Leadership Without Solitude?

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Growing up in a Massachusetts college town, I often heard the name of Nathan Pusey, Harvard University's president for several decades in the 1950s and '60s. So the other day, when my hosts put me up at the stately, century-old Harvard Club in Boston, I found my way to the Nathan Marsh Pusey Reading Room on an upper floor.

There, incised into the wood above the fireplace as a kind of epitaph to Pusey, were three sentences from another Harvardian, the nineteenth-century poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion. It is easy in solitude to live after our own. But the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

Early that weekend morning, all was quiet in the reading room. Except for a lone man reading at the far end of the room by the tall windows overlooking Commonwealth Avenue, I was alone. I sat writing at a round table by the fireplace, surrounded by bookshelves. It was, in Emerson's words, the "perfect sweetness" of "the independence of solitude." In that setting, it was easy to live after my own opinions, think my own thoughts, and engage my own principles.

And that's when my Blackberry vibrated.

Nothing odd about that, of course. In the twenty-first century, staying connected is an essential condition for leadership. So even there, in the solitary silence of that hour, my smart-phone stood at the ready. And why not? How many times have we said to colleagues, friends, and family, "I'll be on the road for a bit, but you can always reach me if you need me." On the rare occasions when someone says the opposite — "I'm deliberately leaving my smart-phone off for a week, so don't even try me!" — it strikes us as bizarre, irresponsible, almost rude. "How dare you reject *my* views, *my* needs, *my* whims!" we want to expostulate. "What gives you the right to ignore the world's opinion?"

But back to Emerson: He wasn't setting up a dichotomy, where we either marinate ourselves in worldliness or exclude ourselves in solitude. He was defining great leadership as the ability to engage both. He was calling for individuality and self-reliance — two key Emersonian traits — despite the insistent tugging of the world on your sleeve. For him, the vital ingredient in this mix was solitude.

That's a hard argument to make in a digital age. These days, the love of solitude strikes us as quaint, even peculiar. What Emerson saw as an asset related to wisdom is seen today, for the wired world, as a deficit defined by loneliness. In a world where one's importance is measured by the frequency of one's intercommunication — for surely those whose smart-phones are

vibrating perpetually must be important people! — what could a quiet phone mean but rejection, dismissal, marginalization, exclusion? And if solitude requires us to mute our access to the world — or at least to ignore the vibes and refuse to wonder what we might be missing — well, who among us wants that?

But suppose Emerson was right. Suppose the missing ingredient — the great explanation for our age's inept management and unethical leadership — is the lack of solitude. What if solitude is essential to independence, and independence is central to leadership, and leadership is crucial to greatness? Do our leadership courses say anything at all about solitude — what it is, what it does, and how to attain it? Are we helping future leaders see that only through solitude can we develop the three core leadership attributes of reflection, vision, and artistry?

I'm not saying that great things don't happen in teams or that great leaders should work wholly in isolation. But teamwork isn't the whole answer. Leaders need ways to discover the tranquility that leads to reflection, the concentration that promotes vision, and the listening that looks at one thing and sees another — that deeply metaphoric process that is the essence of artistry. Leaders without those things may be effective, even admirable, but I doubt that they'll be remembered as great.

And my vibrating phone? It could have been an invitation from the White House — or a scam from the black market. Whatever it was, it would have to wait. That morning, the solitude was too rare and the independence too valuable.