground, and so on. Basically, I spent as much time together with her as possible (she was still rather young, and so much of the time she was running around outdoors or, in the winter, we’d go to the game center in the mall, or I’d let her play with the toys in the toyshop, etc.). I continued to see her regularly like this right up until I had to leave Fukuoka in search of work after my contract ended, three years later.

Not long after my separation and divorce, I met a woman (whom I shall hereby refer to as “my ex-girlfriend”) whom I had, at various points in time over the nearly four years we were together, considered one day marrying (once bitten, twice *cry*?)... But this was all before I abruptly left the relationship in the summer of 2020, almost literally “fleeing” from it/her after a rather unfortunate series of events involving, well, too many stressful things to mention here (and too much alcohol), leaving my/our home (a repeat of 2016, except until totally different circumstances) only to find myself quite alone in this tiny apartment room in what felt like Nowhere Tokyo, a mere five months after having first arrived in this city sans work, and just as the Covid pandemic was getting itself underway. The rallying cry of the government at the time was “Wear a mask! Practice Social Distancing! Stay at home!” And that is exactly what I ended up doing. For much longer than I’d ever expected...

III.

It is no secret to those who know me, and even to those who don’t necessarily know me so well, but who perhaps have been following my SNS feeds or who otherwise may have seen some of my YouTube talks, that I generally feel my life to continue to be worth living because I have *music* and *creativity*.

Music. Creativity. Art.

Along with this/these, there is also, of course, my writing (creative and/or academic, fiction writing, poetry and/or prose-poetry writing, composing music lyrics, non-fiction writing, and so on). Then there is my love of film/video editing, which goes hand in hand with the music/audio obsession I have. I also enjoy photography, doing CD jacket or flyer designs (for myself, not professionally “for others”), etc...

To put this further into perspective, *creativity* has not only saved my life on many, many occasions, especially during those times when I have hit what felt to be “rock bottom,” with no sight of the crack of light that would eventually bring me back “amongst the living,” and/but it also continues to do so regularly. Possessing a mind for creativity helps me to feel that I have a purpose in this life, and this is so for me *every single day of my life*, even on those days when I do not have the time to fully devote to creating something as much as I might wish to, as during times when I am teaching classes all day, or when I have to grade a pile of essays, etc. (Currently, as a part-time instructor, I am not required to attend meetings, and I don’t generally get invited to year-end social events and so on, since I am not a part of any department, except “on paper,” so I am indeed free to focus on music-making most other times...)

Indeed, I cannot think of a single day in the last 30 or 40 years (?) when I haven’t listened to some sort of music I wanted to (I almost always have earbuds in my ear canals, whether on the train, in a cafe — such as the one I’m in today, etc.), read something *by choice* that was interesting or in some way enlightening — fiction or non — or else engaged in some other form of creative activity. Music and “creating new things” does not just “save” this life I call *mine* either, mind you, it also makes it sparkle and glow; it makes it “wonderful,” in fact, even when other things in my life aren’t so wonderful, even when I am not feeling pleasant or even hopeful or...you know, at times when I get close to the edge of “how much longer?” And I do, admittedly, sometimes fall into that Nihilistic space from time to time, even now. Thanks to my desire to make more art, however, I am able to pull through those times and crawl out of the proverbial ditch, or at least I have been able to every time I’ve tried up until now...

When I am deeply engaged in the creation of something, something new, or even just the *planning* of a future project, either in my head or on paper (or, again, on virtual paper!), etc., I am content. Doing so fills me with a sense of excitement and buoyancy and “expectation,” but it is an expectation which depends solely on *me*, on *my* bringing something into being, whether it is a song or a story or a music video. This is *not* expecting anything of any *other people*, nor from any external circumstances that may be well beyond my control. And so, this sort of expectation I consider to be “healthy” (whereas expectations of others, or of circumstances, will only make one disappointed, and eventually depressed, from my experience). Art/creation is my life. It is my reason for being. It is what the French refer to as one’s *raison d’être*, or what the Japanese might call *ikigai* (生き甲斐).

Indeed, whatever name one decides to give it, for me it is this very “reason to exist,” and to *continue existing* over all of these years, despite all of the trauma (starting in childhood, a story I will pass over here...) and internal struggles I’ve had, the stubborn health problems I’ve never been able to understand, control, or solve in any way (though I am excellent at baffling doctors, some of whom have actually even “fired” me because they couldn’t do anything for me), the constant disappointments in life and my tendency to at times get rather depressed... *All of it* is made more bearable because of creativity and music. And so, it is this ability to make new things on a regular basis, to bring ideas to life, to “give form to emptiness,” in Buddhist terms, or, in more secular terms, to create “something from nothing,” or to go from idea/concept to the creation of a finished

something (e.g. a song, a story, a video, etc.) that is key to my survival... Indeed, any activity that allows me to enter what a certain American author-guru (Barry Sears) once referred to in his bestselling self-help series as “The Zone” helps me to do this, and creativity is just that.

(“The Zone,” as I understand it, is more or less the same thing as what might be referred to as *Śūnyatā* in ancient Hindu and Buddhist traditions, a place beyond space-time where one can act without thinking too much, or, to put it differently, the (metaphysical) place (or space) where one enters the realm of “Thought Beyond Thought”... This is a place, located in one’s consciousness (or, rather, one’s *sub*-consciousness, an area *outside* of consciousness!) where one’s identity, in a sense, simply vanishes from the processes of logical thought, and where all that remains is the *process of doing*, of *being* and of *being present in this moment* without worry or scheming/planning/thinking about things outside of one’s very *doing*, a place where there is, for the present moment, at least, no past nor any future, but only *this/here/now...*)

OK, so let’s come back down to earth again together, shall we?

“Give me your hands...”

(David Bowie, 1973, Hammersmith Odeon, singing to his fans during the finale “Rock & Roll Suicide,” just after making a surprise onstage announcement about the imminent retirement/killing off of his alter-ego/persona Ziggy Stardust, implying, too, that his bandmembers, or most of them, were soon to be unemployed as he moved on to his next project... Kind of like the way one might feel when a romantic relationship is abruptly ended by one’s partner suddenly, out of the blue, via a text message or something, no? Not that I’d know.)

To restate, sum up, and continue, then:

Being creative gives me something to live for. No two ways about it. Whether alone at home every day, as I am now and have been for the past few years already, or when living together with a partner I might have had genuine and deep feelings for (and/or whose company I could at least have daily enjoyed, if not at least *tolerated*, domestically-speaking, when things were still more-or-less “fine” or even seemingly “pretty good” between us)... Whether in a healthy and mutually-beneficial relationship with a woman/romantic life partner, or in a non-attachment/no-expectations-type “I can be a Stoic for as long as necessary! I can live alone as long as necessary! I can do *alone* until the very day I die if need be!” relationship with no one other than oneself (or “myself”) — and I’ll come back to this topic again later — creativity itself is always, always there for me. It is the rock that anchors the chaos, because within the rock that chaos is allowed to run wild, without destroying the vessel itself...

In some sense, creativity is how I define myself *to* myself, though not, mind you, to or for other people. If I say “I make music, but it’s not for money,” most will assume (from my experience, over and over again) that music is merely “a hobby” for me, since I am not monetizing it, not seeking out more fans and bigger venues at which to perform it, ratcheting up the number of tickets sold, or of CDs sold or whatever (people in Japan

still buy CDs, by the way, though some people don't bother to listen to them, but rather just buy them as a sort of souvenir, an act of supporting a musician or band they wish to support rather than because they care even to listen to the music-data on the disc itself...).

I am an artist, a musician, and a creator. I pay my bills by teaching literature at university. Does it matter whether or not I am monetizing my creative activities or not? To other people it may, just as the title "Associate Professor" (at university) will garner more respect from others than if I say "I am a 'Part-Time Instructor' at 2-3 universities around Tokyo." To me, not going "commercial" with my music is the only way to keep what I do real, to keep it free of outside influence and, ultimately, as well, to prevent it from becoming stressful or "like a job," which is the antithesis of what it is for me now. Feel free to refer to it as "(my) hobby," if this is how you wish to define a hobby *for yourself*. For me personally, however, it is my *raison d'être*. It is my everything. It's not merely a hobby I do in my spare time.

I am eternally grateful for having the ability to be able to create, for being able to access my "Muse," if you will, which is a very mysterious thing to me, indeed, that energy. (And by "Muse" I don't mean a living person whom I have as my inspiration, mind you. For better or for worse, there is no such person currently in my life, no love interest or Guru at whose feet I bow. Rather, I am here using the term in the metaphorical/metaphysical sense.) Without something into which to pour all of my ideas, all of my frustration, and at times even anger about things, both personal (i.e. the direction my life has taken since coming to Tokyo, such as still being single/alone after two "failed" long-term relationships — and one rather shorter one, more recently — or still being a part-time university instructor "sans benefits" after four years of teaching a series of classes on various topics in Tokyo), and public (i.e. gazing outward at this so-often selfish, rather cold, uncaring, very much materialistic/material-centric world, peppered by news of so many horrid wars and nuclear threats and mass shootings and unbelievable cruelty to other people) I would be in big trouble, indeed... I've no doubt that, without a medium through which to express the pains and constant disappointments in my world, be it via music or prose writing or whatever, who knows where the hell I would be. I certainly don't.

I shudder at the very thought.

And so, having a creative life and some sort of outlet for all of my thoughts and emotions has allowed me, in various ways, to work through past traumas, such as the breakup and moving-away from my then-girlfriend in the summer of 2020 (the second such move I'd made in less than a half year, the first being the bigger and more expensive move from Fukuoka to Tokyo in October of 2019), or the dissolution of my "handpicked" band several years earlier in 2016, several months prior to having met my (now) ex-girlfriend (I have written, at length, about the topic of my ex-band in my music-related essay "Without End or Beginning," which can be read at my official blogspot page), or, again, being separated physically from my daughter from the time I left Fukuoka for Tokyo in 2019 in order to find work... After that came Covid, and so on...

And so art, music, creativity... These things give some meaning to all of the (at times seemingly pointless, or in any case excessive) suffering one endures. It is both a dynamic

and a therapeutic method of exorcising demons, though sometimes it can also be a way to express other emotions as well, such as feelings of love or contentment (on occasion, in the past, I have had the ability and the great fortune to write such songs!). Another thing I came to realize over time is that, for me, anyway, making art/music is a much more effective (and also “cost-effective”) method than sitting in a chair for 50 minute bi-weekly, not to mention costly, sessions with a “licensed therapist” (in Japan, one pays 100% out-of-pocket, and the standard fee is around U.S. \$100 for 50 minutes). Further, the more art/music one makes, the more one will have to leave behind oneself when one’s time comes. I already have quite a vast catalog of music built up behind me, as well as video and some unpublished writings, too, which anyone who might find something of value in might one day perhaps consider listening to or watching or reading. Perhaps someone someday will also gain something of value from something I once made long after I am gone! That would be worth a lot more, ultimately, than any of those therapy sessions had cost me, both in terms of time *and* in terms of money!

IV.

I started out writing this essay by asking the question, “What is loneliness?” (and how it might differ from “solitude”), but it has since taken a turn in a rather different direction. I was not planning on putting so many words into this so-called creative essay on *creativity* per se, ironically, and my initial intention was not to write an essay about music or art, either (though about 95% of the time I end up doing just that!). Rather, I had set out, quite simply, to inquire into this seemingly complex issue of the difference between one’s “feeling lonely” vs. simply “experiencing aloneness.” Also, since, well, it happens today to be Valentine’s Day, I also wanted to talk here a bit more about relationships in general, and especially about so-called romantic ones.

And so, in this penultimate section of my essay here, continuing on into the final section, let me return to the aforementioned topic and say just a bit more about it from my current vantage point as I sit here in this darkening cafe and as I also, concomitantly, begin contemplating when and where I should get tonight’s “V-Day *dinner-for-one*” before I hop on a train back home, likely crawling into bed to sleep at around 2 or 3 a.m., which has been the usual pattern of late, despite my best intentions to get to sleep by around midnight...

Well then, I said that I wanted to return to the issue of the differences between “loneliness” and “solitude,” not just linguistically-speaking, but in a broader sense having to do, ultimately, with how one *perceives* “being alone” or “aloneness” at any given moment in one’s life (and this perception changes a lot, from my experience, from day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute sometimes even, though perhaps this is, in my case, due to my own particular and perhaps *peculiar* personality, my somewhat fickle — if not completely ADHD, then definitely at least somewhat finicky — nature). And so, let me start with the stated topic before moving on to the second topic I had promised at one point to address, which is the issue of “being in a(n ideal) relationship with someone” vs. “being in a (realistic) relationship (i.e. exclusively) with oneself” (that is, alone, and *not also* having a partner, live-in or otherwise, whether by choice *or* by circumstance, or perhaps it’s a bit of both, after all?!)

First, and/or again, then: How to define “loneliness”? Let’s try to do it one more time, but from a slightly different angle now...

Well, loneliness is, of course, how one *perceives* one’s state of “aloneness,” or of simply “being alone,” untethered to a romantic partner (or, more generally, “not surrounded by family/friends/other people”). But it’s really not so simple as this, is it? If it were, entire books (some of them bestsellers, some not...) would not already have been written on the subject, nor would anyone else ever have to write another book on the topic again (or do a monetized YouTube talk on it, for that matter!); there would be no such buzz-term as “loneliness pandemic” floating about in the popular media, and the YouTube AI-controlled algorithm system wouldn’t always have so many videos to push into my feed (and, presumably, thousands or perhaps millions of other “loners” like me, right?) on a daily basis.

So, OK then. You (and this “you” should be read as an anonymous, hypothetical “you” — not “you” the reader, nor “me” the author, either, but just “you/a hypothetical individual”) feel lonely because you’re alone. You feel lonely because you want to talk to someone, but you also feel, or realize, that there is no one you can talk to, no one you can contact who will respond, or at least not immediately, nor anyone you feel who will really *listen*.

And then again, perhaps you may also want, at times, to hold someone’s hand, perhaps someone of the opposite sex’s hand (or else, if you prefer same-sex romance, that could possibly also be so for “you,” if not for “me”), to go on some sort of date, maybe even, or, more ideally (depending on your personality, your age bracket, your current position in life, etc.) to spend a “quiet evening at home” with a loved one, a partner, a husband or wife, or perhaps a first-time “How about I make you dinner at my place?” style date... You might also like, eventually, to kiss, to touch, leading eventually (if you’re lucky?) to a trip to one’s/one’s partner’s bedroom (or, if you live in a single-room apartment, just “over to the bed”)... However, that option simply isn’t available to you now, has not been within reach, seemingly, for some time, the reason itself for which you yourself do not fully understand... Are you simply shooting yourself in the foot over and over whenever the chance seems to be hanging before you, simply because you enjoy the pain that comes after each and every blast you yourself have fired?

To take another hypothetical situation/example, one on the “less romantically-inclined” side...

Perhaps “you” aren’t lonely in the sense that you desire romance or “physical interaction,” but you simply want a friend (same sex or no, but in any case completely *platonic*) who will listen to you: you want to talk or perhaps complain at length with someone about your job, or perhaps to gripe about how expensive your city taxes have gotten this past year (OK, now that’s *me* talking this time!), or you want to engage in a conversation with someone who is open to discussing religion or politics or sports or philosophy or whatever, to be with someone with whom you can freely and openly and reciprocally joke around and laugh, can share an interesting anecdote about something interesting you recently read, or maybe you just want someone you might drink a beer (or a coffee) with, someone simply to casually “shoot the breeze” with, to talk about nothing in particular, maybe, someone with whom you might just “hang out” or whatever, simply so that you

don't feel so goddamned *alone* as you've been feeling lately, sitting as you are/often do at home in front of your computer screen or your television screen or your gaming console... Indeed, here you find yourself once again tonight, inextricably in just such a situation, and, although you try concentrating on your book, your movie, or some other form of distraction (such as the television or SNS), you simply find that you can't; you are restless, friendless, *alone*... Feel free to insert any *self-negating* term for it you wish, for this is a state of mind, is it not, rather than purely a state of *being*?!

How dull, indeed. Don't we ever get tired of this particular episode?

OK, so if this is "loneliness," what about "solitude"? How is it any different, substantially, from the former?

Going back for just a moment to my discussion of the differences between the two terms in Japanese, in section II, above... I have often been struck by the fact that the film version of Haruki Murakami's short story entitled *Kodoku* (孤独) is translated into English as "Solitude," as is the musical composition (part of a longer soundtrack) written by composer Ryuichi Sakamoto [坂本龍一] to accompany the film. (I covered/interpreted this piece last year on piano, by the bye, shortly after *Kyōjū*, or "Teacher," as he is often referred to colloquially in Japan, passed away, and I also ended up including it on an LP I decided also to entitle "Solitude." I had considered the accuracy of this translation already for quite some time last year, due to this, and, ultimately, I was not/am not sure whether or not this translation for the word *kodoku* is completely accurate, in terms of its nuance.) In any case, the thing about the term *kodoku* in Japanese, you see, is that the first character of the compound literally means "alone" or, in some contexts, it could also mean something like "fatherless/parentless." The second character in the sequence means, simply, "alone," or otherwise "having no partner," which is, essentially, the same thing. And yet, when we speak of solitude vs. loneliness in English, solitude may be said to be, simply, the (or "a") state of "being alone," minus the feeling that one is "lonely" per se (in other words, desirous of another's company, but not having access to it, in this case). So, which is it, then? Or, rather, which can we say is which? Can solitude be "lonely"? Well, yes, certainly it might or could be. And conversely, then, can a person be lonely without *also* feeling a sense of, what to call it? A sense of "solitude-ness"??

Hmm...

And so, it can all get a bit muddled and confusing, even to this writer of oft-abstract thoughts and concepts! What's going on here anyway with all this hair-splitting linguistical analysis? Can all of this, simply put, be boiled down to a problem of semantics? Shall we call in Derrida, Deleuze, and all other such Postmodern French semanticists from the past we can think of in order to try and clarify for us?

All joking aside (at least for the moment)... In the videos I had referred to earlier in this inquiry — some of which I've watched, others I've skipped past immediately after reading their titles — we are told that the two are intrinsically separate. Is this completely true, though? Or are we all being duped by the YouTube gurus, who are getting paid

every time we click on their cleverly entitled presentation videos because we feel so...
alone?

Well, my answer this time would be as follows:

It is partially true, yes. At least *some of the time*.

Sometimes *yes* (that is, we *can* at times be alone and yet not also concomitantly [feel] “lonely”)...

And sometimes no (that is, we *can* at times feel that our “aleness” *also* [and concomitantly] *includes* a subjective feeling of “loneliness” or “aleness,” and this feeling can occur even to those of us who are generally content being alone most of the time, even those who are not actively seeking companionship, romantic or otherwise, because they — or we — feel “content” enough all by our “lonesome”).

In 2022, I created a song/album called “The Way Out Is In.” And I “meant it” (though the project/album was also in response to my [having still been] grappling psychologically with the fallout from my breakup two years prior). However, let us consider... Even if we are able to enter our own respective “Zone(s)” when creating (or cooking or dancing or whatever), we aren’t going to be able to dwell in this temporary liminal space 24/7, right? Think about it. Not unless we are perhaps in a coma, have ingested some sort of strong hallucinogenic drug (which will eventually bring us right straight back to our physical bodies eventually, if it doesn’t first kill us, and often with dire consequences), or, well: dead. So... What happens during those times when we are alone and having a moment of intense/harsh self-reflection and/or self-doubt? What happens when we have not had any prolonged or deep physical touch from the opposite sex for, say, a *very long time*? (I am not speaking about myself here, for the record, as I was in a[n albeit short-lived] relationship until the end of last year, but I have myself gone through rather long periods of isolation without any sort of physical contact at all, so I also do understand what this is like firsthand.) Will we not, however “strong” we believe ourselves to be, however “stoic,” eventually, over time, begin to feel a wee bit, dare I say (!?) “lonely” (or *lonesome*)? Hmm...

This time, my answer will be a resounding “*Yes*.” (How’s that for a definitive response, finally!) For most people it will be, anyway, for I cannot speak for everyone *else* on the planet. Unless, well, one is oneself truly a god... I was going to say “a saint,” but actually I don’t believe so. One would have to be a sort of god, not a human being, to not so much as experience loneliness, frustration, or desire. Even saints have desires, both emotional and physical, and so they are then left with the need to find ways to repress it, such as through intense prayer, meditation, standing under a freezing cold waterfall, walking atop hot coals with their bare feet, and/or some other form of self-denial.

V.

We humans are lonely creatures. By nature, it is so. It can’t be helped (*shikata ga nai* 仕方がない)... We just are.

Even when we are in groups, or with a romantic partner, we may sometimes feel “lonely.”

And so, loneliness is not the sole possession, the sole “badge (or scar) of honor” of the person who lives alone, eats alone, and sleeps alone. It can be felt by anyone, anytime, even sometimes even when surrounded by others, and maybe even, in some cases, especially so.

Why, though, might this be?

Well...

This would lead me straight into a discussion of Eastern Philosophy, I’m afraid. And so, without going in that direction and making this essay twice the length it already is, I will soon return to the second (and final) topic for this essay, the one I had promised to address earlier. If one is interested in seeking out some sort of response to the former question, one might start by looking at the Hindu/Buddhist distinction between the “self” and the “Self” (*Atman/Anatman*).

So, before moving on, and to answer more simply and directly the question “Why?” as posed above, I propose that it is simply our nature to feel “separate” from others precisely because we *are* separate. Not only our physical bodies are separate but, and more importantly, our minds and “way of thinking” can often be radically so as well. And, therefore, it is our innate tendency to feel ourselves separate, hence lonely, even at times when we are not, in fact, *alone* in a physical sense.

To take this one step further, approaching it now from the opposite end of the spectrum, even when we are physically separated from others (i.e. such as when I so-frequently find myself sitting alone in my room at home eating a meal-for-one or playing the guitar or editing a video for my YouTube page, etc.), we are never totally alone. By the same token, then, even if we are married and sleep in the same bed as someone else, someone we might believe we know well after several years of life together, we are still, and at the same time, also rather alone (and separate) from that person!

Conundrums, conundrums... Again, one may wish to read the Vedas or the Upanishads for more insights into these things...

The second topic was/is, then: To live alone, or not to live alone? [insert colon “:”] The benefits, and the drawbacks. Or, put another way [colon “:”] “cohabitation/having a relationship with another person” vs. “solitary living/having a relationship only with oneself.”

Or something like that, wasn’t it?

Well... Just who am I, again, to wax philosophical about such a lofty topic? I am certainly not one to take as a role model in this matter, and I would strongly suggest turning elsewhere if one wishes to work on becoming anything other than a loner-artist who finds refuge in making stuff, and who is constantly disappointed by relationships

(and soon finds himself no longer *involved in them* before he realizes what came and side-swiped him). I don't really think there would be many takers, right? This particular writer has indeed, to some extent, in recent years especially (or again), retreated into himself, retreated into a world of "philosophy/philosophizing," of the mind and also the out-of-mind when creating art and music (which is, in other words, light/sound = "interplay of energy"), whilst, in some deep-down place, he still daily longs for a deep and rich relationship that, to date, has not manifested in his life. Such a relationship would include all of the messy stuff, of course, both "the good" (sharing laughter and joy, having interesting and/or silly conversations, enjoying each other's company without enforcing strict rules or expectations of each other [relationships need not feel like business transactions], having good/great (!) sex together on a regular basis [yes! it's very important!!], supporting one another through "thick and thin" and/or just "being supportive" of the other's interests and activities...) as well as "the bad" (having occasional and inevitable fights or disagreements — and then working through them together — hardships in the form of one or the other person falling ill, experiencing the death of a friend or family member, perhaps, or going through periods of mental distress or depression, inevitable financial issues, and so on)...

At this point, perhaps, the reader may be wondering whether, in my case, I "chose" this lifestyle, the "lone wolf" lifestyle, and wish to maintain it until I am old and gray (and ultimately ill and dying)?

My answer to this question is as follows:

It's complicated.

During the Covid pandemic, I was unable to meet new people, obviously, since most of the places where I would normally have gone to interact socially — livehouses, as they are called in Japan, or otherwise smaller music bars or cafes — were at that time temporarily shut down by the government as a precaution against contagion, and for some months during the summer of 2021, before the first vaccines became available, I in fact spent all of my time almost completely in isolation from the world, alone in my apartment, taking long evening or late-night walks *every single* night, with music in my ears via my iPhone, or going to a rehearsal studio from time to time to make music by myself (that was the summer I also started doing a series of talks for my YouTube channel; actually, I never expected I'd still be doing them post-pandemic the way I have been, all the way up until the present, but lo and behold, the more things change...).

Since I did not know many people in Tokyo or have many close friends at the time (not so much has really changed there), having only recently arrived here with my then-girlfriend (and we lived in a very isolated part of Tokyo, a more isolated town than the one in which I now reside, the reasons for which I won't go into...), in order to stop myself from going completely Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*-style "cuckoo's nest" nuts, I started communicating with strangers online, mostly in Japanese but sometimes in English, via a (free) app for language learners, and I occasionally also had conversations via SNS with old friends from Fukuoka, or with family members living in the U.S. via my smart device (smarter than I, apparently) at home when I could. And so, my Wifi, you might say, also had "saved my life," at times, alongside my music-making, though the

alcohol I was imbibing in rather large quantities at the time certainly was not helping me mentally or otherwise. (I eventually quit drinking on more than one occasion, sometimes refraining from imbibing even a single drop of it for weeks or even months at a time, and so now I feel myself likely to drink less, or even to refrain from it completely during those times I deem it unnecessary, either alone or “socially,” though I do enjoy a beer or a glass of “umeshū” - Japanese plum wine - from time to time.)

Once the pandemic started letting up, I began again doing more live shows, collaborating from time to time on music projects with other people I encountered at livehouses or other related events, and I started to at least become *slightly* more social. My job went from online-only to face-to-face on campus, and eventually, over time, having then finally been “fully vaccinated” (after which I ended up contracting the “Omicron” variant of Covid twice, and so not getting any follow-up vaccination booster shots) I started to feel just a little bit better about things in my life here in Tokyo. And yet, after the breakup with my ex-girlfriend in the summer of 2020, and then Covid, I realized that something inside me had in fact drastically changed. Indeed, *everything* had changed.

I had come to realize that, for the most part, anyway, I preferred spending time alone to being in groups of people, that I was more productive and creatively-focused when alone, and also that I was much less stressed out, and could also do what I wanted to do “my way” without having to take any slack for it from others (or to apologize for doing something a certain way, or to feel it necessary to explain myself to anyone either...). The more time spent alone, the less inclined I became to necessarily want to participate in events, or even to “try and find/meet” a woman, to go on dates, etc. After all, how/where could I “find” a potential partner without the usual social outlets I had once had readily available, such as going to bars — which I had more or less stopped doing except on rare occasion, which is true to this day — or frequently playing (or attending) live shows (I still do perform, albeit less frequently than I did pre-Covid, but I have never met a potential romantic partner nor gotten a date at/after a show...). Where to meet someone who wasn't a heavy drinker and/or smoker (like my ex), but who also wasn't, on the opposite end of the spectrum, also totally *uninterested* in music and in the arts and such things? Dating apps were a sham (I tried a couple of times, regretting the money I'd spent and the time I'd wasted flipping through the choices as if “Shopping For Girls,” a reference to a Tin Machine song, by the bye), and over time I simply got tired of “trying” and simply resigned myself to a life of — at least for the time being — complete “solitude.”

I spent both Christmas and New Year's Eve/Day alone for the third consecutive year in a row at the end of last year, and although I will once again this year perform live on my birthday — as I also did in 2022 and '23, though this year it will be at a different venue and as part of a “regular” event (where I will only have 25 minutes onstage), rather than for my own “birthday live event” (where I, along with a few collaborators, *were* the event, though my inability to bring in enough guests marked the end of that tradition after last year...) — I do not (again) have any girlfriend who will be attending, no such “partner” to speak of since the woman I was dating late last year decided she was better off without me and texted me a simple message, saying only, “Maybe you'd better not contact me anymore.”

And so...

And so, well, am I “lonely” now?

And so, once again, I’ll say...

Yes, and no.

I have my music.

I have my creativity.

I am basically a survivor of this game called “life.”

One has to be, right? What other choice does one have?

I enjoy my solitude...most of the time.

I enjoy my freedom.

I try not to depend too much on others for my happiness or inner-peace.

I do my best...

And so, again, I return to the question, “What *is* loneliness?” How to define it?

In the end, I really don’t know. But here’s what I’ll say about it as a tentative conclusion, for now.

Loneliness is much the same as solitude, though the emphasis would seem to fall on “what one lacks at present” instead of simply “what *is* at present.” On the flip side of this coin, however, one might also consider the phrase, “Careful what you wish for” as well. Why do I say this?

You want it. You want it, now.

But then, what happens when you actually “get” it?

At first, maybe things are great. But eventually, you may again find that you end up feeling miserable, or, if not miserable, perhaps unsatisfied, somehow. Now you are in need of more freedom, or of a partner who will really listen to you, or one who doesn’t have such strange or different habits (from you)... And then, perhaps, you start telling yourself that you were much happier *before* you got involved with this individual, and so you really just want to go back to being “single” again, free again, where your life is once again “peaceful,” when it is, again, really *your own*. Or else the other party decides the same and says goodbye first.

Does this sound familiar to anyone reading this?

(...)

The grass is *always* greener.

Flip-flop, flip-flop, flip...

Flop!

This is the human condition. This is how the human mind works.

I've decided for myself, rather recently, that ideally I do *not* want to live alone for the rest of my life (whatever is in fact left of it...), or at least that I'd like to again have some sort of a romantic relationship (or relationships, plural: if the next one doesn't work out, I'll just have to try again, won't I?) with someone of the opposite sex, someone I am attracted to both physically (to some extent, I feel, this is important) and also as a person (this is 100% important, if it's going to last "long-term").

Aside from the aforementioned "wish list" for "my future," which, again, I try not to be too hopeful about or to feel too "expectant" of (lest I destroy any last chance I might have for something nice or good or real to actually happen to me in this lifetime from this point on — hope can help us to go on, but it can also become an unrealistic crutch that destroys us), I will continue — as I have been doing for so many years already — to make music, to make art, to write and to perform live, to enjoy the process of all this, since all of it is precisely *life itself* to me. It's obvious, isn't it?

I think there's maybe still a bit of time (and energy) left to me, despite my being extremely underweight (I have all kinds of absorption issues, apparently), for one thing, and though no one really knows what tomorrow might bring, indeed... And so, all I can do is to live for today. And to try to live completely, and as joyfully as possible, whenever possible. And to also try and leave the past behind as much as possible, which is so, so important.

Just to live in the now.

So, I am not lonely, per se, but I *am* alone. And, at the same time, I am never truly alone, either. I get that.

"Gimme your hands!" Right?

Happy Valentine's Day, everyone.

Marc Lowe
February 14, 2024
Tokyo, Japan

(With revisions made on Feb. 15-16)