

# Reflections on Citizenship while Staying at Home

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*If social distancing is unnatural, can it still help us become better citizens and more fully human? Yes, indeed, if citizenship demands solitude and the observance of law, as much as it might involve individual initiative and coordinated social action. Catherine E. Wilson, Ph.D, is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Administration at Villanova University.*

Social distancing is not a natural human state. Great comfort is not typically found in exclusion and isolation from others, especially when it is practiced on a global scale. However, this time away from concerts, sports, and social gatherings has provided us with deeper insight into the meaning and purpose of citizenship. This may sound counterintuitive. How can we deepen our appreciation of citizenship while we sit by idly at home? How can sitting on the sidelines cause us to better appreciate those on the frontlines? We must admit that we are not simply sitting on the sidelines. Even though work and schools may have temporarily closed, many of us are working from home – but not everyone. We must not forget essential workers who have remained at their posts. And we must not overlook those workers who have lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Regardless of our employment situations, one thing we have in common is that all of us are responsible for the health and wellbeing of others, whether family, friends, coworkers, students, customers, clients, and patients. Also, we must realize just how much more vigilant we should be for those who are among the most vulnerable – the elderly and others with underlying health conditions.

We need a general definition of citizenship. James Wilson, Founding Father and Pennsylvania delegate to the Constitutional Convention, wrote in his 1791 essay, “Of Citizens and Aliens,” that a citizen plays a role both in ruling and being ruled.<sup>1</sup> Wilson emphasizes that the primary duty of citizenship is “obedience to the laws and to the administration of the laws” (p. 1039). And for Wilson this obedience ultimately enhances rather than diminishes the safety, freedom, dignity, and self-government of citizens (p. 1041).

It is now Day 64 of my confinement to home. For me, staying at home began 10 days before Governor Tom Wolf’s stay-at-home order for all Pennsylvanians on

March 23. I was exposed from afar at a large family function to someone who tested positive, and I had to begin self-quarantine on March 13. As someone who once found solitude as a voluntary and welcome escape, I must admit that staying at home has caused me to be somewhat restless. It’s curious how the human mind works – when we are required to refrain from doing something (even for a brief period of time), we end up desiring to do that very thing.

I often find myself wanting to join those on the frontlines. I have been inspired by those dedicating themselves to keeping the American people safe and healthy during this unprecedented time. I am proud to say that some of these individuals are students, alumni, staff, administrators, and fellow faculty members. Ironically, sitting tight is precisely where some of us have needed to be. For it is in this solitude that we can deepen our understanding about the practice of American citizenship.

Throughout our history, citizenship has been characterized both by individual rights and responsibilities. It is true, however, that in recent years we have tended to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter. Responsibilities (and the individual sacrifices required by these responsibilities) typically involve action, whether in response to wartime, natural disasters, election calendars, and even jury duty, rather than solitude.

The demonstration of individual responsibility can also be a very local phenomenon. We have witnessed this in abundance as adult children sacrifice for their elderly parents and parents sacrifice for their children to protect them from the coronavirus. And let’s not forget to mention the extraordinary efforts of so many dedicated health care workers, township managers, state National Guards, nonprofit leaders, and corporate response teams throughout the country.

While responsibility (especially at the local level) is an undervalued characteristic of American citizenship, so too is the importance of solitude. But solitude is making something of a comeback with the

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<sup>1</sup> James Wilson, *Collected Works of James Wilson*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007): <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/wilson-collected-works-of-james-wilson-vol-2>

rapid spread of meditation and mindfulness practices in workplaces. Even though many of us are becoming more understanding of the need for these practices, we continue to dislike when we are required to enter into solitude. Instead, we believe that solitude should be an individual choice – a respite from a hectic week of work or long day with the family.

Perhaps this is because solitude – and the reflective time that is associated with it – is an elusive thing. William Penn, the founder of the colony of Pennsylvania and a Quaker, was well-acquainted with solitude after being imprisoned multiple times for religious dissent in England, including eight months in the Tower of London. He wrote in his late 17<sup>th</sup> century work, *Some Fruits of Solitude* “there is nothing of which we are apt to be so lavish as of time, and about which we ought to be more solicitous; since without it we can do nothing in this world. Time is what we want most, but what, alas! we use worst.”<sup>2</sup>

But what if solitude is also a responsibility and key ingredient of citizenship? In *Lead Yourself First* (2017), Raymond Kethledge and Michael Erwin contend that “personal leadership – leading oneself – is the foundation of leading others. And personal leadership comes through solitude.” (p. xiii).<sup>3</sup> The authors underline that solitude demands awareness, discipline, and moral courage (p. xxi). Kethledge and Erwin note that “leadership solitude” is “productive solitude.” In other words, they argue that solitude is not a passive but an active process as it allows for time for insight and synthesis which can result in conviction (p. xix).

During this pandemic, leaders and citizens from across the world have learned that solitude is not simply a right, but more importantly, a responsibility. This experience has demonstrated that solitude is our civic duty as we strive to protect the safety and wellbeing of others.

As the country and a large part of the world is advised to continue social distancing protocols, let us take this view of productive solitude to heart. Let us allow this time of solitude to strengthen us to practice citizenship with all its rights and its responsibilities. While definitely not anticipated or pleasantly welcomed, this global time-out may afford us the opportunity to appreciate more fully the duty of citizenship as we witness the range of lifesaving efforts taking place every day.

I just might find when the stay-at-home orders are lifted in Pennsylvania that I agree with William Penn that solitude “is a school few care to learn in, tho’ none instructs us better.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Penn, *Some Fruits of Solitude In Reflections And Maxims*, 1682, Preface. Internet Modern History Sourcebook: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1682penn-solitude.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin, *Lead Yourself First: Inspiring Leadership through Solitude*, (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> William Penn, *Some Fruits of Solitude*, Preface: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1682penn-solitude.asp>