

A New Kind of SAD (Solitude Anxiety Disorder): Lessons from the Pandemic

1.

SAD: Those three simple letters convey many and various meanings when we see them. At the most basic level they name an emotional state so foundational to the human experience that AI programs and robots must “learn” to simulate it if they are to have any prospect of either relationship or communication with naturally embodied people. Every human being knows what “sad” feels like, looks like (facially) and means to them, with an inventory of experiences to back it all up. So I’ll leave that there.

The fact that I’ve capitalized all three letters suggests, of course, that I’m interested here not in what they “spell,” but in their acronymic functions in the current culture, a couple of which have entered both the standard discourse and, more technically, are now listed as official “disorders” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (DSM.) The most common condition this “word” indexes is something called Seasonal Affective Disorder, a state of temporary and conditional depression, first identified in the 1980s, that many suffer during the light-deprived

winter months (though there is a summer version as well). There are a variety of antidotes to this affliction, including light therapy (primarily), talk therapy, and certain kinds of supplements or anti-depressants.

But the version of SAD I want to expand on here is Social Anxiety Disorder, a term that came into currency during the 1960s and that I became aware of a generation or so later when I was in my 40s. The DSM defines its general features this way:

Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others.

Examples include social interactions (e.g., having a conversation, meeting unfamiliar people), being observed (e.g., eating or drinking), and performing in front of others (e.g., giving a speech).

(DSM-5)

A more detailed description, with common symptoms, is this:

Social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia, is an anxiety disorder involving discomfort around social interaction, and concern about being embarrassed and judged by others (NIH,

2014). This discomfort will be experienced as fear and anxiety, and will be accompanied by autonomic arousal, including diaphoreses [sweating], apnea, tremors, tachycardia, and nausea (ADAA, 2014). It can range in severity to a discomfort which can be circumvented and adapted to, to a virtually disabling fear with infiltration into multiple areas of life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The discomfort that people with Social Anxiety Disorder experience can generalize to routine activities such as eating in front of others or using a public bathroom. People with social phobia desire social contacts and want to participate in social situations, but their anxiety can become unbearable (NIMH, 2014). Social anxiety can lead to isolation, and either absence of development or stagnation of social skills, which can intensify existing social anxiety.

[[https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/social-anxiety-disorder-\(social-phobia\)-dsm--5-300.23-\(f40.10\)](https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/social-anxiety-disorder-(social-phobia)-dsm--5-300.23-(f40.10))]

I intend (as my title promises) to propose a new use for the SAD acronym, what I call Solitude Anxiety Disorder, the complementary sibling of Social Anxiety Disorder, a condition that, among the socially normative majority, expresses as an

aversion to being alone with oneself, one that became much more visible and problematic (via many forms of unusual disruption) under the duress of the pandemic which enforced solitude even for those who don't savor it. I came up with this concept the other day while I was taking a bath, after wandering down a long speculative path that opened with some thoughts about boredom as a mode of fear. And I'll get to it soon. But, as is my practice, I want first lay the foundation for my innovation, one based on a lifetime of personal experiences with the original version of SAD.

While Social Anxiety Disorder (the textbooks say) predominately affects women, with a typical onset in the early-teens, I was, I am certain, born with it; and I experienced all of the specific symptoms listed above throughout my youth. I prefer to name it as a condition and not as a disorder, or even an affliction. It is so foundational to my identity and temperament that I can't imagine a version of myself without it, and, perhaps surprisingly, I actually prefer mine to the more socially normative temperaments I became aware of very early in life and have learned, through assiduous study, not just to simulate but to embody with deep authenticity in my professional and personal life. While I was growing up I thought of my aversion to the social as an extreme form of shyness, what was called back then "morbidly shy," a term that had been in use at least as far back as the late 19th century [see

Harry Campbell's article "Morbid Shyness" in the *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1865 (Sept. 26, 1896)]. The morbidity part of it is, of course, figurative, in that in this state of mind one experiences a vague "deathly" fear of situations that might be potentially embarrassing, even mildly so, inducing, among other quite visible autonomic reactions, intense blushing. Thus the aversive response to situations of that sort. The first nightmare I remember experiencing—I was maybe five or so—was of an oversized, disembodied hand dipping a very large brush into a can of crimson red paint and then applying it over my face. I can still recall vividly that imagery and feel the overwhelming terror I woke in start with that night.

Wikipedia lists several technical names for various aspects or modes of Social Anxiety Disorder. The one I'll focus on primarily is "ophthalmophobia," which is, basically, a fear not just of being the center of attention, as in, for example, on-stage type performances (quite common); or even of having the spotlight cast on you unexpectedly, as in, for example, being asked a question in class (not unusual); but of being looked at under any circumstances at all, events that instigate a variety of anxiety-related physical responses. I spent my childhood in this state of chronic "fear," a term I put in quotation marks to indicate that I did not experience it as exactly that, in that it was, as I said, simply foundational to my identity, which I liked quite a lot, actually preferred, as I said, over the various more normative alternatives

I saw out there in the world. It felt to me more like living inside a very well-insulated house, keeping the outside out and the inside in, which can make for quite a comfortable living space in a world that is often, for those like me, either way too hot or way too cold. All of this had many indirect benefits. For example, my anxiety about performing publicly in the classroom inspired me to excel in my studies to such a degree that teachers stopped picking me out to answer questions, on the assumption that I was always fully prepared and needed none of the prodding that the potential embarrassment of such moments incited in those less studious than I was. After a certain period of time, maybe by the fourth grade, I acquired such a reputation for academic excellence that I was pretty much left alone entirely to simply work at my own pace and at my own level, typically beyond my grade-level norm, which is kind of idyllic for someone of my temperament. So, in this respect, my condition paid off handsomely: I evaded the ongoing gaze of institutional authority while setting myself up for subsequent success in my academic and professional life.

At some point in my early years, I'm thinking now when I was in first grade, because I have specific memories related to this that I tend to visualize in that classroom, I realized that not only would I have to work hard to insulate myself from being "looked at" in all these ways, but that, complementarily, I would also need to learn

how to at least appear to behave normally in the process, another kind of self-cloaking. This meant that I would have to hide as best I could the symptoms that revealed my exaggerated self-consciousness. If you have ever tried to keep yourself from blushing, to stop from sweating, or to still fidgeting digits, you know how hard it is to control these essentially autonomic expressions of anxiety. I struggled with all of them, and still do, though over time I made some small progress, able to keep my hands still when I spoke publicly, to forestall sweating to some extent, and to bring blushes back down to “normal” skin-tone relatively quickly. I realized as well that I would have to develop from the ground up a set of social skills that were more normative (I was naturally endowed with none of those), an insight that took the form of something like this, though I’m sure I wasn’t astute enough back then to frame it this precisely: “In order for me to function in the world, given the way the power dynamic is presently constituted, with extraversion the standard of social normativity—I mean practical things like getting a job (mine turned out, ironically, to combine teaching, where one is constantly on display to groups of people, and scholarship, which often involves giving talks in front of larger audiences)—I would need to learn how to behave in ways that those dominant others perceived as compatible with theirs, legible, to “speak their language,” as it were.

I set myself that task immediately and worked at it quite diligently. The first thing I had to do was learn how to talk, I mean literally, how to vocalize the words in my head so that they could be heard; and to get familiar with the feeling of words flowing out of my mouth smoothly and naturally. One of the family “legends” about me is that I started to talk way, way late, concernedly so, past two years old. It was not that I didn’t acquire or know how to use language, because (I was told) when I started to speak, it was in full sentences, out of the blue. I have no recollection of any of this, but I assume I just preferred a wordless silence (or my own nonsensical idiom for talking to myself, a lifelong habit) as the background noise in my head.

Once I developed this basic fluency, I started talking more with/in front of other people, at home primarily, or in familiar settings. I knew, of course, that I would not just have to say things, but also to make what I said sound like authentic expression. So I practiced that, too, the way an actor might practice a script. That happens now to be the same method I use to learn a song I want to record, losing myself in the text and music until they become fully my own, at a deep emotional level. In other words, I never try to simulate how the writer or primary performer of the song presented it; I make every song I sing entirely “mine” before I record it, often revising or rewriting it in significant ways if that’s what it takes to make it feel genuine. In some ways, I guess, my early regimen was like learning how to sing a song I was

making up myself! This may sound like an unpleasant way to spend one's early childhood, but I didn't experience it that way at all. I actually thought of my temperament then, and still do, as a "gift," and of all the work I was doing as a very worthy investment in my future, which it was. As I said above, I truly enjoyed being who I was and learning all I learned, about myself, about others, and about the structural ways the world works, through these endeavors. And you may think what I describe here is so auto-didactically eccentric that it is by definition rare. But every other person I know who could warrant the SAD designation describes experiences similar to this as they pertain to the invention/creation of a public version of themselves and to their insights into how socially normative habitats operate.

2.

Before the advent of modern psychology with its penchant for technical terminology, people like us tended to be designated as either, on the one hand, off-beat/strange/weird/eccentric; or on the other, depending on what they accomplished, sages/saints/poets/seers, two extremes that seem expressly designed to keep these behaviors cordoned off in "safe" spaces where they can't interfere too much with the normal state of social affairs. While I was growing up, I was determined to avoid that

first category of “impressions,” so I aspired toward the latter, a commitment that proved to be quite generative. For example, because I spent large chunks of my youth outside the plane of the normative social universe surrounding me (which allowed me to “study” it the way one would another universe) I became astute at seeing how foundational “systems” functioned in that world, what animated them, their purposes and problems; and I learned how to navigate them, even use them to my advantage, which I often did. And because I preferred listening over speaking (paying close attention to words, of course, but even more so the ways in which they were embodied) I became adept at “understanding” other people, not just at a surface level but more deeply, what made them “tick,” as it were, which I experienced even back then as a mode of compassion, empathy. I would have made a good psychotherapist, I suppose, a career path I considered along the way; or priest, a “calling” I luckily avoided, my top two “matches” on one of those standardized “interest” tests I took in my college’s advising office back in the mid-60s when I was sorting through possible career plans. Instead, I turned these skills to my advantage in my professional life as a teacher and my family life as a father, two roles I feel I excelled at in my life, for both of which listening is, without a doubt in my view, way more efficacious than speaking.

During my teenage years, when I started to “come out” a bit, I spent enormous amounts of time at the local hangout, The Sugar Bowl, wandering from table to table talking with friends or pretty much anyone willing to talk, or just sitting by myself with a cigarette and cup of coffee, observing. This was no longer, for me, a mode of practice. It was a way to celebrate and hone my hard-earned skills. In other words, I was not only socially apt, I was quite adept at it. I continued this “wandering” practice at every one of my subsequent workplaces, just popping in for a few minutes with colleagues for a quick hello, a brief chat, or, my favorite, an occasional, spontaneous, deep conversation. The fact that all of these encounters were one-on-one or, at most, one-on-two, and largely under my control, was, I understood even then, what made them not just comfortable to me but quite desirable experiences. From the Sugar Bowl all the way through my time in the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh, where I acquired a reputation as such a happy wanderer, I sought out these encounters eagerly, and in my retirement I miss them. So it’s not only self-aloneness I crave. I also like alone-togetherness, in situations that are relaxed and comfortable for me. This is a crucial element of Social Anxiety Disorder that tends to get underplayed, even ignored.

To get at the subtleties of this distinction, I often think of Greta Garbo’s famous incident in New York City, she having retired from acting, living a solitary, private

life, wearing dark glasses and big hats when she went out to evade the paparazzi who hounded her. I have a newspaper or magazine photo emblazoned in my mind, which may or may not be accurate, of Garbo walking her dog in Central Park being pursued by a bevy of photographers, almost running to escape their harassment. The caption was her famous alleged quote, “I want to be alone,” a line from the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*. It is a poignant example of the sort of cultural bullying the normative social universe inflicts on those of us who simply prefer to evade their chronic gazes. As Emily Dickinson says in her famous “Nobody” poem:

How dreary - to be - Somebody!

How public - like a Frog -

To tell one's name - the livelong June -

To an admiring Bog!

Exactly, Emily! And that’s not in any case exactly what Garbo actually said, as she explained in an interview for *Life* magazine in 1955: “I never said ‘I want to be alone.’ I only said ‘I want to be let alone.’ There is all the difference.” Anyone with a temperament like hers (or mine or Emily Dickinson’s) will understand implicitly what that “difference” is and why it’s so monumentally consequential.

In my early adulthood, when I started to teach, I realized I needed to be able to speak not just spontaneously and communicatively, but with authority, and to sound “smart” doing so. So I practiced that, too, created in effect a persona that could quite comfortably stand up in a classroom and conduct its essential business, a “me” that was both me and not-me, which is I assume pretty much the way “normal” people operate in professional cultures, though less intentionally and self-consciously. Those of us less well-endowed with natural social instincts simply have to work harder at it. That my techniques for doing so ended up being somewhat quirky—i.e., “authentic” to my aberrant social nature—made me a unique and quite extraordinary teacher, a claim I can back up with ample documentation and multiple awards.

One mental “trick” I used toward this end was to write out silently in my head exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it (I always preferred writing as a means of personal communication for the control-related reasons that are obvious to me now, but only became so well into my adulthood.) I would then memorize what I had “written” and say it as if it was spontaneous and “true” to the moment; again, like a good actor reading from a good script, one I had just written myself *for* myself! As you might imagine, it takes some persistence and patience to learn to do this well: first to generate the script more and more quickly, then to move from the script to the speech more and more seamlessly, and then to make it all sound both

authentic and spontaneous, belonging to that instant. Fortunately, as time went on, all of these steps gradually collapsed into one so that I could in fact speak spontaneously and authentically and sound “smart” doing so, “off the top of my head,” as it were, a great boon for my career in the academy. I was, I will insist, throughout this process, saying exactly and only what I wanted to say; i.e., I had no intentions toward duplicity or deception. In other words, none of this was even remotely a “con” let alone sociopathic. It was simply my process for making the self I knew inside as accurately visible as possible to the outside, which given the deficits in my naturally endowed skill set, was more a mode of work than behavior: exactly the way anyone with any deficit in “normalcy” overrides its consequences.

One of the tropes I used to describe to myself the “me” I deployed in the classroom was that “he” was just a more “perfect” version of my basic me, a “me” I aspire toward ideally, ethically speaking, unable to be “him” all the time simply because it takes so much energy to keep “him” persistently intact and afloat in that form. A full-time job of that would so quickly exhaust “him,” “he” would have to quit his job to recover! Perhaps the most fundamental skill this “he” could enact in the classroom was intense, active listening, a mode of apparent inaction, transacted in silence, that requires highly focused attention, a brief suspension of one’s own inner discursive sound track followed immediately by a response that is uniquely pertinent to that

interaction, an overdrive gear I have to engage willfully, one that also takes a considerable input of energy. If you think that is easy to do well, you've never done it well. This was, I see now, among the very first "social" skills I learned in my life, most likely in those first two silent years, and it is not only useful but, I would argue, essential for establishing and maintaining *equitable* relationships with others.

Sometime in my thirties I started to name my temperament as "reclusive," a term I preferred to "shy," which has a child-ish ring to it, and, especially to "introverted" which, like Social Anxiety Disorder, has the oily fingerprints of the modern psychology machine all over it. Reclusive had a much more noble tenor to it, put me in the company of poets, like Emily Dickinson, whom I so admired. And thinking of my temperament that way actually made me proud of it. Pertinent to this, I recall a conversation in the living room of my family home in Forest City, everyone home for Christmas, sitting together talking. I was unmarried so it was most likely between my marriages, when I was in around 30. As was my customary practice, I was just sitting calmly and happily listening while my parents and siblings shared their various stories about work, friends and travel, etc. When the focus turned to me I simply deflected it as was, again, my customary practice in such situations, which inspired some mild chiding, the gist of which was "you never seem to go out and do things with other people, you never travel to new places, you never have interesting stories

to tell,” all true of course. I got a bit testy and said: “I truly enjoy my own company and am very happy when I’m alone, an experience that seems endlessly interesting to me. How many of you feel that way?” No one piped up. Then I added, “I truly enjoy being exactly where I am and rarely have any desire to go somewhere else simply to escape where I am. Where I am at the moment seems endlessly new to me, too. How many of you feel that way?” Again, no one piped up. The chiding ceased, of course. But what this suddenly made visible *to me* was that my way of being in the world, i.e., enjoying true happiness with who I am and wherever I happen to be, was not a disability at all. It was in fact a very healthy alternative to the cultural standard for social normalcy, which seemed (to me) to depend to some extent on doing all kinds of things, no matter how exhausting or unpleasant, simply to have a good story to tell “around the campfire,” as it were. That moment was profoundly illuminative for me, my explaining for the first time, not just to others but also to myself, exactly who I was and how I lived with an air of confidence and deep pride rather than embarrassment.

3.

I was, you might be surprised to hear, not much of a reader growing up. I actually never read a whole book, to my best recollection, until I was in the 6th grade, and even then only because I had to write a “book report,” for which I chose the shortest book I could find, a little monograph on the life of Babe Ruth, one of my childhood heroes. The teacher accepted it, but also made clear that this was not what she meant by a “book” in the assignment. I avoided reading because it was really hard work for me, and still is. I did what I needed to do to excel in school (for the reasons I describe above), and that was about it. I was particularly adept at math, which has a symbolic simplicity to it that I found quite transparent.

At some point in my academic career I realized that I read things via a much different route than most people, a lot of jumping around, back and forth, up and down, almost in some sense “viewing” a text as if it were a painting, piecing it together that way, eyes darting from point to point, light to dark, etc. For the vast majority of my life, I just assumed that’s how people read normally. Were I going through school now, I might well be diagnosed with some bizarre form of dyslexia. Fortunately, I was just left alone to follow my own lights. It allowed me over time to develop a form of “speed reading,” of seeing the whole of a piece almost at once as an organic unit, the way one does with a painting, a skill that made me a very effective reader of other people’s work, from students to colleagues, my goal always

being to apprehend the overall vision that animated a project before I made any specific commentary on it. And, honestly, one of the things I discovered along the way is that most writers, even novices, can quite capably attend to “corrective” revisions in their work. What they crave is a reading that actually “gets” what they’re trying to say, to be not just heard but “seen.”

It wasn’t until the seventh grade that quite out of the blue and entirely by accident I discovered poetry and fell in love with it, became almost addicted to it. It was then and still is the one sort of verbal discourse that seems to me to reveal its meanings directly and immediately, altogether, all of a piece, transparently, like mathematics. Poems are, as well, short, quite a boon for someone with maze-wandering eyes like mine, which may well be why I preferred them over longer genres. I started out with Edgar Allen Poe, whose “The Raven” I memorized over a period of a week or so, in chunks, right before I went to sleep at night, all of those intoxicating images and evocative words cascading thrillingly through my head and, when I mouthed them, lavishing their sonic sauces on my tongue. The whole process was exotically sensuous to me, and almost immediately I decided that at some point in my life I wanted to write at least one thing that good, that compelling, that someone else would want to commit to memory and speak to themselves over and over simply because it was outlandishly gorgeous. So I dedicated myself to that mode of creative

enterprise, as a set of verbal practices, of course, i.e., writing actual poems, but more so as a way of being in the world, one that witnessed it as rich, beautiful, capable of generating lush sequences of words but also and more often instilling wordless states of mind that felt Poe-scale ecstatic to me. I reveled in those worded and wordless realms, and still do, all of that wonderful sensory and emotional overwhelm burgeoning with meanings that I can, from time to time, with careful attention to detail, at least intimate with well-constructed verbal artifacts. I love making such things even when no one else but me reads them, which was most often the case when I was young, all that adolescent glam, and still is, now that I'm really good at it but don't any longer "publish" conventionally.

In general then, right from the outset and well into my adulthood, I always thought of myself as special, privileged, extraordinary even, to have the temperament I was endowed with from birth, this reclusive nature that so well suited me. I was, therefore, quite crestfallen when I first encountered the term "Social Anxiety Disorder," most likely in the late 80s or early 90s. What had previously seemed to me to be a gift, or set of gifts, was all of a sudden being trafficked as a worrisome aberration, simply another psychological disorder, one the culture at large seemed to believe I needed to be "treated" for, if not "cured" from. As I said above in relation to my reading practices: Were I born now, in the context of current psychological

discourses, I would early on quite likely be identified as “on the spectrum,” afflicted with SAD, perhaps even autistic. Fortunately, I evaded such a fate by growing up in the 50s in a small town and a tiny school system and a close-knit family that had likely never heard these terms, or, if they had, could not imagine that they might apply to someone like me in their contexts.

While I realized very quickly, reading about it, that I did indeed manifest (I avoid the term “suffer from” for all the reasons I’ve already made clear) all the symptoms and features of SAD, I never fully acceded to the “diagnosis” or the “prognosis” this new terminology proffered. I had, after all, learned how to function quite effectively in the pertinent cultural marketplaces; and had, as a bonus, acquired that other huge reservoir of knowledge I’ve described: not just of their operative systems but of what the more normative inhabitants of those systems *were* at some “essential” level (having been born that way); and even more valuably, what *I* was at some “essential” level (having not been born that way.) That was where the definitional contest rested, in a kind of tense equipoise, for several decades. Until the Covid pandemic took hold of the culture at large in 2020, which caused me to reevaluate all of this down to the ground, and has led me now to write this essay, in which I propose a new way of reading my title’s acronym, what I have decided to call Solitude Anxiety Disorder (a co-equal counterpart to Social Anxiety Disorder) which has been running rampant

over the last two-plus years and can account for much of the otherwise inexplicably aberrant behaviors of vast numbers of previously sedate socially normative people: all those fights on airplanes, in stores, and in front of school boards, not to mention the ways in which various “hate” groups and cultures have effloresced and flourished lately in the dominant social media, sometimes spilling into the streets or chambers of government. It may even account for the popularization of outlandish conspiracy theories and outright cults, systems of belief that were broadly nascent beforehand, to be sure, as potential states of being, but were largely held in check by conventional forms of what I’ll call “social etiquette,” which ceased to function properly once the normative social universe was so severely disrupted. Thus, while the underlying condition I point toward has always haunted the dominant cultural cohort, it simply evaded detection, in part by defining itself as majority-normal and in part by diverting all the negative attention toward its benign minority-non-normative counterpart.

My first hint that something was up in this regard was the almost preternatural comfort I felt in the grip of the lockdown, or, my favorite of the terms, the sheltering in place. This was home to me, my “natural” state of being. And now, for the first time in my life, I felt fully normal, was actually being rewarded by rather than penalized for my temperament. What I wondered was up with that? The “penalties”

I refer to were manifold, but the dominant one was a feeling of shame, induced from the outside in, a sort of chronic, low-grade sense that, smart as I was, this was a test I could never pass even adequately, let alone with my customary flying colors, basically the feeling I had in that living room back home when I was in my 30s. At the occasional extreme, I might even feel as if I was being stigmatized as the herd's "black sheep" in order to make the more normal others around me feel safer and superior. The minute the pandemic started, I no longer felt a shred of shame, and haven't since. On the contrary, I felt strong and capable, the "survivor" in the herd while the previously dominant majority floundered. It was an awesome feeling. Still is.

4.

So what might the DSM entry look like for this condition I'm calling Solitude Anxiety Disorder? Let me rewrite the existing description of SAD this way:

Solitude anxiety disorder, also known as solitude phobia, is an anxiety disorder involving discomfort around being alone with and in enforced intimate contact with oneself, a fear of self-presence that

compels one to imagine/realize the degree to which they are on their own in the world, separated from the various kinds of soothing external validation social interactions induce, inciting concern about being embarrassed and judged by themselves. This discomfort will be experienced as fear and anxiety, and may [I have no experimental basis for these, of course, but assume these, or physiological or psychosomatic reactions like them, might be common] be accompanied by autonomic arousal, including diaphoreses, apnea, tremors, tachycardia, and nausea. It can range in severity from a discomfort which can be circumvented and adapted to, to a virtually disabling fear with infiltration into multiple areas of life. The discomfort that people with Solitude Anxiety Disorder experience can generalize to routine activities such as eating alone or simply sitting still. People with solitude phobia do in fact want to better understand and relate to themselves, but their anxiety about that can become unbearable, and can only be relieved by entering a distracting social arena.

One of the general implications here is that neither version of SAD is *best* characterized as a disorder. Both simply reside on alternate sides of the wide

spectrum of what is humanly normal socially. At their far extremes, either can, I admit, be aberrational and quite deleterious and may warrant their mention in the DSM. But, in sum, I would argue, equally so, as all of those breakdowns in social decorum during the pandemic amply demonstrated. There is no reason, really, why sociability should be privileged over solitude, even in evolutionary terms where the ability to both be alone and act autonomously would be just as valuable to survival (it seems to me) as the desire to be part of a supportive community. While contemporary workplace cultures tend to promote “team”-based approaches and frown on the “lone wolf” syndrome, that was not always the case even in industrial cultures. And in my experience “introverts” tend to be just as productive and valuable in collaborative relationships as their more socially-oriented partners, excelling often at exactly the sorts of organizational or mediating work that their colleagues falter with. The primary reason SAD means what it does and not what I’m suggesting is, I would argue, simply because it represents a majority bias, in much the same way that “winners get to write the history.” Except that right now, during this pandemic, those winners are no longer winning.

What the DSM doesn’t attend to in its definition of SAD (no matter whether you take their actual one or my proposed revision) is the underlying emotional dynamic that supports and attends to it. The one exception to this is the mention of “fear,”

which is, as I said, a foundational human instinct in the face of perceived threats, whether real or imagined. One might, of course, just as easily fear intimate contact with oneself as with others. They are, in my view, co-equal “threats” to one’s security and equilibrium. For example, I actually saw this bit of graffiti scrawled on a railing in Watershed Park today: “My worst enemy is my inner me!” I’ve written elsewhere on a number of occasions that fear is at the root of any number of other expressions of intense human emotion. The two I’m most interested in here, and pretty much always, really, are grief and rage, which Mia Farrow so brilliantly declares as “savage companions” in the human universe, whose spawn she says is often “despair.”

The sort of grief socially normative people feel now in the face of what they have “lost” is somewhat different, perhaps even more vivid and intense, than the grief socially anxious people have always felt, in that the loss that precipitated it has been sudden and dramatic, akin to a tragic death. I have experienced such a loss and have written about it extensively, so I know a lot about that form of grief, how it manifests, what its primary symptoms are, etc. Any number of socially normative friends and family of mine have described similar symptoms in the face of this current loss, from mood disorders, to gestural responses like crying, to literal physical pain. This form of grief is structurally different from the one socially anxious people experience, in that we never *had* what we perceive to have “lost.” Ours is more like the sort of grief

any “minority” might feel, whether their oppression is intense (as in race and gender identity matters) or vague and amorphous, as is the case with social anxiety disorders that don’t rise to the level of clinical definition (like autism) or mental “illness” (like psychosis), the sorts of “privacy” tendencies that are simply criticized, as mine were in that living room 40-some years ago. It is, of course, both possible and healthy to grieve for things you want but have never had. Just ask anyone who craves a child but can’t have one. It is just different from a grief founded on an actual loss of something you did have. Just ask anyone who has lost a child they bore and raised.

So, one way of coping with Solitude Anxiety Disorder would be traditional grief therapy, whether formal, via a psychotherapist, or by following the conventional suggestions always directed toward the anxious: exercise, diet, etc. A third (and my personally preferred) alternative, for those less faint of heart, is self-reflection, deep self-reflection. Which can begin with something as simple as sitting still. I don’t mean the more rigorous form of “sitting” that accomplished meditators practice. I mean just sitting in a chair as calmly as possible for as long as possible. At some point in this process, the boredom and agitation it initially provokes will be countered by some attention to what is in one’s head at the time, a form of thinking that is not outcome-driven, equivalent to a very basic kind meditation with similarly salutary effects. Walking—I mean walking just to walk, not to get “somewhere” or to

shop—is similarly generative of nondirective thinking, inducing it whether you want to or not, maybe because of the rhythm of walking, akin to dancing, so good for “losing” oneself, the body directing the mind rather than vice-versa. Given our foundational temperament, socially non-normative people like me are often quite adept at both of those things—which may resemble doing “nothing” to more goal-oriented people but are clearly “somethings” when you practice them. Those less accustomed to the self-presence experienced in solitude might need some help along this path, via, for example, mindfulness practices, many of which are cultural commonplaces these days and proffer comfortable starting points.

Of more concern to me is the “rage” side of this “savage” partnership, which has been on full display in so many ways during the pandemic that I am stunned so few have put that two-and-two together. That actual physical violence can ensue from the simple matter of being asked to wear a mask (on behalf of one’s own health and, more aggravating I suppose to those most resistant, on behalf of others) is shocking to me. In stores, on planes, in public meetings, in the theater of current politics, you name it, this mindless rage has run rampant, abating a bit only lately as various “mandates” have been lifted or mitigated. How so many could feel so deeply oppressed by this mild assertion of authority—for their own benefit, no less—suggests several things to me. First of all, that the sense of unbridled “freedom” and “self-

reliance” the average socially-normative-majority American (specifically, compared to other cultures) takes for granted is almost pathologically toxic, this unwillingness to make even the slightest compromise, let alone sacrifice, on behalf of the collective, as if the social universe should always serve one’s own desires and needs without even the slightest vice-versa. And, ironically, all of this while simultaneously indenturing oneself to all sorts of way more transgressive authoritarian groups and practices!

I would add to this array of dysfunctions things like the “Karen” phenomenon and MAGA mania. Then, more appallingly, there is the ongoing obsession with guns, and the inevitable mirror image of that, the explosion of mass-shootings, which now occur at a rate of almost two/day, up from less than one/per week pre-pandemic. More generally, the overall murder rate has increased by almost 50% during the pandemic years. You could argue that this has nothing to do with Solitude Anxiety Disorder but is a separate and peculiarly American aberration. But think about it: Whether it’s the “loners” who shoot up schools and nightclubs or the brother- and sister-hoods that constitute the various “militias”—animated by anything from White supremacy to religious zealotry—now roaming the country, you will find at the core of each (I believe) someone who cannot tolerate a life without chronic external validation, a deep need to be “seen” and approved of by others, even if that means

becoming famous for atrocious misdeeds. That is the grave toll you pay when you can't stand to be alone with yourself, the path that fear takes when it goes directly to rage, without passing through grief's "go" to collect its two-hundred dollars' worth of alone-time. Social Anxiety Disorder is not at the root of these aberrations, Solitude Anxiety Disorder is.

5.

One of my first reactions to the initial pandemic lockdown was, as I said, a feeling of ease, calm, wellbeing; and it didn't take me long to figure out why: Here, finally, was a social universe that was adapted to my temperament, suited for what I was really good at: being alone, reading, writing, thinking, walking in the woods, all solitary experiences for me. This was a world for which I was ideally suited, and in which I was fully functional: i.e., normal. For the first time in my life, yes, socially normal. My like-minded friends said essentially the same thing, how happy they were and felt under this new regime. And all of the previously socially normal people I knew began to struggle with reactions that ranged from sadness to frustration to actual physical pain to outright rage. They had, I realized—having suddenly been deprived of a privilege they had always taken for granted, one they never even perceived as a

privilege, just a condition of the natural state of human affairs in this world—began to come apart at the seams. They didn't like it and didn't cope well, some to the extreme, all of that fury and fighting and violence or just the hapless flailing around that I began to witness almost everywhere I turned. That's when I started thinking about the power dynamic that has led to this essay.

At the onset of this seismic shift in the social matrix I made up an illustrative joke that I told over and over to the socially normative people I was in contact with: If the pandemic conditions continued in place for a several generations, people like me and my kind, who were ideally adapted to it, would ultimately become the “fittest” to “survive” and would be if not in the majority, certainly the new normal. And those who depended so heavily on satisfying their social urges with other people or travel would be perceived as ill-suited to the ambient cultural conditions, aberrant, “disordered.” I also took every opportunity to urge socially normative family and friends who were struggling with their sense of deprivation to use that experience to learn some things: First of all, that social normativity was in fact a culturally constructed privilege, not some form of naturally endowed goodness, and, like all such privileges, it was ephemeral, as this interlude demonstrated. In its temporary absence, I hoped they would use the time as an opportunity to look inward, find self-motivated ways to cope with their grief and rage and fear. But especially in that

process to learn something important about those of us who don't fit the norm, that we are not aberrant off-beats to be chided or shunted aside, but strong, fierce and free, capable and deeply healthy human beings who enjoy our own company and being right where we are. The best way to do that, I explained, is the same way I had to learn how to understand them: Set your mind to it, pay attention, practice, until you begin to feel the sort of calm contentment that we feel in this current state of deprivation. Then, when it's over, you may for the first time have a clue not just about who and what we are, finding better ways to communicate with and relate to us as equals, but about yourself, a quantum of knowledge that is the inevitable payoff when you realize that you are just as much an "other" as all the others you have "othered" along the way, a privilege founded on the assumption that it is a permanent and naturally endowed advantage instead of the fleeting cultural construct it actually is, one that you haven't "earned" and don't "deserve," which is always the case with taken-for-granted privileges, in that they can evaporate almost instantly under the right circumstances, as this one did in March of 2020.

6.

Those of us on this side of the spectrum have no desire to shame socially normative people for the “weaknesses” they are now displaying. We know full well what it feels like to be undeservedly shamed for one’s temperament. But I do hope the process of inward-looking I’m recommending will create a modicum of temporary, self-induced shame for the way you have at least misunderstood (often quite entirely) if not actively discriminated against those of us who happen to reside on a different part of the social spectrum from you, a spectrum that, except perhaps at its furthest extremes—psychosis and sociopathology—is not differentiating better from worse, good from bad, normal from disordered, but simply measuring variations in the ways selves and others can find a comfortable balance in the communities we create. As I said, after a lifetime spent in my neighborhood on that spectrum, I’m more than happy to highlight and endorse its qualities. Our kind, for the most part, are peaceful, gentle and kind. We don’t want to shoot up the neighborhood or force our most deeply held moral principles on others. We are, almost by definition, tolerant, which is what you have to learn how to be if you want to really like yourself and enjoy your own company, being with that other-in-you, right where you’re sitting, right now.

Despite that reassurance, I’m going to close here with a series of what may seem like harsh assessments and recommendations, just to bring into focus

the importance of coming to terms with oneself in solitude at least from time to time. There are, of course, all the obvious big benefits that pertain thereby, like escaping from toxic relationships you persist in out of a fear of being alone, like depending for self-worth on the shallow approval of others you don't even like much. At the extreme, this tendency takes the form of cult-like attachments to groups and theories that demand complete obeisance from their ranks.

If you're in any of those latter cohorts, you're not likely to be reading this, of course, so what specifically do I have to offer those in the more "normal" range? Well, here's something: You might be wondering why I would prefer to spend time with myself instead of with you? Well, why would I go out of my way to seek out someone who doesn't even want to be with him/herself? Or with someone who doesn't really care to find a clue about who I am or what makes me tick? It is very painful to be present but unseen, to be chronically misread, misunderstood, even chided simply for being one's own good self. I don't like it. Those are not experiences I am keen to repeat. I never treat myself that way and rarely treat you that way when I'm in your company, either. When I do, I always regret it and most often apologize. Think about that. If you'd prefer not to spend the time and

energy to actually be with me, to listen to me, to get to know me, I'm quite fine with that. Like Garbo, "I want to be let alone."

Or think about this: I spent decades learning every little nuance about you and the neighborhoods you inhabit, as a matter of survival, creating in the process a compendious archive of knowledge and multiple very useful versions of myself. And, by dint of my "disorder," I also know myself inside out. Because I spend tons of my time in there! And I still like myself, by the way! It would be well worth your while to learn something about those of us who do not share *your* disorder. We are not only interesting, we can help you with it. What you're missing by letting us "pass" is of some considerable value, and there's no other way to get it except at the source, which, if you'd just calm down and listen, you will find right in your own self, waiting patiently for you both to wake it up and to wake up to it. And by that means you will start down the road toward understanding and loving yourself in a deep way. When you get there, no amount of solitude will disorder your mind. In fact, in a social universe where the power dynamic remains balanced, in equipoise, across the spectrum of possible temperaments, both of these versions of SAD could be excised from the DSM, replaced by a Calm Social Order even a pandemic would not be able to unravel.