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Mindfulness 101: Mindfulness, Leadership, and Solitude

By Scott L. Rogers

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In today's fast-paced, high-tech world, it can be close to impossible to find time to engage in deep thought and meaningful reflection. It used to be easier to find a little solitude, be it by closing a door and sitting in quietude, getting out for a long drive or walk, or getting away from it all to pause, reflect, and recharge.

The advertisement banner for LawPay features the LawPay logo on the left, which includes the ABA American Bar Association logo and the text "ABA Advantage PROUD ABA ADVANTAGE BENEFIT". The central text reads "Drive cash flow with online payments to end your year strong!" and "Sign up by Nov. 30 and pay no monthly fee for a year!". On the right, there is a graphic with a green arrow pointing left, a blue speech bubble containing "CYBER NOVEMBER", a red square with a white dollar sign, and an orange "SIGN UP" button.

Not only is it challenging to set aside the time and create the space, solitude is at risk of becoming a thing of the past. For even when people find a little quiet time to be alone with their thoughts, it's generally only a matter of moments before they find themselves *alone with others' thoughts*. While it's obvious that podcasts, videos, texts, e-mail, and social media are a steady stream of other people's thoughts, what might not be obvious are the implications of this information predominating in the mental processing of our experience.

I've previously written on the value of what I call [mindful solitude](#), having been influenced by the 2009 West Point speech given by William Deresiewicz on the importance of solitude to effective leadership. His speech appeared in the Spring 2010 issue of [The American Scholar](#) titled "Solitude and Leadership: If You Want Others to Follow, Learn to Be Alone with Your Thoughts." Picking up on his argument, Raymond M. Kethledge, a federal appellate court judge, and Michael S. Erwin, a graduate of West Point who served three combat tours, wrote the book *Lead Yourself First* (Bloomsbury, 2017), in which they explore the ways great leaders integrated periods of solitude into their lives, personally and professionally. They succinctly define solitude as a state of mind "isolated from input from other minds" and argue for the role it plays in creativity, emotional balance, strategic planning, and decision-making.

Imagine that . . . "isolated from the input of other minds." As important and enjoyable as it is to be connected to just about everything and everyone, the mere thought of finding a little distance from it can be liberating—literally breathtaking.

In this month's column we'll explore mindfulness practice as a form of solitude. Doing so will occasion a mental shift from mindfulness practice as something to do, to mindfulness as a place to be that can deepen our understanding of what mindfulness is, enrich the practice experience, and broaden its application in our lives.

Natural Mindfulness and Practiced Mindfulness

If you have attended a mindfulness presentation, workshop, or training, you have most likely learned at least one of four primary mindfulness practices, known by different names, but in my teaching and research as: focused attention, body scan, open monitoring, and connection. These practices are central to the development of self, social, and situational awareness.

The elegance and utility of these four practices are that they perfectly pair with innate qualities we already utilize throughout the day. For we naturally are able to focus our attention and notice mind wandering (focused attention), attend to shifting body sensations be they pleasant or unpleasant (body scan), observe whatever passes through the senses (open monitoring), and offer kindness to ourselves and others (connection). We could refer to these intrinsic expressions of present-moment awareness as *natural mindfulness*. You already do them, and your productivity and well-being depend on them.

We live in a VUCA world, one that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. High-stress, high-stakes professions, such as the law, medicine, and the military, are filled with VUCA moments, sometimes short-lived and sometimes of prolonged duration. VUCA describes conditions that call for and inspire great leadership. It also describes conditions that exacerbate vulnerabilities to performance and well-being that might take hold in an instant, or as a slow, creeping threat.

This is where *practiced mindfulness* comes in. Mindfulness practices bolster and refine the very same four innate capacities necessary for our survival and that are fundamental to our success and well-being. We can each improve and optimize these capacities through practice. This is the lesson of much scientific research and the direct experience of many. It can be your experience, too. And it can make a great difference.

Solitude

The importance of time for reflection and to pause and recharge cannot be overstated. Yet, opportunities to do so are dwindling and elusive. For even if you take a long drive, go for a walk in nature, get to the gym, or take a vacation, it is highly likely you will spend much of your time alone—with others' thoughts. Such moments can be very useful for gathering information, entertainment, and staying connected. The problem, as Cal Newport, author of *Digital Minimalism* (Portfolio, 2019), writes, is that our extended tech-connected time deprives us of the opportunity needed to process all this input and to refresh and recharge the processor. Insufficient periods of solitude come at a steep price, not only compromising our ability to absorb and integrate the very information we gathered but contributing to anxiety, depression, addiction, and loneliness. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), reminds us of this when he writes of “sharpening the saw,” or taking the time to renew and refresh the four dimensions of our natures—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional—so that we’re more effective in our life’s work and more at home when we’re home.

There are many ways of practicing solitude, of being free from the input of other minds. Before the prevalence of technology, such moments occurred naturally. But today, planning is often needed to establish the conditions for solitude. You can keep this simple by taking a walk in nature, journaling, or sitting in a chair reflecting on your day or a specific question. You need not be separate from other people. Walking in a park, sitting on an airplane, awaiting the start of a Zoom meeting—the litmus test is straightforward: “Where is your mind?” Are you attending to third-party output or the output of your own mind? None of this should be new to you. It’s the digital detox, taking a mental health day, taking a breather from social media, decompressing. It’s not always so easy to do. And because it’s pretty much impossible to be entirely free from the input of other minds, do your best to minimize such inputs and keep the experience comfortable. Slowly ease into solitude. You may head out for a walk listening to a podcast, and when you turn around, turn it off and immerse in the far greater richness and beauty evident all around, and within, you. So, too, if walking with a friend, agree to spend time talking and catching up, and time walking together in silence (or rather attending to the input of your own mind, which can be quite the internal dialogue). For just as you can be alone yet far from being in solitude, so, too, you can be in solitude with other people, for solitude is not a physical experience.

The Fortress of Solitude

Superman is a good role model. Notwithstanding all his superpowers, he would spend time in his Fortress of Solitude, a remote location far away from the busyness of the day and people’s demands. He wasn’t running from his responsibilities. Rather, he was looking to a period of solitude to enrich his capacities and decision making, to sharpen his saw. He was spending time in the place where he could truly be with himself, as himself. The idea of the Fortress of Solitude appeared even earlier in the Doc Savage pulps of

the 1930s and 1940s, where Doc Savage retreated to his Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic to make new scientific or medical breakthroughs. What strategic insights and breakthroughs might be before you?

Mindful Solitude

While the prescription for finding periods of solitude is not new, the definition of solitude in today's technologically omnipresent world is evolving. This is because natural opportunities for solitude are few and far between and, absent the intention and will to rediscover them, we run risks to our performance and well-being we are just beginning to realize.

Mindful solitude is intentional, directed, and constructive. It recognizes that practicing mindfulness (especially when self-guided) has always been a form of solitude. When you take your seat and intentionally turn your attention inward to observe the character and activity of your own mental and bodily experience, you are in *perhaps the deepest form of solitude* there is. The science can inform you of the many benefits across cognitive, emotional, physical, and interpersonal domains. Even more, you can inform yourself with a serious and yet manageable commitment to spend time in *your* Fortress of Solitude. This highly refined state of reflection may act as an accelerant, exercising and honing the four primary capacities of concentration, body awareness, observation, and connection. While listening to guided practices involves third-party input in the form of instructions, much like being guided on a nature hike, you are largely left to your own experience.

Alone with Our Thoughts

When sharing the concept of solitude with others, I occasionally hear that being alone with one's thoughts can be uncomfortable. Such statements are extremely important to consider as such a state, when unstructured, can indeed be very uncomfortable. A wandering mind like a wandering puppy dog can get into serious trouble. Rumination and catastrophizing are just some of the places where we may find ourselves—and indeed are the places we find ourselves, anyway, that are associated with anxiety and depression and prompt the impulse to reach for the cell phone, take a drink, or put aside that important project. But like a puppy dog, [attention can be trained](#), and mindfulness practices are an informed, directed, and compassionate way of befriending and retraining the activity of the mind. Importantly, even when structured, as when following the instructions of a mindfulness practice, such moments can still be uncomfortable—but far more manageable and in the service of developing what are among the most important skills and capacities we possess.

So, the next time you sit down to practice, remember that you are not only training the brain, you are accelerating the processing of myriad input channels and recharging the processor. Even now, without needing to listen to a recording or read up on the subject, you can practice. Close your eyes and notice your experience for a few breaths or a few minutes. Instantly, your own superpowers will transport you to your Fortress of Solitude. While you can guide (lead) yourself in this way, guided mindfulness practices offer many an easier time (especially at the beginning) connecting with the strategic elements of the practice and facilitating longer practice periods. As you become familiar with the different practices, you can choose those that are most enjoyable or enriching or which effectively train those capacities you find most important.

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