Meet me, my new best friend

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was a wet evening and a speaker I desperately wanted to hear was in town to give a lecture. I got on the phone and rang several of my friends: “Come with me,” I implored as each of them reeled out a host of reasons why they couldn't. In a state of mild discomfort I rang my husband. Although he had already said he didn't want to come, and having him along would have meant forking out for a babysitter, I tried to cajole him into joining me.

“But why can't you go on your own?” he queried, as I moaned and sighed and finally gave in.

It was a very pertinent question. Good company? Isn't it always sweeter to share with another, to laugh if the lecture is bad, to look knowingly at each other during the bits that strike a chord? Isn't relating the real point of life?

And yet, underneath I knew that it was time to admit what a decade of being in a close, loving partnership had done to me. Like many people in long-term relationships, I had grown emotionally flabby. A girlfriend recently said the same thing to me: “Before I got married I did everything alone. I travelled through Asia. I used to eat alone in cafes from one end of the planet to the next, happily reading magazines or flirting with waiters. Now I rarely venture down the street without a girlfriend or my partner by my side.

“I feel awkward being alone, vulnerable, self-conscious. And I feel like I'm missing out if I don't have someone to share my every thought with.”
I began wondering whether it's a function of youth - the ability to live joyfully and confidently in the world by oneself, full of anticipation, eager to chat with strangers, happy to stand alone at parties without a cigarette or drink in hand to mask a sense of alienation.

Or is it simply that we lose emotional muscle tone as the years go by if we couple up and don't exercise some independence, often at significant cost to our personal growth and that of our partner?

I just finished reading the classic book by renowned author and psychiatrist Anthony Storr titled Solitude: A Return to the Self, about how people really need their own space. Storr says that while “love and friendship are of course an important part of what makes life worthwhile, they are not the only source of happiness”.

Which, he says, is why so many marriages fall under the brutal wheels of expectation and then die a horrid death.

He says: “Two opposing drives operate throughout life, the drive for companionship, love and everything else that brings us close to our fellow men, and the drive towards being independent, separate and autonomous.”

He says that there is profound value in the insights, creativity and self-discovery that can occur in moments of solitude. People can often be most themselves when they are alone. And he argues that we should cultivate our innate need for

time alone as we get older because the move towards solitude is nature's way of preparing us for the losses of old age.

Meanwhile, the great psychological theorist Abraham Maslow argues that peak experiences depend on being free of other people, free from neurotic involvements, needy relationships, hangovers from childhood, obligations, duties and hopes.

Maslow writes that when we become less clingy with other people, less fearful of spending time alone, we become more ourselves, our real, authentic selves, and hence can find our greatest joy and meaning in life.

This world view, of seeking emotional non-attachment, is at the essence of Eastern thinking. Which is why so many troubled Westerners flock to silent Buddhist retreats and meditation centres in search of inner peace.

But the truth is few last long because Western society has so intensely reinforced the importance of romantic love, procreation, coupledom, mateship. I've heard countless stories about people going off alone to do silent, spiritual retreats, falling madly in love with the nearest human life form and bonking it furiously.

A close friend and counsellor believes that one of the most important journeys we go on is the move towards old age. In our latter years it's natural to find ourselves profoundly alone. Grown children have little time, friends pass away. The state of aloneness is the status quo.

Agreeing with Storr, she says: “The point is not to learn to endure loneliness but to embrace it, enjoy it and feel its sacredness.” Although she has a partner and many friends, she rehearses for her impending solitary time by walking alone each day, going out often on her own, and by meditating daily on self-love and on a higher source.

The adage says: “We're born into this world alone and we die alone.” During the time in between, it seems wise to cultivate a deep and loving relationship with oneself, and to surrender to the inevitable beauty of one's aloneness - even if it's simply by spending the odd wet night at a lecture, alone.

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