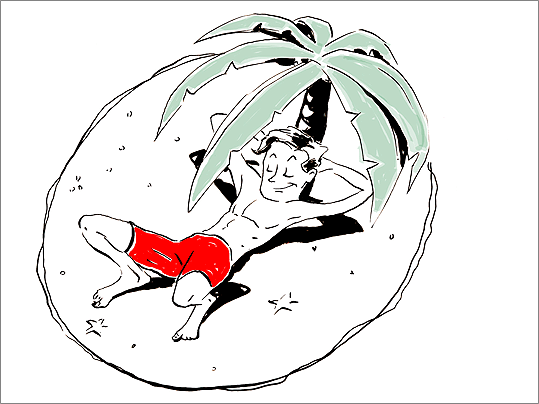
# The power of lonely

## What we do better without other people around

(Tim Gabor for The Boston Globe)

By [Leon Neyfakh](http://search.boston.com/local/Search.do?s.sm.query=Leon+Neyfakh&camp=localsearch:on:byline:art)

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You hear it all the time: We humans are social animals. We need to spend time together to be happy and functional, and we extract a vast array of benefits from maintaining intimate relationships and associating with groups. Collaborating on projects at work makes us smarter and more creative. Hanging out with friends makes us more emotionally mature and better able to deal with grief and stress.

* [Tweet Be the first to Tweet this!](http://www.boston.com/newsprojects/widgets/twitter/retweet.php?bcom_url=http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/03/06/the_power_of_lonely&title=The%20power%20of%20lonely)
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Spending time alone, by contrast, can look a little suspect. In a world gone wild for wikis and interdisciplinary collaboration, those who prefer solitude and private noodling are seen as eccentric at best and defective at worst, and are often presumed to be suffering from social anxiety, boredom, and alienation.

But an emerging body of research is suggesting that spending time alone, if done right, can be good for us — that certain tasks and thought processes are best carried out without anyone else around, and that even the most socially motivated among us should regularly be taking time to ourselves if we want to have fully developed personalities, and be capable of focus and creative thinking. There is even research to suggest that blocking off enough alone time is an important component of a well-functioning social life — that if we want to get the most out of the time we spend with people, we should make sure we’re spending enough of it away from them. Just as regular exercise and healthy eating make our minds and bodies work better, solitude experts say, so can being alone.

One ongoing Harvard study indicates that people form more lasting and accurate memories if they believe they’re experiencing something alone. Another indicates that a certain amount of solitude can make a person more capable of empathy towards others. And while no one would dispute that too much isolation early in life can be unhealthy, a certain amount of solitude has been shown to help teenagers improve their moods and earn good grades in school.

“There’s so much cultural anxiety about isolation in our country that we often fail to appreciate the benefits of solitude,” said Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at New York University whose book “Alone in America,” in which he argues for a reevaluation of solitude, will be published next year. “There is something very liberating for people about being on their own. They’re able to establish some control over the way they spend their time. They’re able to decompress at the end of a busy day in a city...and experience a feeling of freedom.”

Figuring out what solitude is and how it affects our thoughts and feelings has never been more crucial. The latest Census figures indicate there are some 31 million Americans living alone, which accounts for more than a quarter of all US households. And at the same time, the experience of being alone is being transformed dramatically, as more and more people spend their days and nights permanently connected to the outside world through cellphones and computers. In an age when no one is ever more than a text message or an e-mail away from other people, the distinction between “alone” and “together” has become hopelessly blurry, even as the potential benefits of true solitude are starting to become clearer.

Solitude has long been linked with creativity, spirituality, and intellectual might. The leaders of the world’s great religions — Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Moses — all had crucial revelations during periods of solitude. The poet James Russell Lowell identified solitude as “needful to the imagination;” in the 1988 book “Solitude: A Return to the Self,” the British psychiatrist Anthony Storr invoked Beethoven, Kafka, and Newton as examples of solitary genius.

But what actually happens to people’s minds when they are alone? As much as it’s been exalted, our understanding of how solitude actually works has remained rather abstract, and modern psychology — where you might expect the answers to lie — has tended to treat aloneness more as a problem than a solution. That was what Christopher Long found back in 1999, when as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst he started working on a project to precisely define solitude and isolate ways in which it could be experienced constructively. The project’s funding came from, of all places, the US Forest Service, an agency with a deep interest in figuring out once and for all what is meant by “solitude” and how the concept could be used to promote America’s wilderness preserves.

With his graduate adviser and a researcher from the Forest Service at his side, Long identified a number of different ways a person might experience solitude and undertook a series of studies to measure how common they were and how much people valued them. A 2003 survey of 320 UMass undergraduates led Long and his coauthors to conclude that people felt good about being alone more often than they felt bad about it, and that psychology’s conventional approach to solitude — an “almost exclusive emphasis on loneliness” — represented an artificially narrow view of what being alone was all about.

“Aloneness doesn’t have to be bad,” Long said by phone recently from Ouachita Baptist University, where he is an assistant professor. “There’s all this research on solitary confinement and sensory deprivation and astronauts and people in Antarctica — and we wanted to say, look, it’s not just about loneliness!”

Today other researchers are eagerly diving into that gap. Robert Coplan of Carleton University, who studies children who play alone, is so bullish on the emergence of solitude studies that he’s hoping to collect the best contemporary research into a book. Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert, a leader in the world of positive psychology, has recently overseen an intriguing study that suggests memories are formed more effectively when people think they’re experiencing something individually.

That study, led by graduate student Bethany Burum, started with a simple experiment: Burum placed two individuals in a room and had them spend a few minutes getting to know each other. They then sat back to back, each facing a computer screen the other could not see. In some cases they were told they’d both be doing the same task, in other cases they were told they’d be doing different things. The computer screen scrolled through a set of drawings of common objects, such as a guitar, a clock, and a log. A few days later the participants returned and were asked to recall which drawings they’d been shown. Burum found that the participants who had been told the person behind them was doing a different task — namely, identifying sounds rather than looking at pictures — did a better job of remembering the pictures. In other words, they formed more solid memories when they believed they were the only ones doing the task.

The results, which Burum cautions are preliminary, are now part of a paper on “the coexperiencing mind” that was recently presented at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference. In the paper, Burum offers two possible theories to explain what she and Gilbert found in the study. The first invokes a well-known concept from social psychology called “social loafing,” which says that people tend not to try as hard if they think they can rely on others to pick up their slack. (If two people are pulling a rope, for example, neither will pull quite as hard as they would if they were pulling it alone.) But Burum leans toward a different explanation, which is that sharing an experience with someone is inherently distracting, because it compels us to expend energy on imagining what the other person is going through and how they’re reacting to it.

“People tend to engage quite automatically with thinking about the minds of other people,” Burum said in an interview. “We’re multitasking when we’re with other people in a way that we’re not when we just have an experience by ourselves.”

Perhaps this explains why seeing a movie alone feels so radically different than seeing it with friends: Sitting there in the theater with nobody next to you, you’re not wondering what anyone else thinks of it; you’re not anticipating the discussion that you’ll be having about it on the way home. All your mental energy can be directed at what’s happening on the screen. According to Greg Feist, an associate professor of psychology at the San Jose State University who has written about the connection between creativity and solitude, some version of that principle may also be at work when we simply let our minds wander: When we let our focus shift away from the people and things around us, we are better able to engage in what’s called meta-cognition, or the process of thinking critically and reflectively about our own thoughts.

Other psychologists have looked at what happens when other people’s minds don’t just take up our bandwidth, but actually influence our judgment. It’s well known that we’re prone to absorb or mimic the opinions and body language of others in all sorts of situations, including those that might seem the most intensely individual, such as who we’re attracted to. While psychologists don’t necessarily think of that sort of influence as “clouding” one’s judgment — most would say it’s a mechanism for learning, allowing us to benefit from information other people have access to that we don’t — it’s easy to see how being surrounded by other people could hamper a person’s efforts to figure out what he or she really thinks of something.

Teenagers, especially, whose personalities have not yet fully formed, have been shown to benefit from time spent apart from others, in part because it allows for a kind of introspection — and freedom from self-consciousness — that strengthens their sense of identity. Reed Larson, a professor of human development at the University of Illinois, conducted a study in the 1990s in which adolescents outfitted with beepers were prompted at irregular intervals to write down answers to questions about who they were with, what they were doing, and how they were feeling. Perhaps not surprisingly, he found that when the teens in his sample were alone, they reported feeling a lot less self-conscious. “They want to be in their bedrooms because they want to get away from the gaze of other people,” he said.

The teenagers weren’t necessarily happier when they were alone; adolescence, after all, can be a particularly tough time to be separated from the group. But Larson found something interesting: On average, the kids in his sample felt better after they spent some time alone than they did before. Furthermore, he found that kids who spent between 25 and 45 percent of their nonclass time alone tended to have more positive emotions over the course of the weeklong study than their more socially active peers, were more successful in school and were less likely to self-report depression.

“The paradox was that being alone was not a particularly happy state,” Larson said. “But there seemed to be kind of a rebound effect. It’s kind of like a bitter medicine.”

The nice thing about medicine is it comes with instructions. Not so with solitude, which may be tremendously good for one’s health when taken in the right doses, but is about as user-friendly as an unmarked white pill. Too much solitude is unequivocally harmful and broadly debilitating, decades of research show. But one person’s “too much” might be someone else’s “just enough,” and eyeballing the difference with any precision is next to impossible.

Research is still far from offering any concrete guidelines. Insofar as there is a consensus among solitude researchers, it’s that in order to get anything positive out of spending time alone, solitude should be a choice: People must feel like they’ve actively decided to take time apart from people, rather than being forced into it against their will.

Overextended parents might not need any encouragement to see time alone as a desirable luxury; the question for them is only how to build it into their frenzied lives. But for the millions of people living by themselves, making time spent alone time productive may require a different kind of effort. Sherry Turkle, director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, argues in her new book, “Alone, Together,” that people should be mindfully setting aside chunks of every day when they are not engaged in so-called social snacking activities like texting, g-chatting, and talking on the phone. For teenagers, it may help to understand that feeling a little lonely at times may simply be the price of forging a clearer identity.

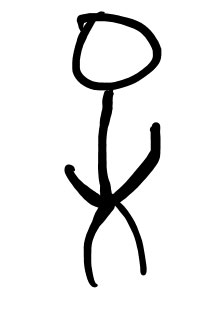
John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, whose 2008 book “Loneliness” with William Patrick summarized a career’s worth of research on all the negative things that happen to people who can’t establish connections with others, said recently that as long as it’s not motivated by fear or social anxiety, then spending time alone can be a crucially nourishing component of life. And it can have some counterintuitive effects: Adam Waytz in the Harvard psychology department, one of Cacioppo’s former students, recently completed a study indicating that people who are socially connected with others can have a hard time identifying with people who are more distant from them. Spending a certain amount of time alone, the study suggests, can make us less closed off from others and more capable of empathy — in other words, better social animals.

“People make this error, thinking that being alone means being lonely, and not being alone means being with other people,” Cacioppo said. “You need to be able to recharge on your own sometimes. Part of being able to connect is being available to other people, and no one can do that without a break.”

**程序员和绘画**

今天，我打算说一说绘画是如何帮助我更好的编程的故事。

在一年半之前，如果让我绘画，我除了能用5条线和一个圈画出一个人的形状外，画不出更复杂的图案。我既不认为曾经会过，也不认为以后可能会。但我错了。



**如果你能画出这个，就能画出一切。**

有一天，我在Hacker News上看到一篇有趣的文章，里面介绍了一些能够帮助我们通过自学来提高自己的书籍，这些书的特点是虽是自学，但不会让你感觉到是一种学习任务。涉及到很多方面，而最有价值的就是这本《[像艺术家一样思考(Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain)](http://t.cn/8FEM8JC)》，因为它里面提到的方法非常简单，正中我的下怀。

当我最终把它拿到手，开始阅读时….奇迹发生了。这本书是我见到的最好的一本“how-to”书籍，它用非常奇特的方法教你绘画。它并不告诉你绘画技巧知识，它也不推荐你去画一些简单的图形、像学生那样练基本功。它一开始就通过一些简单的练习让你相信你可以绘画，增强你的自信。而这正是我最需要的。

*这真是一个意外的礼物。*

我通读了这本书，完成了里面每个练习，然后停了下。我停下来是因为这本书已经让我实现心愿——想去证实我不是一个在绘画领域毫无希望的人。我不知道拿我的这些新学的本领去干什么，于是我又恢复了以前业余时间所干的事情——开发游戏，写关于编程的博客。停止了绘画，直到3个月前。

你应该明白，当一个人在开发视频游戏时，他很自然的需要去体验和分析大量的其它种视频游戏，尤其是那些个人独立出品的，你的脑子里经常会出现这样的声音：“喔欧，太漂亮的了，真希望我也能画出这样的场景”，但马上又会想：“没有什么能难倒我的，因为我读了那本书，我也会绘画。”于是，经过了几次这样的刺激后，我再也忍不住要拿起铅笔和纸了。

我又开始了素描。起初，我是在工作之余做这些事情，但很快发现，在具备了一些基本技巧后，我能非常迅速的完成简单的素描，于是我开始尝试在每当遇到新的编程问题、思路卡住的时候画画。让我吃惊的是，我的开发效率大幅提高。

每个程序员都应该深知这一点：编程中更重要的是思考，而不是敲代码(如果你不认同这一点，那你应该改行做打字员)。当在研究一个麻烦问题时，你思考，思考，思考，阅读关于你的问题的文章，思考，也许做一些盲目的实验，再思考，终于赢来了“哦”的时刻，然后，剩下的就是敲代码了。

但这里会出现一些小问题，至少对我是这样。我有拖延症，它会出现在我思考的间隔中。因为专注思考是一件很难的事，收邮件、看微博却是很容易的事。这个毛病在程序员中很普遍，我就是一个永远都在同自己的消极怠工做斗争的人，使用了各种[精良](http://getcoldturkey.com/)[武器](http://macfreedom.com/)，但很遗憾，都没有解决[核心问题](http://bookofhook.blogspot.ru/2013/03/smart-guy-productivity-pitfalls.html)，而是让我更分心。绘画是我的武器库里最后一种武器。

于是，现在我会每天拿出一到两个休息时间来绘画——当我感觉累了或需要大脑放松时。画简单的素描，临摹名画，或完全涂鸦。每次最多20分钟，大多时候这些时间是够用的。绘画后我感觉非常好。



*2次休息 x 20分钟 = 这幅画和放松的大脑*

我不知道为什么绘画能帮助我编程，我想可能有两个主要原因：

1. **绘画不会中断工作状态。** 绘画也是在工作，只是形式不同。也许正好和逻辑思维工作的编程补充。而看微博会很快打断你的工作状态，比大锤敲脑袋更具破坏力。
2. **绘画跟编程不一样，它使用的是另外一半大脑，绘画时，大脑在整理你之前的思维。**这纯属个人观察，没有科学论据，你也不必相信我。但我认为就是这样的。

放松并不是我要绘画的唯一原因，但的确是很重要的原因之一。并且它有助我做其它事情。希望你能喜欢这篇文章！

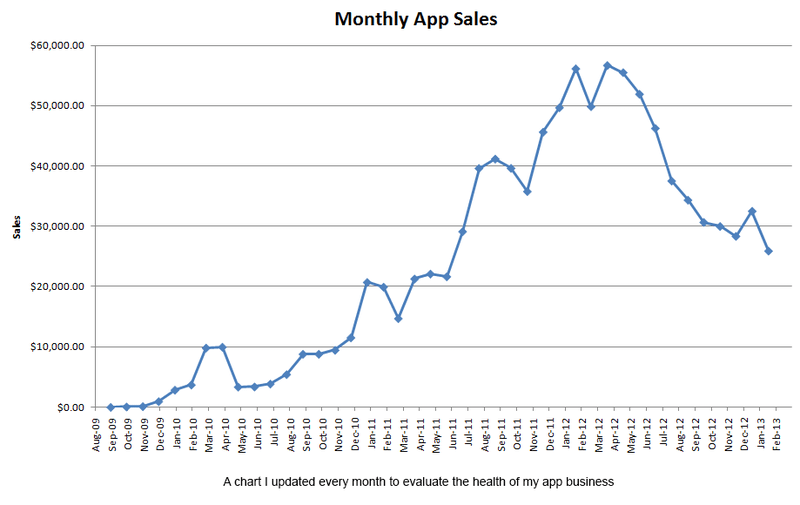
# 我的上一个安卓应用销售业绩，以及为什么你应该开发自己的移动应用

我开发安卓应用并在安卓市场上销售，挣了一大笔钱，最高时每月5万7千美元(请看下面的图表)。最终，销售量下滑，但这种扶摇直上的感觉还是很爽快的——只是太短暂。销量回落后，我转身开启了一个新的创业，[ZenPayroll](https://zenpayroll.com/)，想以此获得同样的快感并持续时间更长。如果你想知道创业是什么感觉，但不想去花数年时间和所有积蓄去体验，做一个移动应用是个不错的选择，它能让你低成本、快速的品尝到创业是什么滋味，或不是什么滋味。

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2008年，我从YCombinator投资公司拿到了1万5千美元，开始开发[Picwing](http://www.picwing.com/)。我们开发了一些[硬件](http://techcrunch.com/2008/08/15/picwing-debuts-their-social-digital-picture-frame/)，随后重点是[软件](http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/29/picwing-reboots-iphone-mom/)，这个业务我们经营了2年多。那是我和我的合伙人的一段辛苦磨练的经历，一年多的流汗、流血及流泪，换来的只是一点点的小成功。但最终，我们在经验上却获得坚实的回报。在一次并购后，我最终选择离开，我计划去开发并销售安卓应用。我是这样想的，相对于Picwing——让我花了2年时间，我可以在几个月里开发出一个安卓应用。

我的设想证明是正确的。相对于开创业公司，我开发安卓应用的过程要快的多。我真正的开始是写一个小的、叫做Car Locator的简单应用，大概是2009年8月。2个月后我就发布了它，我通过2009年9月的一篇叫做[I was making enough money to pay for my lunch](http://blog.edward-kim.com/my-android-app-sales-figures)的博客好好宣传了一下。销售业绩的起飞真正开始于2010年3月。你也知道，当时安卓还是一个很小的平台，很多人都在质疑它如何跟iPhone app store竞争，所以，当我分享了[success story of making $13,000/month in app sales](http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/01/android-market-gets-a-13000-per-month-success-story-of-its-own/)故事后，很多人都感到吃惊和欣喜。这个故事迅速风传进各这科技社区，Car Locator这个应用成为各种杂志、电台、博客、甚至Verizon TV的报道重点。所有的这一切只用了6个月。因为安卓平台在发展，所以我也乘势继续开发和发布了新的应用。在安卓市场卖出每月5万7千美元的销售额时我的事业达到了顶峰。



我的整个安卓应用市场经历让我收入颇丰。看着这些销售数字一周高过一周，我盘算如何能让这一切一直持续下去。在很多方面，安卓应用跟之前的Picwing创业都很相似，有起有伏，不同的是周期按周算，还是按月、年算。

事情都是这样，起的快，落的也快。我的安卓业务也不例外。有趣的是一个安卓应用的繁荣期总不超过12个月，我在想，如何能让它们更长久些。

Richard Foster的书，Creative Destruction，显示财富500强的公司平均寿命是15年左右。我怎么能祈望我的安卓应用能持续15年呢！不幸的是，因为官方的安卓应用评级——目的是激励开发人员推出“新的和有价值”的应用——成功的应用的生命期变得更短，也就12月左右。

我也逃不过此劫

开发移动应用就跟做普通的创业公司一样，比如Picwing，只是从开始到结束的生命期严重缩水。你投资的金额也相当很少，所以，潜在的回报也是这样，但我认为，这其中的很多经验和教训是在Picwing需要花数年才能学到的。很多第一才创业的人通常会失败——问题是，如果要失败，最快的失败会最快的获得经验。移动应用开发是一个很好的方法让创业者去体验第一次创业的感觉，而不必冒着损失大量金钱和时间的风险。

如果有一天你想跳入创业者的行列，在行动前你会十分好奇创业的感觉，我强烈的建议你去开发一个移动应用作为创业。你会从中学到大部分的经验——好的和不好的——在很短的时间里。如果你喜欢这段经历，你可能就应该开一个真的创业公司。

[ZenPayroll](https://zenpayroll.com/)是我过去两年创业的高潮，也许是我这辈子最优秀的成绩。我希望每天都能开发出一些新东西，用它们来服务客户。但同时，我会经常充满感激和自豪的回顾在这2年的经历中学到的东西。

[英文原文：[My last Android app sales figures, and why it's still great to start a mobile app business.](http://blog.edward-kim.com/my-last-android-app-sales-figures-and-closing-thoughts-on-starting-an-android-app-business) ]