Loneliness in a Fractured World

Background Readings

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# Table of Contents

- Foreword                  4
- How Loneliness is Tearing America Apart  5
- How to Be Alone           8
- The Danger of a Single Story  16
- The Origins of Totalitarianism  23
- Optional: Readings on Recent Survey Findings  26
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Foreword

The events of the first half of 2020 – a global pandemic, economic instability, and social unrest – have accentuated a broader set of societal and systemic challenges. A silver lining: this unprecedented moment also highlights the innate need for humans to connect with one another, to share our experiences, and to form long-lasting communities. Yet, as these conditions deteriorate, is connection sustainable?

Already, we see growing evidence of the impact these crises are having on overall levels of life satisfaction and happiness, particularly across American adults. It then begs the questions: what are the long-term effects on our physical health and well-being; what is the relationship between loneliness, technology, and current events; and how will this impact our understanding of equity and community?

To unpack the challenges and uncover solutions, Aspen Digital, in collaboration with Facebook, is hosting a series of roundtables to explore the intersection of loneliness, technology, and social connection. This second roundtable titled, “Loneliness in a Fractured World,” will examine the role loneliness plays in shaping an individual’s identity, worldview, and interactions with others. Participants will be challenged to consider how loneliness influences specific communities, their underlying needs, and/or particular life stages. The goal is to better understand these dynamics and to share practical knowledge on how to elevate positive outcomes and reduce negative effects.

In the Aspen tradition, the following readings provide a common starting point for discussion by highlighting trends and emerging issues and providing contrasting viewpoints for how to approach the topic. The collection urges the reader to consider the multiple lenses by which loneliness, social connection, and community have been presented, discussed, and analyzed. We hope that these discussions will play a critical role in informing loneliness research, as well as potential areas for industry investment to advance the future of loneliness and social connection.

We recognize the vast amount of excellent and ongoing research in this space. The goal of these discussions is to highlight this work and identify how we may move forward in our appreciation for what loneliness permits and prevents for human flourishing.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts and feedback.

Vivian Schiller
Executive Director
Aspen Digital
American is suffering an epidemic of loneliness.

According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, most Americans suffer from strong feelings of loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half say they sometimes or always feel alone or “left out.” Thirteen percent of Americans say that zero people know them well. The survey, which charts social isolation using a common measure known as the U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale, shows that loneliness is worse in each successive generation.

This problem is at the heart of the new book “Them: Why We Hate Each Other — and How to Heal,” by Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska. Mr. Sasse argues that “loneliness is killing us,” citing, among other things, the skyrocketing rates of suicide and overdose deaths in America. This year, 45,000 Americans will take their lives, and more than 70,000 will die from drug overdoses.

Mr. Sasse’s assertion that loneliness is killing us takes on even darker significance in the wake of the mail-bomb campaign against critics of President Trump and the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, both of which were perpetrated by isolated — and apparently very lonely — men. Mr. Sasse’s book was published before these events, but he presciently described what he believes lonely people increasingly do to fill the hole of belonging in their lives: They turn to angry politics.

In the “siloed,” or isolated, worlds of cable television, ideological punditry, campus politics and social media, people find a sense of community in the polarized tribes forming on the left and the right in America. Essentially, people locate their sense of “us” through the contempt peddled about “them” on the other side of the political spectrum.

There is profit to be made here. The “outrage industrial complex” is what I call the industries that accumulate wealth and power by providing this simulacrum of community that people crave — but cannot seem to find in real life.

Why are we becoming so lonely? One reason is the changing nature of work. Work is one of the key sources of friendship and community. Think of your own relationships; surely many of your closest friendships — perhaps even your relationship with your spouse — started in the workplace. Yet the reality of the workplace is rapidly attenuating, as people hop from job to job, and from city to city, as steady work becomes harder to find and the “gig” economy grows.
Mr. Sasse worries even more, however, about a pervasive feeling of homelessness: Too many Americans don’t have a place they think of as home—a “thick” community in which people know and look out for one another and invest in relationships that are not transient. To adopt a phrase coined in Sports Illustrated, one might say we increasingly lack that “hometown gym on a Friday night feeling.”

Mr. Sasse finds this phrase irresistible and warmly relates it to his own life growing up in Fremont, Neb., a town of 26,000 residents. He describes the high school sports events on Friday nights that drew the townspeople together in a common love for their neighbors and community that made most differences—especially political differences—seem trivial. He relates with deep fondness the feelings he experienced, after moving away for a couple of decades for school and work, when he returned to Fremont’s small-town life with his family, and the deep sense of belonging it created.

In what might be called “the social capital of death,” Mr. Sasse charmingly describes the sense of being rooted that it gives him, at a robust and healthy 46, to own a burial plot for himself in Fremont’s local cemetery. A précis of Mr. Sasse’s recommendations to America thus might be this: Go where you get that hometown-gym-on-a-Friday-night feeling, put down roots and make plans to fertilize the soil.

That can be a tricky proposition for many of us. On reading the book, I asked myself where I might get that hometown-gym feeling, where I have natural roots, where I can imagine being buried. No specific place came to mind. I have no Fremont—not even Seattle, my hometown, which is a perfectly nice place, but one I unsentimentally left behind 35 years ago.

All this is particularly germane to my wife and me at the moment, as we prepare to move from Maryland to Massachusetts in the coming months. We fear the loneliness we are sure to feel as we enter a completely new place where neither of us grew up or has ever lived. Is a thick community and the happiness it brings out of reach for rootless cosmopolitans like us?

I recently put these questions to Mr. Sasse. He told me I had it all wrong—that moving back home and going to the gym on Friday aren’t actually the point; rather, the trick is “learning how to intentionally invest in the places where we actually live.” In other words, being a member of a community isn’t about whether I have a Fremont. It isn’t about how I feel about any place I have lived, nor about my fear of isolation in a new city. It is about the neighbor I choose to be in the community I wind up calling my home.
And there lies the challenge to each of us in a country suffering from loneliness and ripped apart by political opportunists seeking to capitalize on that isolation. Each of us can be happier, and America will start to heal, when we become the kind neighbors and generous friends we wish we had.
How to Be Alone: An Antidote to One of the Central Anxieties and Greatest Paradoxes of Our Time
Popova, Maria, Brain Pickings, 2014

If the odds of finding one’s soul mate are so dreadfully dismal and the secret of lasting love is largely a matter of concession, is it any wonder that a growing number of people choose to go solo? The choice of solitude, of active aloneness, has relevance not only to romance but to all human bonds – even Emerson, perhaps the most eloquent champion of friendship in the English language, lived a significant portion of his life in active solitude, the very state that enabled him to produce his enduring essays and journals. And yet that choice is one our culture treats with equal parts apprehension and contempt, particularly in our age of fetishistic connectivity. Hemingway’s famous assertion that solitude is essential for creative work is perhaps so oft-cited precisely because it is so radical and unnerving in its proposition.

A friend recently relayed an illustrative anecdote: One evening during a short retreat in Mexico by herself, she entered the local restaurant and asked to be seated. Upon realizing she was to dine alone, the waitstaff escorted her to the back with a blend of puzzlement and pity, so as not to dilute the resort’s carefully engineered illusory landscape of coupled bliss. (It’s worth noting that this unsettling incident, which is as much about the stigma of being single as about the profound failure to honor the art of being alone, is one women are still far more likely to confront than men; some live to tell about it.)

Photograph by Maria Popova
Solitude, the kind we elect ourselves, is met with judgement and enslaved by stigma. It is also a capacity absolutely essential for a full life.

That paradox is what British author Sara Maitland explores in How to Be Alone (public library) – the latest installment in The School of Life’s thoughtful crusade to reclaim the traditional self-help genre in a series of intelligent, non-self-helpy yet immeasurably helpful guides to such aspects of modern living as finding fulfilling work, cultivating a healthier relationship with sex, worrying less about money, and staying sane.

While Maitland lives in a region of Scotland with one of the lowest population densities in Europe, where the nearest supermarket is more than twenty miles away and there is no cell service (pause on that for a moment), she wasn’t always a loner – she grew up in a big, close-knit family as one of six children. It was only when she became transfixed by the notion of silence, the subject of her previous book, that she arrived, obliquely, at solitude. She writes:

I got fascinated by silence; by what happens to the human spirit, to identity and personality when the talking stops, when you press the off button, when you venture out into that enormous emptiness. I was interested in silence as a lost cultural phenomenon, as a thing of beauty and as a space that had been explored and used over and over again by different individuals, for different reasons and with wildly differing results. I began to use my own life as a sort of laboratory to test some ideas and to find out what it felt like. Almost to my surprise, I found I loved silence. It suited me. I got greedy for more. In my hunt for more silence, I found this valley and built a house here, on the ruins of an old shepherd’s cottage.

Maitland’s interest in solitude, however, is somewhat different from that in silence – while private in its origin, it springs from a public-facing concern about the need to address “a serious social and psychological problem around solitude,” a desire to “allay people’s fears and then help them actively enjoy time spent in solitude.” And so she does, posing the central, “slippery” question of this predicament:
“Being alone in our present society raises an important question about identity and well-being.

[...]

How have we arrived, in the relatively prosperous developed world, at least, at a cultural moment which values autonomy, personal freedom, fulfillment and human rights, and above all individualism, more highly than they have ever been valued before in human history, but at the same time these autonomous, free, self-fulfilling individuals are terrified of being alone with themselves?

[...]

We live in a society which sees high self-esteem as a proof of well-being, but we do not want to be intimate with this admirable and desirable person.

We see moral and social conventions as inhibitions on our personal freedoms, and yet we are frightened of anyone who goes away from the crowd and develops “eccentric” habits.

We believe that everyone has a singular personal “voice” and is, moreover, unquestionably creative, but we treat with dark suspicion (at best) anyone who uses one of the most clearly established methods of developing that creativity – solitude.

We think we are unique, special and deserving of happiness, but we are terrified of being alone.

[...]

We are supposed now to seek our own fulfillment, to act on our feelings, to achieve authenticity and personal happiness – but mysteriously not do it on our own. Today, more than ever, the charge carries both moral judgement and weak logic.”

Curiously, and importantly, mastering the art of solitude doesn’t make us more antisocial but, to the contrary, better able to connect. By being intimate with our own inner life – that frightening and often foreign landscape that philosopher Martha Nussbaum so eloquently urged us to explore despite our fear – frees us to reach greater, more dimensional intimacy with others. Maitland writes:
Nothing is more destructive of warm relations than the person who endlessly “doesn’t mind.” They do not seem to be a full individual if they have nothing of their own to “bring to the table,” so to speak. This suggests that even those who know that they are best and most fully themselves in relationships (of whatever kind) need a capacity to be alone, and probably at least some occasions to use that ability. If you know who you are and know that you are relating to others because you want to, rather than because you are trapped (unfree), in desperate need and greed, because you fear you will not exist without someone to affirm that fact, then you are free. Some solitude can in fact create better relationships, because they will be freer ones.

And yet the value of aloneness has descended into a downward spiral of social judgment over the course of humanity. Citing the rise of “male spinsters” in the U.S. census – men over forty who never married, up from 6% in 1980 to 16% today – Maitland traces the odd cultural distortion of the concept itself:

In the Middle Ages the word “spinster” was a compliment. A spinster was someone, usually a woman, who could spin well: a woman who could spin well was financially self-sufficient – it was one of the very few ways that mediaeval women could achieve economic independence. The word was generously applied to all women at the point of marriage as a way of saying they came into the relationship freely, from personal choice, not financial desperation. Now it is an insult, because we fear “for” such women – and now men as well – who are probably “sociopaths.”

This fairly modern attitude, which casts voluntary aloneness as a toxic trifecta of “sad, mad, and bad” – is reinforced via rather dogmatic circular logic that doesn’t afford those who choose solitude the basic dignity of their own choice. Reflecting on the prevalent response of pity – triggered by the “sad” portion of the dogma – Maitland plays out the exasperating impossibility of refuting such social assumptions:

If you say, “Well, no actually; I am very happy,” the denial is held to prove the case. Recently someone trying to console me in my misery said, when I assured them I was in fact happy, “You may think you are.” But happiness is a feeling. I do not think it – I feel it. I may, of course, be living in a fool’s paradise and the whole edifice of joy and contentment is going to crash around my ears sometime soon, but at the moment I am either lying or reporting the truth. My happiness cannot, by the very nature of happiness, be something I think I feel but don’t really feel. There is no possible response that does not descend almost immediately to the school-playground level of “Did, didn’t; did, didn’t.”

Underlying these attitudes, Maitland argues, is the central driver of fear – fear of those radically different from us, who make choices we don’t necessarily understand. This drives us, in turn, to project our fright onto others, often in the form of anger – a manifestation, at once sad, mad, and bad, of Anaïs Nin’s memorable observation that “it is a sign of great inner insecurity to be hostile to the unfamiliar.”
These persistently reinforced social fears, she notes, have chilling consequences:

If you tell people enough times that they are unhappy, incomplete, possibly insane and definitely selfish there is bound to come a grey morning when they wake up with the beginning of a nasty cold and wonder if they are lonely rather than simply “alone.”

(This crucial difference between aloneness and loneliness, in fact, is not only central to our psychological unease but also enacted even in our bodies – while solitude may be essential for creativity and key to the mythology of genius, loneliness, scientists have found, has deadly physical consequences on our risk for everything from heart disease to dementia.)

Paradoxically, Maitland points out, many of our most celebrated cultural icons had solitude embedded in their lifestyle and spirit, from great explorers and adventurers to famous “geniuses.” She cites the great silent film actor Greta Garbo, a famous loner, as a particularly poignant example:

Garbo introduced a subtlety of expression to the art of silent acting and that its effect on audiences cannot be exaggerated… In retirement she adopted a lifestyle of both simplicity and leisure, sometimes just ‘drifting’. But she always had close friends with whom she socialized and travelled. She did not marry but did have serious love affairs with both men and women. She collected art. She walked, alone and with companions, especially in New York. She was a skillful paparazzi-avoider. Since she chose to retire, and for the rest of her life consistently declined opportunities to make further films, it is reasonable to suppose that she was content with that choice.

It is in fact evident that a great many people, for many different reasons, throughout history and across cultures, have sought out solitude to the extent that Garbo did, and after experiencing that lifestyle for a while continue to uphold their choices, even when they have perfectly good opportunities to live more social lives.

So how did our present attitudes toward solitude emerge? Maitland argues that our lamentable refusal to afford those who choose aloneness "the normal tolerance of
difference on which we pride ourselves elsewhere” is the result of a “very deep cultural confusion”:

For two millennia, at least, we have been trying to live with two radically contrasting and opposed models of what the good life would or should be. Culturally, there is a slightly slick tendency to blame all our woes, and especially our social difficulties, either on a crude social Darwinism or on an ill-defined package called the “Judaean-Christian paradigm” or “tradition.” Apparently this is why, among other things, we have so much difficulty with sex (both other people’s and our own); why women remain unequal; why we are committed to world domination and ecological destruction; and why we are not as perfectly happy as we deserve. I, for one, do not believe this – but I do believe that we suffer from trying to hold together the values of Judaean-Christianity (inasmuch as we understand them) and the values of classical civilization, and they really do not fit.

She traces the evolution of that confusion all the way back to the Roman Empire, with its ideals of public and social life. Even the word “civilization” bespeaks these values – it comes from civis, Latin for “citizen.” (Though it warrants noting that one of the greatest and most enduring Roman exports issued the memorable admonition that “all those who call you to themselves draw you away from yourself.”) Still, the Romans were notorious for their lust for power, honor, and glory – ideals invariably social in nature and crucial to the political cohesion of society when confronted with the barbarians at the gate. Maitland writes:

In these circumstances solitude is threatening – without a common and embedded religious faith to give shared meaning to the choice, being alone is a challenge to the security of those clinging desperately to a sinking raft. People who pull out and “go solo” are exposing the danger while apparently escaping the engagement.

Maitland fast-forwards to our present predicament, the product of millennia of cultural baggage:

No wonder we are frightened of those who desire and aspire to be alone, if only a little more than has been acceptable in recent social forms. No wonder we want to establish solitude as “sad, mad and bad” – consciously or unconsciously, those of us who want to do something so markedly countercultural are exposing, and even widening, the rift lines.

But the truth is, the present paradigm is not really working. Despite the intense care and attention lavished on the individual ego; despite over a century of trying to “raise self-esteem” in the peculiar belief that it will simultaneously enhance individuality and create
good citizens; despite valiant attempts to consolidate relationships and lower inhibitions; despite intimidating efforts to dragoon the more independent-minded and creative to become “team players”; despite the promises of personal freedom made to us by neoliberalism and the cult of individualism and rights – despite all this, the well seems to be running dry. We are living in a society marked by unhappy children, alienated youth, politically disengaged adults, stultifying consumerism, escalating inequality, deeply scary wobbles in the whole economic system, soaring rates of mental ill-health and a planet so damaged that we may well end up destroying the whole enterprise.

Of course we also live in a world of great beauty, sacrificial and passionate love, tenderness, prosperity, courage and joy. But quite a lot of all that seems to happen regardless of the paradigm and the high thoughts of philosophy. It has always happened. It is precisely because it has always happened that we go on wrestling with these issues in the hope that it can happen more often and for more people.

And wrestle we do, often trying to grasp and cling our way out of solitude – a state we don’t fully understand and can’t fully inhabit to reap its rewards. Our two most common tactics for shielding against solitude, Maitland notes, are the offensive fear-and-projection strategy, where we criticize those capable of finding joy in solitude and condemn them to the sad-mad-bad paradigm, and the defensive approach, where we attempt to insulate ourselves from the risk of aloneness by obsessively accumulating a vast network of social ties as a kind of “insurance policy.” In one of her most quietly poignant asides, Maitland whispers:

*There is no number of friends on Facebook, contacts, connections or financial provision that can guarantee to protect us.*

Our cultural ambivalence is also manifested in our chronic bias for extraversion despite growing evidence for the power of introverts. Maitland writes:

*At the same time as pursuing this “extrovert ideal,” society gives out an opposite – though more subterranean – message. Most people would still rather be described as sensitive, spiritual, reflective, having rich inner lives and being good listeners than the more extroverted opposites. I think we still admire the life of the intellectual over that of the salesman; of the composer over the performer (which is why pop stars constantly stress that they write their own songs); of the craftsman over the politician; of the solo adventurer over the package tourist… But the kind of unexamined but mixed messages that society offers us in relation to being alone add to the confusion; and confusion strengthens fear.*
Among Maitland’s toolkit of “ideas for overturning negative views of solitude and developing a positive sense of aloneness and a true capacity to enjoy it” are the exploration of reverie and the practice of facing the fear. She enumerates the five basic categories of rewards to be reaped from unlearning our culturally conditioned fear of aloneness and learning how to “do” solitude well:

1. A deeper consciousness of oneself
2. A deeper attunement to nature
3. A deeper relationship with the transcendent (the numinous, the divine, the spiritual)
4. Increased creativity
5. An increased sense of freedom

In the remainder of How to Be Alone, Maitland goes on to offer a series of “exercises” along each of these five directions of aspiration – psychological strategies for retuning our relationship with solitude.
I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know
that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."
So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Lok. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling
slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called "American Psycho" --

-- and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers. Now, obviously I said this in a fit of mild irritation.

But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans.

This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gaitskill. I did not have a single story of America.
When I learned, some years ago, that writers were expected to have had really unhappy childhoods to be successful, I began to think about how I could invent horrible things my parents had done to me.

But the truth is that I had a very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family.

But I also had grandfathers who died in refugee camps. My cousin Polle died because he could not get adequate healthcare. One of my closest friends, Okoloma, died in a plane crash because our fire trucks did not have water. I grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education, so that sometimes, my parents were not paid their salaries. And so, as a child, I saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed. And most of all, a kind of normalized political fear invaded our lives.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

So what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories."

What if my roommate knew about my Nigerian publisher, Muhtar Bakare, a remarkable man who left his job in a bank to follow his dream and start a publishing house? Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that
people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them.

Shortly after he published my first novel, I went to a TV station in Lagos to do an interview, and a woman who worked there as a messenger came up to me and said, "I really liked your novel. I didn't like the ending. Now, you must write a sequel, and this is what will happen ..."

And she went on to tell me what to write in the sequel. I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.

Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Funmi Iyanda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers.

What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband's consent before renewing their passports? What if my roommate knew about Nollywood, full of innovative people making films despite great technical odds, films so popular that they really are the best example of Nigerians consuming what they produce? What if my roommate knew about my wonderfully ambitious hair braider, who has just started her own business selling hair extensions? Or about the millions of other Nigerians who start businesses and sometimes fail, but continue to nurse ambition?

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called Farafina Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don't have anything in their libraries, and also of
organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained."

I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise. Thank you.
The Origins of Totalitarianism

What we call isolation in the political sphere, is called loneliness in the sphere of social intercourse. Isolation and loneliness are not the same. I can be isolated—that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me—without being lonely; and I can be lonely—that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship—without being isolated. Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed. Yet isolation, though destructive of power and the capacity for action, not only leaves intact but is required for all so-called productive activities of men. Man insofar as he is *homo faber* tends to isolate himself with his work, that is to leave temporarily the realm of politics. Fabrication (*poiesis*, the making of things), as distinguished from action (*praxis*) on one hand and sheer labor on the other, is always performed in a certain isolation from common concerns, no matter whether the result is a piece of craftmanship or of art. In isolation, man remains in contact with the world as the human artifice; only when the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world, is destroyed, isolation becomes altogether unbearable. This can happen in a world whose chief values are dictated by labor, that is where all human activities have been transformed into laboring. Under such conditions, only the sheer effort of labor which is the effort to keep alive is left and the relationship with the world as a human artifice is broken. Isolated man who lost his place in the political realm of action is deserted by the world of things as well, if he is no longer recognized as *homo faber* but treated as an *animal laborans* whose necessary "metabolism with nature" is of concern to no one. Isolation then becomes loneliness. Tyranny based on isolation generally leaves the productive capacities of man intact; a tyranny over "laborers," however, as for instance the rule over slaves in antiquity, would automatically be a rule over lonely, not only isolated, men and tend to be totalitarian.

While isolation concerns only the political realm of life, loneliness concerns human life as a whole. Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.
Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness can be the preliminary condition for superfluousness, just as isolation can (but must not) be the preliminary condition for loneliness. Taken in itself, without consideration of its recent historical causes and its new role in politics, loneliness is at the same time contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition and one of the fundamental experiences of every human life. Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our common sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience. Yet, we have only to remind ourselves that one day we shall have to leave this common world which will go on as before and for whose continuity we are superfluous in order to realize loneliness, the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody.

Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others. Apart from a few stray remarks—usually framed in a paradoxical mood like Cato's statement (reported by Cicero, De Re Publica, I, 17): numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset, "never was he less alone than when he was alone," or, rather, "never was he less lonely than when he was in solitude"—it seems that Epictetus, the emancipated slave philosopher of Greek origin, was the first to distinguish between loneliness and solitude. His discovery, in a way, was accidental, his chief interest being neither solitude nor loneliness, but being alone (monos) in the sense of absolute independence. As Epictetus sees it (Dissertationes, Book 3, ch. 13) the lonely man (eremos) finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore "can be together with himself" since men have the capacity of "talking with themselves." In solitude, in other words, I am "by myself," together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable
individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other. For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them "whole" again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person.

Solitude can become loneliness; this happens when all by myself I am deserted by my own self. Solitary men have always been in danger of loneliness, when they can no longer find the redeeming grace of companionship to save them from duality and equivocality and doubt. Historically, it seems as though this danger became sufficiently great to be noticed by others and recorded by history only in the nineteenth century. It showed itself clearly when philosophers, for whom alone solitude is a way of life and a condition of work, were no longer content with the fact that "philosophy is only for the few" and began to insist that nobody "understands" them. Characteristic in this respect is the anecdote reported from Hegel's deathbed which hardly could have been told of any great philosopher before him: "Nobody has understood me except one; and he also misunderstood." Conversely, there is always the chance that a lonely man finds himself and starts the thinking dialogue of solitude. This seems to have happened to Nietzsche in Sils Maria when he conceived Zarathustra. In two poems ("Sils Maria" and "Aus hohen Bergen") he tells of the empty expectation and the yearning waiting of the lonely until suddenly "um Mittag war's, da wurde Eins zu iZwei . . . Nun feiern wir, vereinten Siegs gewiss,/ das Fest der Feste;/ Freund Zarathustra kam, der Gast der Gaste!" ("Noon was, when One became Two . . . Certain of united victory we celebrate the feast of feasts; friend Zarathustra came, the guest of guests.")

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- In the first week of June, more Americans reported experiencing negative emotions -- and fewer reported experiencing positive emotions -- than in the week prior. By the second week of June, the percentages reporting those same emotions returned to their former levels.

Reports of feeling anger changed more than any emotion, rising from 25% in the last week of May to 38% in the first week of June, before falling back to 27% the following week. There was a nearly double-digit increase in the percentage of Americans feeling sadness, with smaller increases for worry and stress.
Slightly fewer Americans said they felt happiness and enjoyment -- the two positive emotions Gallup is tracking -- during the first week of June than in the prior week. But like the negative emotions, the proportions of Americans feeling happiness and enjoyment are back to where they had been.

The first week of June was an eventful one in the U.S., as millions of Americans protested racial injustice in the U.S. after the May 25 death of George Floyd, a black man from Minneapolis, who was killed while in police custody. Those protests were largely peaceful, but some did result in looting or destruction of property. The Trump administration's response to the protests was widely criticized.

These results are part of Gallup’s ongoing COVID-19 tracking survey and based on interviews with weekly random samples of Gallup’s probability-based panel.

Americans remain less likely to say they are experiencing worry and stress, and more likely to say they have felt happiness and enjoyment, than in late March and early April, when most Americans were living under stay-at-home orders to slow the spread of the coronavirus. U.S. adults are about as likely now as they were earlier in the COVID-19 crisis to say they feel anger and sadness.

**Surge-and-Decline Pattern Seen Among All Key Subgroups**

During the week of June 1-7, members of key subgroups, including by party identification, age, race and education, tended to show increased negative emotions and decreased positive emotions, with those effects subsiding partially or completely the week of June 8-14.

For example, there were double-digit increases in the percentage of Democrats, independents and Republicans who reported feeling anger between late May and early June. Democrats (43%) were the most likely of those groups to say they were angry, followed by independents (37%) and Republicans (32%).

In the second week of June, all party groups showed declines in reports of anger, although Republicans were still more likely to report feeling anger (28%) than they were during the last week of May. Democrats and independents were back to the prior levels.

This general pattern among the party groups was also seen in other emotions measured. One notable exception is that Republicans' reports of positive emotions were steady across the three weeks.
White people and nonwhite people showed similar increases on most of the emotions, including anger. Nonwhite people had a slightly greater increase in reports of sadness than white people. Both groups' percentages are largely back to where they were in late May, but nonwhite people's reports of positive emotions stayed lower in the second week of June.
Bottom Line

Nearly a month after Floyd’s death, Americans continue to protest racial injustice. Congress and the president have taken some initial steps to address police actions that have been factors in the recent deaths of black people. The incidents have certainly raised awareness of and sensitivity to matters of race.

The effect of the events of late May and early June on Americans have been borne out in public opinion surveys, including a sharp drop in President Donald Trump’s job approval rating and satisfaction with the country more generally. And Americans were more inclined to experience strong negative emotions during that period, though those effects seem to have been short-lived.

The sharp increase in anger and sadness during the first week in June contrasts with similar increases in stress and worry in March, during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak and associated social isolation policies. These results illustrate the different circumstances under which negative emotions are experienced on a daily basis.

Learn more about how the Gallup Panel works.
Two in five UK adults feel lonelier under lockdown, finds survey
Campbell, Denis, *The Guardian*, 18 June 2020

28% of respondents said they worried no one would notice if something happened to them

Two in five adults in the UK feel lonelier under the lockdown amid the tight limits it has placed on social contact, new research has revealed.

Survey results by the British Red Cross paint a stark picture of Britain as a society where a substantial minority lack regular face-to-face interaction and feel alone and uncared for.

In a survey of 2,000 adults that was representative of the population, the charity found that 28% worried that no one would notice if something happened to them.

Even more – 33% – said they feared that their feelings of loneliness would get worse in the years ahead.

“The coronavirus crisis is exposing how a lack of meaningful connections can increase feelings of loneliness, and many people fear they will become lonelier in the future,” the British Red Cross said.

Other key findings showed that 37% of adults said their neighbours were like strangers to them and 31% feel they have no one to turn to when they are confronting a problem.

The survey was undertaken by pollsters Opinium between 12 and 15 May, when the full range of lockdown restrictions was still in place.

It also found that at that time a third of adults – 33% – had not had what they regarded as a meaningful conversation in the previous week.

The government has acknowledged that the pandemic has been accompanied by a rise in loneliness. Earlier this week the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport set up a £5m fund to award grants to charities and local groups to tackle the problem.

Zoë Abrams, the British Red Cross’s executive director, urged ministers and the NHS to increase the number of people going to see a GP who are offered “social prescribing” rather than drugs or psychological help.
It involves people being encouraged to take up new social activities, such as dance, bowls, bingo or gardening as a way of having more social contact. It is widely seen as a useful way of reducing isolation, loneliness and depression.

“For many, life before lockdown was lonely already. We want to make sure no one is left behind as restrictions ease,” said Abrams.

The survey also found that people from BAME backgrounds, parents, young people, people with long-term health problems and those on low incomes were more likely to feel lonely.

Earlier this month the Guardian revealed that scores of people who have died at home during the pandemic have lain undiscovered for up to two weeks.

That prompted Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs, to lament the existence of “an epidemic of loneliness” in Britain.

Claire Murdoch, NHS England’s national director for mental health, said: “It is vital that people do not undervalue their mental health during this really difficult time, and reaching out to talk to someone is a small gesture that can make a world of difference. The NHS has been here to help people who need our support throughout the pandemic, so if you or a loved one is suffering please come forward and seek help.”