

Privacy and Private States

One way of beginning to understand privacy is by looking at what happens to people in extreme situations where it is absent. Recalling his time in Auschwitz, Primo Levi observed that "solitude in a Camp is more precious and rare than bread."¹ Solitude is one state of privacy, and even amidst the overwhelming death, starvation, and horror of the camps, Levi knew he missed it.

Uprooted by the Second World War from his life as a chemistry student and beginning chemist, Levi, a twenty-four-year-old Italian Jew from Turin, was arrested and deported to the Nazi labor camp at Auschwitz in February 1944. Six hundred and fifty other men, women, and children traveled with him. When he returned home a year and a half later, he was one of twenty who had survived. Levi spent much of his life finding words for his camp experience. How, he wonders aloud in *Survival in Auschwitz*, do you describe "the demolition of a man," an offense for which "our language lacks words."²

Many people carry a mental image of a Jew in a concentration camp. We see the striped jacket, the starved face with shaved head and unseeing eyes. To Levi, the picture of an emaciated man "with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose

eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" encloses "all the evil of our time."³

During the past century we have learned much about how to create an individual and how to destroy one—not that such knowledge hasn't always existed. But we have had particular opportunity to observe and explore ideas about both individual worth and mass human destruction, including the ways to destroy an individual short of outright murder. Destroying his privacy and his safety in private is one way.

A basic ingredient in such destruction is terror. I am walking with a friend in the Dordogne region of France. It is a warm mid-summer day, and the blackberry bushes are flowering. During the war, my friend recounts, pointing up at an old stone house set on a small hill, a family lived there who joined the Resistance. The SS arrested the husband, tortured him, and then delivered him back to their door. The captors waited until the family, overjoyed that he was alive, ran out to hug him. Then they shot him in front of his wife and children.

Hitler's accomplices understood—as many have before and since—that if you kill an enemy, his loved ones will grieve, but if you kill him in a way that also terrorizes them, you will accomplish more effective harm. Psychologically fractured by fear, these "enemies" will find it harder to oppose you. Yet they remain alive and able to till fields that feed your troops. The English who fought Indians in seventeenth-century Virginia summed up this approach neatly, observing that "terrour . . . made short warres."⁴

When you set out to destroy someone psychologically, destroying his privacy turns out to be one effective and common tactic. When Primo Levi talks about solitude in the camp being more precious and rare than bread, he helps us understand its place in life. One function of privacy is to provide a safe space away from

terror or other assaultive experiences. When you remove a person's ability to sequester herself, or intimate information about herself, you make her extremely vulnerable.

Consider Vera Wollenberger, a woman who spent much of her young adulthood protesting East German communism. For her dissent she was harassed, fired from her job, and imprisoned. After communism collapsed, Wollenberger, elected to Parliament, helped enact a law allowing people to read the secret files kept on them by the East German government. Reading her own, she realized with horror that the intimate and damaging information that filled it could only have been offered by her husband. No one else knew the particular details.⁵ Violating the privacy she expected to hold in common with him, her husband took advantage of her trust in their intimacy (a private state) to betray and exploit her, probably in the hope of increasing his own power. What must it have been like to recognize that her spouse was responsible for her imprisonment? After such a betrayal, what would happen to her ability to love?

The totalitarian state watches everyone, but keeps its own plans secret. Privacy is seen as dangerous because it enhances resistance. Constantly spying and then confronting people with what are often petty transgressions is a way of maintaining social control and unnerving and disempowering opposition. While spying efforts sometimes backfire and increase the loyalty of friends and intimates, too often they succeed. And even when one shakes real pursuers, it is often hard to rid oneself of the feeling of being watched—which is why surveillance is an extremely powerful way to control people. The mind's tendency to still feel observed when alone (a phenomenon related to Freud's idea of the superego) is probably biologically and culturally indispensable, but it can also be inhibiting. Used malevolently, surveillance badly harms indi-

viduals in part by really endangering them, in part by overstimulating their vigilance. Feeling watched, but not knowing for sure, nor knowing if, when, or how the hostile surveyor may strike, people often become fearful, constricted, and distracted.

Nadezhda Mandelstam was married to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam who was arrested and imprisoned by Stalin and eventually died in a labor camp. In her memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, Mandelstam relates the terrible havoc wreaked by Stalinism, and she details the insidious psychological harm of surveillance. She describes how the dictatorship destroyed trust—often by destroying the sanctuary within privacy—and “atomized” the society. Anything a person said in private could be reported to government spies, and used against him to demonstrate his disloyalty, for which he was then imprisoned and often killed. Spies were everywhere, and when unable to find damaging material, they made it up. Since the conversations they reported had theoretically occurred in private, no one could disprove the accusations. Mandelstam observes how, when such practices destroy people’s safety, everyone becomes a little mad:

An existence like this leaves its mark. We all became slightly unbalanced mentally—not exactly ill, but not normal either: suspicious, mendacious, confused and inhibited in our speech, at the same time putting on a show of adolescent optimism. What value can such people have as witnesses? The elimination of witnesses was, indeed, part of the whole program.⁶

Constrained and frightened, harassed people often lose their efficacy. Their privacy has been destroyed by surveillance and fear. (It is this same phenomenon as it sometimes occurs in family life that serious discussions on talk shows attempt to witness and describe and that psychotherapists treat.)

It is of course not just communist or fascist governments that use such tactics. The United States has often spied on and persecuted dissidents: Emma Goldman, the Wobblies, and Malcolm X are a few who come to mind. Surveillance and harassment have grown in America along with the rest of government. Curt Gentry’s eight-hundred-page biography of J. Edgar Hoover offers an endless catalogue of the FBI chief’s appalling misuse of spying sometimes for political, sometimes for more self-serving, purposes. Here is a small example:

On learning that one magazine publisher was considering an exposé of the FBI and its long-tenured director, Hoover struck first, viciously. Favored newspaper contacts all over the country received a plain brown envelope with no return address. Inside was a packet of photographs showing the publisher’s wife engaged in fellatio with her black chauffeur.⁷

Such surveillance betrays intimacy—and all privacy—by observing people while they are enjoying the freedom of being unobserved. The FBI’s attempt to make Martin Luther King commit suicide by sending him and his wife tapes of his sexual infidelities is another example of this approach. Along with the videos, King received an anonymous letter. Knowing that he had attempted suicide as a twelve-year-old child, the writer, an FBI agent, encouraged King to end his life.⁸ As we learn more about J. Edgar Hoover, his morbid shame about his own sexuality, his secrecy, and decadence, the way he persecuted others in the name of patriotism seems not only awful, but obviously self-defensive. But such insight is cold comfort to the people whose lives he destroyed or harmed.

Safe privacy is an important component of autonomy, freedom, and love, and thus psychological well-being, in any society

that values individuals. In fact, by reversing to the smallest detail all that was perpetrated against Levi, Mandelstam, Wollenberger, and King, we can extract a standard. Summed up briefly, a statement of "how not to dehumanize people" might read: Don't replace names with numbers. Don't beat or torture. Don't terrorize or humiliate. Don't starve, freeze, exhaust. Don't demean or impose degrading submission. Don't force separation from loved ones. Don't make demands in an incomprehensible language. Don't refuse to listen closely. Don't destroy privacy. Terrorists of all sorts destroy privacy both by corrupting it into secrecy and by using hostile surveillance to undo its useful sanctuary.

But if we describe a standard for treating people humanely, why does stripping privacy violate it? And what is privacy? In his landmark book, *Privacy and Freedom*, Alan Westin names four states of privacy: solitude, anonymity, reserve, and intimacy.⁹ The reasons for valuing privacy become more apparent as we explore these states.

Solitude is the most complete state of privacy. A person seeking solitude separates from others so that she cannot be seen or heard, and so that she is not easily intruded upon. In solitude, as opposed to the other states of privacy, she is most free to relax her body.

What is considered physically private varies in different cultures and different families. Anthropologists suggest that most people, no matter where or when they live, seek privacy for sex and defecation.¹⁰ But other habits are more local and temporary. In private today, a person might remove undergarments, use the toilet, sleep, pick his nose, masturbate, examine and cleanse parts of his body, or sniff his own odors. The heroine in Marie Cardinal's

memoir/novel *The Words to Say It* describes her adeptness at discretely reaching her hand down under her clothing to check her menstrual flow. And when alone, she privately examines her blood. "I remember taking out the tampon that stopped the blood, which I began to watch gently flowing, drop by drop. . . . It was an activity to watch the blood work its way out of me; it had a life of its own now, it could discover the physics of earth-bound things, weight, density, speed, duration. It kept me company and at the same time was delivered over to the indifferent and incomprehensible laws of life."¹¹

Similarly, in his memoir *Self-consciousness*, John Updike describes the close attention he paid to his body because of his psoriasis. Years later he remembers the smell of the medicine, the "insinuating odor deeply involved with my embarrassment. Yet, as with our own private odors, those of sweat and earwax and even of excrement, there was something satisfying about this scent, an intimate rankness that told me who I was."¹²

Alone with our bodies, we allow ourselves to know them thoroughly—the shape of an arm, the bend of a toenail, the pattern of freckles or scars. In private we learn and continually update our knowledge of the small details that make up our physical being. It is a vast and fundamental entry in the lexicon of our identity. Freud believed that the primary ego is a body ego—that the first and most basic knowledge we have of ourselves is through the feelings in our body, our physical gratification, pain, hungers, and needs. The body is the plowed field in which the self grows. As the body changes, it alters and recreates the self. Souls and private scents are inextricably commingled.

It is not only when we are alone that we come to know our bodies. The touch of others is critical for comfort because it allows us to learn where we begin and end. It can offer pleasure or pain. A

baby deprived of human touch is a baby unlikely to survive infancy. But in the presence of others, once out of earliest childhood, the intimate and thorough explorations of the body are limited and inhibited by demands for propriety and conformity.

In some Catholic orders, a nun was forbidden to examine her own body. Even when she bathed, she was covered with sheets. While the repression of sexuality is obvious (though it's easy to imagine such an effort backfiring by creating a tabooed eroticism), more subtle is the impact such strictures must have had on the woman's sense of self and individuality. Did she collect knowledge with her fingertips instead of her eyes? Or was her mind so completely on God that she just didn't care? Diminishing individual identity heightens receptivity to authority—something military leaders have understood for centuries. Discouraging people from private knowledge of their bodies probably eases that process. An opposite approach is that of feminist doctors who hand women mirrors and encourage them to examine their own vulvas.

Solitude frequently gets represented by a man alone in nature—something that television commercials play upon endlessly. Often the image replaces the experience: Urban highways are crowded with Land Rovers and Jeeps theoretically designed to allow people to go alone into the wilderness—to drive beyond the roads or to ford streams. Gas guzzlers, short on comfort, awkward on crowded streets, these cars have little practical purpose in city life except, I suspect, the profound one of maintaining the fantasy of solitude in nature against the besieging reality.

Americans have long loved the idea of the man alone in nature. Whether of Thoreau, Natty Bumppo, a Native American, or a cowboy, the image is deeply held. Entering nature we identify with him, like children with superheroes. The solitude he inhabits is a child's fantasy of life without dependency, of sublime confidence,

of conflict without ambiguity or compromise. The nature that frames him is a stage set, a passive backdrop for human assertion constructed to flatter him as separate, free, and strong.

Real accounts of nature describe the difficulty of physical toil and the constant danger of dying—men in their fishing boats lost at sea, women frozen in storms, children eaten by wolves. The perception of beauty and freedom is set against the deep fear, even terror, of harm and death. The natural world that the Pilgrims encountered was, according to William Bradford, "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." New England fishermen understand this feeling. Only when summer people started visiting the coast did houses get fitted with decks and picture windows. People who daily worked and died at sea had no urgency to contemplate the water from their kitchen tables.

In the suburban world, wilderness dangers are overshadowed by civilization's; we fear stalkers more than bears. People generally possess a more distant and split image of nature. On the one hand, it is a weakened and perhaps dying leviathan harpooned by overpopulation, technology, toxic waste, and the pollution of contemporary life—not a place to seek solitude. On the other hand, the contemporary sense of nature is still the wide open spaces, pristine—or at least pastoral—beauty, a spiritual haven, the site of personal liberty, freedom, and autonomy. The nature in which one seeks solitude has often already been subdued. Nineteenth-century transcendentalists and romantic poets, facing the encroachments of industrial society, wrote about solitude in this nature and tried to define why it mattered.

"I went to the woods," Thoreau asserts in a famous passage from *Walden*, "because I wished to live deliberately." Or, as he states earlier, because he wished to be awakened by the "undulations of celestial music instead of factory bells."¹¹ Solitude allows

people to regulate their rhythms and behaviors away from the influence of others. No one controls what you do or when. No one else's alarm clock wakes you. No one's questions or needs interrupt your train of thought or feeling, or your solitary pursuits. Solitude does not have to be in nature, but when set there, frees people most completely from the regulation, control, and constraint of society. Even more than the factory bells, it is the direct influence of other people, particularly in their more oppressive and intrusive dimensions, that one temporarily eludes in solitude.

Why is it that I am drawn to sit alone on a small beach watching the ocean, the circling gulls and ospreys, the piles of smooth stones surrounded by wild indigo, morning glory, and hawkweed? My answer is common. I love the peace of not having to take account of others. I am amazed by the beauty. I am reminded that my concerns are small and that what good or damage I do is small. The large wild domain indifferent to my existence is both soothing and thrilling. Alone in nature, one confronts its grandeur. Sensing its scope, it is the rare person who feels no awe. Solitude in nature places a person directly in contact with a vivid, original force.

One may, like Wordsworth, experience nature as a moral force that reinforces and enhances one's virtues. Nature, he asserts, is "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul of all my moral being." By closely watching nature, he believes, one uncovers the divine and feels its resonance within the self. A related use of solitude occurs in some kinds of meditation, when people sit alone in order to examine and reflect more rigorously. When this ancient practice is undertaken as part of a religious pursuit, people seek to become closer to a god or to holiness. Otherwise, it is to calm oneself, or use contemplation as a route to knowledge.

Seeking solitude, but not nature, people wish for time alone

to "center" or to "get back in touch" with themselves. But what does this mean? Since I have had children, commuting to work forty minutes in traffic has changed from onerous to almost pleasant. It is privacy I can count on having. As the traffic inches along, my thoughts drift freely to situations at work, exchanges at home or with friends, problems I need to solve, plans, feelings, and fantasies. If a story on the radio is sad and my eyes tear, no child looks at me with worry. If an old song reminds me of a good time and I sing along, no adolescent passenger complains that it's a bad song and I'm off-key. A car in traffic is not completely private, yet it suffices.

We seek solitude because our psyches are permeable membranes. When we come in contact with others, we tend to absorb feelings, thoughts, moods, and opinions. A child says you're unfair for making her start her book report today. Are you? A client asks to change his appointment from Tuesday to Monday. Can you? A spouse gives you a look that suggests it's your turn to fold the laundry. Is it? A friend describes events that have made her sad. Is that why you now feel sad? We separate from others to sort through all we have taken in, to replay pieces of exchanges, to evaluate them, to rework them—and ultimately for the peace in which to listen attentively until we can hear our own notes amidst the jangle.

The essence of solitude, and all privacy, is a sense of choice and control. You control who watches or learns about you. You choose to leave and return. Even Thoreau left his cabin to seek companionship. Often we are all our own worst company, and nothing can relieve us except the comfort of others. Unchosen solitude quickly becomes painful isolation. Frederick the Great, wishing to hear the original language he believed had been spoken before the Tower of Babel, reportedly isolated a group of infants in hopes that when they talked, they would speak the ancient lost language. Though fed and clothed, they died.

People in solitary confinement have to fight constantly against madness. In fact, the way they often preserve their sanity is by learning to dissociate, to alter their own mental state, and use fantasy to evoke images, memories, and feelings of loved ones. Yamil Kouri, a doctor jailed in solitary confinement in Cuba for allegedly conspiring to overthrow Castro, recalls that he survived the darkened two-foot-by-two-foot cell for two and a half years by meditating continually.¹⁴ Paradoxically, one can defy isolation by evoking memories of intimacy.

Enforced or protracted solitude is unbearable to most people. But solitude in moderation, held in check by its being a sought and limited departure from the company of others, allows freedom. Alone, we create stories about ourselves as we would wish to be. We can feel our own feelings free from the direct influence of others, think our thoughts uninterrupted, spin out fantasies, and follow the images of the imagination. In his book *Solitude*, the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr argues that its value has been hidden in this century because of psychology's obsession with intimacy. Storr suggests that many highly creative people, like Beethoven and Kipling, were extremely solitary and that solitude is often a prerequisite for creativity. Some people want to be left alone to imagine.¹⁵

People need privacy from others so that they can rest from the strain of being what others desire—responsive, civil, engaged, conventional. "We pray to be conventional," writes Ralph Waldo Emerson, "but the wary Heaven takes care you shall not be, if there is anything good in you."¹⁶ To think and create, people often need solitude because its privacy allows not only mental continuity, quiet, and relief from feeling noticed, but latitude to experiment with half-formed ideas and ridiculous solutions.

Still, that image neglects the full cycle. Solitude is half a heartbeat. Artists seek solitude so that they can create what they then

must take before the public. Without an eventual audience, no matter how small, solitude can become, in Emerson's words, "the safeguard of mediocrity."¹⁷

Most images of solitude are male: men alone, men in nature, men making art. Almost the only time women traditionally were allowed solitude was in prayer—as they conversed with a saint or a god. Emerson's mother, who bore eight children of whom five survived, sought solitude to pray. "She led a deeply religious life. Every day after breakfast she retired to her room for reading and contemplation. She was not to be disturbed."¹⁸ At the hearth, surrounded by children and family, in the imagination, we place women in the presence of others. A woman alone is usually perceived not as seeking solitude, but as abandoned, unattractive, isolated, and lonely, or conversely as dangerous, unattached, destabilizing. A woman without a man is a woman after your man—ask any country western singer.

When women venture out alone—whether into wilderness or empty alleys—they often feel apprehensiveness about their own vulnerability. It is not wolves or snakes that raise contemporary fears, but the violence of men. In a chilling *New York Times* "Hers" column, Susan Brison describes setting out alone for a country walk on a beautiful summer day in southern Europe:

I sang to myself as I set out, stopping to pet a goat and pick some wild strawberries along the way. An hour later, I was lying near death, pleading for my life with a brutal assailant who had jumped me from behind. I hadn't heard or seen him coming. He dragged me off the road and into a deep ravine, beat me with his fist and with a rock, sexually assaulted me, choked me repeatedly and, after I had passed out four times, left me for dead.¹⁹

A woman alone is a woman easily overpowered and hurt. And while all the ramifications of such violence are terrible, one of the

worst is the way it harms women's freedom to relish solitude. The story includes a cautionary tale about solitude: It can be dangerous. It may be that we associate the glory of solitude with men, and its liabilities with women. Underlying that unfortunate polarization is the recognition that the aloneness people seek can be risky; it can undermine communal life, or make individuals too vulnerable.

A second state of privacy is *anonymity*. To be anonymous is to be unidentified, unnamed, unnoticed: a walker in a city, a member of a crowd. With the absence of recognition can come a liberating privacy. People often seek anonymity when the conventions of their surroundings, when the burden of being known, threatens to obliterate vital dimensions of their being. It seems no coincidence, for example, that the nineteenth-century feminist Margaret Fuller fell passionately in love and had a child while living in Italy, not in New England. Being surrounded by people at home with narrow ideas about women hindered her wish to have both passion and a mind. In Rome, she found freedom in not knowing or being known. (To find equal freedom, an Italian woman of her era might have expatriated herself elsewhere.) So, too, in *My Own Country*, Abraham Verghese, a doctor in Tennessee treating people with HIV, describes how frequently gay men left their small hometowns and moved to the city to find a place where they could possess their sexuality and their lives.

Anonymity in an urban setting is in some ways equivalent to solitude in nature. Like solitude, anonymity offers space. But because we are surrounded by other people, our aloneness is less complete and more easily disrupted. In an anonymous state, we are alone because we don't stand out or invite identification. No one interrupts us, we believe that no one notices us—though that is

not certain. We may notice others and create their meaning without having to entertain their subjectivity. Anonymity, you might say, is privacy for people who don't want to be really alone.

Ernest Hemingway liked to write in places where he could be in the private world of his work, but still among people. In *A Moveable Feast*, he describes sitting and writing in a café when a pretty girl comes in. He would like to approach her, but he realizes she is waiting for someone—he assumes another man. Nevertheless, she becomes "his" because he can fantasize and write about her. He writes, "I've seen you, beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again, I thought. You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and this pencil."²⁰

Anonymity allows people to express thoughts or feelings they might suppress in a relationship where they feel ashamed, vulnerable, or frightened. Writing about the way anonymity permitted intimacy in the letters women wrote to the birth control crusader Margaret Sanger, her biographer Ellen Chesler recounts: "They wrote of strict and falsely modest mothers who had told them nothing of sex or birth control, of callous physicians who claimed ignorance of reliable methods, of husbands who abandoned them when they chose continence over the risk of another pregnancy, of illegal abortionists who cost them their fertility. They wrote with a sisterly affection and intimacy made possible by distance and anonymity."²¹ When not worried about being identified, people will say what they are otherwise ashamed to say.

Anonymity is a tentative and unsteady state of privacy. In a hurry to get somewhere, a neighbor, stuck behind a car dawdling at a stoplight, honked her horn angrily. A few seconds later she became embarrassed when the driver, an elderly man, turned around and recognized her. She had expressed her dismay rudely because

she felt anonymous. She assumed that her behavior would not be identified with her. This response and the embarrassment it sometimes occasions, familiar to all of us, is the stuff of contemporary urban life.

Honk a horn, deface a sign, state an unacceptable wish— anonymity supports the mischievous, the petty vandalisms against each other and authorities that give us room to mock perceived hegemonies and to release “incorrect” but genuine feelings. Unfortunately, crime and serious assaults are also based in anonymity. The terrorist, bank robber, housebreaker, and rapist cover their faces to hide their identities and to avoid social sanctions. They may know their victim, but hope not to be recognized by him.

The proliferation of certain kinds of crime testifies to the overabundance of anonymity in contemporary life. Like solitude, anonymity offers the most when it is temporary—and freely chosen. When undesired, anonymity leads to dehumanization and isolation. Many people, though they have friends, feel alienated and reduced because they participate in fragmented communities too large and impersonal to recognize or value them. Their anonymity becomes burdensome.

Sitting before computers linked by modems, some users of the Internet make up names, identities, true or untrue stories about themselves, and exchange unverifiable messages with other people. Good things come of it: vital exchanges, useful information, psychological adventure, creativity, and recreation. Yet the Internet reflects the culture’s dilemma of too much anonymity. No one on it has to answer for himself. People make contact with each other, start to build relationships, exchange information, and cannot verify what is fantasy and what is fact. While this is an age-old problem, usually embodied in a story of a deceiving stranger who arrives in a village—like Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*—it

reaches almost absurd heights in computer relationships where no observing community is present to contradict an individual’s deceptions.

Reserve, the third state of privacy is forbearance, tact, restraint. In a state of reserve, unlike solitude, we are together with people, and unlike anonymity, we are usually known to them. We may be intimate. Our state is private simply because we do not choose to reveal the full extent of what we feel, observe, think, or experience. We set aside our immediate perceptions, sometimes our frankest opinions—preserving them (and often us) for the future. Reserve is a house with glass walls, but no one mentions it.

Highly variable among cultures, reserve tends to be a type of privacy available in the absence of most others. The Utku Eskimos, who during the long arctic winters share close quarters with a number of family members, signal their wish for privacy by withdrawing into their own sleeping space, not speaking or responding to people around them. They are awake, but no one approaches them.²² Kids on subways often use headphones to the same end, or family members, television. In situations where other privacy is denied or undesirable, reserve offers an opportunity to move away. The state is most easily sustained when surrounding people agree not to intrude.

Levels of reserve vary from person to person, family to family, neighborhood to neighborhood. Standards continually shift. At the end of *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton’s novel set in late-nineteenth-century New York society, Dallas Archer talks openly with his father, Newland Archer, about his parents’ relationship. Contrasting Dallas to his parents, Wharton observes, “it had never been possible to inculcate in him even the rudiments of reserve.”

On this occasion, Dallas brings up the passionate love for another woman that his father once felt and then renounced. He startles his father with the news that his mother knew about her husband's feelings. She told Dallas that Newland had given this love up at her request. Wharton writes:

Archer received this strange communication in silence. His eyes remained unseeingly fixed on the thronged, sunlit square below the window. At length he said in a low voice: "She never asked me."

"No. I forgot. You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything, you just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact! Well, I back your generation for knowing more about each other's private thoughts than we ever have time to find out about our own."²³

Wharton suggests that in a state of reserve people do not necessarily know less about each other's private experience; they just learn by watching rather than speaking, and they preserve privacy by not speaking about what they believe they know. While Wharton—through Dallas—gently ridicules the idea, she also romanticizes it, implying that reserve does not obscure understanding, that perhaps it enhances it. In this sense, the privacy of reserve is the privacy of not being forced to openly acknowledge what it is known that you know.

Words can be indelicate, and can tear the fragile gauze of life-long intimacy. In their inexactness or awkwardness, they may cause unnecessary pain by making something too explicit. Over a long marriage, each partner's love has vicissitudes. Does it do more harm or more good to document them aloud? When people live at close quarters, small irritations are frequent. Some are better unnamed. Some feelings can be universally understood to be present, and thus do not warrant expression.

Various types of reserve dominate most exchanges. Sometimes we lower our eyes or look away. Frequently adults admonish children, "Don't stare." We offer privacy by not letting our interest be noticed, by pretending not to hear something that is said, by deflecting with silence or platitude a remark that threatens to intrude into private space or to reveal "too much." Reserve is a cornerstone of civility. Its premise is that most exchanges are better off partial, most days improved by not telling much to many.

The disadvantages of reserve, and particularly the price to a person's life of being overly reserved, are explored in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*. The story is narrated by a butler who has devoted his life so entirely to serving a rich Englishman in a large mansion that he has forgotten himself. He has not married or had children. Stevens prides himself on being a superb butler, for whom reserve is an essential professional quality. One evening, in the middle of looking after his lordship's guests, Stevens is called to the attic bedside of his father who has just suffered a stroke and is dying. Though others gathered around the bed are visibly distraught, Stevens shows no emotion, saying dryly, "This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs."²⁴

For Stevens, it is a point of honor neither to show emotion nor to acknowledge feelings or behaviors in others that might reveal their personal state. The lack of acknowledgment preserves privacy. Reserve is the essence of the butler's art because a butler must be extremely intimate with the people he serves without developing the habits or expectations of intimacy. Normally, if you help or watch someone change from nightclothes to street clothes, you share a close relationship. You are good friends or lovers or a parent with a young child. But a butler often must view his employer intimately without taking it as an invitation to closeness. Unfortunately, Ishiguro implies, the demands of the job are ulti-

mately so dehumanizing that anyone expert at it is rendered useless for more intimate human relationships.

Too much reserve leaves people isolated, misunderstood, and guessing. Do you like me or hate me? Are you angry or sad? Am I helping or hurting? People get edgy when they cannot figure out where they stand. Yet almost all exchanges require some holding back of what is thought or felt because our most private thoughts and feelings are too idiosyncratic, vacillating, boring, unsocialized, and bald to be more than occasionally tolerable to other people. The capacity for reserve is as important to sustaining intimacy as disclosure is. It offers a basic form of emotional safety.

"There are people," the psychoanalyst Leston Havens has observed, "to whom we would say nothing. Even when the hot iron comes toward us and the manacles are clamped tight, we will say nothing."²⁵ Havens is referring to the way in which we instinctively and at times powerfully recognize that revealing something about ourselves—no matter how trivial—to someone we judge as untrustworthy will harm us. Without the capacity and the freedom to stay silent, to guard one's psychic privacy, there is no possibility for authentic relationships. Sometimes reserve is the only way to resist people who have more power. It allows us to choose to whom we speak.

One evening after a large Los Angeles earthquake, I turn on the television news. The story begins innocuously enough with footage of a twisted freeway filmed from a circling helicopter. We see rubble, destroyed buildings, fires, broken water mains, and listen to residents recount ordeals. The scene shifts. We are at the site of an attempted rescue. An apartment has collapsed, and men and bulldozers are digging in the rubble. They have just found the body of a woman's only child, her daughter. The woman is out of sight, and then she comes into the camera frame, screaming.

I expect the camera to offer us one look at her and then cut away. But it does not. She is wearing a gray pantsuit and sunglasses, and she cannot stop running and screaming. Her husband tries to grab her and pull her into his arms, but her grief is so intense, her body cannot allow itself to be held still. A man at the scene stands looking away from her, his reserve intuitively granting her the privacy that the camera refuses to offer. I look away and back, in my mind telling them to stop, and finally when she settles for a moment in her husband's arms, the screen cuts back to the somber faces of our local news anchors.

As I go to bed, I cannot shake the profound trauma of a woman I have never met. Does the television news editor feel I must see her to understand that earthquake? Her grief is vivid and somehow timeless. She looks like a mother would look. Parents digging children out of the ash around Pompeii two thousand years ago would know just how she felt. The horror of the event is vividly transmitted. But there is something wrong with witnessing the intimate traumas of people we don't hold close. Violating her privacy by allowing the camera to defy reserve, we violate a collective standard of honoring life and death by shielding people when their suffering is extreme.

Intimacy is the fourth state of privacy.

I am standing with a friend on a long, crowded beach. It is a hot day, and we have rolled our slacks so that foam from the waves hits our ankles and splatters our legs. My children swim in the glare and green water, and we both watch them, vigilantly tracking their movements among those of other swimmers. People walk by us. We talk, but with eyes fixed on the water, we do not often look at each other. Standing with arms almost touching but eyes rarely

meeting is conducive to good talk. This beach reminds my friend of one she used to visit as a child. She describes it, and then speaks of her life growing up. I am content, caught up in her story, and the large umbrella of intimacy with which it shelters us. In "Midrash on Happiness," Grace Paley writes about how much her happiness depends upon such moments. "To walk in the city arm in arm with a woman friend (as her mother had with aunts and cousins so many years ago) was just plain essential. Oh! those long walks and intimate talks, better than standing alone on the most admirable mountain or in the handsomest forest or hay-blown field."²⁶

Intimacy is a private state because in it people relax their public front either physically or emotionally or, occasionally, both. They tell personal stories, exchange looks, or touch privately. They may ignore each other without offending. They may have sex. They may speak frankly using words they would not use in front of others, expressing ideas and feelings—positive or negative—that are unacceptable in public. (I don't think I ever got over his death. She seems unable to stop lying to her mother. He looks flabby in those running shorts. I feel horny. In spite of everything, I still long to see them. I am so angry at you I could scream. That joke is disgusting, but it's really funny.) Shielded from forced exposure, a person often feels more able to expose himself.

At moments, questions of intimacy become euphemistic questions of sex. "Are they intimate?" often means "Have they had sexual intercourse?" An intimate relationship may sometimes be observed in the way couples touch, kiss, or stand close in public, but many expressions of physical intimacy are private. Deep kissing, the touching with hands, mouths, or genitals or breasts, buttocks, and genitals tend to be private expressions of physical intimacy. Not all physical touching, even when it occurs in private,

is intimate. One characteristic of violence is that it is contact—often to intimate areas of the body—without consent.

Sometimes out of lust, joy, lack of privacy, or the wish to shock, private touching occurs in public. Sometimes people get a kick (or an orgasm) out of being seen, of having others witness their pleasure. But often, making it public diminishes intimacy.

The heart of intimacy, its essence, is that in it one comes as close as one is capable of, or as close as one feels permitted, to revealing oneself to another person. One attempts to express frankly to another one's inner experiences, desires, feelings, and perceptions—though the expression is inevitably limited and incomplete. Intimacy requires trust and confidentiality. Intimacy may grow simply through experiencing events together, but often it grows through the sharing of private thoughts and feelings. The warp and woof of its development are the alternating cycles of revelation, bearable response, and gradually heightened trust. In the course of falling in love, each lover tells his beloved a story of his life. Othello recounts the effect of telling Desdemona about himself. "She thank'd me and bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her, I should but teach him how to tell my story, and that would woo her. Upon this heat I spoke. She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, and I lov'd her that she did pity them."²⁷

Desdemona is wooed by Othello's story. She feels awe and tenderness, feelings that deepen love. He offers her a man she can admire, a person worthy of her affection. So, too, her sympathy wins him. He has revealed himself without feeling shame.

In *War and Peace*, Princess Natasha and Princess Marya, originally enemies, become intimate friends while sitting together at the deathbed of Prince Andrei—Marya's brother and Natasha's onetime fiancé. After Andrei dies, Natasha risks telling Marya of her love:

"Masha," she said, timidly drawing Princess Marya's hand toward her. "Masha, you don't think I'm wicked, do you? Masha, darling, how I love you! Let us be real, bosom friends!" . . .

From that day there sprang up between them one of those tender, passionate friendships that exist only between women. They were continually kissing and saying tender things to each other and spent most of their time together. If one went out, the other became restless and hastened to join her. Together they felt more in harmony than when apart. A tie stronger than friendship was established between them: that special feeling of life being possible only in each other's company.²⁸

Love and intimacy are often wound together—though not always. We may preserve a habit of intimacy with people we no longer love. Loving someone, we desire increased intimacy. Put in a situation with another person where intimacy grows, we often come to feel love. And ultimately, love is private. Displayed too long before an audience, it becomes performance.

Intimate expressions occur in private because revelation makes people feel vulnerable. Imagine an intimate moment, then imagine it observed, and it changes. The sensibility jumps back, like an animal startled by a loud noise. Privacy not only sanctions intimacy, but appears to be a precondition of its most complete expression.

When people are not held, thrown, or forced together by geography, tradition, enslavement, simple dominance, economics, or kinship, then intimacy, chosen closeness based in love or tenderness, becomes a desirable alternative. Even were it not intrinsic to creativity, autonomy, and dignity, privacy would be invaluable simply for its role in supporting the possibility of rich and pleasurable intimacy.

A compelling image of Franklin Roosevelt is of him on his yacht relaxing by fishing, sleeping, and spending time with close

friends. While president, Roosevelt drew enormous sustenance from the laughter, gossip, sexual intrigue, and warm friendships that privacy permitted. In the face of impossible political situations, he appreciated that creative public solutions often first came to mind when one was enjoying privacy. While Eleanor Roosevelt rarely relaxed, she too used private relationships for emotional sustenance. Whenever she wished to muster courage for a task that frightened or overwhelmed her, she would create intense, intimate friendships. The love emboldened her. Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography *No Ordinary Time* describes how much the courage and political force of both Roosevelts rested on their personal relationships.

Why is intimacy so sustaining? This question is key to understanding the importance of privacy. If aloneness is our predicament, then everything rests on finding ways to bear it. Love and friendship fulfill this mission. Love because it suggests we are acceptable and thus deserve to give and get respite. Friendship because it puts a person near us proffering this possibility. When, as Grace Paley suggests, we metaphorically or actually walk "arm in arm" with a lover or a friend, we have company with whom we can comment freely upon the passing scene, and each of us is allowed to be. As we will see in the next chapter, choosing the company we keep is both quite modern, and an important function of privacy.

