

That's the first half of the lecture: the idea that true leadership means being able to think for yourself and act on your convictions. But how do you learn to do

that? How do you learn to think? Let's start with how you *don't* learn to think. A study by a team of researchers at Stanford came out a couple of months ago. The investigators wanted to figure out how today's college students were able to multitask so much more effectively than adults. How do they manage to do it, the researchers asked? The answer, they discovered—and this is by no means what they expected—is that they don't. The enhanced cognitive abilities the investigators expected to find, the mental faculties that enable people to multitask effectively, were simply not there. In other words, people do not multitask effectively. And here's the really surprising finding: the more people multitask, the worse they are, not just at other mental abilities, but at multitasking itself.

One thing that made the study different from others is that the researchers didn't test people's cognitive functions while they were multitasking. They separated the subject group into high multitaskers and low multitaskers and used a different set of tests to measure the kinds of cognitive abilities involved in multitasking. They found that in every case the high multitaskers scored worse. They were worse at distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information and ignoring the latter. In other words, they were more distractible. They were worse at what you might call "mental filing": keeping information in the right conceptual boxes and being able to retrieve it quickly. In other words, their minds were more disorganized. And they were even worse at the very thing that defines multitasking itself: switching between tasks.

Multitasking, in short, is not only not thinking, it impairs your ability to think. *Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it.* Not learning other people's ideas, or memorizing a body of information, however much those may sometimes be useful. Developing your own ideas. In short, thinking for yourself. You simply cannot do that in bursts of 20 seconds at a time, constantly interrupted by Facebook messages or Twitter tweets, or fiddling with your iPod, or watching something on YouTube.

I find for myself that my first thought is never my best thought. My first thought is always someone else's; it's always what I've already heard about the subject, always the conventional wisdom. It's only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw connections, take me by surprise. And often even that idea doesn't turn out to be very good. I need time to think about it, too, to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses, to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing.

I used to have students who bragged to me about how fast they wrote their papers. I would tell them that the great German novelist Thomas Mann said that a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. The best writers write much more slowly than everyone else, and the better they are, the slower they write. James Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, the greatest novel of the 20th century, at the rate of about a hundred words a day—half the length of the selection I read you earlier from *Heart of Darkness*—for seven years. T. S. Eliot, one of the greatest poets our country has ever produced, wrote about 150 pages of poetry over the course of his entire 25-year career. That's half a page a month. So it is with any other form of thought. You do your best thinking by slowing down and concentrating.

Now that's the third time I've used that word, *concentrating*. Concentrating, focusing. You can just as easily consider this lecture to be about concentration as about solitude. Think about what the word means. It means gathering yourself together into a single point rather than letting yourself be dispersed everywhere into a cloud of electronic and social input. It seems to me that Facebook and Twitter and YouTube—and just so you don't think this is a generational thing, TV and radio and

magazines and even newspapers, too—are all ultimately just an elaborate excuse to run away from yourself. To avoid the difficult and troubling questions that being human throws in your way. Am I doing the right thing with my life? Do I believe the things I was taught as a child? What do the words I live by—words like *duty*, *honor*, and *country*—really mean? Am I happy?

“Your own reality—for yourself, not for others.” Thinking for yourself means finding yourself, finding your own reality. Here’s the other problem with Facebook and Twitter and even *The New York Times*. When you expose yourself to those things, especially in the constant way that people do now—older people as well as younger people—you are continuously bombarding yourself with a stream of other people’s thoughts. You are marinating yourself in the conventional wisdom. In other people’s reality: for others, not for yourself. You are creating a cacophony in which it is impossible to hear your own voice, whether it’s yourself you’re thinking about or anything else. That’s what Emerson meant when he said that “he who should inspire and lead his race must be defended from travelling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions.” Notice that he uses the word *lead*. Leadership means finding a new direction, not simply putting yourself at the front of the herd that’s heading toward the cliff.

So why is reading books any better than reading tweets or wall posts? Well, sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes, you need to put down your book, if only to think about what you’re reading, what *you* think about what you’re reading. But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of *his* solitude, *his* attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they’re not *from* today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don’t reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought. They were revolutionary in their own time, and they are still revolutionary today. And when I say “revolutionary,” I am deliberately evoking the American Revolution, because it was a result of precisely this kind of independent thinking. Without solitude—the solitude of Adams and Jefferson and Hamilton and Madison and Thomas Paine—there would be no America.

So solitude can mean introspection, it can mean the concentration of focused work, and it can mean sustained reading. All of these help you to know yourself better. But there’s one more thing I’m going to include as a form of solitude, and it will seem counterintuitive:

friendship. Of course friendship is the opposite of solitude; it means being with other people. But I'm talking about one kind of friendship in particular, the deep friendship of intimate conversation. Long, uninterrupted talk with one other person. Not Skyping with three people and texting with two others at the same time while you hang out in a friend's room listening to music and studying. That's what Emerson meant when he said that "the soul environs itself with friends, that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude."

Introspection means talking to yourself, and one of the best ways of talking to yourself is by talking to another person. One other person you can trust, one other person to whom you can unfold your soul. One other person you feel safe enough with to allow you to acknowledge things—to acknowledge things to yourself—that you otherwise can't. Doubts you aren't supposed to have, questions you aren't supposed to ask. Feelings or opinions that would get you laughed at by the group or reprimanded by the authorities.

This is what we call thinking out loud, discovering what you believe in the course of articulating it. But it takes just as much time and just as much patience as solitude in the strict sense. And our new electronic world has disrupted it just as violently. Instead of having one or two true friends that we can sit and talk to for three hours at a time, we have 968 "friends" that we never actually talk to; instead we just bounce one-line messages off them a hundred times a day. This is not friendship, this is distraction.