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Topic: Alone or Choices

## ALONE AND LONELY

To an extreme extrovert these two words might seem synonymous. To an introvert they can mean very different things. To me “lonely” is a sad word, suggesting one is in a place s/he’d rather not be, whereas “alone” suggests happy hours lost in a book; exploring trails and city streets; planning, pondering, dreaming.

I spend a lot of time alone, but I haven’t been *really* alone for days or weeks on end very often. One period of my life that comes to mind in this regard is the first few weeks of a year I spent in Paris. In 1957 I set off for France planning to spend a year at the Sorbonne. I read but didn’t speak French, had no idea where I would live or how to find housing, and knew no one. I did have a bit of help when I arrived – relatives of a Wisconsin neighbor met me at the boat train and took me to a hotel where they had reserved a week’s lodging for me. These people were to become wonderful friends, introducing me to the pleasures of French food and Parisian cafes, taking me to some of their favorite spots in Europe on long weekends, but though they told me to get in touch if I needed anything, I didn’t contact them for over a month.

During that month I learned that I was ineligible to enroll at the Sorbonne proper, but enrolled instead at the (wonderful) Cours de Civilisation française de la Sorbonne and moved from one seedy hotel to another, as there was much going on in the city and I could never stay

one place for more than a few days. Every day I wandered the magical city streets, getting lost and finding myself again, in more ways than one. Just before classes were to begin I contacted the Wisconsin couple, who helped me find a room in a women's boarding house.

All of the women in the boarding house at that time were French, but only one, my roommate, Nellie, was a student. For the first several weeks I hardly spoke a word, but the language was working itself into my psyche and eventually began spilling out. Nellie sometimes talked at me non-stop without expecting a reply, and I think she was shocked the first time I came up with more than a "oui" or "non". I didn't make a close friend, though, until a Swiss girl who shared interests with me in film and art moved into the house in the spring. I spent a great deal of time alone that year, learning the city unsystematically by wandering endlessly through the neighborhoods, along the quais, past monuments and palaces and cathedrals.

I must have been lonely at times, especially during those first few weeks, but my memories are the opposite of sad. I had grown up in one place, surrounded by friends and family, and my strength of will had never been tested to this extent. During this time in Paris I grew tremendously in self-awareness and self-confidence. Maybe a little homesick once in a while, but I was always, at every moment, where I wanted to be.