

# Privacy

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I want to write a little bit about privacy, but not in the way it's usually discussed.

Broadly speaking, privacy is the right to be let alone, to be free from interference or intrusion. In America, privacy commands a certain mythic reverence, largely because of our historical obsession with individual freedom. What privacy has meant for most Americans, however, is more an idea than a reality. Of course, the America of the past hundred or so years has paid precious little heed to actual privacy. We still prattle on about individual freedom, but it's little more than a sham, a pretense. As the decades from the mid-20th century have passed, our lives have been less and less our own.

Part of this is due to the juggernaut of economics. The relentless growth of commerce in America has invaded every nook and cranny of our social lives. Advertising assaults our senses all day every day, and the steadily increasing sophistication of techniques in advertising to penetrate our lives, invade our consciousness, and shape both consent and desire among us have proven so powerful as to be damned near irresistible.

America was once an industrial nation. But no more. Our interest in making tangible things has been outstripped by the commodification of information. The Big Money is no longer in literal mining and manufacturing, but the buying and selling of information — data mining. Oh sure, we still pillage the natural environment, and we continue to build stuff, but we let other countries make most of the equipment to do it. They provide the means and muscle, and we supervise.

Meanwhile, the information we mine comes from constant, continual, around-the-clock surveillance of every person in the American population. Government and business track with technology as many of our behaviors as they can — where we go and what we do, who we watch and everything we buy. The Deep State watches and records everything it can.

But that's not what I want to write about. Instead, I want to discuss a more inviolate privacy that is uninteresting to government or business, in part because there's no money in it, and in part because we don't even have a language for it.

The privacy I'm talking about is the suffering that almost everyone experiences in their lives. I'd prefer to say everyone *without exception*, because I'm pretty sure that no one is immune from the suffering that comes inevitably from selfhood in bodies, but I don't actually know everyone, so I'll use the vague qualifier "almost." Over my lifetime, though, I have yet to meet anyone who hasn't experienced individual and personal suffering. Maybe someone exists who is exempt from suffering, but my world contains no one like that.

And here's the thing: The great bulk of suffering that human beings undergo is utterly and completely private. We go through it alone.

Much of the suffering earth's living creatures experience is physical and takes the form of pain. Pain arises in the nervous system as an unpleasant sensation that can take many forms: sharp, dull, throbbing, pinching, stinging, burning, or sore. It can be consistent or sporadic, regular or random, chronic or acute. It can come in rhythmic waves or lightning bolts. Pain can be mild or intense, a minor irritant or completely debilitating. It may be the simple and direct result of illness, injury, or breakdown in the body, but it also functions as a signal, like radar or a warning siren, that something is wrong. Pain gets our attention.

But suffering goes beyond mere physical pain to include mental, emotional, psychological, and even spiritual distress. These non-physical forms of suffering can be provoked by pain, but they may arise without the trigger of bodily illness, injury, or breakdown. Disappointment, disillusionment, loss, and grief are among many possible doorways into deeper suffering.

In whatever form suffering takes, though, it tends to be private — individual, isolated, and obscured. Our suffering is either partially or completely invisible. Others may see that we are in pain, discomfort, or distress, but they do not experience the actual suffering, merely the evidence at the surface that it exists within. More often than that, however, no one even knows that we are suffering. Like it or not, we suffer alone.

Some people regard suffering as infectious. Like sick elephants that leave the herd, they may isolate socially, in self-quarantine, to reduce the odds of infecting others. Equally common, though, and perhaps even more frequent, is the selfish motive to hide our suffering from prying eyes in an attempt to maintain face and prevent possible social ostracism.

But what if we wish to break out of our private prisons of suffering to share with others what we're experiencing? Even that is mostly impossible. Despite attempts by the institution of medicine to codify categories of pain and similar efforts by institutional psychology to define less physical forms of suffering, we still do not possess a common, easily learned and understood language with which to communicate either experience. Many kinds of pain defy description. Verbal translation is altogether inadequate to the task. In addition, both physical and non-physical suffering are sometimes so enervating and psychologically exhausting that no attempt to share the experience is even possible. We sink

into the abyss, even if we continue to function in ordinary tasks. Many people soldier on in their lives for years as hollow shells of their authentic selves.

Pain and suffering tend to remain a huge wilderness. It is not entirely unexplored, since billions of people spend so much time there, but the territory remains mostly unmapped. As individuals, we typically find ourselves in this realm of suffering in very specific and highly custom-tailored ways.

Everyone has a long list of vulnerabilities. Some are nearly universal — the common cold, for instance. Others are relatively rare. Each of us discovers certain forms of pain and suffering near the top of our lists. For one person, that might be migraine headaches. For another, it could be eczema, allergies, or muscular dystrophy. My own personal list of private maladies increased ten-fold after a serious stroke. Pain I knew nothing about over my first 60 years and couldn't have imagined was suddenly my constant companion, and in many different forms. Even experiences as common as indigestion or dental pain may become nightmarishly private hells when they strike. Any of us can be transported into the wilderness of suffering at a moment's notice.

No one gets through life without damage. It may be with us at birth, or it may enter our lives later, but everyone gets an allotment, and some people get more than others. For you this might take the form of mainly physical pain, while for me it could be more psychological suffering, but both categories of distress remove us from others and make us either feel or literally be isolated and invisible. What you suffer may not be the same as what I suffer in terms of originating causes and/or symptoms, but we both have been exiled to our own wilderness of individual suffering, like Napoleon being banished to the island of Elba. We are alone, imprisoned on our private islands of purgatory.

What I wonder is whether this almost universal condition among humans is producing side effects that we've failed to factor into our understanding of civilization and the challenges of living together.

Stated simply, the question I'm chewing on is this: *Does the debilitating isolation of prolonged suffering make people even crazier than they would otherwise be?*

I think the answer is yes.