

THIRD EYE EDITION

Islands of being

One of the most done-to-death quotations that has set my teeth on edge since circa my school days of the mid sev-enties is John Donne's "No man is an island, entire of itself, each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Basically, it means that human beings do not thrive when isolated from others. When our English teacher first read it out to us, we had absolutely no idea that we would remember it like forever and shamelessly use it for essays as varied in theme as world peace and free market economy. The quote was revealed to us at a moment in our lives when we were making that difficult transition from girl to woman. Each of us were locked in a private world of confusion, panic, defiance and self-doubt. At this juncture, Donne's all-embracing credo felt as comforting as a hot cup of cocoa. Having a common destiny, being interconnected to each other seemed to take the bite out of approaching adulthood. Surely, it wouldn't be all that bad if we were all in the same boat?

Halfway down the stream of life, I am not so sure. Suddenly, there is this eagerness to be an island – remote, inaccessible, circled by deep waters. Because being connected is not so great as it is cut out to be. Belonging to the brotherhood takes away your resilience, your uniqueness, your identity. Nothing great was such achieved by mooing with the herd. The more eager you are to belong, the more you will be bound by rules and conventions, the wish to please others will rule your existence and you will be incapable of realising the self that is you. Society does not approve of the loner. Revise that. Society is afraid of the loner, because the loner exists outside the pale of its system, the loner questions conventions. John Steinback, in *Mice and Man*, brooded, "May be everybody in the whole d – world is scared of each other."

There are, however, two kinds of loners and it would help if you know your category. One is the voluntary loner – who, by temperament or circumstances, keeps to himself for most of the time and rarely feels the need for human company. The second is the hapless loner who has no gift for winning friends. Unlike the voluntary loner, he feels intensely the need for companionship. Haruki Murakami put it across aptly in *Sputnik Sweetheart* when he wrote, "Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?"

It's a strange thing that the more populated the earth is getting, the more people are lonely. You will not smile at your next door neighbour, but you will open your heart out to a stranger in an assumed name in some chat room and feel you are connecting. My friend once told me, "The loneliest places are not some mountain-top or empty sea beach. I feel most alone when I am on the metro to and from work. Everybody is avoiding eye-contact, keeping to themselves, but packed dense, like sardines – it's a nightmare."

Loneliness is discouraged right from babyhood. A baby that smiles easily, goes willingly from lap to lap is cooed and fussed over with kisses and clucks under the chin. These days, babies are barely able to sit up without toppling over when they are put into creches and play

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schools. The school teacher is quick to point out reprovably a child's inability to blend in, form friendships. If he hangs around alone, it is almost as if he is programmed wrong, even if he is perfectly content being on his own. This continues throughout life and a lot of subtle and not so subtle indoctrination goes on to change the loner to a member of the herd. The mad geniuses in white coats actually conduct loneliness studies in their labs by, maybe, trapping mice in solitary confinement cells? Loneliness is seen as an affliction of the modern man (and woman), caused by long working hours and lack of social activities. But, there is no reason to be paranoid about this state of being. As author Herman Hesse of *Siddhartha* fame put it, "Loneliness is the way by which destiny endeavours to lead man to himself." A lonely man, out off from his fellow-beings, has a deeper understanding of his own inner self and can thus, go on an inward voyage of discovery. In this stage of awareness, a person learns to accept and then love oneself. Once you have made peace with yourself, it is easier to reach out to others and forge lasting ties.

There have been famous loners throughout history. The reclusiveness of Hollywood star Greta Garbo is the stuff of legend. American poet Emily Dickinson spent the last sixteen years of her life at home, talking to visitors through a partially opened door. A small and fragile child, Isaac Newton always kept to himself – reading, solving maths problems and tinkering with mechanical devices. He lived this way all through his life and discovered the law of gravitation, laid the foundations of celestial mechanism and created the world's first reflecting telescope. When Japanese author Haruki Murakami attained cult status with books like *A wild sheep chase*, he fled Japan and spent years living anonymously in Europe and America. He once told an interviewer that his writings return again and again to "the figure of a loner because it isn't easy to live in Japan as an individualist or as a loner. I'm always thinking about this. I'm a novelist and I'm a loner, an individualist."

Loneliness could be a curse or a key to delving into the bottomless well of your subconscious. It would transform you to a poet or an outcast. In conclusion, all people would like to vacation at a tropical island, but how many would like to be islands themselves remains a contentious issue.