



SOLITUDE AS A CREATIVE CRUCIBLE

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

I once spent a summer in Antigua, Guatemala, as a student in a Spanish language school. Our format was simple. In a large house filled with tables and chairs, each student met one-on-one with a tutor for eight hours each day. My tutor was Reginaldo, a Mayan Kaqchikel man who had served as an interpreter for US aid agencies after a major earthquake struck Guatemala in 1976. Two decades later, I met with Reginaldo to practice speaking Spanish, work through readings together, and sometimes take walks through the city or venture to nearby villages on brightly painted public buses.

At the end of the summer, I worried that without a teacher I would lose the progress I had made in spoken and written Spanish. Reginaldo assured me that with self-discipline, I could continue to learn on my own. A book could be my teacher, he reminded me, as his father had taught him long ago.

Our ongoing pandemic has imposed many challenges and restrictions, but if we're lucky, it may also offer opportunities. Solitude can be one of them. We may turn to history to find examples of scholars, writers, and social leaders who used isolation to look inward, study, and develop new ideas.

Famously, the young Isaac Newton retreated to his family farm at Woolsthorpe Manor in 1665, escaping bubonic plague that had broken out in London and Cambridge, where he was studying. Ensnared in his childhood bedroom, Newton puzzled out theories of light and optics, calculus, and the laws of motion and gravity.

At a similarly young age, Malcolm Little, 20 years old, took a very different path and found himself sentenced to Charlestown State Prison for burglary. The year was 1946, and prospects for Little's future were dim. But he met an older convict who encouraged him to study the dictionary whenever he could, memorizing the definitions of words both common and obscure. The young man set himself a rigorous course of study and read books in the prison library on linguistics and etymology. He completed university extension courses in English, Latin, and German. He joined a prison debate club and became an expert public speaker. By the time of his release in 1952, the self-reinvented Malcolm X was ready to lead a movement.

Solitude can lead to creativity, as Virginia Woolf argued in her 1928

lecture, "A Room of One's Own."

Woolf distilled a writer's needs into a few simple elements: a room with a lock on the door, and enough money to keep oneself alive. These were not symbolic, as Woolf strenuously made clear, and in these difficult times we must advocate for the many would-be writers, thinkers, scholars, and leaders who are being silenced by the strain of daily life. But as Woolf concluded, in a stirring call to action for her young listeners, if we each find rooms of our own, "if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think," then our work will find its own connections to all who have come before us, and to those who will come after.

One by one across the centuries, our ideas will carry on.



KELLY MATTHEWS

(Framingham State University) is a professor of English at Framingham. A graduate of Harvard, Trinity College Dublin, Boston University, and the University of Ulster,

Matthews teaches English methods and supervises student teachers seeking the English 5-12 teaching license.