Solitude

by

*Eyes Right*

**Springfield, VA –** For no apparent reason, last week I realized that I have spent nearly all of my life around others. Although I was an only child, I was never far from my parents. As far as I know, they never hired a babysitter to care for me at any time. Wherever they went, I went. This was not an unusual situation in our socio-economic group in Kentucky in the 1940-50’s time frame. Children went with parents to parties, weddings, funerals, restaurants, church…everywhere. When I was not with my parents, I was with buddies playing every imaginable sport, and many others which we simply made up on the go (such as “catchers in the trees”).

In the early 1960’s, I ended up at the U.S. Naval Academy with 4000 of my closest friends. Four years later I headed out to the submarine force where our typical crew of roughly 100 spent weeks (and sometimes months) submerged in very close quarters deep in the ocean. When our sub came into a port, for safety reasons, I never went into a city, foreign or domestic, by myself. I married five years later and have spent the following 50+ years with our family.

I mention this personal history to set the scene for one of the most satisfying periods of my life when I took several camping trips by myself to hike on the Appalachian Trail (AT) in each of the 14 states through which it passes. I was truly, almost for the first time, by myself. I had hiked on the AT several times previously, but always with buddies.

Setting up a tent by yourself in the middle of an unfamiliar woods was a new experience for me. No one knew where I was or what I was doing. I was not overly frightened, but I was definitely aware that if I were to have a problem, I was on my own. There is certainly an awareness of your surroundings. Noises take on a new meaning. Are those two coyotes wailing somewhere out there discussing how they are going to circle in for the kill? Or are they simply gossiping to while away the night?

The more positive aspect of this solitude is the opportunity to enjoy your own individual “humanness.” Lying snugly inside a sleeping bag in a small tent during a pouring thunderstorm allows one to reflect on the genuine wonder of being alive while soaking in nature (without being soaked by the rain) and then falling asleep basking in a profound gratitude of the miracle of life.

In the morning, there is no alarm, nothing that has to be done to please others, just a grateful smile that those coyotes had been nowhere to be seen during the night. There is also the charm of not having access to that smart phone full of texts, emails, social media, and news, which, in reality, are simply ways to kill time.

Because there is no one to talk to, or listen to, a series of thoughts tend to race through your mind – often concerning issues that have long been buried in the rat race of daily life. You think of friends you have not heard from in ages, projects you have postponed indefinitely, bucket list items you have been promising yourself to do, promises made and not kept….all sorts of random thoughts. Inevitably, however, your mind will return to admiring the sheer beauty of nature surrounding you – trees far older than several generations of humans, a moss bank with its own extremely complex eco-system, and the animals which spend their lives in this beautiful, but sometimes harsh environment.

Solitude – try it sometime.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R