On the Capacity to be Alone

(Post for Independence Day)

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I recall that in college there was an idea of studying together. If a young couple, or a group of friends, wanted to spend time together, one thing they would do was to study together. But of course it was difficult to get much studying done because the people had so much to say to one another and the lovers wanted to exchange kisses, and there was all the unexpressed erotic excitement. (The child psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott talks of an ability to be excited by a game "without being threatened by a physical orgasm of local excitement.")

I wonder if I was particularly ill-suited to studying together. I do not recall that I even tried it very often, though I had friends and girlfriends. One of my problems was that I was indeed interested in studying, and my sense is that studying together works best when the people are more interested in the together part, in the game. But beyond that, for many,

many years I had no ability to be quiet in the presence of another person. Indeed, as I best I can remember, in almost sixty years of life I have been able to be quiet in the presence of only one other person: my son. And this pastime has been a great pleasure for me, and, I believe, for him. For example, often on the weekends we go out to breakfast, and he quietly reads his book, and I quietly read or write, and perhaps twenty words and two or three touches are exchanged in the whole hour or two.

I come to write about this subject after having been introduced to Winnicott's article on "The Capacity to be Alone." In a section titled "Paradox," Winnicott proposes that any adult capacity to be alone depends on having in early childhood been successfully, securely alone while someone else—your mother or a "mother-substitute"—is present. Later in the article Winnicott speaks of the young child's belief in a "benign environment" and freedom from "persecutory anxiety." He brings in his most well-known concepts: "good enough mothering" and the true versus the false self. "It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli." (Or alternatively, I would propose, one can lead a rather peculiar life built on distancing oneself from external stimuli and perhaps from one's past as well.)

Winnicott's point, as I am reading it, is that the anxieties and emptiness of many parents impinges on their children so that the children, to include in infancy, cannot quite feel relaxed or comfortably alone with themselves. If by contrast a parent is able to create a physical and psychological space in which the child feels completely secure—

> The infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement. . . . In the course of time there arrives a

> sensation or an impulse. In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience.

That is to say that, rather than being a reaction to others' needs or anxieties, the sensation or impulse will be, as it were, mine alone. And if I have a series of such experiences in infancy and early childhood, I will be able to have them, too, in adulthood, to keep rediscovering myself, my sensations and impulses, independent from the crowd or from those closest to me, be they studying partners, lovers, colleagues.

I do not want to drift into a discussion of Winnicott's view of social relations, of the relationship between an individual and others. Nor would I say too much here about the prevalence of not-good-enough-mothering (and of not-good-enough-fathering), of parents whose neediness, self-centeredness and narcissism is such that their children never really have a chance to be alone and to feel secure and free in the presence of an other. If I am right that this not-good-enoughness is the norm rather than the exception, then this must have a tremendous effect on our adult lives and on society.

For the moment my chief interest is in the capacity to be alone. I would like to think that my son is quite fortunate to be able to be alone in the presence of his father (and perhaps of his mother too). In my own case, my assumption is that I did not have this experience in early childhood. (Was the matter complicated by the fact that, unlike my son, an only child, I had three siblings competing for my parents' attention and for whatever sense of psychological security the parents might be able to provide? My sense is no, this was not the problem.)

I am struck then, and curious about, what seems a kind of miracle: that lacking a capacity to feel comfortably alone in the presence of others, suddenly, at more than 40 years old, I discovered this ability as a parent, in the presence of my son, Jonah. It seems relevant that, although I take such great pleasure in being alone with him, in the two of us both

reading, side by side, I have often felt that there might be something wrong with this. We should be talking. We should be playing cards or throwing a ball (things we also do). I take these feelings to be a sign of my own insecurity, and I am sure that my son would say no, and indeed he has on occasion said as much. He's perfectly content just reading. (And it is likely relevant that while I am reading Winnicott or Plato—desperate to find solutions? or at least to understand problems?—Jonah is reading fantasy novels; he is in the cocoon or womb of imagination.)

While it was Winnicott's article that spurred me to finally write this piece, its thoughts have been flitting in and out of my mind for several years, years spent largely "single," without close attachments besides to my son. Learning (so much) from my relations with Jonah, my sense has been that the ideal lover would be a person who I felt comfortable being alone with, reading in the same room or going for a hike or to a museum without feeling the need to share reactions (to agree on the experience?) with my companion. (In fact I do not like going on hikes with other people because of a visceral sense that I cannot have my experience, my relation to the surroundings, in the presence of people I know. It would take some work for me to explain, even just to myself, why this is, but I can fall back on Winnicott's idea that one must have found in early childhood that one can be alone in the presence of another.)

In a recent essay on Emily Dickinson I joined with those who have noted that her mother was apparently incapable of offering her daughter much nurture or companionship, and so Emily felt not physically or financially, but emotionally on her own, and from a very early age. I went on to add that, as is suggested all too painfully by Dickinson's biography, a child who is not loved by, or does not feel loved by, his mother or his father may have great difficulty ever feeling loved. The copy editor wanted me to take this line out, and I could not

help feeling that this was because she found the idea unpalatable. In the United States we do not want to believe that our lives are determined by our history (or that aging or even mortality are unavoidable). On this Independence Day I will close by repeating that it has been a great and wonderful miracle that I have found an ability to be alone in the presence of my son, and, though I am not optimistic, I will hardly be opposed to discovering that such a relationship might be possible with someone who was not my son.

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