Splendid Isolation: A Narrative Essay of American Proxemics

Robert Chasteen
College of DuPage

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I want to live all alone in the desert
I want to be like Georgia O'Keeffe
I want to live on the Upper East side
And never go down in the streets

I'm putting tin foil up on the windows
Lying down in the dark to dream
I don't want to see their faces
I don't want to hear them scream

- From the song "Splendid Isolation,"
by Warren Zevon

I'm just like the people on this train.
The realization struck me like lightning as I rode the half-filled car into Chicago; it was as if I were watching an episode of "The Twilight Zone" turned inside-out. As the train clambered to each stop along its route, it made no difference whether one person got on or one person got off. Every seat in my rail car was occupied by only one person, although each seat could comfortably accommodate two. New passengers would open the door to my car, note every seat was filled by only one person, then move on to another car because they considered mine full.

Every rider, from the rumpled lawyer to the business woman in Reeboks, was a human fortress of solitude, either wrapped up in the newspaper, a Walkman, or his or her own thoughts. No one said a word; thus, the only sounds aboard the train were the staccato singing of the rails and the muted roar of silence. The eventual crowding at rush hour forced people to begrudgingly sit next to one
another, but still not one word, not one glance, was exchanged.

In the frightening clarity of the moment, I realized I was just as guilty of self-absorption as the rest of the people on this train. I had not invited anyone to share my seat; in fact, I had even withheld the courtesy of acknowledging the person sitting next to me. I merely sat, safe in the womb of my self, as the train roared into the heart of the city, its cars silently filled with dozens of people, all sitting alone together.

* * *

The pulse of America may be found at the heart of its cities, for the streets of the city are vessels continually flooded with new life and ancient wisdom, each teaching the other the laws of survival in an urban environment. My experience aboard the train is one of many illustrations of how we as Americans respond to the spatial relationships between ourselves and others, known otherwise as the study of proxemics.

To study American proxemics is to study isolation. Edward T. Hall, a specialist in proxemics, notes of Americans, "As soon as a person stops or is seated in a public place, there balloons around him a small sphere of privacy which is considered inviolate. Anyone who enters this zone and stays is intruding." As I had witnessed aboard the train, the American need for space and solitude is desperate, almost all-consuming.

Perhaps such need stems from the kaleidoscopic nature of the American character itself. The idea of an "American essence" is a myth as old as our nation; in its stead exists a subjective, continually shifting national character built upon foundations of dislocation and rootlessness.

As a nation, the United States is composed of classes in which each group attempts to assert its independence by denying its need for reliance on others. Isolationism is an American instinct, but our need for solitude reflects our still-greater need for identity. As a nation, we have paid the price for independence: our collective psyche has been shattered.

The United States is a country in search of its own consciousness. We need time to ourselves to discover the sense of
self we have never truly possessed. Once in possession of even some fragmented sense of self, we guard it as if our lives depend on it; as human beings, knowledge of self is essential to our existence.

Over time, the East has developed philosophy and the West has developed psychology, both for the purpose of examining and
exploring the human soul. Absolute truth, it may be said, rests somewhere amidst the facts; if so, true understanding of ourselves will come at the point where philosophy and psychology meet.

The environment of the floatation tank, tested and refined by the scientific community for more than thirty years, represents the
convergence of the twain.

The floatation tank is a pool of saline solution contained within a light-proof, sound-insulated isolation chamber. The tank is designed to relieve stress and assist in the achievement of altered states of consciousness through the creation of a "restricted environment." Once inside the tank, the subject is deprived of all incoming sights, sounds, and tactile sensations; without the distractions of the physical world, the subject is left to experience complete physical and mental relaxation with the benefit of enhanced concentration. If the essential American desire is to be alone with one's thoughts, to "get away from it all," perhaps the floatation tank is the American dream.

* * *

I departed the train station and began the unsettling walk through the streets of Chicago. Previous excursions had taught me the necessity of adopting the "city face": a mask of total concentration and complete oblivion, the only look that allows me to pass undisturbed through the disturbing streets. A smile in the city could cost you your life; a glance into the eyes of the city's dispossessed could cost you your soul. I wore the mask as my only means of self-defense.

I soon arrived at SpaceTime Tanks, a "relaxation center" in the Lincoln Park neighborhood specializing in floatation tanks. I had traveled here as part of a field trip experience; searching for a means to explore the concept of "happiness" for a Humanities class, I had rented the use of the tank for an hour.

SpaceTime's lobby was a welcome respite from the jangle of the urban environment, for I was greeted by soft lighting, soothing music, and overstuffed furniture. Tari, one of the owners of the facility, instructed me in the proper use of the tank and how to make the best use of my time. I was left alone to shower; the tank water was filtered after every use, but the shower served to maintain the tank's purity and allowed my body to more readily adjust to the aquatic environment. After placing a pair of foam plugs in my ears to further reduce noise, I tentatively opened the hatch and entered the undiscovered.
Something about the alien atmosphere remained curiously inviting. The pool of water was only ten inches deep, but nearly a half-ton of Epsom salts had been dissolved into the water to provide my body buoyancy; an underwater heating pad regulated both the air and water temperature at ninety-eight degrees. The four-foot high chamber allowed me just enough room to crouch into the tank. As I closed the door behind me and stretched out onto my back, the water swirled silently about me; the darkness embraced me. I realized I had returned to the womb.

The free-floating sensation was at first unsettling, as if the law of gravity had unexpectedly been repealed. I was unused to experiencing the loss of pressure being exerted on my joints and muscles, yet I voiced no complaints as every inch of my body breathed a sigh of relief. I spent my next moments adapting to my new environment, gently rocking back and forth, adrift alone upon my singular ocean.

In the expansive solitude, radio static filled my mind as my cerebral dials spun frantically in search of a clear channel. I kept hearing the silence of the people on the train; I kept seeing the faces on the street I had tried so desperately to avoid. My mind soon became the center of a psychic storm, inundated by waves of troubling memories and unstable emotions.

Even here, in the tank, I could not escape my self. Above the roar, I heard the distant bass of my heart and the steady, muffled rhythm of my breathing; I tried to isolate each physical note as I focused on the simple sonata my body sang to me. In my mind's eye I began to picture a crystalline pool of water, intent on keeping the water still so nary a ripple disrupted the surface. As I worked to keep the pool of water as placid as glass, each new breath I drew became a mantra; I soon lost track of time. The tempest inside my mind seized as suddenly as it had erupted, and my final thoughts before drifting off into unconsciousness were of islands and continents. 

My next memory was of Tari tapping gently on the closed hatch of the tank. I came back to consciousness like a swimmer surfacing for air. As I started to move about the chamber, I noticed
everything was different. With leaden limbs, I rushed in slow motion toward the hatch; as I opened the portal, light streaked brilliantly all around me.

My "reality" exploded: when I turned my head too quickly, my vision shimmered into a Technicolor blur; my skin burned with cold fire as I showered again to wash the salts from my hair and body. I was experiencing "stimulus hunger," a physical condition brought about by the absence of incoming stimuli to the nervous system.

The hour had fine-tuned my being. As I dressed, I felt a continuous current of energy surging through me like a live wire. The most scintillating sensation was the crystalline quality of my mind: there was no past, no future, simply this moment, followed by another moment, then another. I was holding time in my hands, feeling its instants flow through my fingers.

The moment was transcendent -- spiritual, but not religious. The feeling of emotional abandonment I had experienced on the train, the sense of solitary consciousness, was gone. In its stead was a sense of connection, a high-voltage, direct-input jack into absolute existence. As I walked back to the train station, the once-threatening streets now sizzled with new life: the graffiti was electric, the car horns kinetic, and the air about me hummed like a stack of amplifiers. The train ride home was filled with the fast-forward rush of animated landscapes and cartoon characters, its soundtrack composed of the collective music of passengers talking and laughing with each other. In the carnival purity of the moment, I realized I was just like the people on this train.

Works Cited
