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So I'm gonna talk for precisely ten minutes – and the countdown's started, so awesome – about being alone. So two things to say about that. The first thing is that it might seem like a bit of a strange topic for me to talk about in front of a room of hundreds of my peers. And the second thing is that it's okay if you don't like it, because it will be over really quickly.

So let's start with a quote from, I think, America's most famous seeker of solitude, and this is from J.D. Salinger from an interview he gave with the *New York Times* in 1980: "There is a marvelous peace in not publishing." And he spent a large amount of his life deliberately not publishing.

But the problem is, now we're all publishers, as Michael was talking about so eloquently earlier. We all publish, over multiple channels, and we publish all kinds of different things, more and more personal things about our lives. That has an effect on our culture, and that's much discussed.

But the flip side of that is that we also have to consume all of this stuff too. All of this stuff that's kind of like being pushed out and being published, we all have to consume. And I think that has tremendous effects on our internal worlds, on our internal psyche. And I think the ability to look away from this and to stop and disconnect is vitally important for us as human beings.

As designers, we also seem to be really, really comfortable with adding the network to everything we do. Everything we do, more often than not, we're asked to consider how it connects to something else, whether that's the Web, whether that's another device. This is a typewriter that someone's hacked so that it can tweet.

*[Audience laughter]*

So let's look back into history for some lessons about why being alone – why solitude is so important for us as humans. First thing, regardless of how you feel about the historical accuracy of these various stories, there is a shared cultural history of being alone. Christ's 40 days alone in the wilderness; the Buddha's I think 47 days underneath the Bodhi tree, so he wins in the kind of religious figure solitude race. And then on the right, we have Muhammad, who would visit a cave and sit alone and meditate until he received visions from the angel Gabriel.

But there's a slightly more secular story that's also interesting for us to consider. So this is Michel de Montaigne, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in France, who was a – became – is known now for being an essayist. But how he got to being an essayist is the interesting story.

So he formed a very, very close and intimate relationship with another humanist judge, called Étienne de La Boétie, and the two of them would communicate with each other constantly. They found a soul mate in each other, and they would communicate and

communicate and communicate. They would write; they would share their observations on the world.

Unfortunately, one day Étienne de La Boétie died, and de Montaigne was grief-stricken. How he dealt with this was, he had a – being landed gentry, he had a big chateau. He retreated to his very well-stocked library and announces to the world this very, very flowery statement, within which is contained this line that I really like: "retired to the bosom of the learned virgins."

And he spent around ten years in his library, and he started to write. In the absence of his friend, he started to write about the world around him. He started to write about everything, from society to France at the time. But what actually he created was his essay, and that's what he's known for now. He basically invented short-form writing by shutting himself away from the world.

So I think the point that I wanna make there is that we might think of being alone and disconnecting as an abdication of activity, as something that pushes back the world and is a silent place. But I think what I'm trying to say is that solitude is in fact generative. It can be a place in which we find creative energy. And so that's why it's so important to design so that people can access that space.

And a modern essayist is getting in on the act as well. This is Alain de Botton and he says, "We have become such experts at being always in touch, informed, connected, now must relearn how to be silent, disconnected, alone." The curious syntax of that statement may give you a clue as to the channel over which he published it: this is his Twitter feed. There it is. I favorited it. I'm sure the irony wasn't lost on him, or perhaps it was, but he runs the University of Life in London, so what do I know?

If you prefer something a little bit baser, there's too much stuff – we live in a stuffalanche, which is this rather great columnist who writes for a British newspaper called *The Guardian*, Charlie Brooker – both kind of expressing the same sentiment.

So let's look at a few – well, this is like a solitude in the modern world, basically. A friend of mine, Sarah Pennington, performed a piece of research for this pan-European research project called the Equator Project, which was to basically look at the effects of what we in the old country call information/communication technology on our lives.

And so what Sarah did is she logged every interaction she had with a piece of technology. Most of it's a phone, you can see the TV, whether she played PlayStation. And she found out that, over the course of a week, she spent a total of 25.47 hours interacting with some form of communications technology, which is a shocking discovery, or at least it's interesting.

That was in 2002. Why that's interesting is 'cause that's before we started having all of these many channels to publish over, so that's before Twitter, Flickr, Facebook became

popular. So I wonder what would happen if Sarah did the same research now, how much more of her time would be taken up.

And the network that enables all of this communication keeps growing. That might be a matter for some conjecture. That network map, you may not believe it, but it does keep getting more blue. And there are things like the network permeates interspaces, which we never had it before, so onboard Wi-Fi and wireless access points in the middle of the Yukon. That green dot up there, I believe it's a place called Betty's Chicken Shack that has free publicly available Wi-Fi.

So I guess the question is, if we accept that solitude is a valuable state for us to enter into, how do we design for it? This is a Robinson Crusoe Lego figure. How do we recreate Montaigne's library?

This may be a bit extreme. It takes a while before people realize what's wrong with this image. Basically, the call answer buttons and the soft keys have been removed, and this is an artifact that Sarah created for her research.

But there are, like, elements of that in a product that I actually worked on. This very, very weird thing is a collaboration between Bang & Olufsen and Samsung. It was called the Serenata. It was a miserable failure.

But it had this feature, and the deal was that it was a music phone. It had this feature called Pure Music mode, and what happened is, when you slipped the speaker up, the phone would background any communications activity and just focus on playing music, so you could put it on the sideboard of your expensive Scandinavian log cabin and, like, hear the beautiful music from the actually quite nice speaker.

When you exit Pure Music mode, you would get a log of all of the communication activity that had happened whilst you were listening to music. So it wouldn't answer the phone. The phone would ring. You wouldn't get alerted to any incoming text messages until you actually made the decision to, like, reengage with the world.

Now, I know the idea of a phone that shuts off its communications capabilities simply by a physical action – maybe the way you hold it.

*[Audience laughter]*

Oh, right, yeah. Anyway, so there's also things like OmmWriter, and I don't know how many of you have used OmmWriter. It's a fantastic piece of software that does the same thing: backgrounds all of the kind of activity and all the stuff that's coming into your laptop, and it just lets you focus on the craft of writing.

And there's also some inspiration to take from the way that people reestablish boundaries outside in the real world, so it's a quiet car on an Amtrak train, or another train operator chain. How those rules are expressed and how they are respected by the community,

because there's something about stepping back and disconnecting – has to be – so it's like it has to be a two-way thing. So you have to have some kind of permission from the community to disengage from it, so that people don't kind of like worry when you suddenly disappear. And that's something to think about.

Cornish, New Hampshire, was where Salinger lived, and those community rules were expected and enforced there. So people would come to Cornish looking for Salinger, and depending on how aggressive they were in their questioning, they would get sent on a wild-goose chase. So the more kind of annoying they were, the further they got sent.

Someone once taught me once that I should always end every talk with a quote from Charles Bukowski. I don't think that was my mother, but anyway, so I'm gonna do that. And Bukowski has something to say on the subject, because he normally has something to say on every subject: "Without stopping entirely and doing nothing at all for great periods, you're going to lose everything." So let's think about how do we help people to disconnect, to stop. Thanks.

*[End of Audio]*