

Curated hermit

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Saint Onuphrius from Egypt – one of the most famous hermits who lived in the Egyptian deserts in 4th or 5th century, who's severe lifestyle became a cult and an inspiration for several monasteries.

What we share shapes our society and changes our personal habits within these relationships. With the increasing number of people living alone in cities it can be asked how this solitude shapes our personal identity. If there exists an urban hermit, a lone dweller, then what could be the role of sharing his personal life to others? In order to approach the idea of sharing, let us first explore the very opposite of the seemingly public medium of our social affairs in the embodiment of a hermit – a person who lives in seclusion from society.

The very word we use here hermit, from Latin *ĕrĕmĭta*, meaning 'of the desert' originates from Christian hermits who lived in the Egyptian deserts. It is important to note that the content of the word has various nuances and forms of practices for different cultures and beliefs worldwide. While some forms became institutionalised, such as the desert communities became the models for Christian monasticism, others remained solely dependent on individuals. Although mostly carried by religious reasons, the underlying idea during the period of seclusion is to renounce from one's daily habits and personal volition in search for a higher consciousness.

Most of Asian Buddhism follows the idea that a person should at least once be apart from his contemporary earthly way of living. In some branches of Tibetan Buddhism it is required of monks to do solo retreat for three years and three months. They live in caves and

forests for deep contemplation. The monks in search for solitude would not necessarily avoid villages that come to their way. Instead, they would unconditionally help the inhabitants, if only for a fee of a piece of bread to eat. The hermit steps under the service of other living beings with the absence of ego. While committing solely to others, the person no longer is in the centre of his actions himself, therefore entirely sharing himself with the world. This very absence of ego can be seen as absolute sharing. A hermit in order to fully depart from his self could act as a scarecrow on the fields. To abandon one's personal identity within the society by living in an absolute absence of self, leads ultimately as far as identifying a hermit to the forces of nature – like a wind that someone felt and then is already gone.

Funnily enough, and as a contradiction, hermits who could not hide their traces were immediately wanted as great teachers. Hermits were even followed and looked up for. The paradox lies in the fact that after returning from seclusion, sharing these experiences as great stories would only promote the hermit's new identity as a survivor and therefore reinforce his/her ego. We might as well say that hermits we know today by name, as poets or writers, are actually failed ones. We can read their curated stories and imagine them without experiencing them in reality. Although this is the beauty of literature, we could also ask if we were supposed to read them. The question lies in the beginning – if

1 Alari Allik – Eraklusest. Radio show on ERR Radio. Translated from Estonian by author. http://vikerraadio.err.ee/helid?main_id=1937381

2 Euromonitor International. One person households: Opportunities for consumer goods companies. <http://blog.euromonitor.com/2007/09/one-person-households-opportunities-for-consumer-goods-companies.html>

the act of sharing itself was appropriate by the hermit.¹

Social changes such as the rise of the solo dweller, the surge in social networks, peer-to-peer logistics, combined with an ageing population common in Western countries, change the way people interact with each other. There is less dependency on communities people reside with, while at the same time highly individualised control over daily habits is increasing, communication being one of them. Events are organised casually, food is delivered, news is read and friends are made without leaving personal territories. Although living densely side-by-side, stitched to urban fabrics of services and infrastructure, there is no urgent need for sharing heated bathrooms or kitchens anymore. The number of one-person households has been on the increase worldwide.² Living alone is common and it can be wondered if a modern dweller is turning into an urban hermit. Although solitude is the common ground, it is important to differ how they share themselves with others. Unlike a hermit who aims to lose its ego, a solo dweller finds advantage in solitude in order to customize everything for the ego. Solitude here does not immediately mean loneliness, since great cities are vibrant with intriguing individuals to meet. A hermit can offer help in a village while a solo dweller catches up with friends downtown, but the underlying difference is how the decisions are taken – the first being accidental and the latter organised.

The possibility to switch on and off, to busy and to offline or even to invisible only reinforces one's ego and increases the highly individually curated self where unwanted topics can be simply avoided. Modern social media has offered us the best means to curate our self-image. The actions taken are increasingly in the centre of personal commitment. Our personal knowledge, visual perception, valuable information and quite often not that valuable information are continuously shared through a neatly personalised filter. In a similar but extreme manner it can be thought that the very act of sharing has also become the means to represent a personal image and not the actual content of the shared information. Sharing becomes the victim of objectification. While it still remains the medium that binds the society, it is less accidental and more personalised.

Furthermore gratitude or feedback is expected from the contributor's followers, regardless if the real content was even received. The anxious state of waiting for people to like or to respond only raises self-awareness and personal identity.

It can be therefore critically considered what is shared around us. Was this story just worth sharing? It might be that the increasing amount of urban solo dwellers that live their seemingly customised dream lives, appear to be more like curated hermits that only want to tell their stories. The underlying questions still remain if we were supposed to read them at all. Although these stories can be imagined, talked about and gossiped about, it should be considered if this was actually for sharing or was it for self promotion.

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