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VARIETY PACK

Episode 21: Alone Pack

Host: You are listening to the Slack Variety Pack, brought to you by Slack. All kinds of people on all kinds of teams use Slack to do amazing things.

Host: Welcome to Episode 21 of the Slack Variety Pack. It's probably the most famous Jazz quote out there, courtesy of the wonderful Miles Davis. It's not the notes you play, it's the space in between the notes that really matter. Apply that to work. Just like a jazz quintet, sometimes the best thing for a work team is when people stop to take a break, and that's what this episode is all about, carving out space for ourselves so that we can bring our best selves to our work and the people we work with. Disconnecting, so that when we reconnect we make our human connections stronger. Being alone isn't about being lonely. Aloneness is musical man.

First up, it's the middle of the workday. The usual office chaos is happening all around you. You are officially overwhelmed, and much like your poor smart phone, your internal battery is critically low. You need to recharge, but we have good news. You don't have to plug yourself into a power outlet. You just need to find yourself a box.

Reporter 1: Imagine walking around the office and then tripping over somebody who is lying on the floor, on their back, with a cardboard box over their head. No, your workmate isn't having a breakdown. Your workmate is going to the movies, on their break, alone, with only a box and their cellphone.

Female: You want some coffee?

Male: Yeah, thanks Hun.

Female: Someone could hide in here and never be noticed.

Male: Someone did.

Female: I remember reading about a few in high school.

Mikito Tanimoto: It's really funny, this is for watching movie in personal space, and this is made of cardboard.

Reporter 1: Mikito Tanimoto is the creative director of Lucy Altered Design in the heart of Tokyo, and one of the designers of the simple, single occupant movie experience. This idea is called solo theater. Turns out, it started with a Tweet. A couple of years ago, people started popping up on Twitter, posting pictures of themselves lying down with boxes over their heads, watching movies from their phones wedged into the other side of the box. Mikito tried it. He liked it, and he went one more step than the others did. They only took pictures. He got the patent.

Mikito Tanimoto: This has the hole in the top and then you put the smartphone there and you can see the movie in a small personal space.

Reporter 1: That's right, the solo theater is not much more than a simple brown cardboard box, except it has two holes, one for your head and on the opposite side, one for your cellphone. You strap your phone onto the hole and that's your movie screen. Then you put your head in the other hole. Pop in your headphones, throw on a film, and voila, you're suddenly in a dark movie theater, watching your own private screen, cut off from work and people.

Mikito Tanimoto: I want you to try it.

Reporter 1: I will, I will try it.

Mikito Tanimoto: All right, yeah, you can make it.

Reporter 1: Got the box on my head. I'm lying on my back in the boardroom, the box is going over my face. I'm going to put my smartphone on top of the hole, plug in my headphones. Mikito's pro version of the solo theater has a couple more do-dads than your average box. It's easily collapsible, has air holes, and even offers rows of little cardboard cut out heads, in case you want to sit inside a full theater. My box is from the grocery store and smells like rotten fruit, but I get the idea.

It's perfectly dark, looks like I'm in a theater. The one thing that I do notice is there's nobody around me chewing popcorn or gum and this is actually quite peaceful.

If you think about it, the box is an easy escape from the constant noise of the outside world, of social media, of the workmates that surround me. It's cardboard therapy.

Mary White: Solitude is a highly valued thing, sometimes hard to find of course, in people's busy, especially urban, lives.

Reporter 1: That's Mary White, author and professor of anthropology at Boston U, and a pro when it comes to offbeat Japanese culture.

Mary White: One business mind said, "Being private in public, what a luxury.

Mikito Tanimoto: Can I speak in Japanese.

Translator : Yes.

Reporter 1: This is Yuka. She's my server at my local sushi bar and doing me a big favor, translating today.

Translator : [Foreign language 00:05:23]When Japan is always connect with some people, coworkers, family, and they really want their own space, own time for themselves. You don't need to fight over the TV channel with your family or friend. You get your own space. You can enjoy your movie by yourself.

Reporter 1: In the notoriously crowded Japan, with household space shrinking, squished subway commutes, hectic offices, Mary White says it's only natural, that need for alone time, a private place, a safe place, a third place.

Mary White: In Japan, third spaces are often places to be private and to find relief from responsibilities that you have and the roles you are known by in other spaces. [inaudible 00:06:27] cafes, ways of going to a stall on the street to have your bowl of noodles, curtain behind you. There are a lot of places for semi-privacy I would say.

Reporter 1: The solo theater cost 3600 yen, around the price of two real movie tickets in Japan, and the guys at Lucy Altered Design are getting orders. Are you making money?

Mikito Tanimoto: No, not yet.

Reporter 1: In the nosiest era on earth, it's becoming more and more important to find solitude, and where I live may not be as cramped as Tokyo, but really, is putting a box over our head at work such a far out idea?

Mikito Tanimoto: Exactly. I think it's good for it.

Host: Slack, like work, but less workie. Channel change, the unplugged version. In this episode, we're talking about being alone, even when we're together. We have never been more connected than we are today, and we must love it, because sometimes it can be really hard to take a break and find some alone time. We asked you about the last time you unplugged from the digital world and what it was like.

Streeter 1: One time I was hiking and there's no service. That's for a couple of hours, so it's not even really that big of a thing.

Streeter 2: I usually feel pretty good, but after a couple of hours I feel disconnected and I need to go back and see how the world's going on and what's going on with people.

Streeter 3: You put a lot on it, on being able to communicate with people, and if you can't communicate with them, what do you do?

Streeter 4: There's that time I was on the bus and my phone died. I was pretty alone then. I feel like my heart probably skipped a beat and after that I was like realistically there's nothing wrong.

- Streeter 5: Once I left my phone at work, went home, and I felt anxious about my ability to connect with the people that I needed to connect with.
- Streeter 6: I do get sick of the social media all the time. People, sometimes we just want to be alone. I do that sometimes. I just sit alone, keep my phone aside. A lot more to life just than that.
- Streeter 7: I feel that if I turn it off then people won't know where I am. What's going to happen? What if my girlfriend needs to ask me where we're going to go for dinner tonight?
- Streeter 8: I actually felt more connected to my life and to my world when I wasn't on technology.
- Streeter 9: I'm not on any kind of social media. I didn't see the purpose in it, and it was just clogging up too much time.
- Streeter 10: I know a lot of people do that and they talk about it's really freeing. Personally, I'm just not about that. I might try it someday. I'm not against it. I just don't really see the need to do that.
- Reporter 2: Some of those people we talked to didn't like being away from their devices too long. Why? Have a listen. Silence, uncomfortable isn't it? Even a little bit scary. It's in our nature to be social and these days that instinct is on overdrive. Our next guest did a couple of experiments. For his last book, he decided to unplug for one month. For the book he's working on now, he went remote and off the grid. He learned that once you get beyond your connected comfort zone, silence truly can be golden.
- Our modern connected lives can be overwhelming. We need to make decisions, stay informed, and stay connected in order to get through our work day, but sometimes it can be too much and our productivity suffers. What if you just pulled the plug.
- Michael Harris: My name is Michael Harris. I am the author of *The End of Absence* and I'm working on my new book, which is called *Solitude*. I was one of those guys who had three computer screens open at all times and I was on digital overload.
- Reporter 2: Michael Harris knows what it's like to be consumed by connectivity. He reached a breaking point about five years ago.
- Michael Harris: There was a moment when somebody texted me, "Are you alive or what?" It had taken my five minutes to get back to them. I realized in that moment, looking at these glowing rectangles, that this wasn't really my life. It wasn't what I wanted to do with myself, and I spent my whole life responding to information, instead of creating something meaningful to me.

Reporter 2: Michael soon quit his job as a magazine editor and began writing *The End of Absence*.

Michael Harris: I put myself through an analog August. I went one month with no internet, no cellphone. I don't want to compare it to something like a heroin addiction, but there is an addictive or withdraw symptom thing that happens. When we get a text message, or when we get an email that feels ego boosting, there is that serotonin squish in your brain. To cut yourself off from that is really tricky at first.

Reporter 2: Weening himself from digital connection had other drawbacks. Michael lost writing gigs because editors couldn't reach him on email. He was behind on breaking news and the latest celebrity Twitter feuds.

Michael Harris: My boyfriend would come home from work and I would be like that golden Labrador who's been locked in the house all day and he's obsessively interested in you the moment you walk through the door, because I hadn't had any kind of social grooming while he was gone. I hadn't been texting and Facebooking or whatever.

Reporter 2: After his unplug month, Michael went from purged to a more balanced connectivity diet. Michael is currently working on another book called *Solitude*. It's an extension of *End of Absence*. This time though, being your best self means disconnecting, not just from our electronic devices, but from people. He kicked off the project by spending a week in a far away cabin.

Michael Harris: It was incredibly frightening the first night. It felt like being a little child being afraid of the dark to be alone in the woods and not be able to be in contact with anybody. Really, the whole experience reminded me how primal this need for connection really is.

Reporter 2: Michael realized his self imposed restrictions, in people and the digital, have solid benefits. It's enriched his work life, because it's enhanced his creativity and productivity. The same benefits can happen to people who work together. Sometimes to get the best results, you need to take a break from the team.

Michael Harris: I think that you can't have a really big idea at a conference table. You can not have an intense creative moments while talking to other people. You do need to go out into the world and see what they think about things. You do need conversations. You do need to talk to people, then you need to retreat after that. Real thought, I think, requires a dynamic between conversation and solitude. You go out into the field and then you retreat to your tower, back and forth and back and forth. It's in that dynamic of sharing, but then also protecting your thoughts, that's where really interesting things emerge.

Reporter 2: You don't need to go to a remote cabin to try all this. Turn off your phone. Take a walk. Meditate.

Michael Harris: When you develop a rich interior life, when you become okay with being alone, you are more likely to have fresh ideas. You are more likely to be self aware, and you are more likely to actually feel connected to other people.

Host: Slack, work, life, balance. Channel change, world wide web. You're listening to the Slack Variety Pack. On this episode we're exploring being alone during the most socially active time in history. The majority of our social activity happens online. We post a status update. We upload a video, some photos, then we get comments, re-tweets, likes, typical interactions, right? Maybe we shouldn't take that thumbs up emoji for granted.

Reporter 3: There's a part of the web that most of us never visit. Up until recently, I didn't even know that it existed. It's called the lonely web. The thing about the lonely web is that it is huge and very very lonely. Consider that every single minute, hundreds of hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. Every day Facebook users share 350 million photos. Spotify has 20 million songs. There's just so much stuff, but in the highly filtered algorithmically curated world of social media, a lot of that stuff just never gets seen.

Joe Veix: There's too much information on those platforms to see everything that's getting posted, so all of that content that disappears is something I would call the lonely web. It's there, it's just hard to get to.

Reporter 3: This is Joe Veix. He's a writer and artist in Oakland, and he first started surfing the lonely web as a way to escape all the viral sensations in his social media feeds. He loaded up a random number generator and started to search for videos that very few, or in some cases zero people, have ever seen. Like this YouTube video titled 1007751.

YouTube 1: Hello and this is my first video, live. I traded a bicycle I never used for a video camera.

Reporter 3: Or this one, called IMG3972211. It's four seconds long.

YouTube 2: And that's how you make brownies.

Reporter 3: That's it. That's the whole video.

Joe Veix: Karaoke videos are also really good.

YouTube 3: I guess mine is not the first heart broken.

Joe Veix: It seems like they're not meant to be watched by anyone, even the people who have uploaded them. It's not really clear why they posted it to begin with. It's just them singing a song.

YouTube 3: There's just no getting over you.

Reporter 3: The lonely web isn't just videos. Joe says it also includes:

Joe Veix: Facebook posts nobody likes, Twitter accounts with no followers that just keep tweeting change.org petitions, that no one will ever sign.

Reporter 3: Some of this stuff is funny and strange, but it can also seem a little sad. Joe says a lot of the things on the lonely web never get seen because they don't play by the rules. This stuff is, for lack of a better word, really weird.

Joe Veix: They're not using the formal social media structure for a headline, or they're not the appropriate length, or there's no real narrative structure to the thing. They just float in this experimental area.

Reporter 3: Other videos act as time capsules, like this one, another of Joe's examples.

YouTube 5: Y-I ...Can't spell.

Reporter 3: It's a video called Terry's Real World Audition Tape, and that's exactly what it is, an audition tape by a guy named Terry, for the reality TV show, The Real World. It was shot on a camcorder, and when you watch it in YouTube's 16x9 window, the black bars down both sides let you know that it's dated.

Joe Cullen: Uh, 1995.

Reporter 3: This is another Joe, Joe Cullen. He's the one who uploaded Terry's Real World audition video, because back in 1995-

Joe Cullen: I was the friend that had a video camera. It wasn't super planned. We were just three teenagers hanging out on the weekends, having a few beers, and why don't we make a Real World video audition.

Reporter 3: I asked Joe if he thought his upload was part of this weird unfiltered lonely web.

Joe Cullen: I can see why somebody might react to it that way, because it was an awful video.

Reporter 3: Joe uploaded the video to share a bit of his past with his friends and family and anybody who happened to be searching for some Real World nostalgia. It was never intended to go viral, and it probably never will, but sometimes, parts of the lonely web do crossover and become insanely popular, like the dress. Remember the dress, that photo of a dress that was either white and gold or black and blue, depending on who you asked?

Ellen Degeneres: Last week a picture of a dress was posted on Tumblr. Millions of people from all over the world saw it, and now it's being called the dress that broke the internet.

Reporter 3: For awhile the dress was everywhere, but here's the thing. When it was first posted, that photo spent weeks in relative obscurity, living on the lonely web. When it was first posted on Facebook-

Joe Veix: Only like 20 people liked it at most.

Reporter 3: It wasn't until the dress was reposted on Tumbler and then again on Buzzfeed that the dress became "the dress".

Joe Veix: This viral sensation started as this tiny tiny Facebook post that almost no one saw.

Reporter 3: It makes you wonder what other mega hits are out there just waiting to be discovered. The good news is that the lonely web is pretty easy to explore once you know how. One of Joe's favorite techniques involves searching YouTube for random numbers. Yep, using a random number generator and then searching for whatever it comes up with.

Joe Veix: You'll reliably just get weird videos. You'll find videos that are just names like the default file name from the digital camera, like IMG2272. It's almost like you're an internet wizard. You can think of any combination of words and then search them and make that thing exist.

Reporter 3: Harry Potter waffles.

YouTube 4: I tweeted earlier that I was going to be on the couch all day watching Harry Potter and eating waffles.

Reporter 3: Canoe 8546.

YouTube 5: 8546

Reporter 3: This is what makes the lonely web so appealing and so lonely. It's vast and expansive and it's raw.

Joe Veix: It's emotionally exhausting, because it feels like you're dropping into people's lives without them knowing and watching surveillance footage of them, and there's something particular about the style of the videos too. A lot of them aren't really performative. There candid in this way that a lot of content online just isn't anymore. Most of us are aware that we're performing on some level and can play a very media savvy character online, but these people are uploading videos that maybe they're not meant to be seen or they don't realize anyone will see them. Who knows? There just very quietly emotional.

Reporter 3: In a world of glossy highly curated social media and videos that are engineered to go viral, it can be comforting to know that underneath it all there's a weird

unfiltered ocean of stuff that almost nobody sees. It might be lonely, but it looks a lot more like the real world.

YouTube 5: Overall, I'm a nice responsible kid and I'm fun to live with, and I want to get the hell out of my house. Okay. Please.

Host: Slack Variety Pack, tweet us @SlackHQ. Channel change, team of one channel. Our next guess works in Yellowstone National Park. For a few months each year, he works with his team, but for most of the year, he's left alone, snowed in, isolated. Some would say he has the loneliest job in the world, but he couldn't be happier. With the job title of Winter Keeper, it could be the coolest alone job out there.

Steven Fuller: I am Steven Fuller. I am 69 years old. I have lived and worked in the center of Yellowstone National Park at Canyon Village for 42 winters now. I was hired as the Canyon Winter Keeper. A winter keeper is basically a caretaker. There have been winter keepers in Yellowstone Park since the 1880s.

When my wife and I arrived at Canyon, when I'd just been hired as the canyon winter keeper ... By the way, I was the only applicant for the job, which was the only reason I got the job. We arrived the first of October long ago, 1973.

I work my team to maintain the summer visitor facilities here at Canyon, but my team all evaporates by the end of October or early November. They all go on to other jobs in other places, and I'm the only one left here at Canyon. I don't have a team, other than my cats, the buffalo, grizzlies. We get several hundred inches of snow every winter, and the winter keeper's primary job is to remove the snow from the roofs, so the buildings don't collapse.

I use a large cross cut saw and a coal scoop, shovel. I cut the snow into upright blocks, about the size of a large refrigerator and skid them off the roof. It's great being up on the roofs. There's nothing but big sky all overhead, the beautiful clouds of high altitude Yellowstone Plateau and frequently ravens circling overhead, talking to each other or talking to me.

When people ask me what I do in Yellowstone and I say, "I'm a winter keeper," or to be more clear to most people, I say I'm a caretaker. They always say, "Have you seen the shining?" I've not, for a variety of reasons, but I've always found the life here, the solitary life, very nurturing and not in the least fearful.

I've never had television here, in all the years that I lived here. I have a large eclectic library, sometimes I think the largest in northwestern Wyoming. I've always taken great pleasure in books and reading. It's a chance to be alone with oneself, sometimes my mind will work on questions, interesting things I've read, and other times, I have a blank mind, which is most enjoyable. Most of us are burdened with that interior monologue constantly and it's a chance to escape

that working up on the roofs. It becomes almost like a dance. It's an economy of motion, no wasted movements. It's a yoga discipline that quiets the mind.

Most of us live in constant noise and activity in congested places. The opportunity for quietude, for aloneness in both the physical and the spiritual sense, is a rare commodity.

Host: That's a wrap for episode 21, The Alone Pack. You might be wondering, why would Slack, a company that connects and empowers teams, tell all these stories about disconnecting and being alone? Teams work best when all the individual members are fully charged and engaged, but we can't be on all the time. Whether it's disconnected from the web, living in the remote wilderness, or putting your head in a box, don't forget to take time to recharge. Your introvert will thank you. For more information about this podcast, go to [Slack.com/variety pack](https://Slack.com/variety-pack). Subscribe to this podcast on iTunes or Stithcer. Thank you for listening.

Host: Slack variety pack. All kinds of teams use Slack to do amazing things.