



ALONE

Solitude As Strategy

June 7, 2020 | Article No. 8

**Written and
Illustrated by**

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When is the last time you were truly alone? Totally unplugged from any source of information and alone in your thoughts. Not a sadness associated with loneliness, but the thrill of solitude. Finding opportunities to escape is not the misperceived trait of the so-called introvert; rather, it's a deliberate strategy to reflect, refuel and regenerate perspectives for success in life and work. Personal conversations with explorers, both professional and amateur inform this article. It is through their journeys that we can reflect a window into our own life potential.

Insights

- Being alone is not the same as being lonely
- 3 in 4 People achieve breakthroughs in ideas while alone
- Openness to experience is the strongest and more consistent personality trait that predicts creative achievement
- Find alone time, it's a **R.U.S.H.** (Reinvest in a micro-expedition, Unplug yourself, find Solitude, start with Handwriting)
- Create a habit each day to **W.R.I.T.E** (Wake up and begin, Remember details, Ink as your medium, Tell the truth, and do it Everyday, Everywhere)

“There's something thrilling about the absolute freedom of being on your own. Solitude is the ultimate freedom.”

—— Adam Shoalts ——
Explorer

Alone simply defined as “isolated from others” often connotes an undesirable state of being. Alone and Loneliness shouldn't be confused. Loneliness, as Hara Marono writes is “marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely—perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness.”¹ But here's an alternative view. In a hyper-connected world, what's wrong with leaving it-once in awhile- for what some call “me time”.² There are some who embody the spirit of being “alone”. Explorer with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, [Adam Shoalts](#), represents one end of the spectrum, anchored by a seemingly genetic disposition to a 'call of the wild'. He ascribes “solitude” as a state of being alone or remote from society. “I don't always do solo expeditions” says Adam; however, there's definitely an advantage to having a minimal disruptive footprint in nature. That is, if you want unfettered access to the natural world. “I've looked an arctic wolf in the eyes” remarked Adam during our recent conversation on OrthoPod. Whether, or not, you identify with the mindset of expeditions in the woods, atop a mountain, or across water you needn't always go alone. But, if you do, you might just upregulate your “explorer” gene.

Adam Shoalts is a professional adventurer and best-selling author. A Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS) for “extraordinary contributions to geography” and completing a nearly 4,000 km solo journey across Canada's Arctic, he's happiest when simply outdoors in the woods. Learn more: www.adamshoalts.com

Click [HERE](#) to watch it.

“Anyone who is curious about the world can be an explorer. You don't have to go on an expedition; rather, you can be a scientist exploring the invisible world”

—— Adam Shoalts ——
Explorer

On Curiosity and Idea Generation

OrthoEvidence polls suggest 3 in 4 healthcare providers need alone time to generate new ideas [Exhibit 1]. In fact, the best ideas, come from solitary activities for the majority of people.

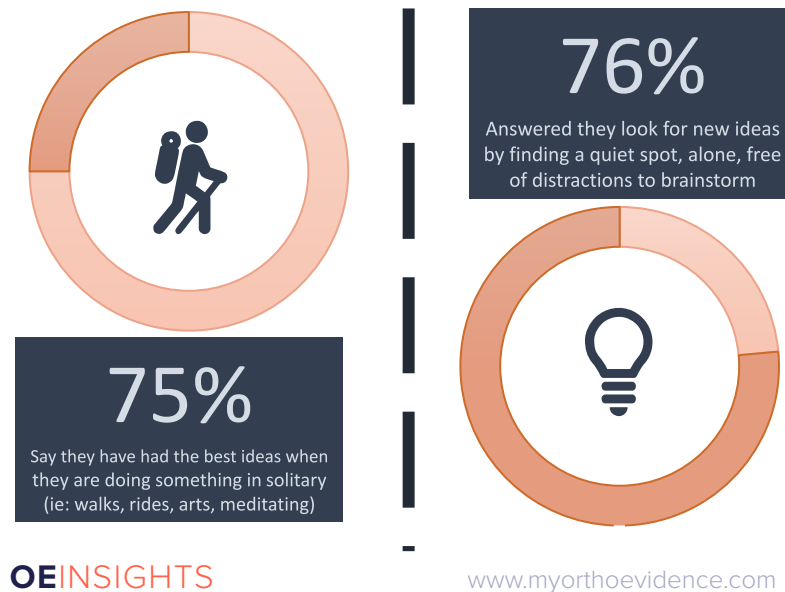


Exhibit 1: Solitude As Strategy: Idea Generation Poll. OrthoEvidence Random Sampling 20

Building a creative mindset begins with being open to new experiences, new people, and new opportunities.³ A meta-analysis by Silvia, Kaufman, and Pretz suggests openness to experience is the strongest and more consistent personality trait that predicts creative achievement.⁴ Evidence suggests highly creative people –whether scientists or clinicians– tend to engage in a large number of loosely related activities, forming a broad “network of enterprises” including creative hobbies and interests outside the sciences.⁴ For instance, Galileo's scientific activity was hugely influenced by his exploration of the humanities (arts and music, literature).⁵

“Get up at seven, yeah, And I go to work at nine.
I got no time for livin'. Yes, I'm workin' all the time.
It seems to me I could live my life, a lot better
than I think I am.'

— Neil Peart —
March 1974 - Drummer, RUSH

On Working More Effectively

The first quarter of 2020 has forced countless millions to ask the question, “Can I work more effectively?” What many of us have held as routine has been disrupted. We have found ourselves facing a new reality of working from 'home'. With virtual communication higher than ever, connectivity at record highs, and billions of people online daily, the urgency for 'solitude' has never been greater. The idea is a simple one. Get away.



“Being alone with the mountains for me is divine. It is a place where I leave my life behind and become unplugged from the rest of the world. It gives me the precious moments to reflect on why I continue doing the things I do”

Kumaran Rasappan
Orthopaedic Surgery Trainee, Singapore

Make the improbable possible. Work hours may limit the possibility of a multi-day expedition. But getting away—for even a few hours—is a **R.U.S.H!** [Exhibit 2] In fact, be in a hurry each week to find opportunities for solitude. Think micro-expedition. A smaller, compact, high return on investment hour. It matters not how you spend this time. Just unplug and find solitude.



“Any expedition, large or small, involves, planning, strategy, physical and mental and logistic preparation -- very similar to performing a complex surgical operation”

Hemant Shirali
Orthopaedic Surgeon, Canada

R

Reinvest in micro-expeditions. Find an hour each week.

U

Unplug as a daily routine. Disconnect from everything.

S

Solitude is the ultimate freedom. There's power in being alone.

H

Handwrite your notes. Imprint them into your longer term memory.

“Okay, this is the notebook I'm going to write Pulp Fiction or whatever in. You can't write poetry on a computer, but I can take this notebook places—I can write everywhere. It never looks like a script; it always looks like a diary of a madman”

— Quentin Tarantino 1993 —
Interview with Grahan Fuller

On Writing

To document an experience often provides a powerful opportunity to reflect. Whether you scribble notes in a pocket journal, or carefully prepare prose for a book, the process is entirely the same. While the original goal may be to get “unplugged” for a few hours, a few days, a few days or a few months, journaling may serve to explore ideas, insights and epiphanies. And while it may begin as a description of the day's events, its bound to expand to stories, aspirations, regrets, and new hopes.

When alone, Julia Cameron, author of *Artists Way*, urges a ritual of “three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness” every morning.⁷ Try a simple approach and start to **W.R.I.T.E.** for 7 days consecutive days. [Exhibit 3]

W	Wake up and begin
R	Remember the details
I	Ink will save your laptop battery
T	Tell the truth. Don't lie to yourself
E	Everyday. Everywhere

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Exhibit 3: Five Strategic Writing Behaviours

“I love the natural world-it's probably the thing the fires up my soul and gets my blood flowing”

On Expeditions: “I am constantly confronted with mental problems that need to be solved—not necessarily big abstract questions of the universe—but those that involve real risk”

— Adam Shoalts —
Explorer

On Risk As a Strategy

When Sophie Zhu set out on a 2025 km multi-day solo road trip she had two main goals: 1. Complete the Kwasatchewan Falls hike and 2. Document her journey through northern Manitoba to show the world the beauty of this province. As Kumaran Rasappan stood atop the world on the summit of Mount Everest (29,000 feet), he had overcome many failures and had taken tremendous risks along the journey. One might argue both individuals exemplify the phenotype of a strategic risk taker. Tara Nelson suggests 3 traits of the strategic risk taker which include: 1. there are but two possible outcomes (succeed or learn); 2. the personal costs of inaction can be much greater than action (regret minimization), and 3. worse-case scenarios almost never happen (right-size the risk).⁸



“High altitude mountaineering expeditions rarely go according to plan. During every adventure there is an obstacle that requires you to resort to plan b and occasionally plan c. This ability to stay collected and improvise during a stressful situation is what makes an excellent surgeon and is a skill I learned climbing”

Rakesh Patel
Orthopaedic Surgeon, Michigan, June 2, 2020

Many use time away as a means to refuel and re-invigorate. “When I’m able to take a step back and think, the clarity that unfolds within is spectacular. I renew myself and invigorate the passion that got me choosing what I do in the first place. I understand myself better. When I return to my life and work back home, I’m once again able to give my 100% to everything. I come back as a stronger, more positive and calmer person – a person that I lost touch with once, but able to relate to again now” says Rasappan. However, not every get away needs to end on the summit of Mount Everest. Although, if you have it in you, go for it! As Hemant Shirali, an orthopaedic surgeon and climber, recently told me, “Climbing and exploring remote mountains in the world takes me out of my comfort zone - it gives me time completely to myself where I can reset my priorities in life. Climbing connects me to nature and enriches me with a mental, spiritual, cultural and physical experience that I desperately need. I always come back feeling a better version of myself.” Of course, it goes without saying that with great rewards, comes great risk. Getting out of your comfort zone into so-called “stretch experiences” requires you to step outside of your day-to-day responsibilities and take on a new challenge.⁹ A stretch experience requires courage in the face of fear. And after all, Bertand Russell argues, “to conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom”.



“I haven't truly been alone in a very long time, maybe ever. This trip's solitude has taught me to listen to my instincts, that growth happens when you challenge yourself, and that if you want others to believe in you, you have to believe in yourself.” I conquered my fears of being alone, of discomfort, of insects and I came out the other side a more resilient person.

Sophie Zhu
Resident, Orthopaedic Surgery, Canada, May 2020



“I still vividly remember the time I was alone on the ascent to Camp 2 on Everest. I was very tired. There was nobody around. It was near whiteout conditions and I asked myself, why am I doing this?”

Kumaran Rasappan
Resident, Orthopaedic Surgery, Singapore, March 2020

Contributors



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