Solitude as a Community of Difference

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Abstract

Through an analysis of the experiences of early morning beach-goers at Bondi, this article shows that there is a fundamentally important form of solitude that is characterized by both separation *and* connection. This form of solitude cannot be understood when seen in terms of sociological theories of alienation, or psychological theories of privacy, both of which one-sidedly emphasise separation. The article also shows that, associated with this solitude, there is a significant form of community that is not based on one-sided sameness, but on sameness *and* difference, on respect for the presence of undefinable difference. The article argues that this form of solitude-and-community underpins the experience of being healthy, of feeling really alive.

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The ocean and the city meet at Bondi. The Pacific Ocean rolls through the headlands onto the wide arc of sand; lightning splinters over the sea; southerlies blow in across the water, turning blue to grey in seconds. And, wrapped around the beach, built on dunes and sandstone cliffs, are the apartment blocks of inner city living; in good traffic, a taxi will get you to the Sydney CBD in less than 15 minutes.

In the quiet of dawn, dozens of people all around Bondi wake to another morning at the beach. Some will go to walk or run, on the sand or along the cliff path; some to swim, in the ocean pool or the ocean; some to surf, as board-riders or bodysurfers; some to do a workout at the outdoor gym; some to do yoga or tai chi. Nearly all will do one or more of these activities in a particular pattern that has developed over time. These are people, of all ages, who go down to the beach every morning, regardless of the weather, no matter what else they are doing in the day. They don't wake to a decision about whether to go or not; their waking is part of their morning preparation for the beach: in the privacy of their bedrooms, they are already there.

When we conducted research among these early morning beach-goers, three themes emerged strongly.[i] The first is that these beach-goers, who frequently refer

to the beach as Dr Bondi, find their early morning routines therapeutic. In saying this, they move between different senses of health and fitness, as these comments indicate:

I think there is a general consciousness about fitness and that is a reason [people go to the beach every morning]. But for the people I see here often, it is not just fitness. They are really drawn to it. It is like, yes, you just have to go. (Ben)

It is much more than exercise. I can't imagine getting a similar feeling running on a gym treadmill for 40 minutes. (Katrina)

Most conspicuously, early morning beach-goers insist that their exercise regimes on the beach keep them fit, in the sense of individually being stronger and faster and less likely to suffer illness. Nonetheless, interviewees gave the sense that something more is also involved, that their beach rituals allow them to live well, keeping their lives and desires 'in perspective', with a sense of what is truly important. This is the point at which interviewees introduce one and more usually both of the other two themes.

The second theme is that the therapeutic effects of the early-morning rituals emerge as an experience of peace, beauty and meditative solitude. Here are a few typical comments:

I love the isolation, the peace or solitude. Because I've been an active parent for thirty years, and because I'm a teacher and am interacting with young people or people all the time in the course of the day, I think that this is my time. I don't have to be there for anyone or interact with anybody. (Carol)

You get into a zone or whatever and suddenly all these ideas start flowing and you become really creative. It is just a chance for me to think. You know how you have different stages where you get clutter in your mind? Well I do anyway, lots of clutter, and I'm all over the place, as you can probably imagine, but this gives me a lot of clarity. It is a chance to dream in a daydream-like state. (James)

When you are running you are in the moment, although you can wander off and you allow yourself to wander off. So sometimes you are just looking at the wonder and splendour and beauty of being down here and outside. I love the outdoors and sometimes you are very here, and often I just go into a zone and meditate. (Denise)

Your mind switches off and you go into that sort of contemplation where it is not actual thinking, but somehow or another your mind, and I'm not too sure how I can describe this, but your mind seems to be free of boundaries, and sometimes all sorts of inspirational thoughts will come into your mind. (Jack)

The third theme was that the well-being came from the acceptance and community experienced by beach-goers.

It gives you clarity and broader perspectives. You meet a lot of people down here, and everyone is from a different walk of life, and even though we are all similar in that we all love exercise and love being down here, we all come from different places and different angles, so you get a broader perspective from that. (Delphine)

It is a community that is more based on place rather than on familiar faces. You get to know a few people. When you run the same path nearly every day for two years, you know people, and people have nicknames for you, and so there is that sense of community. There are people who must be just travelling through, but they are all enjoying the same space and when you meet them, there is that Hello. (Katrina)

The thing that I find about Bondi is that the great diversity of people somehow allows me to be any kind of person I want to be. It is like you are allowed to be anyone you want. We can do the most weird sort of exercises and I can do these really funny walks, and someone started singing some song the other day. You see people doing all the most unusual things on Bondi. (Lill)

The standard assumption of both sociological and psychological theory is that solitude and community are opposite conditions: solitude is normally seen as individual isolation, and community is seen as collective solidarity. Accordingly, in

any situation, there is solitude *or* there is community. At Bondi, however, we see a solitude that is congruent with community. Although the conventional view is that solitude is a condition of being closed off, the solitude at Bondi is often described as an experience of openness. And though we conventionally assume that community is unity, the community at Bondi is associated with an acceptance of difference. These tensions reveal, I think, why the co-existence in Bondi of solitude and community provides an opportunity to reconsider both these concepts.

In social theory, solitude is a particularly under-appreciated condition (see Coleman, 2009; Urry, n.d., p. 4), largely because it is simply identified with alienation and the absence of community. In this article I will argue that this lack of conceptual specificity has fed into serious inadequacies in the prevailing understandings of community, which is, by contrast, a prominent and foundational concept in social theory. I will also show that this reconsideration is required if we are to understand how solitude produces health and a sense of vitality, whether we are thinking in terms of healthy people or healthy communities.

In the next section, I will begin by distinguishing three common but divergent accounts of solitude, the sociological, the psychological and the monastic, in order to untangle the assumptions that underlie their inconsistencies. In the subsequent section, I will give an outline of the relational social theory which I think best accounts for the early morning experiences on Bondi beach. This theory provides

an account of solitude that aligns closely with the monastic account. In the final substantive section, I will use a case study from Bondi to give readers a living sense of how this solitude feels, of how it changes the temporal, spatial and ontological experience of the world, and of how it is fundamental to a sense of open community and health.

Three Models of Solitude

The dominant view in the social sciences is that solitude is associated with alienation, which is usually understood in terms of Marx's early writings (1975) or the work of Simmel (1964) and Tönnies (2001). For Marx, alienation arises when capitalism appropriates the products of labour, so that human subjects no longer recognize themselves in the objects they produce. Tönnies and Simmel describe subjects who feel a lack of meaningful connection to the social organizations to which they contribute, because of social scale, speed and complexity. The common essence of these approaches is that people are alienated when the objects and social organizations they produce feel external and oppressive, and when *they* feel like objects rather than subjects. It is argued that this alienated state is either experienced as solitude or that it leads to solitude as a defensive reaction.

An influential example of this equation of alienation and solitude is offered by Fredric Jameson:

Edward Munch's painting *The Scream* is, of course, a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. (1991, p. 11).

Likewise, in his study of Octavio Paz's book *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* Capetillo-Ponce directly identifies alienation and solitude through the compound word 'alienation/solitude' (2005, p. 100). Once this equation of alienation and solitude is made, solitude and community are often just binary opposites: solitude is no more than a person's social isolation, no more the unhealthy lack of connection with self and with others. Accordingly, Capetillo-Ponce describes a dualism between 'loneliness and solitude' on the one hand and 'participation or communion with others' on the other hand (2005, p. 100).

Whereas Marx finds nothing redeeming in alienation and anomie, Simmel offers a more tragic view, arguing that the blasé attitude, reserve and intellectual abstraction that characterize metropolitan interactions are defences that protect 'the person [from] being leveled down and worn out by a social-technological mechanism' (1964: 409). The logic is that the retreat of solitude protects fragile subjectivity from the alienation of objectification. One form of alienation protects against a worse form. In a cruder version that simply counterposes 'society' and 'the individual', this argument underlies an alternative sociological view of solitude, a view that matches a standard sanguine account found in psychology. Aloneness, it is argued, comes in multiple forms, some

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harmful, some healthy: one of these forms is the alienated quality often characterized as loneliness; another is the 'voluntary aloneness' of privacy, often named solitude, which offers sanctuary and freedom from an alien public world (e.g. Galanaki, 2004).

When it loses Simmel's ambivalence, this view relies on the reification of individuals and societies: it is the assumption that individuals and societies are finite and locatable things that allows writers to imagine a private individual withdrawing from others and the social world. The same assumption underpins the argument that the non-alienating quality of this solitude arises because of its *voluntary* nature, its 'freedom' from 'social encumbrances and expectations' (Long *et al*, 2003, p. 578). Instead of treating social participation as the opposite of 'alienation/solitude', this view treats it as the cause of alienation. In the process, alienation is redefined as the loss of autonomy.

Writers advancing this case for the positive nature of solitude often draw for support on the example of writers, artists and monks:

> Time spent alone, separate from friends, family, and colleagues, is often experienced negatively. ... Historically, however, solitude often has been associated with beneficial outcomes, especially with spiritual growth and creativity. Many religious leaders, including Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, to name but a few, have spent a significant amount of time in solitude. Today, as for the past few thousand years, monks and nuns of various religious persuasions continue to seclude themselves in collective

devotional solitude, and solitary meditation is a part of many spiritual regimens. Similarly, many writers and poets, such as Kafka, Gibbon, and Rilke, have made solitude part of their creative regimens. (Long *et al*, 2003, p. 578)

In characterizing monastic solitude as 'time spent alone [and] separate ', however, these writers fundamentally misunderstand the monastic vocation. The retreat is not conceptualized as a separation but as a communion, with others and with God. Here, for example, is Thomas Merton, writing under the chapter heading 'Solitude is Not Separation':

[T]he only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace not solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils. …

There is no true solitude except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his place in relation to other men…. We are members one of another and everything that is given to one member is given for the whole body. (1972, p. 52, p. 56; see also Williams, 2005)

Seeing solitude as communion, this monastic view is clearly at odds with the sociological view that solitude is alienation, and this difference arises from the monastic insistence that ordinary busy social life is already alienated, and characterized by the fantastic desires of individualism and narcissism, even if we do not always acknowledge this alienation. But the monastic view is also clearly at odds with the sanguine psychological view of solitude as privacy. Monks seek solitude not to withdraw into an inner life separate from others; they do so in order to re-connect with them : 'the more we are one with God the more we are united with one another' (Merton, 1972, p. 66). Moreover, as Merton insists, while solitude may happen, it cannot happen as the outcome of voluntary decisions of individuals: 'None of this,' he says, 'can be achieved by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own, by any competition with other men' (1972: 63).

There are undoubtedly aspects of the Bondi experience that can be explained using sociological and psychological theories: our interviews certainly reveal experiences of alienation, as well as times when people crave privacy, and occasions of community unification against external threats. But the point of this article is that these theories do not help us understand the form of solitude that is aligned with community. As secular and profane as Bondi apparently is, we will see that the experience of its early morning beach-goers has important similarities to the experience in monasteries. In the next section, I will outline a relational

understanding of solitude that tries to make sense of, and develop the implications of, this co-existence of solitude and community.

Solitude as Relation

The relational understanding of solitude outlined here draws together arguments from theorists, such as Buber, Merleau-Ponty, Winnicott and Bachelard, who have reconsidered orthodox assumptions about identity and abstract time and space. These theorists not only make it possible to conceptualise the relational state that underpins experiences of solitude in community, they also make it possible to place in a larger context the experiences that involve alienation or privacy. I will offer this outline in abstract terms, drawing attention to its logic, and will wait till the following section to show the relevance of this account to lived experience.

The starting point for Buber is that we all live 'two-fold lives', continually shifting between different social logics, different experiences of time and space and ontological form. We usually lack the words for these differences but Buber talks of them in terms of two mutually-implicated worlds, one the realm of the *I-It*, the other the realm of the *I-Thou* (1958, p. 3). His implication is that social theory usually confuses these different social logics by eliding them under single concepts. In the present case, there are both *I-It* and *I-Thou* forms of aloneness, community, health, time, space and individuality.

The *I-It* is the world of subjects, objects and exchange, a world where the *I* sees in the *It* an object through which it can confirm its own identity, where the other is not respected for the difference it offers. By contrast, the *I-Thou* is the world of relation, of me *and* you, of call-and-response, where *Thou* calls out in *I* a difference that is as much in *I* as *Thou*. This *I-Thou* is the basis, then, of relation, of a condition where there is difference-*and*-sameness. These two realms are not in binary opposition, for Buber, because they are always implied as potential in each other. Even if the *I-It* is characterized by an alienating denial of its dependence on the *I-Thou*, the latter is characterized by its acceptance of the potential of the *I-It*. The *I-Thou* thus holds the *I-It*: The *I-Thou* is the non-finite relation whose connection *allows* exchange between apparently distant and finite entities.

According to Buber, there is a relational state, characteristic of the *I-Thou* relation (and, we will see, of forms of solitude-and-communion), that does not involve the ontological form of the identifiable subject. The *I* of the *I-Thou* is not the same as the *I* of the *I-It*. There is immediacy in the *I-Thou* relation, by which I mean that there is no alienating identification with representations or definitions or categories. Buber's description of face-to-face meeting offers an account of this state:

> If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things.

Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* or *She* ... able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities....

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words ... so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be *Thou*.

And just as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, sacrifice not in space but space in sacrifice, and to reverse the relation is to abolish the reality, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I do not meet with him at some time and place or other. I can set him in particular time and place; I must continually do it: but I set only a *He* or *She*, that is an *It*, no longer my *Thou*. (1958: 8-9)

Buber is describing a relation where the *Thou* is not objectified or represented, but his implication is that the *I* is also in a non-identified state, for there is no object of perception to turn the *I* into a subject (see also Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 57, 149). Relations do not happen between subjects, even if subjective definitions (hair colour, named qualities) do not have to be denied. Relations, this also implies, are not just between beings identified as human. In a famous example, Buber discusses an *I-Thou* relation with a tree (1958: 7-8).

Buber's comments on space and time highlight the boundlessness of *I* and *Thou*. Whereas the exchanges of the realm of *I-It* require the locations and abstract distances

of Euclidean space and linear time, the relations of the *I-Thou* occur in the present, in the unidentifiable uniqueness of right here and right now. I can participate in the present but cannot represent or compare it, without thereby becoming alienated from it. It follows that in the *I-Thou*, community is not based on the unities, solidarities, samenesses, onenesses and identifications that derive from Euclidean space and linear time. There is a need to distinguish the forms of community based on the inside and outside of a unity from the forms of community based on the here, now and no-thing-ness of presence.

By characterizing the meeting of *I* and *Thou* as non-locatable presence, Buber is lead to reconsider the concept of responsibility. Because the *I-Thou* relation suspends the desire of the subject, it silences all the chatter generated by the strategy, judgment, expectation and self-consciousness of the *I-It* state: presence strips us of our excuses and defences, and opens us to our deepest and clearest sense of the bigger picture, of what most matters in life. When the world calls us in this state, we respond as easily as if we ourselves had made the call, for, indeed, in a way we have, even if it was nothing we would have expected of ourselves (see Buber, 1965, pgs 10-17).

With this context, let me now make a number of points about solitude in particular. I think it is conceptually useful to distinguish solitude from alienated conditions like privacy and loneliness, treating solitude as a manifestation of the *I-Thou* state and the others as manifestations of the *I-It* state. This allows us to make sense of how the solitude of Bondi or the monastery can be at once aloneness *and* communion. What is

an either/or issue within the finite terms of *I-It* logic is a both/and issue within the non-finite relational terms of *I-Thou* logic. There is no *one* else around during solitude because the difference that is present is not localized into identifiable others: other people may be present as whole, unique, undefinable beings, but, in the here and the now, there are no individually identified others, no subjects and no objects. Such an experience is of solitude because there is no one there, no one to exclude. At the same time, however, there is in this solitude an experience of communion because in a non-finite situation all possibilities are present and none have to be excluded to defend an identity: there is connection to every potential thing.

The term solitude is worth distinguishing because it allows us to recognise a state to which a number of theorists have ascribed great significance. One such theorist is Winnicott, who, in his famous article 'The Capacity to be Alone' (1958), insists on the fundamental importance of the unintegrated quality of solitude. Taking the example of the child playing alone under the unobtrusive care of its mother, Winnicott insists that 'the child is alone *only* in the presence of someone' (1991, p. 96, my italics). On the one hand, because the child is not required to identify as a self, the child can just 'BE', experiencing a real that is neither refracted through self-consciousness nor divided into distinct inner and outer worlds; on the other hand, because there is a trustworthy witness, the unselfconscious and unintegrated child comes away from the experience with a reliable ongoing sense of what it is to really exist (Winnicott, 1958, 1991). This is for Winnicott, the state of creativity, the foundational capacity that allows people to develop a self while belonging to a

world that is real. In Winnicott's phrase: 'After being – doing and being done to. But first, being' (1991, p. 85). In Buber's language, we might say that the immediacy of *I-Thou* is the precondition of the mediations and distances of *I-It*.

Bachelard makes the same point. It is often wrongly assumed that Bachelard focuses on the house in *The Poetics of Space* because he prioritises the private and subjective over the external or objective, but his point is that the house allows the reverie that suspends identity and the logic of insides and outsides and, therefore, the insatiable desires of subjectivity. In other words, the house is like the mother guarding the unintegrated child. Accordingly, the house allows not just the closure of privacy but also, and more fundamentally, the connection of solitude, which is open-*and*-closed (1969, p. 212). This solitude 'binds' the 'cosmos', according to Bachelard (1971, pp. 16, 177): in the state of 'tranquility', the being 'opens himself to the world, and the world opens itself to him' (1971, p. 173).

The common association between solitude and health can be understood in terms of solitude's world-binding effects. Solitude makes whole, through its acceptance of unbounded connection, and it is this wholeness that allows people to feel real and alive and healthy, *regardless* of identifiable injuries. As both Winnicott and Bachelard insist, solitude is the precondition of the sense of really being alive.

Solitude on Bondi Beach

Because the previous section gave only an abstract account of the relational understandings of solitude and community, I will now offer a more evocative account. If there are forms of solitude and community that involve participation in a whole, they, and their connection, cannot be understood simply through the distance of abstraction. Let me return, then, to the example of Carol, who spoke at the beginning of the article of her love for the isolation, peace and solitude she experiences during her early morning routine on Bondi beach.

When Carol arrives at Bondi beach, she walks two laps of the kilometre long shoreline. She says that this routine clears her mind of day to day worries, allowing her to pause and celebrate the new day. It is a time when she doesn't have to perform roles as parent, teacher or friend. In making this distinction between the self that is busy performing and the self that is solitary and peaceful, Carol is suggesting that her ritual changes who she is. It is *very transformatory*[ii]*,* sensitizing her to the changing environment around her, to *weather, climate, season, natural change.*

Carol likes to get to the beach before sunrise because *she particularly loves the little cuspy time between darkness and light. It's eerie and strange, but it's wonderful.* At this time of day and in this place, there is a blurring of boundaries between night and day, light and dark, and land and sea and sky; only slowly do forms emerge to reveal the difference that the night has made to the day. Emphasising this interest in liminality, Carol is drawn to the shoreline that joins earth and water and air. The footprints that she leaves as she walks wash away, and each new step is guided by

the incoming ripple that moves the shoreline she is following. Rather than walking with a strong sense of her purpose or line, then, Carol's focus is continually and gently returned by the waves to the moments of contact between her feet and the sand. She describes this experience in terms of becoming grounded, of being *totally tuned into the sand, because there is nothing between you and it.* This attunement changes her relation with sand:

> Sandiness annoys me when I'm away from the beach. I feel discomfort. So I suppose I just like the sand at the beach because you're more in tune with the landscape there. At the beach, you run across the fine dry stuff and then get to the wet stuff and, when it is a cold day, you notice that the wet sand is warmer than the dry, because the water temperature is warmer than the air temperature. I would have known intellectually, but it's really nice to experience it: that the air is colder than the water, and that even though the day feels really cold, the water's fine and you want to be in the water because the wet sand is warm.

When Carol is attuned, sand is no longer an external discomfort; her bare feet give her direct experience of what otherwise she would have known only from the outside or the intellect. The world she experiences in this grounded form of being is not outside her, a backdrop to her activity, but is the world of which she is part. What might have been distant is now at her feet and of her feet.

Carol's account up to this point describes how the beach ritual transforms her, from being a defined and anxious *I* operating in an environment of foreign and intrusive things (students, children, sand), to being a blurry or undefined *I* that is part of, and grounded in, the reality of the world. Her sense of ontology, space and time has changed. Instead of feeling at an intellectual remove from the world, she finds that the world is both surprising and 'internally' knowable; what was once known abstractly has become real and direct.

The more Carol feels sensitized to and part of this environment, the less intruded-upon she feels. The sand and the ocean and the sky are different every day, not as she might ideally choose, but every day she finds anew a sense of belonging. But this sense of belonging will enhance her solitude. At the beach, walking the shoreline, ontologically unintegrated (*blurry, cuspy*) she is neither distracted by external otherness nor required to erect protective barriers. There is no one there to be excluded, because while everything is different and surprising, everything is also to do with her. Her aloneness is not located, therefore, within a small bounded beleaguered self; her solitude is as vast as the ocean and as palpable as the sand.

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As Carol walks the beach, *totally tuned into the sand,* she is repeatedly struck by what the waves have brought to shore during the night. She says:

First of all you walk and you see what the sea's tossed up. Occasionally you

get very unusual things. One time oranges; somewhere out there a crate of

oranges had been swept overboard. Sometimes you get star fish or jelly fish

or blue bottles or bits of fish or octopus. Sometimes there's a huge amount

of weed that's been ripped off rocks. Two or three times now, the beach has

been covered with dead birds, muttonbirds I think, that must have got

caught up in a storm while they were migrating. So, very weird things, stuff

that you don't normally see and I think about that a lot. It's a good reminder

that the sea is not just this little, pretty beach that is here for us; it's this

whole, huge habitat. It makes you realise that what turns up at the beach will

be the consequence of something that's happened that you don't know

about, maybe just a human-related thing like the oranges on the beach, or a

storm.

Things tossed up by the sea allow Carol to experience what should be obvious but
nonetheless goes unnoticed when she is busy and distracted: that the sea is wild
and deep and vast, even at Bondi.

As she walks, Carol speculates about how the *very weird things* got to the beach from
the depths and distances of the ocean; she imagines and even later researches
storms at sea and migration patterns. Nonetheless, what really engages her is a
sense of present wonder. The wonder is not so much that oranges were swept

overboard a distant ship but that the oranges are at her feet *now*, on this very morning, and that no explanation could grasp all the connections that brought them here; the unfathomable mystery of the ocean is found as much on the Bondi shoreline as it is in unknown ships beyond the horizon or in the kelp beds of the ocean depths. And Carol, who feels she must come to Bondi every morning, for reasons she doesn't fully understand, is connected with these unfathomable processes.

Carol shows here the 'negative capability' that Keats associates with creative genius: 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (quoted in Hopkins, 1984, p. 85). Her meditations are an acceptance of the world's infinite potential, without the need to integrate them around her identity. Accordingly, what is most different is connected with her, here and now. She is as wild and mysterious as the kelp beds. In other circumstances, when for example she is playing the role of teacher or friend or parent, these qualities would need to be denied, or managed, so that she can integrate herself into a self-same identity. At the beach, however, she is not required to identify difference as hers or not-hers, and accordingly she can feel whole. This is an aspect of her feeling that her Bondi ritual is a healing practice.

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We now arrive at the culmination of Carol's ritual, her witnessing of the sunrise.

There's something about the light on the sea. I just love it. When you see the sun come up out of the water, that's to die for: it's beautiful the way it wobbles at the point where it's rising above the horizon. I particularly like that little blurring, wobbly moment.

As Carol says this, her face lights up and her words trail off. She is in the dawn. As she reflects on this experience of sunrise, Carol says that these moments allow her to tap into life itself, life that is deeper than the life of any individual.

I am always drawn back and I think: 'The sun has been doing this for a long time, and people have been watching this for a long time'. There's a sense of continuity, eternity about it. I think observation of nature, if that's what I am doing, is a reminder of smallness. I always have this when watching the sun and the sea. The sea is such an implacable thing. It just goes on regardless of whether we are here to see it or not. And it can be benign and it can be a joy and it can be ferocious and terrifying and unpleasant and it doesn't care, it just is. Things just are what they are, and observing nature you can tap into that is-ness quality. It strips away or puts out of your mind all the things you should be doing, all the things you must remember to do. All that stuff gets put aside and you're just there, in this moment.

The beauty of this dawn is *to die for* because it is only noticeable when Carol is *tuned in* and the life of plans and expectations is *stripped away*. When tuned in, she isn't observing nature as though it were outside her. Instead she is experiencing a whole of which she is part. This is why she speaks simultaneously of smallness and immensity, the *implacable* power of the elemental.

Carol says that *is-ness* brings a sense of *eternity*. A new day reveals what is always there, in all its unpredictability, as if for the first time. The transformation brought about by Carol's ritual is not spiritual, then, in the sense of rising above the everyday, but is the encounter with whatever *is*, with what is *just there, in this moment*. As Winnicott says, this experience of 'being' is an experience of 'the real'. It turns what might have been just another day into the *wonderful* and *exquisite beauty* of a new day.

The cycle from one ripple on the shoreline to the next is measured in seconds, the cycle between sunrises marks a day, and the muttonbirds' migratory cycle marks a year, but each cycle carries the same message of permanence and change, and it is to this message of the eternal that Carol attunes. While Bondi remains the same, it is also always changing: each wave, each day, each year brings something different, revealing new aspects of the place, which extends forever. As she walks the shoreline, every morning, time stretches and Carol feels she is connected with rhythms that extend beyond the limits of her day and her life.

When beach-goers say that their rituals are therapeutic, they often go on to explain that their beach routines give them *clarity* and put their lives *in a broader perspective.* In saying this, they are not thinking of perspective taken from the fixed position of a subject. The perspective at Bondi is *broader* because it is a view that cannot be located in Euclidean space or linear time. It looks in and looks out at the same moment; it is both new and *eternal.* Not the view of one identifiable person, it is the awareness of what it really is to be alive. This is the whole life in which Carol participates. Such a perspective undoes the identity-based anxieties and problems that define ill-health in the realm of *I-It.*

<center>***</center>

In everyday usage, peace and solitude are usually understood as the result of the pacification or exclusion of others, but Carol is not using the terms in this sense. To the contrary, she describes her peace and solitude as an enhanced connection to the difference of the world, and she attributes this to the morning ritual's ability to set aside social roles and allow her to respond to the world without having intellectually predefined it. It is interesting to note, then, that Carol's solitude also involves a sense of being part of a living community in Bondi whose participants co-exist without needing to domesticate or define each other. In other words, the way in which Carol encounters other early morning beach-goers parallels the way she encounters the other strange-and-familiar things along the waterline. She explains:

<center>26</center>

There's one guy, and I don't know his name, but he says 'Hello' and I say 'Hello'. He says 'Hello' to a thousand people on the beach so he's obviously known by everybody. And there are other people who you've seen often enough and you start off with a smile but then it might become a 'Hello' or 'Morning', or 'Isn't it cold?'. I don't know their names, and I imagine that if you actually got to know them you might have very little in common, but you have this thing in common. We are all just sharing the space. Everyone gets something, presumably something very similar, from being at the beach, a sense of well-being. And I sort of assume that they love that time of the day as well.

I love the inclusiveness. It's very diverse; a lot of things happen on the beach, a lot of different people doing their thing, and everyone seems to fit together pretty much, so you feel that there's a community. Well, you feel that there are <u>lots</u> of little communities that co-exist. There's the whole surfing thing, there are the exercise people, there are the old timers, there're people like me just using the beach, but you also see people who always walk in pairs. There's nobody I know on the beach as a personal friend, so I suppose I feel outside that, but I don't feel excluded in any way. Sometimes it's a bit of a balancing act when I come here with friends. I love them to have this experience but I'm conscious that I've lost that solitude, which I really, really value.

Carol cannot say if the early morning beach-goers constitute *a community* or *lots of little communities that co-exist*. She feels a strong connection with people she objectively knows little about. She presumes, but can't be sure, that they feel as she does toward the early morning beach. She feels affection for them but it doesn't lead to a desire to develop more personal relations off the beach. It seems, then, that the important quality of this beach culture is that people do not have to define themselves, that they can be at ease with each other without the alienating role-playing that dominates Carol's life as parent, teacher or friend.

It isn't that the beach does away with identities, for if Carol turns her mind to it, she can list sub-groups on the beach. These identities are used lightly, however, and not turned into definitions through which people address each other. Carol does not feel defined or excluded by the identifications that she knows could be applied to her. Instead, it is the acknowledged unknowability of others that connects people. In respecting each other's solitude, in carefully avoiding over-familiarity, people accept each other just as they are. Thus, the undefinable and unintegrated *I* that Carol experiences in solitude and *really, really values* is the form of being that others witness and acknowledge when they share greetings. Her feeling of peace and solitude arises through her sense of an accepting community.

Just as Carol feels revitalized by the presence of the oranges and the kelp and the blue-bottles, she finds new potential in the presence of diverse joggers and walkers and surfers and couples. The difference that each brings to the beach allows the others to be whatever they discover themselves to be on that day. As Carol implies when discussing the *balancing act* she faces when inviting friends to join her ritual, the beach's sense of impersonality allows for an intimacy-*and*-solitude that are often missing in more exclusive allegiances.

The beach's solitude is, therefore, an experience of communal presence. This is not an identified and integrated community, not a unity. It is a form of communion based on respect and unintegration. When people say *Hi,* they are witnessing each other, so that what is experienced in an unintegrated state can be subsequently relied upon in other -- *I-It* -- modes of life. People know that others have both seen and accepted them when they were alone, in unselfconscious, emotionally vulnerable and almost naked states.

Conclusion

In analyzing Carol's experience of solitude and community in terms of the themes prominent in works of relational social theory, I have tried to show that there is an important form of solitude that is characterized by both separation *and* connection.

It cannot be understood when seen in terms of sociological theories of alienation, or psychological theories of privacy, both of which one-sidedly emphasise separation. I have also tried to show that, associated with this solitude, there is an important form of community that is not based on sameness, but on sameness *and* difference, on respect for the presence of undefinable difference. I have argued that this form of solitude-and-community underpins the experience of being healthy, of feeling really alive.

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[i] Although I have, for various administrative reasons, written this article myself, it has come from ongoing work with my friend and colleague Ann Game. We have been assisted in this project by Demelza Marlin, Luca de Francesco and Belinda Clayton. Over the last few years, we have done in-depth semi-structured interviews with over 100 Bondi beach-goers, focussing particularly on those who go in the early morning. The interviewees quoted here have all had their names changed. I would like to thank Ann, and my other collaborators; I would also like to thank all the generous and inspiring interviewees, who are not responsible for my analysis. Our research has been supported by a UNSW Goldstar award and a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Grant.

[ii] These italicised phrases are direct quotations from Carol's interview, except that they have occasionally been shifted from first to third person.