

Solitude: On Dining Alone, Cellphones, and Teddy Bears

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There is more to life than increasing its speed.

—Gandhi

Solitude is a controversial concept. Often wrongly equated with isolation and loneliness, it is alternately praised as a spur to psychological growth and creativity, and damned as a precursor of depression and suicide. Many people find solitude refreshing, while others experience it as stressful, threatening, and dangerous. Psychologists have given a name to extreme aversion to solitude—*autophobia*, the fear of being alone.

COMBATTING SOLITUDE

Attitudes toward solitude vary widely among cultures. In Japan, the ambivalence toward aloneness has created a market niche. In Tokyo, “anti-loneliness restaurants” known as Moomin cafés try to rescue single customers from feeling alone and “the awkward perils of solo dining.”¹ They have a huge clientele because, the café creators say, most Japanese people experience loneliness due to their busy life and hard work. Moreover, loneliness is likely to increase. According to Tokyo’s NLI Research Institute, by 2020 living alone will be the norm in the country.²

A typical customer is a single diner who feels shy or embarrassed about dining alone in public, such as the individual who goes to a café alone and pretends to read a book or newspaper or uses her phone to disguise her loneliness. Moomin cafés have come up with a solution: they provide company for solo diners. The company they offer, however, may be surprising.

After the solitary customer is seated, the waiter inquires whether he or she desires company. If the answer is yes, the

waiter offers to seat stuffed animals called Moomins at the diner’s table. Moomins are beloved fairy-tale cartoon characters and stuffed animals. They are not original to Japan, but were created in Finland by illustrator and writer Tove Jansson.³ The most popular Moomin is a large, white, featureless, hippo-like creature popular in Finnish stories, about the size of a large teddy bear. This Moomin is seated in a chair across the table or beside the customer as a dining companion. Customers may simply stare at the Moomins, but they are encouraged to cuddle and talk to them.⁴ (Why this is believed to *decrease* a sense of social awkwardness and conspicuousness is a mystery to most Westerners, but Japanese sociocultural awareness can be quite different from our own.)

Moomin cafés gained international celebrity in 2014 when a CNN story about their “anti-loneliness” theme went viral. Since the first Moomin café opened in Tokyo in 2003, three more have opened in the city, alongside six Moomin-themed coffee stands. Another Moomin café has opened in Hong Kong and one is rumored to open soon in New York City. Stuffed Moomins can be purchased in shops at the Helsinki airport, as well as in Moomin shops in London’s Covent Garden and in the Tachikawa area of Tokyo.⁵

For those whose loneliness persists after leaving a Moomin café, the new “anti-loneliness hugging chair” for home use is an option. The chair is built in the shape of a large fabric doll with long moveable arms. One simply leans back in its lap and folds the arms around one’s body. It’s pricey at \$419, but the chair delivers an unlimited hug and never tires.⁶

Some critics consider the Moomin craze as totally wacky, but its defenders

see it as an innovative response to serious social issues. As one journalist says in *Japan Trends*, “Depression and suicide are a fact of life in Japan... something like 70 people killing themselves per day.... It would be insulting to suggest that the Moomins can contribute to combatting suicide—but they can’t hurt either.”⁷

GOING DUTCH

The stigma of dining alone is also taken seriously in Amsterdam, but an entirely different approach has been employed. The Dutch solution is actually to celebrate and promote solo dining, not neuter it as in the Moomin cafés. The Moomin approach is to diminish the diner’s solitude; the Dutch approach is to honor and indulge it.

In 2013, two design/branding agencies in the city joined forces to “break the taboo that surrounds eating alone in public.” Thus, they opened Eenmaal, originally as a “pop-up” or “test” restaurant. Eenmaal means literally “one meal.” At Eenmaal there are no tables for two, only one-person table cubes for solitary diners. Customers are asked to put away their cellphones for the entire duration of the meal and are instead encouraged to read a book or magazine. The restaurant features a four-course vegetarian meal from a *prix fixe* menu with optional wine.

In addition to offering tempting food, creator Marina van Goor says the restaurant’s mission is to “rid solitary participation in a public space of negative connotations.” She describes Eenmaal as “the first one-person restaurant in the world and an attractive place for temporary disconnection. Where you might usually go out to eat with company, at Eenmaal you are your own company.

It is the perfect place to dine in pleasant solitude; an exciting experiment for those who never go out for dinner alone. Solitary dining can be an inspiring experience in our hyper-connected world just because you can disconnect for a while.”

The response to the Eenmaal test restaurant was viral. As van Goor states, “The launch of Eenmaal produced more than we could have hoped for: a global conversation about eating out alone.... Print media, radio and television producers the world over have covered it and we have received very positive reactions via social media, blogs and from the visitors who ate there for the first time....”

The restaurant founders expanded the concept to London in 2014, and plans are afoot to bring the concept to other European cities and New York City as well.⁸⁻¹⁰

Eenmaal restaurants may find a happy home in the United States.¹¹ In 1985, *The New York Times* chronicled the stigma of solo diners. Eating alone has become a fact of American life 30 years later. As *The Washington Post* reports, “A 1999 survey found that the number of people who ate alone at least part of the time tripled between the 1960s and 1990s. By 2006, nearly 60% of Americans regularly ate on their own.... Today, that number is even higher.”¹²

PLUSHOPHILIA

Plushophilia: the devoted appreciation of and love for stuffed animals or plushies; such devotees are frequently called plushophiles.¹³

A common sight in airports is a child carrying a stuffed animal onto a plane. Such “transitional objects” have always served universally as antidotes for loneliness by offering psychological comfort and emotional security. Children often consider the stuffed animal as alive and a source of understanding, love, and support. As all healthcare professionals know, stuffed animals are among the most common objects seen in pediatric units of all hospitals.

One outstanding organization, SAFE (Stuffed Animals for Emergencies, Inc.), has for two decades collected stuffed animals to benefit children during emergency situations such as illness, fires,

accidents, neglect, abuse, homelessness, and even weather emergencies.¹⁴ Run by volunteers, SAFE has chapters in 17 states in the United States, and one in the United Kingdom: <http://www.stuffedanimalsforemergencies.org/Home.php>.

As the Moomin craze shows, the appreciation of stuffed animals is not limited to childhood. Some children grow up to become plushophiles, carrying their love and affection for stuffed animals into adulthood.

Some adult plushophiles in Japan sense that their stuffed animals are lonely like themselves. As owners, they feel a responsibility to combat the loneliness, just as Moomin cafés try to diminish the loneliness of their solo customers. Their options include a time-honored therapy for loneliness: travel. They are helping their stuffed animals get out more by sending them on tour.

Unagi Travel, a Tokyo company, takes stuffed animals on tours as if they are living humans. Unagi's Sonoe Azuma, 41, who used to work in finance, dreamed up this exercise in anthropomorphism in 2010. She reports back to the owner on how well the toys enjoyed the tour, together with lots of photos documenting the trip.

Clients are accepted from Japan, Europe, Asia, and the United States. The client pays the shipping costs of the toys to Tokyo, but Unagi covers the return expenses. Itineraries vary. There is an urban tour in Tokyo and one to Japan's famous volcanic hot springs and baths. (It is unclear if the stuffed animals actually get wet.) The cost of the Tokyo tour is \$45, while the hot-spring tour is \$55. A tour to Kyoto's famous temples and shrines costs \$73. There is also a one-day Mystery Tour in or near Tokyo, in which the stuffed animal never knows where it will be going until the last minute.

Before the stuffed toys go touring, the owner completes a form that defines the toy's character, personality quirks, what their hobbies are, whether they have allergies to certain foods, and whether they are prone to car- or sea-sickness. The stuffed animals are kept informed about their activities. For instance, after they depart on the Tokyo tour to the Meiji Jingu Shrine and the Imperial Palace gardens, they are given an early-

morning briefing on what to expect. At the gardens, Azuma spreads out a towel for the menagerie to sit on as they pose for one of the day's group shots. Photos are forwarded to the owners, with captions describing how well the stuffed animal enjoyed the experience.¹⁵

Crazy? Not to the stay-at-home owners. They often describe vicarious benefits from their stuffed animals' tour. The *Japan Times* reported one woman as saying, “I enjoyed the scenery or the food through their eyes, even if I was not physically there.” Other clients describe how seeing their toy on tour cheered them up after a death in the family. Others report being inspired to do things they would not normally do; if their stuffed animal can go on tour, surely they themselves can summon greater effort. One woman who is wheel-chair bound considers the tours therapeutic, and is a regular client of Azuma's. Another woman, who became reclusive after an illness made it difficult for her to walk, describes that her illness changed after she saw photos of her stuffed animals on tour. She said, “Seeing my stuffed animals traveling encouraged me. I began to think that I should do what I can do, instead of lamenting over things I can't.”^{16,17}

We smile smugly at those Japanese plushophiles, but is their enthusiasm so different from our Western obsession with Paddington Bear?

Paddington Bear first appeared in 1958 as a fictional character. He has been featured in more than 20 books by Michael Bond and illustrated by Peggy Fortnum and others. Paddington books have been translated into 30 languages that have sold more than 30 million copies worldwide, and have been the subject of several TV series and a feature film.

Paddington comes from the deepest, darkest jungles of Peru. He wears an old hat, carries a battered suitcase with a secret compartment, wears spectacles and a run-down coat, and loves marmalade. He is unfailingly polite and rarely addresses people by their first names. He is endlessly bumbling into trouble, although he “tries so hard to get things right.” He was discovered in Paddington station in London, as the story goes, where you can buy stuffed Paddingtons and accessory toys at the Paddington Bear kiosk.¹⁸

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