

What good is solitude?

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It's

a new year, with new opportunities to banter around familiar clichés such as "taking time on the journey," cultivating "spirituality but not religion" and "going on retreat." Most of us agree that solitude is key to all of these endeavors, and that solitude is a good thing.

Yet

like the above expressions, the concept of solitude could use some fresh air. We tend to think we know what solitude is: it means leaving one's work for "time away," right? And we're pretty sure that solitude means being alone: it can't be experienced with anyone else, right?

William

Deresiewicz plays with these assumptions. Back in 2008, Deresiewicz wrote an [essay](#) for *The American Scholar* in which he says that "the ability to engage in introspection. . . is the essential precondition for living an intellectual life, and the essential precondition for introspection is solitude."

Then

last spring Deresiewicz pressed on with his defense of solitude, this time [naming it as essential to leadership](#) (he was addressing plebes at West Point):

So solitude can mean introspection, it can mean the concentration of focused work, and it can mean sustained reading. All of these help you to know yourself better. But there's one more thing I'm going to include as a form of solitude, and it will seem counterintuitive: friendship. Of course friendship is the opposite of solitude; it means being with other people. But I'm talking about one kind of friendship in particular, the deep friendship of intimate conversation. Long, uninterrupted talk with one other person. Not Skyping with three people and texting with two others at the same time while you hang out in a friend's room listening to music and studying.

That's what Emerson meant when he said that "the soul environs itself with friends, that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude."

In other words, we may find

the solitude we need in being alone on a retreat or in daily prayer. But we may also find it by moving not away from but *toward*

a focused work. Likewise, we may find that an honest, uninterrupted talk with a friend is a private, removed solitude that we've taken for granted. Here's to solitude as we discover and cultivate it in 2011.