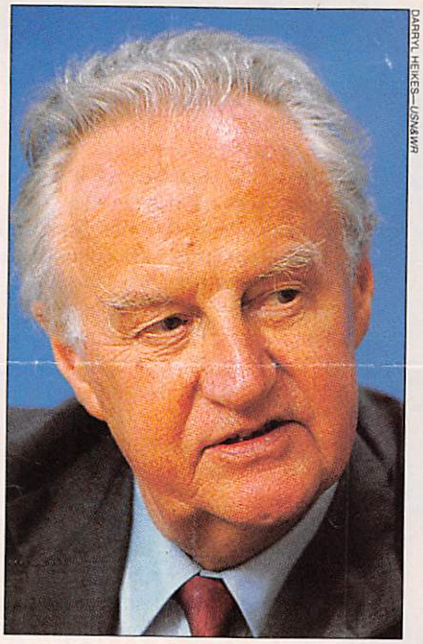
CONVERSATION ■ Conventional psychological wisdom has it that a person's mental health is only as good as his relationships with others. Oxford University psychiatrist Anthony Storr challenges that view in his new book, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*

The creative virtues of loneliness

In an urban society, it's very difficult to get away from the constant press of activity, from relationships, from the telephone and whatever else impinges on us. We don't realize how much we could enjoy ourselves if we escaped from all that input. We forget that the imagination flourishes best in solitude.

The virtues of solitude have been lost sight of because my profession—psychiatry—has pushed the view that personal relationships are the only source of fulfillment. A child's development is always analyzed in terms of the relationship with parents, and adult lives are discussed in terms of heterosexual partnerships. With all of the stress on relationships, it's not surprising that married couples tend to feel guilty if they need to separate from one another for a while. But the best marriages are probably ones in which the partners can be separate for a period and then come back together. They enjoy each other more.


DARRYL HEIKES—USN&WR

Many people find that one of the best ways of coming to terms with a very traumatic situation like divorce or bereavement is to go off by themselves. Adm. Richard Byrd, the noted explorer, went to the Antarctic for a considerable period when he felt under terrific pressure because he was always being asked to lecture, to tour the country, to raise money for expeditions. This proved to be a healing experience for him.

The solitary genius

Among creative individuals, the great abstract thinkers and philosophers probably have led the most solitary lives. There must be some connection between the capacity for long periods of concentration on abstract thought and not having the distraction of a family and close relationships. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant worked alone most of the time, yet he was quite well adjusted. He had an active social life in the evenings and was a very good conversationalist, with a wide range of interests outside philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein also worked alone, but he was an extreme eccentric who came from a very disturbed family. Three of his brothers committed suicide, and he was often near suicide himself. Wittgenstein deliberately chose to go off to remote places. He had a little shack in Norway and another on the west coast of Ireland, and most people think that his best ideas came in those places. Wittgenstein was much more tormented than Kant. His was a nature close to paranoia. Yet both based their self-esteem on their work rather than upon the love of others.

There are writers and composers who also go away from home to do their work. The French author Georges Simenon was the great example. He had a book the way other people have illnesses. When he felt a book coming on, he went to his doctor to have his blood pressure taken. Then, he would go to some retreat and write a mystery within a matter of a few weeks. He would have his blood pressure taken again, and it would have fallen. He'd come back and interact, and then go off once more.

Nightmares and prison cells

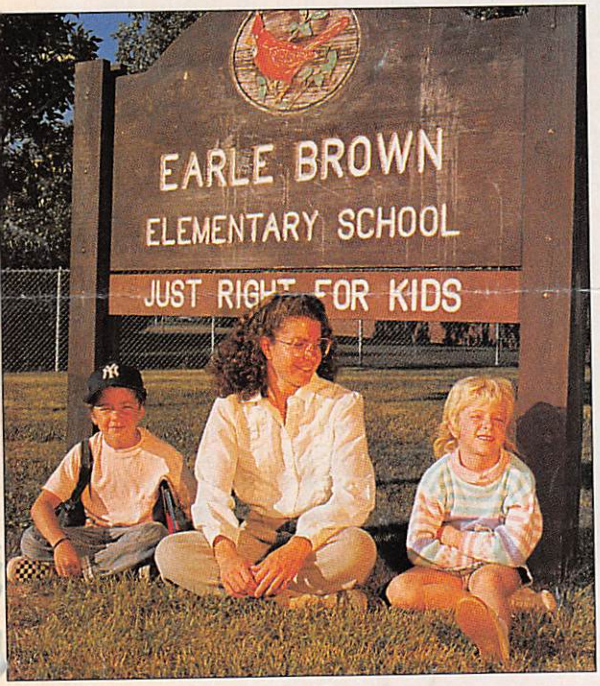
Solitude can come about involuntarily. Beethoven found himself isolated because of his deafness, which forced him inward. Many people think the depth and interest of his later works came about because of his deafness. The painter Goya is another creative man of genius whose art owed a good deal of its originality to deafness. His isolation impelled him to record his nightmare visions. He did etchings with monsters and horrors of every kind. I don't know how he could live with his imagination, but he did.

Enforced solitude of another kind—imprisonment—can also trigger experiences of lasting value, at least for some people, although it clearly is a very stressful situation. The writer Arthur Koestler had the fascinating experience of being under threat of death while imprisoned in Spain. He was kept in solitary confinement most of the time and said that he started thinking about only absolutes and very basic, fundamental problems. He later had a very interesting discussion on television with British journalist Anthony Grey, who had been imprisoned in Communist China. They both agreed that, even though this was an absolutely horrific experience that they would not want to repeat, it enabled them to feel this sense of being in touch with their own depths in a way that they wouldn't have otherwise.

It's fascinating to me that quite a number of people I have come into contact with—people I didn't know had any religious feeling—have been on retreats or have voluntarily gotten themselves into a monastery as guests. Virtually all of them have found the experience very rewarding.

I'm surprised at the number of people who have told me that they used to feel guilty because they enjoyed solitude, but now, after hearing what I have to say, they understand that it's O.K. to take pleasure in being alone. I believe that the happiest lives are probably those in which neither interpersonal relationships nor impersonal interests are idealized as the only way to salvation. The desire and pursuit of the whole must comprehend both aspects of human nature. ■

Conversation with Alvin P. Sanoff



Old school ties: Michael Mischke, 16, and his sister, Lisa, 17, wanted to remain at Armstrong High School when their family moved just beyond its district line. Parents Donn and JoAnn contacted the school and discovered that Minnesota's choice plan made this easy. Here, they meet with Linda Powell, interim superintendent for their school district

Quality: Teresa Harlow and her children, Samuel, 8, and Hannah, 6, live in Minneapolis but selected a school in Brooklyn Center, Minn. Mrs. Harlow grew up in the Brooklyn Center district herself and thinks highly of its academic programs. Like the Sparlings, day care was a factor, too: The children's day-care center is right across the street from their new school

may effectively exclude some lower-income families from participating in the program. A student will be transported within his new district, but not from his old one unless his family income is at or below the poverty level. For families like the Sparlings, transportation is not an issue, but for lower-income urban or rural students interested in attending suburban schools, the cost of transportation could impair their ability to attend their schools of choice.

Yet if Minnesota's brief experiment is any guide, fears that inner-city schools will go down the drain and rural schools be forced to shut down from a loss of enrollment may be unfounded. The Red Wing school district, 60 miles from Minneapolis, added 12 pupils this year and lost only five. And in the suburban Robbinsdale district, Jessica Sparling's choice district, the change was about the same: 19 students gained, 12 lost.

As State Senator William Bulger of Massachusetts, the architect of the plan his state considered, also points out, if some students have already left, it behooves a school to be more responsive to those still enrolled. "Are the kids left behind any worse off?" he asks. "At least now when a parent comes to complain, people will be more likely to listen." ■

by Jill Rachlin