

Being alone can be lonely, or not

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I was by myself this past week as the local Alpha female horsed around with a friend on Hilton Head Island, S.C.

I, too, was horsing around as I cared for her three resident geldings who spent the fresh spring days looking for holes to step in, gates to fight with and hindquarters to bite. Of the four of us, mine were chewed on the least.

Cattle and hogs, not horses, were the first livestock that mid-17th-Century English explorers left with the Natives on Hilton Head Island and around Port Royal Sound.

These donations were a test to see how English livestock would fare on unfamiliar native grasses. Free-range four-leggers were expected to provide food for future colonists.

The Natives should have looked this gift livestock in the mouth. From their perspective, nothing good would come of it.

William Hilton, Jr., out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and captain of the *Adventurer*, was scouting the coast for fertile land and timber resources in the fall of 1663.

He was employed by a small group of well-connected English “proprietors” to whom King Charles II had given settlement grants for present-day North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Their leader, Sir John Colleton, a Barbadian sugar planter, wanted to expand slave-based agriculture to this region, then called Florida and claimed by Spain.

Hilton gave his surname to the Sound’s headland and island.

In a post-voyage pamphlet, Hilton and two companions pitched the low-lying coast to prospective colonists: “The Ayr is clear and sweet, the Country very pleasant and delightful.” They found “abundant trees” (oaks on good dirt; pine on “barren sandy ground”) and good “soyl” for pasture and crops. They did not mention mosquitoes. Nor do current promotional materials.

In Hilton’s mind, he had purchased this region from the Indians for glass trade beads, hoes and hatchets. In their minds, the giving of goods was a way to establish friendship and alliances rather than a way to sell real estate. You can see how a fight over land would develop.

Today, you'll find 20 world-class golf courses on the Island and around the Sound where Indians once raised corn, pumpkins and watermelons.

The beads they received from Hilton would be worth something today in a competitive auction, particularly if a doomed Native hand from 350 years ago had woven them into a wampum belt.

Keeping my own company reminded me that I know a growing number of people who live alone. Some are divorced; some are widows or widowers; others are single by circumstance or preference.

I know people in their 80s and 90s who live on their own. They make an effort to get out and stir around. One friend took up a brush at 91 and produced a calendar with 12 of her paintings.

I've rarely been lonely when I've lived by myself. I read more and eat less. There are fewer arguments and about the same amount of self-stewing and berating. Things are steady and a little bland.

There are times when two are preferable to one. Try moving a refrigerator upstairs by yourself.

The question of being alone or with another is central to the origin of our species.

Everyone -- believer and atheist alike -- has an explanation for how human beings came to be...as well as how we came to be male or female.

Genesis 2 reports that God said, “It is not good that the man [whom he'd made out of dust] should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

The first helpers He cooked up were “...every beast of the field and every bird of the air...but there was not found a helper fit for him.” Thank Heavens!

At which point, He slipped the man a Mickey Finn, extracted one of his ribs and fashioned Woman.

A slightly earlier account in *Genesis 1:26-27*, however, says that God created “male and female” seemingly at the same time.

There was even some talk in the Babylonian Talmud and the unsigned Alphabet of Sirach, which is not an impeccable source, that Adam had a wife before Eve—Lilith. The story goes that Adam and Lilith quarreled constantly and could not agree on how their sexual relations were to be conducted.

“I will not lie below,” she said, as reported in the Alphabet.

“I will not lie beneath you, but only on top,” Adam replied. “For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be the superior one.”

Her retort invoked the earlier version of human creation in *Genesis*: “We are equal to each other inasmuch as we are both created from the earth.”

Adam wouldn't buy Lilith's feminist position on position, so she dumped him and flew off. And then Eve fed him the apple. Women do not come off well in the Old Testament.

On the other hand, Adam and Eve did have Seth when both were 130 years old, which suggests that they had come to a united front on marital positions. Seth married his sister, Azura, four years younger—a union from which the Bible says we all derive.

It's arguable that Adam would have been better off by himself. He never complained about loneliness. But man alone was not self-pollinating. And without begetting, there would not be seven billion of us alive today, or the estimated 100 billion or so who came before.

Aloneness is a continuum. Each of us is alone in many ways whether we are together with another person or not. It's often a matter of the quality of the experience that determines how lonely we feel.

Aloneness is also a matter of how you choose to manage the time by yourself with the time that you're with those who are, in various ways, close to you.

You can be lonely while alone if you're a person who draws energy from others and activities with them. Enforced aloneness can be painful. No one wants to be left alone from the death of a spouse or close friend.

Voluntary solitude can either be spent hashing over regrets or fashioning something useful and possibly amusing. Perhaps God used solitude to create humans on Earth for such reasons.

Managing being alone is an acquired skill that prevents it from being a self-imposed, wall-less prison. Engaging mind and body with even half-meaningful activities seems to be the key. A running game of pinochle might work in a pinch.

Success at being by yourself is probably more of an art than a science—a kind of navigation by dead reckoning.

The Rodgers & Hammerstein 1945 hit “You'll Never Walk Alone” from “Carousel” argues that “hope in your heart” is the one companion that you can always create for yourself. If you don't, you're on your own.

Stimulation is what prisons take away through solitary confinement. Nelson Mandela wrote in his book, The Long Walk to Freedom:

I found solitary confinement [in which he spent more than six years of the 27 he logged in South African jails] the most forbidding aspect of prison life. There is no end and no beginning; there is only one's mind, which can begin to play tricks. Was that a dream or did it really happen? One begins to question everything.

America has assigned an estimated 25,000 to 80,000 prisoners to some version of solitary confinement, which our prisons call, "single-celled segregation." Many are kept in windowless, always illuminated cells for 23 hours every day, denied sight and sound of other people.

States employ this type of imprisonment differently. Minnesota holds prisoners in solitary for an average of 29 days; California, 6.8 years. Several inmates have pulled three and four decades in solitary. Assignment to isolation comes absent basic due-process rights, and very few appeals succeed.

Being warehoused this way makes you less able to function and more likely to require further separation.

Hope and discipline are the only tools that can keep your wits together in such circumstances, which strike me as needlessly cruel and harmful. It appears that most prisoners in solitary have no idea when they might be released. This sucks hope out of the cell and out of the heart.

The evidence does not seem to support the idea that solitary confinement improves safety or operations. Prison violence appears to increase with its use and decrease when it's reduced. Solitary confinement is, however, administratively convenient.

Hilton Head is the far opposite of solitary imprisonment. It offers abundant sensory stimuli. You can do pretty much what you please, when you please. Thoughts of solitary confinement need never intrude.

But anyone can be lonely anywhere in any circumstance.

Wasn't I lucky to have three geldings to keep me company?

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown**, **Land Matters** and **Blue Grass**

Notes -- are available through his website. He writes a bimonthly column for BackHome Magazine.

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