

*The Bond of Shared Solitude: How do we stay connected to our children and spouses in the age of wall to wall media?* Richard Louv, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 from his Blog, children and nature

*Adapted from "The Nature Principle."*

**B**oredom has its benefits. So does solitude, that lost art in the age of wall-to-wall media. To occasionally be alone — not lonely, but alone — is an important part of parenting and of

marriage. One time, my wife Kathy rented a room at the beach, and spent a weekend with no electronic interruptions, no demands for time or attention — just the sound of the waves and gulls. She came home looking even younger than she usually does.



Several years ago, facing a book deadline, I drove to the Cuyamaca mountains. My friends Jim and Anne Hubbell had invited me to house sit a magical Hobbit cottage, a work of art, on their property. I planned to spend a whole week there, alone. I realize taking work on a retreat is a contradiction, but even with work at hand, solitude is elevating. I had done this once before, spending a week in a bunkhouse made from an abandoned railroad car in Mesa Grande, had worked during the heat of the day and then wandered at dusk through the hills.

This was mountain lion country. I always felt watched. I carried a walking stick made of light, strong yucca. Each evening, as it turned dark, I would stop at an open watering tank to wash up, then head back to the boxcar.

This time, the accommodations were better, a charming, sculpted house with windows of stained glass — I even had electricity, and a comfortable bed to sleep in. In the gray dawn on my first morning there, I opened my eyes to see a coyote standing next to an open window. It stared at me. I blinked. It was gone.

I got up, made coffee, and went to work.

During these days of solitude, moving clouds and lifting wind would begin to bring voices — of a father and a mother, now gone, and of my wife and children. On the fourth day, Kathy and the boys, Jason and Matthew, arrived for a visit. In solitude, even for a few days, a person changes subtly; the familiar phrases and patterns seem odd, somehow. So our first minutes together felt a little awkward. But this is why taking a retreat, as a husband or wife or parent, is a good thing. Familiar patterns can shield us from true familiarity.

At the end of their visit, Kathy took me aside and said that Jason had commitments at home, but Matthew would like to stay with me for my remaining three days. He was terribly bored at home, and needed a break from his brother (and his brother needed a break from him). Of course, I said, as long as he understands that I need to work, and he'll have to entertain himself.

**A**t 11, Matthew was in the between time, in the gap between childhood and adolescence.

This is a particularly magical stage in a boy's life, a time when it's good to take a break from familiar patterns — to spend some time in silence.



My wife and older son drove off, and Matthew and I went through the house to look for books for him to read. There was no TV in the little house and no radio. Not a single electronic game, either. He picked out a Tolkein novel and another book about a boy who adopts a wolf cub. He sat on an old couch behind me, and respecting my need for quiet, began to read.

Three hours later I realized he had not said a word. I turned around. He was asleep, holding Tolkein like a stuffed bear.

That evening, we walked up the hill and swam together in a round, tiled pool under a quarter moon, and later, we listened to the wind come up and the coyotes jabber in fits and starts. For the next three days, we talked only occasionally, in the pool or at dinner. He was usually a voluble boy, so I was surprised that the silences came so easily to him.

The absence of electronics (except for my laptop computer) helped. So did the wildness of the land around us. So did the fact that I was there, but quieter than usual. I asked him to take charge of feeding the cats and dog. He gave names to the cats, who followed him around the property, scrambling up the oaks to show off for him. In the evenings we swam or walked, and he took his camera, and snuck up on the deer that wandered through an orchard at dusk.

Matthew and I moved into a new rhythm. I got to know him better during those days, and perhaps he came to know me better, not because we talked, but because we didn't. As a parent, you capture such quiet moments when you can, in the loudness of time.