

THE BIG IDEAS

The Input Age

Inputs. Inputs. Endless inputs.

Solitude's Big 4

Clarity + Creativity + Emotional Balance + Moral Courage.

MLK's Moral Courage

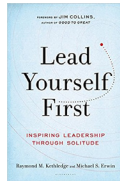
via solitude.

FOMO

Get over it.

Changing the World

<- Great souls. Let's do it.



Lead Yourself First

Inspiring Leadership Through Solitude

BY RAYMOND M. KETHLEDGE AND MICHAEL S. ERWIN · BLOOMSBURY
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“To lead others you must first lead yourself. That, ultimately, is the theme of this book.

Leadership, as Dwight Eisenhower defined it, is ‘the art of getting someone else to do something that you want done because he wants to do it.’ That does not mean that leadership amounts to using people; like anyone else, a leader must recognize that each person is an end in himself. It means, instead, to make others embrace your goals as their own. But to do that you must first determine your goals. And you must do that with enough clarity and conviction to hold fast to your goals—even when, inevitably, there are great pressures to yield from them. To develop that clarity and conviction of purpose, and the moral courage to sustain it through adversity, requires something that one might not associate with leadership. That something is solitude.”

~ Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin from *Lead Yourself First*

Solitude. It's the secret sauce to leadership.

As Raymond Kethledge and Michael Erwin tells us: *“Solitude is a state of mind, a space where you can focus on your own thoughts without distraction, with a power to bring mind and soul together in clear-eyed conviction. Like a great wave that saturates everything in its path, however, handheld devices and other media now leave us awash with the thoughts of others. We are losing solitude without even realizing it.”*

Alexandra got this book for me after seeing it on [Brené Brown's](#) reading list. It's fantastic. I was especially excited to read it as I prepped for Conquering Digital Addiction 101.

Raymond Kethledge is a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. Michael Erwin is a graduate of West Point who served two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq and is now an assistant professor in psychology and leadership at West Point. Together they have written a brilliant, inspiring book on how to use solitude to become a better leader.

Jim Collins's 4-page Foreword is so good I could create a Note just on THAT. I love the way he makes the case for the importance of solitude (and this book): *“We live in a cacophonous age, swarming insects of noise and interruption buzzing about—emails, text messages, cable news, advertisements, cell phones, meetings, wireless Web connections, social media posts, and all the new intrusions invented by the time you are reading this. If leadership begins not with what you do but with who you are, then when and how do you escape the noise and find your purpose and summon the strength to pursue it? This book illustrates how leaders can—indeed must—be disciplined people who create the quiet space for disciplined thought and summon the strength for disciplined action. It is a message needed now more than ever, else we run the risk of waking up at the end of the year having accomplished little of significance, each year slipping by in a flurry of activity pointing nowhere. So take some quiet time, engage with this book, and commit to the hard work of alone time.”*

“Solitude is a state of mind, a space where you can focus on your own thoughts without distraction, with a power to bring mind and soul together in clear-eyed conviction. Like a great wave that saturates everything in its path, however, handheld devices and other media now leave us awash with the thoughts of others. We are losing solitude without even realizing it.”

~ Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin

"We live, in fact, in an age starved for solitude."

~ C. S. Lewis

If that sounds like fun, I think you'll love the book. Get a copy [here](#).

It's a very thoughtful look at how leaders ranging from Dwight D. Eisenhower, Winston Churchill and T.E. Lawrence (aka of Arabia) to Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jane Goodall have used solitude to find more clarity, creativity, emotional balance and moral courage. And, of course, how we can do the same.

It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

SOLITUDE IN THE INPUT AGE

"Solitude has been instrumental to the effectiveness of leaders throughout history, but now they (along with everyone else) are losing it with hardly any awareness of the fact. Before the Information Age—which one could also call the Input Age—leaders naturally found solitude anytime they were physically alone, or when walking from one place to another, or while standing in line. Like a great wave that saturates everything in its path, however, handheld devices deliver immeasurable quantities of information and entertainment that now have virtually everyone instead staring down at their phones. Society did not make a considered choice to surrender the bulk of its time for reflection in favor of time spent reading tweets or texts.

Yet, with an awareness of what we have lost, each of us can choose to reclaim it. And leaders in particular—whose actions by definition affect not only themselves—have more than a choice. They have an obligation. A leader has not only permission, but a responsibility, to seek out periods of solitude."

Solitude.

It's been instrumental to the effectiveness of leaders throughout history and now? Poof! It seems to have disappeared—engulfed in the ubiquitous tsunami of information and entertainment.

Step 1. Recognize the fact that a) solitude is a precious resource for leaders (that means: all of us) and b) it's an endangered species in our modern world.

You know how I like to mention words that are used a lot in books? Well, a word that popped out for me in this book was "inputs."

Inputs. Inputs.

Nonstop inputs via that incessant tsunami of information via emails, texts, news, entertainment, etc. THAT's what pulls us out of our solitude. We're constantly reacting to OTHER people's thoughts—which is why the authors define solitude as "a subjective state of mind, in which the mind, isolated from input from other minds, works through a problem on its own."

Enter: The "Input Age" (rather than the "Information Age").

We recently did a Note on a book called [Bored and Brilliant](#). As I was reading this book, I was thinking that a more appropriate title for that book might have been "In Solitude and Brilliant."

It's only when we're in solitude that we tap into our default mode and let it do its thing. And, of course, it's only in solitude (unplugged from inputs!) that we can go Deep and do our best work.

Even Cal Newport's [Deep Work](#) tip to "Embrace Boredom" can be redefined as "Embrace Solitude." Embrace those micro-moments of doing nothing. And, as per Thich Nhat Hanh in [Silence](#) quit stuffing your brain with all those "nutriment" inputs that your mind will have to digest (kinda like all that edible foodlike substances you might be eating!).

And, let's recall Herbert Simon's wisdom that "[a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention](#)." <- We can modify that to "[a wealth of INPUTS creates a poverty of SOLITUDE](#)."

"Inactivity can be very intelligent behavior."

~ Warren Buffett

"Make big decisions in the calm."

~ Dwight D. Eisenhower

In sum: **Solitude = You - Inputs.**

Quick check in: What inputs do you KNOW you can eliminate? Today a good day to chip away and carve out a little (/a lot) more space for solitude?

P.S. That passage above was from the very last chapter on "Embracing Solitude" in which we get some great tips on HOW to embrace solitude. Like these: "A leader can designate a certain number of workdays per month as no-meeting days... A leader can mark off sixty or ninety minutes on his calendar each day for time to think. A leader can make it known that he does not text, and checks his e-mail only intermittently or at certain points in the day. (One really has to wonder what leaders who make a point of responding to e-mails within minutes are otherwise doing with their time.) A leader can designate weekends as periods for no work-related emails to be sent at all... Or better yet, a leader can do all these things."

That little jab at leaders who respond to every email within minutes reminds me of Cal's definition of Shallow Work and HIS little jab at "human routers": "In an age of network tools... knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative—constantly sending and receiving e-mail messages like human network routers, with frequent breaks for quick hits of distraction." (Note: Let's not be human routers. lol.)

The email restrictions idea reminds me of Dan Ariely in [Manage Your Day-to-Day](#) where he tells us: "It would probably be best if managers went to the IT department and asked them that e-mail not be distributed between eight and eleven every morning. The idea that the best way to communicate with people is 24/7 is not really an idea about maximizing productivity."

(I've personally decided to get back out of email again. After over a year out I dipped my toe back in and it's crazy how quickly those inputs can saturate your brain. I'm also no longer using my phone so texts are gone. Of course, as a Professional Optimizer I have fun being extreme. We all need to find the rhythms/constraints that are optimal for us. But I love how this book provided even more clarity on the just how important it is to prioritize our solitude.)

P.P.S. Remember: **Solitude = You - Inputs.**

(And, with apologies to math geniuses out there: **You x Solitude = YOU²**)

SOLITUDE'S BIG 4

"The leader who is placid inside is much more formidable in battle."

~ General James Mattis

"Clarity is often a difficult thing for a leader to obtain. Concerns of the present tend to loom larger than potentially greater concerns that lie farther away. Some decisions by their nature present great complexity, whose many variables must align a certain way for the leader to succeed. Compounding the difficulty, now more than ever, is what ergonomists call information overload, where a leader is overrun with inputs—via e-mails, meetings, and phone calls—that only distract and clutter his thinking. ...

Solitude offers ways for leaders to obtain greater clarity. A leader who thinks through a complex problem by hard analytical work—as Eisenhower did before D-day—can identify the conditions necessary to solve it. A leader who silences the din not only around her mind, but inside it, can then hear the delicate voice of intuition, which may have already made connections that her conscious mind has not."

Now that we've established the general importance of solitude and its greatest threat (tsunami of inputs!), it's time to look at how great leaders use solitude.

The book has four parts—one for each of the facets of how great leaders use solitude: **Clarity + Creativity + Emotional Balance + Moral Courage.**

You use solitude to gain more Clarity (both analytically and intuitively). Your Creativity goes to a higher level. You're able to maintain your equanimity/Emotional Balance via recharging

"The first step on the road to experiencing true awareness is the cessation of noise from within."

~ Jane Goodall

in solitude while seeing the bigger picture AND that Clarity + Creativity + Emotional Balance creates the essential fuel to LEAD with the Moral Courage required to do the right thing.

Again: If you're CONSTANTLY (!!!) blowing your consciousness up with INPUTS from the outside world, you will NOT have the level of Clarity, Creativity, Emotional Balance and Moral Courage to lead at the levels of which you're capable. (Period.)

You might *get by* in a world in which EVERYONE is distracting themselves, but it will be impossible (!) to truly actualize your potential as a leader without solitude. (Exclamation point!)

Now, let's come back to the thoughts above on Clarity. That's Part I. In Chapter 1 we learn about how Dwight D. Eisenhower used solitude to map out plans for D-day—creating "analytical clarity" that led to his effective leadership. (Think about the ENORMOUS complexity of pulling that off. And then think about the impossibility of creating that strategy while drowning in a tsunami of inputs).

In Chapter 3 we learn how Jane Goodall used solitude to create "intuitive" clarity. It was in the silence of the jungles that she had the intuitive hit on how to best observe the chimpanzees.

Short story: After weeks of zero success, she realized that chimps thought she was a predator when she approached with a couple of guides. So, rather than try to approach them, she sat on a rock and let them get comfortable with her presence—which they did, which led to her remarkable discoveries. Voila. Intuitive clarity via solitude = greatness.

But it's not just the noise from WITHOUT we need to deal with. It's also the noise from WITHIN our heads. Jane says this: *"The first step on the road to experiencing true awareness is the cessation of noise from within."*

While the authors tell us: *"The foundation of both analytical and intuitive clarity is an uncluttered mind."*

All of which requires both reduced inputs and increased capacity to empty our minds and shine the spotlight of our attention where we want when we want for how long we want.

How's that going for you? And how can you Optimize a little today?

MLK'S MORAL COURAGE

"King had been told the same thing. And he knew that the parallel went a step further. Black Americans have long identified with the Israelites of the Old Testament, who were persecuted by the pharaoh. After Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, they wander the desert for forty years. Finally God tells Moses to 'get thee up this mountain,' from whose top God says he will allow Moses to see the Promised Land. And God says he will give this land 'unto the children of Israel for a possession' (Deuteronomy 32:48-49). But God will not let Moses himself go there; instead, God says, Moses will die on the mountain. Moses then climbs up the mountain, sees the Promised Land, and dies."

That's from the section on moral courage in which we get a snapshot at the early days of the civil rights movement and see how Martin Luther King, Jr. rose from a young, unknown local minister into a national leader and, eventually, became an international icon.

Here's the important point: He was often emotionally overwhelmed. Afraid. Felt like giving up. Like WE ALL DO. We have this misconception that our greatest heroes were (unlike us) fearless. That, of course, is simply NOT TRUE. As [David Reynolds](#) says in [Constructive Living](#): *"Anyone who says he isn't afraid of anything is both stupid and lying."*

And, more specifically to the point of our current discussion: You know how MLK found the (emotional balance) and moral courage to push through his pain and doubt and willingly put his life on the line for the cause in which he so deeply believed?

"The point is that every leader has her emotional limits, and there is no shame in exceeding them. What distinguishes effective leaders from inferior ones, rather, is their ability to restore their emotional balance."

~ Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin

"... the leader can again expect moral criticism... The very point of these criticisms is to enforce conformity, and thus to prevent the leader from making these decisions in the first place. Moral courage is what enables a leader to make them nonetheless. It requires not only clarity, but conviction. And to have conviction, and thus moral courage, the leader must get her soul involved."

~ Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin

" And whenever men are fighting against barbarism, tyranny, and massacre, for freedom, law and honour, let them remember that the frame of their deeds, even though they themselves may be exterminated, may perhaps be celebrated as long as the world rolls round."

~ Winston Churchill

Solitude.

In his case, that solitude came in his kitchen late one night after receiving a phone call after his wife and daughter had gone to sleep. *"The white on the other end of the line called King the N-word and told him, 'We are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.'"*

Imagine getting a call like THAT. What would YOU do?

King was ready to give up. But started praying (in solitude!) and praying and arrived at a point where he was ready to step up to his calling. From that day forward, he didn't fear bombings. And, guess what? Three days later an explosion rocked his house and nearly killed his family.

But he didn't give up. He had the moral courage found through solitude.

FOMO <- GET OVER IT

"In some quarters there is a 'fear of missing out': a fear that, if one unplugs from e-mail or news services or social media even for a few hours, they'll be less current (a few hours less, to be exact) than their peers. And indeed that is true. But tracking all these inputs is surrender to the Lilliputians. One simply cannot engage in anything more than superficial thought when cycling back and forth between these tweets and work. And most of the inputs are piecemeal, and thus worthless anyway. As with our obsession with smartphones, one needs to make a choice about whether to engage in this kind of practice. And no one serious about his responsibilities will choose to engage in it."

Do you have a fear of missing out?

Well, I don't know how to put this politely but... Get over it.

You need to make a choice about whether you're going to waste your life on nonsense.

And... No one serious about his responsibilities will choose to do so.

P.S. See Ryan Holiday's "I don't know" and "I don't care" lines from [The Daily Stoic](#) for more.

HOW TO CHANGE THE COURSE OF HISTORY (<- LET'S!)

"The effect of this solitude upon Churchill is hard to overstate. Churchill was a romantic who believed his nation was centered upon principles that—as Churchill himself put it—were at first a distant glimmer through the primeval mists, but that, as the centuries marched forward, emerged as gleaming ideals, whose light then shone across the centuries that followed... Churchill believed further that great men, possessed of the great emotion that these ideals inspire, could change the course of history—and that he was such a man. And thus, night after night, as Churchill paced back and forth across his study, he delivered not only to his readers, but to himself, a verbal history that inspired unshakable convictions within his soul.

Churchill's study of history gave him perspective as well. Churchill saw his time and his own actions in the sweep of history, whose protagonists—king Arthur and Alfred, among others—struggled against evil and adversity in their time just as he struggled against those things in his. Their example reassured him in times of deep adversity; and the vibrancy of their legend, centuries later, revealed to him that in great adversity there is opportunity for lasting honor and glory—that, even 'if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years,' as he put it in June 1940, his own deeds might yet be remembered."

That's from Part IV on how Churchill used solitude for "Moral Courage" as he stood in opposition to Britain's popular approach of appeasing Hitler. (Of course, solitude also amplified his Clarity and Creativity and Emotional Balance as well. They all go together!)

"The most inspiring leaders are the ones who find some transcendent meaning in the enterprise they lead... A transcendent meaning is one that by definition stands apart from the specific goals at hand. To find it, therefore, usually requires reflection. The leaders who do find it are the ones we honor most."

~ Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin

Want moral courage? Kethledge and Erwin tell us we need to invite our SOUL into the picture. (How? Via solitude, of course.)

Any mention of greatness and souls brings to mind Aristotle's wisdom from his *Ethics*. Recall our discussion in that Note about the etymology of the word *magnanimity*. (Do you remember what it literally means? *Magna* for "great" + *animus* for "soul" = GREAT SOUL.)

But what I most love about the passage above is the fact that Churchill was a romantic who believed that a great person could change the course of history AND he believed the fact that HE was such a great person. And... He [proved himself right](#). All of which perfectly (!) captures the essence of Aristotle's virtue of magnanimity.

(And, to cap it all off, Churchill also clearly had fun with the whole process: "*We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow-worm.*")

Let's shine the spotlight back on you. Do YOU believe that great men and women can change the world? And, most importantly, do you believe that YOU are capable of being such a person?

I do. And, to be clear: That's why I'm here all day every day waving my pom poms and doing my best to Optimize and actualize my *own* life as I try to help you do the same so we can change the world together.

I KNOW we can do it. And, I also know our world NEEDS us living our most virtuously heroic lives more today than ever before. It's in great adversity that great leaders are born.

Let's be those leaders. And, let's remember that SOLITUDE is a KEY ingredient to our effective leadership. Turn off the inputs. Step out of the echo chambers and distraction.

We need you to LEAD. And to do that, we need you to lead yourself first.

B

Brian Johnson,
Professional Optimizer

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.