

Time Apart . . . Now and Then

Review of
An Island to Myself:
The Place of Solitude in an Active Life
 by Michael N. McGregor
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Reviewed by **Jack Collins**

Patmos is a special place of encounter for Michael McGregor. It's the place where he wrote his first novel and met Robert Lax, leading to a life-long friendship and the writing of his first published book, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*. Patmos is also the place where McGregor became cognizant of his need for solitude. In his latest book, *An Island to Myself: The Place of Solitude in an Active Life*, McGregor shares a rich experience of solitude discovered through years of searching in many different places.

The book includes four unnumbered chapters, organized in chronological order, beginning with McGregor's first trip to Patmos in 1985 as a twenty-seven-year-old (when he first met Lax) and ending with his 2024 trip to Patmos at the age of sixty-five. The opening chapter, "The First Encounter" (1-62), accounts for forty percent of the book and covers his motivations and expectations for visiting Patmos. He writes about the challenges of island life, his first meeting with Lax and many of his reflections on solitude. McGregor organizes the next two chapters, "Reincarnations (1985-1989)" (63-91) and "Solitude in a Settled Life" (92-123), around specific places after Patmos where he discovered solitude in the active life. In the final chapter, "Returning to Patmos" (124-46), McGregor comes back to the island thirty-eight years after his original visit with no agenda but to examine his life and be fully alive to the present moment. The book concludes with a short section, "Final Thoughts" (147-49), where McGregor provides additional thoughts on the benefits of solitude. Throughout the book, McGregor has solitude-themed quotations from people ranging from Thomas Merton to Marilyn Monroe.

In "The First Encounter," McGregor provides many reasons for going to Patmos, in addition to his primary motive of trying to write a novel. He wants to be "fully alive" and "to be myself" (a writer) (15); "to see what it means to be alone with a deeper self, hoping a purer me would emerge" (16); to seek "a truer and freer life" (21); and "to learn who I was" (55). McGregor emphasizes that he is not on Patmos for spiritual growth. After a long quotation from Thomas Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (in *Disputed Questions*), McGregor writes, "I want to make it clear before I go any further that I didn't choose to live on the island of Patmos because I was seeking spiritual

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betterment” (14). Some of his reasons, however, for going to Patmos suggest Merton’s concept of searching for the true self. One of the books that McGregor reads on Patmos is *The Seven Storey Mountain*. About the book, he writes, “I had no idea, however, how much reading that book at that moment would change my life” (14). McGregor’s Patmos experience ignites his intentional search for solitude throughout his active life.

In the following chapter, “Reincarnations (1985-1989)” he finds solitude living in community at Taizé, during breaks as a European tour guide, while riding on a train, and when walking in nature around Green Lake in Seattle. While at Taizé, after reading a line from Psalm 16, he writes, “What it means to me is that the life I’m living is fine as it is, with all its blessings and yearnings and even uncertainties. All I need is time apart now and then for quiet reflection” (67). This is the main theme of the book. Solitude does have a place, an important place, in our active and often chaotic lives. But we must intentionally take time apart from our active lives to experience it.

In his third chapter, “Solitude in a Settled Life (1991-2011),” McGregor searches for solitude in his active life as a married man, graduate student and professor. His search for solitude to write and reflect continues as he retreats to a cabin on the San Juan Islands, creates a writer’s space in his first home in Carbondale, and finds refuge in libraries. McGregor writes poignantly about the importance of a library to him as a child while his parents were divorcing and his time at the nursing home with his aging mother. In the last paragraph of the chapter, he reveals the reason for the title, *An Island to Myself*. In response to John Donne’s famous line “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main,” McGregor writes, “While it is true that we’re all connected, a person can exist as an island at times as well – edging away from the continent while maintaining a connection below the surface” (123).

Not surprisingly, McGregor’s visit to Patmos in the fourth chapter, “Returning to Patmos (2024),” is a very different experience from that of his original visit decades earlier. With no agenda but to “exist in prolonged solitude” (134), McGregor must move more slowly now because of age and a serious health issue. But moving slower allows him to be more alive to the present moment and feel a greater sense of God’s presence than before. In a final tribute to Robert Lax, he writes: “In a life peppered with mistakes, one of the best things I ever did was cling to this man whose life and love were built on solitude” (146). After calling his wife on her birthday, McGregor is ready to leave Patmos more fully alive and loving.

McGregor’s memoir is an engaging and meaningful contribution to the repertoire on solitude. Frequently, I found myself saying “Yes” to something he wrote. Reading about his simple life in a cold apartment on Patmos and his increasing awareness of the beauty of nature on the island provoked thoughts of Thomas Merton’s life in his hermitage. Although McGregor mentions how important both *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Thomas Merton were to him, I wish he had written more about how they were meaningful. Initially, I found McGregor’s frequent use of the word solitude a bit distracting. But, as I continued to read, I was able to settle into the story. “Final Thoughts,” the short section at the end of the book, was a list of additional thoughts on solitude that probably could have been integrated judiciously into the four chapters of the book. Some Merton followers may not find many new insights, but most readers will appreciate this authentic narrative about McGregor’s personal search for solitude.