

# *Living Learning Loving*

by Gail Cawley Showalter

## **Chapter 1** **Living with Solitude**

*Instead of viewing aloneness as a shameful condition to cure,  
think of it as one of freedom and opportunity.*

–Lauren Mackler, *Soulmate*

Being alone can sometimes get a bad rap or be seen in a negative light, as if something is wrong with you if you are alone. For example, you enter a restaurant and the hostess asks, “just one?” as if there is something wrong with being just one. In all fairness, have you ever seen a table set for “just one?” No, because our world isn’t designed for people to be alone.

The myth is that single women are flawed somehow, or they wouldn’t still be single. Even though being alone should not carry such undertones, our culture continues to support the notion there must be something “not right” with a woman who remains single for too long. This is not a burden single men face until well into middle age.

Another myth that plagues too many single women is the idea that they need a mate to “complete” them. This attitude is most likely a subliminal carryover from Patriarchal days when women needed the protection of a father or husband. Less than a hundred years ago women couldn’t vote, inherit titles, or even check into a hotel unaccompanied by their husband, father or chaperone. Today, women have far more freedoms and choices, often exercising the right not to marry or have children unless they want to do so. **Shel Silverstein** makes the point in his book *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*, that single women must learn to “roll” alone before searching for completion by another.<sup>1</sup>

### **Being alone is not the same as being lonely.**

There is a big difference between being alone and being lonely. No one enjoys being lonely. One of God’s greatest desires for us is to recognize how much *He* is there for us. If you are a single woman or your husband often works away from home, you may truly be lonely. You may not be living the life you planned. At one of the SMORE retreats, a single mom shared,

I have been a single mom for ten years now. My daughter is in sixth grade, and things are going well, but I’m already thirty-five years old, and aching to find a suitable partner and maybe have another child. I envy those who have their complete and blossoming family while I am raising my child alone.

Surely many women raising children alone could say this. Most women don’t plan to stay single. For many women, difficulties and disappointments are frequent events; however, as with most rough journeys in life, there is much to learn on these trips. There are experiences that look much like “rocks in the road,” but once they are polished, they become gems. The problem with polishing rocks is that the process can only take place in solitude—when you are alone.

I used to wonder why people wanted to climb mountains, especially considering all the dangers involved. Now I see it as overcoming a great challenge or obstacle. Isn’t that what

you do daily? Aren't you overcoming challenges and obstacles, sometimes wondering what your next step will be? Or worrying if you will make it through the next crisis? You may even have to make some heart wrenching decisions on life's journey.

I've spent many days in solitude, some by choice—others not. Either way I have learned more, stretched more, and have grown more during those times. Aloneness need not be lonely. It can be a time for needed change and insight into your plans and choices. It can even be seen as "me time" when you can focus on your own needs, wants and desires for the future. Many great spiritual and political leaders such as Martin Luther, Nelson Mandela, the Apostles Paul, Peter and John, and many more have written history-altering words while serving time in solitude. Solitude can be a place of inspiration unlike any other.

Seeking answers to life's hard questions is a process that demands time apart from the crowd. This alone place is where you become your own person. Once you are sure of yourself, your beliefs, and your convictions, the decisions you make will be wiser and more appropriate for your life.

Sometimes it can be painful to look within, to think about your disappointments or hurt, or maybe you just don't enjoy being by yourself, but the rewards of learning to enjoy a bit of solitude is worth the discomfort.

If you feel uncomfortable with solitude, you can take it one small bite at a time. It might be easier to start enjoying solitude by going to the mall, taking a walk, or eating in the park alone, rather than going away (alone) for a long weekend. If you can, or do, take a weekend to yourself, use this time deliberately. Consider taking a notepad with you to write down thoughts and feelings that come to the surface. You may be surprised what you learn. You may even get a much-needed break from the chaos of your life.

Allow your soul to be fertile ground for the seeds of spiritual growth. Growth is what life is about. Seasons change and growth continues. Children are a great example: their physical and mental growth is a constant. As adults and especially as Christians, each of us should ask "How is my growth lately?" Of course, I'm speaking of spiritual growth here, seeing our physical growth is complete by adulthood.

If we see solitude as a treasure, it can afford us the opportunity to look deep within and find precious gems such as self worth, talents, inspiration and much, much more.

### **Solitude offers opportunities to know your abilities.**

Being alone can be an opportunity to reach out and learn from new experiences. A single woman, and dear friend, told me one of her experiences.

I own a circular saw and I use it too. I put my safety glasses on, really think about where and how I'm cutting my board, and I go for it. And I'm the proud creator of a set of closet shoe shelves that look good and are so wonderfully efficient, if I do say so myself.

That may not seem like a big deal to some. I mean, HGTV testifies to the fact that women can be carpenters, too, but for me, it was a big deal. I grew up with the understanding that circular saws, drills, and nail guns were Daddy's tools, and basically, a circular saw was too dangerous for me to handle.

Since I was single and without the manly power of a husband, and had limited resources of help, I could feel rather alone in my situation. I'm also hesitant to ask others for help, so I would lament over the fact that I just wanted some boards cut. Of course, buying and learning to use a circular saw was only one of many things that would challenge me in my singleness.

As with my friend, there have been things I have tackled alone too. I had to confront my

feelings of discomfort or inadequacy about house decisions, auto repairs, even managing finances, and income taxes. What I found was, I really wasn't alone. God was with me all along the way. He has challenged me to rise above what I think I'm capable of doing and to realize that He is the one I can lean on no matter what. The challenges of the unknown and unsettling aren't easy, but they are enormously rewarding as God reveals how much He can do in me. The value of this growth experience takes on a completely different meaning when it's only me involved in a project, versus a husband and me.

### **You can enjoy solitude without being lonely.**

Solitude restores, and can even be liberating. It can be an opportunity for transforming your life, a time of listening to the "friend within."

Solitude suggests peacefulness stemming from a state of inner richness. It is a means of enjoying the quiet and whatever it brings that is satisfying and from which we draw sustenance. It is something we cultivate. Solitude is refreshing, an opportunity to renew ourselves. In other words, it replenishes us.<sup>2</sup>

–Hara Estroff Marano, *Psychology Today*

In times of looking deeply within, our creator God reveals to us why He needs our attention. If we want to truly hear Him, we must be quiet. *"Be still and know that I am God"* (Ps 46:10a KJV). Once you learn to embrace solitude in your aloneness, your spiritual life can grow leaps and bounds.

When God gets us alone by affliction, heartbreak or temptation, by disappointment, sickness, or by thwarted affection, by a broken friendship, or by a new friendship—when He gets us absolutely alone, and we are dumbfounded, and cannot ask one question, then He begins to expound (speak).<sup>3</sup>

–Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

This is the perfect time to hear God speak to your situation. What better way for us to recognize that God can supply all our needs than to hear his voice, feel his love and know He has our best interest at heart? When we experience silence, isolation, or loneliness, we are not being punished; we are being prepared to experience profound growth. God has not forsaken us. If we want to hear the friend within, we must be quiet, still, and willing to embrace solitude.

## SMORE TO CONSIDER

How do you feel about being alone?

- Love it
- Hate it
- Not sure

Describe a time where being alone was peaceful.

In what ways do you embrace solitude?

- Reading
- Journaling
- Surrounded by nature
- Taking a long soak or shower

Describe a new activity you are willing to try in which you can experience solitude that refreshes your soul.

Name two areas where you would like to see “profound growth.”

- 1.
- 2.

Describe what that growth would look like.  
(If you can see it – You can do it.)