

This is a snail shell, round, full and glossy as a horse chestnut. Comfortable and compact, it sits curled up like a cat in the hollow of my hand. Milky and opaque, it has the pinkish bloom of the sky on a summer evening, ripening to rain. On its smooth symmetrical face is pencilled with precision a perfect spiral, winding inward to the pinpoint center of the shell, the tiny dark core of the apex, the pupil of the

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eye. It stares at me, this mysterious single eye—and I stare back.

Now it is the moon, solitary in the sky, full and round, replete with power. Now it is the eye of a cat that brushes noiselessly through long grass at night. Now it is an island, set in ever-widening circles of waves, alone, self-contained, serene.

How wonderful are islands! Islands in space, like this one I have come to, ringed about by miles of water, linked by no bridges, no cables, no telephones. An island from the world and the world's life. Islands in time, like this short vacation of mine. The past and the future are cut off; only the present remains. Existence in the present gives island living an extreme vividness and purity. One lives like a child or a saint in the immediacy of here and now. Every day, every act, is an island, washed by time and space, and has an island's completion. People too become like islands in such an atmosphere, self-contained, whole and serene; respecting other people's solitude, not intruding on their shores, standing back in reverence before the miracle of another individual. "No man is

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an island," said John Donne. I feel we are all islands—in a common sea.

We are all, in the last analysis, alone. And this basic state of solitude is not something we have any choice about. It is, as the poet Rilke says, "not something that one can take or leave. We *are* solitary. We may delude ourselves and act as though this were not so. That is all. But how much better it is to realize that we are so, yes, even to begin by assuming it. Naturally," he goes on to say, "we will turn giddy."

Naturally. How one hates to think of oneself as alone. How one avoids it. It seems to imply rejection or unpopularity. An early wallflower panic still clings to the word. One will be left, one fears, sitting in a straight-backed chair *alone*, while the popular girls are already chosen and spinning around the dance floor with their hot-palmed partners. We seem so frightened today of being alone that we never let it happen. Even if family, friends and movies should fail, there is still the radio or television to fill up the void. Women, who used to complain of loneliness, need never be alone any more. We can do our house-

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work with soap-opera heroes at our side. Even day-dreaming was more creative than this; it demanded something of oneself and it fed the inner life. Now, instead of planting our solitude with our own dream blossoms, we choke the space with continuous music, chatter and companionship to which we do not even listen. It is simply there to fill the vacuum. When the noise stops there is no inner music to take its place. We must re-learn to be alone.

It is a difficult lesson to learn today—to leave one's friends and family and deliberately practice the art of solitude for an hour or a day or a week. For me, the break is the most difficult. Parting is inevitably painful, even for a short time. It is like an amputation, I feel. A limb is being torn off, without which I shall be unable to function. And yet, once it is done, I find there is a quality to being alone that is incredibly precious. Life rushes back into the void, richer, more vivid, fuller than before. It is as if in parting one did actually lose an arm. And then, like the star-fish, one grows it anew; one is whole again, complete and round—more whole, even, than before, when the other people had pieces of one.

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For a full day and two nights I have been alone. I lay on the beach under the stars at night alone. I made my breakfast alone. Alone I watched the gulls at the end of the pier, dip and wheel and dive for the scraps I threw them. A morning's work at my desk, and then, a late picnic lunch alone on the beach. And it seemed to me, separated from my own species, that I was nearer to others: the shy willet, nesting in the ragged tide-wash behind me; the sandpiper, running in little unfrightened steps down the shining beach rim ahead of me; the slowly flapping pelicans over my head, coasting down wind; the old gull, hunched up, grouchy, surveying the horizon. I felt a kind of impersonal kinship with them and a joy in that kinship. Beauty of earth and sea and air meant more to me. I was in harmony with it, melted into the universe, lost in it, as one is lost in a canticle of praise, swelling from an unknown crowd in a cathedral. "Praise ye the Lord, all ye fishes of the sea—all ye birds of the air—all ye children of men—Praise ye the Lord!"

Yes, I felt closer to my fellow men too, even in my solitude. For it is not physical solitude that actually

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separates one from other men, not physical isolation, but spiritual isolation. It is not the desert island nor the stony wilderness that cuts you from the people you love. It is the wilderness in the mind, the desert wastes in the heart through which one wanders lost and a stranger. When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too. If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others. How often in a large city, shaking hands with my friends, I have felt the wilderness stretching between us. Both of us were wandering in arid wastes, having lost the springs that nourished us—or having found them dry. Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others, I am beginning to discover. And, for me, the core, the inner spring, can best be refound through solitude.

I walked far down the beach, soothed by the rhythm of the waves, the sun on my bare back and legs, the wind and mist from the spray on my hair. Into the waves and out like a sandpiper. And then home, drenched, drugged, reeling, full to the brim with my day alone, full like the moon before the

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night has taken a single nibble of it, full as a cup poured up to the lip. There is a quality to fullness that the Psalmist expressed: "My cup runneth over." Let no one come—I pray in sudden panic—I might spill myself away!

Is this then what happens to woman? She wants perpetually to spill herself away. All her instinct as a woman—the eternal nourisher of children, of men, of society—demands that she give. Her time, her energy, her creativeness drain out into these channels if there is any chance, any leak. Traditionally we are taught, and instinctively we long, to give where it is needed—and immediately. Eternally, woman spills herself away in dribbles to the thirsty, seldom being allowed the time, the quiet, the peace, to let the pitcher fill up to the brim.

But why not, one may ask? What is wrong with woman's spilling herself away, since it is her function to give? Why am I, coming back from my perfect day at the beach, so afraid of losing my treasure? It is not just the artist in me. The artist, naturally, always resents giving himself in small drops. He must save up for the

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pitcher-full. No, it is also the woman in me who is so unexpectedly miserly.

Here is a strange paradox. Woman instinctively wants to give, yet resents giving herself in small pieces. Basically is this a conflict? Or is it an oversimplification of a many-stranded problem? I believe that what woman resents is not so much giving herself in pieces as giving herself purposelessly. What we fear is not so much that our energy may be leaking away through small outlets as that it may be going "down the drain." We do not see the results of our giving as concretely as man does in his work. In the job of home-keeping there is no raise from the boss, and seldom praise from others to show us we have hit the mark. Except for the child, woman's creation is so often invisible, especially today. We are working at an arrangement in form, of the myriad disparate details of housework, family routine and social life. It is a kind of intricate game of cat's-cradle we manipulate on our fingers, with invisible threads. How can one point to this constant tangle of household chores, errands and fragments of human relationships, as a creation? It is

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hard even to think of it as purposeful activity, so much of it is automatic. Woman herself begins to feel like a telephone exchange or a laundromat.

Purposeful giving is not as apt to deplete one's resources; it belongs to that natural order of giving that seems to renew itself even in the act of depletion. The more one gives, the more one has to give—like milk in the breast. In our early pioneer days and recently in war-time Europe, difficult as it was, woman's giving was purposeful, indispensable. Today, in our comparative comfort, many women hardly feel indispensable any more, either in the primitive struggle to survive or as the cultural font of the home. No longer fed by a feeling of indispensability or purposefulness, we are hungry, and not knowing what we are hungry for, we fill up the void with endless distractions, always at hand—unnecessary errands, compulsive duties, social niceties. And for the most part, to little purpose. Suddenly the spring is dry; the well is empty.

Hunger cannot, of course, be fed merely by a feeling of indispensability. Even purposeful giving must

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have some source that refills it. The milk in the breast must be replenished by food taken into the body. If it is woman's function to give, she must be replenished too. But how?

Solitude, says the moon shell. Every person, especially every woman, should be alone sometime during the year, some part of each week, and each day. How revolutionary that sounds and how impossible of attainment. To many women such a program seems quite out of reach. They have no extra income to spend on a vacation for themselves, no time left over from the weekly drudgery of housework for a day off, no energy after the daily cooking, cleaning and washing for even an hour of creative solitude.

Is this then only an economic problem? I do not think so. Every paid worker, no matter where in the economic scale, expects a day off a week and a vacation a year. By and large, mothers and housewives are the only workers who do not have regular time off. They are the great vacationless class. They rarely even complain of their lack, apparently not considering occasional time to themselves as a justifiable need.

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Herein lies one key to the problem. If women were convinced that a day off or an hour of solitude was a reasonable ambition, they would find a way of attaining it. As it is, they feel so unjustified in their demand that they rarely make the attempt. One has only to look at those women who actually have the economic means or the time and energy for solitude yet do not use it, to realize that the problem is not solely economic. It is more a question of inner convictions than of outer pressures, though, of course, the outer pressures are there and make it more difficult. As far as the search for solitude is concerned, we live in a negative atmosphere as invisible, as all-pervasive and as enervating as high humidity on an August afternoon. The world today does not understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone.

How inexplicable it seems. Anything else will be accepted as a better excuse. If one sets aside time for a business appointment, a trip to the hairdresser, a social engagement or a shopping expedition, that time is accepted as inviolable. But if one says: I cannot come because that is my hour to be alone, one is considered rude, egotistical or strange. What a com-

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mentary on our civilization, when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it—like a secret vice!

Actually these are among the most important times in one's life—when one is alone. Certain springs are tapped only when we are alone. The artist knows he must be alone to create; the writer, to work out his thoughts; the musician, to compose; the saint, to pray. But women need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves: that firm strand which will be the indispensable center of a whole web of human relationships. She must find that inner stillness which Charles Morgan describes as "the stilling of the soul within the activities of the mind and body so that it might be still as the axis of a revolving wheel is still."

This beautiful image is to my mind the one that women could hold before their eyes. This is an end toward which we could strive—to be the still axis within the revolving wheel of relationships, obligations and activities. Solitude alone is not the answer to this; it is only a step toward it, a mechanical aid,

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like the "room of one's own" demanded for women, before they could make their place in the world. The problem is not entirely in finding the room of one's own, the time alone, difficult and necessary as this is. The problem is more how to still the soul in the midst of its activities. In fact, the problem is how to feed the soul.

For it is the spirit of woman that is going dry, not the mechanics that are wanting. Mechanically, woman has gained in the past generation. Certainly in America, our lives are easier, freer, more open to opportunities, thanks—among other things—to the Feminist battles. The room of one's own, the hour alone are now more possible in a wider economic class than ever before. But these hard-won prizes are insufficient because we have not yet learned how to use them. The Feminists did not look that far ahead; they laid down no rules of conduct. For them it was enough to demand the privileges. The exploration of their use, as in all pioneer movements, was left open to the women who would follow. And woman today is still searching. We are aware of our hunger and needs, but still igno-

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rant of what will satisfy them. With our garnered free time, we are more apt to drain our creative springs than to refill them. With our pitchers, we attempt sometimes to water a field, not a garden. We throw ourselves indiscriminately into committees and causes. Not knowing how to feed the spirit, we try to muffle its demands in distractions. Instead of stilling the center, the axis of the wheel, we add more centrifugal activities to our lives—which tend to throw us off balance.

Mechanically we have gained, in the last generation, but spiritually we have, I think, unwittingly lost. In other times, women had in their lives more forces which centered them whether or not they realized it; sources which nourished them whether or not they consciously went to these springs. Their very seclusion in the home gave them time alone. Many of their duties were conducive to a quiet contemplative drawing together of the self. They had more creative tasks to perform. Nothing feeds the center so much as creative work, even humble kinds like cooking and sewing. Baking bread, weaving

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cloth, putting up preserves, teaching and singing to children, must have been far more nourishing than being the family chauffeur or shopping at supermarkets, or doing housework with mechanical aids. The art and craft of housework has diminished; much of the time-consuming drudgery—despite modern advertising to the contrary—remains. In housework, as in the rest of life, the curtain of mechanization has come down between the mind and the hand.