For my birthday this year, I did the most self-indulgent thing I could imagine. A massage? A facial? Retail therapy? Nah -- that's so last year.

This year I got myself something I never allow myself to have: solitude.

All week long I sit in the beehive of the office, only to venture forth afterward to the larger beehive of San Francisco and buzzing of my friends. My mother hen role requires me to be present and up-to-date in so many lives that at times it feels I've lost track of my own.

But lately, I've felt a strong urge to take a break, to turn down the buzzing. Inverness called my name, and I answered. Four days of no phone, no e-mail, no TV. Only a radio for critical news updates and, of course, Giants games.

Several people stared at me blankly when I told them I was going alone, since for many people solo travel is about as appealing as -- and equivalent to -- standing on Market Street wearing a sandwich board that says: I'M SO LONELY.

Undaunted, though, I went. And was shocked at how good it felt to not talk to anyone for hours. To sit outside and drink tea and read. To take naps whenever I felt like it and eat cookies if I wanted to. To revel in not having to consult a boyfriend about one damn thing.

I discovered my inner loner.

To bolster myself in the experience, I took along the book "Party of One: The Loners' Manifesto" to read. Written by East Bay author Anneli Rufus ("California Babylon"), it's a powerful argument for the virtues of solitude, and against the notion that alone equals lonely.

I took it with me when I went to restaurants in Point Reyes to eat my solo meals -- and chuckled at the passages about eating solo meals.

"I have a friend who ate alone in a restaurant on Thanksgiving," said Rufus a week later, over coffee in a
Financial District cafe. "She was approached by management and offered a job! Like she was perhaps destitute."

She laughs. "Most people just don't get that about loners -- that we prefer being alone. But then most people are terrified of ending up that way, so they project that we must be miserable."

The book covers everything about the culture of loner-dom -- from loners in popular culture to solo travel. But I was mostly intrigued with the notion of loners in love. Loners are only human, and therefore in need of emotional nurturance and sex. But is it harder for them to come by?

Most definitely, says Rufus, who lives in Berkeley with her husband ("also a loner") of many years. "We are much less likely to date," she says. "Since we don't like frequenting crowded places like bars."

For that reason, the Internet has proven to be a godsend for loners. "It's much more comfortable to sit at your computer and feel comfortable than it is to feel that way in the outside world," she says. "Besides, I think there is something tender and beautiful in writing who you are, rather than saying it."

For many people, she says, loners make great companions. "Especially for people who don't want a mate who is clingy and needy," she laughs. "Also, loners tend to not date until it feels really right, so they don't give themselves away to just anyone."

And, she stresses, loners' ideal companions are other loners. "I think we just understand each other better; we don't feel like we need to fix that part of each other."

"And anyway, finding a mate is often just finding a similar idea of fun. Do you want to join the mob at Burning Man or do you want to walk on an empty beach at 2 a.m.?

She says that if you hook up with a non-loner, "Eventually you'll have the fight about how you never want to go play Pictionary with your neighbors."

There's nothing self-canceling about the idea of a relationship between two loners, says Rufus. She and her husband have it down to a science.

"We're both writers and need solitude, but we both work from home. But it works out because I am an early-morning person and he is a late sleeper and up sometimes until 3 or 4 a.m."

Like partners in any relationship, loners who need a lot of space need to constantly, lovingly, renegotiate. But they should be used to that, says Rufus. The world is not always kind to people with that kind of hard wiring.

Rufus suggests in "Party of One" that American culture, which once viewed loners as worthy iconoclasts, has come to fear them in recent decades. Consider that the country was founded by a ragtag group of rebellious intellectuals, for example. And the West was settled by rugged individualists for whom even a small city proved suffocating.

The earliest film and comic book heroes -- Batman, Tarzan, the Lone Ranger -- were all loners. As were Dirty Harry (and pretty much every other role played by Clint Eastwood), Mad Max, Xena the Warrior Princess, Caine in "Kung Fu."

She notes that rock musicians were almost expected to be loners, and the best-known were: Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Joni Mitchell, Kurt Cobain.

But somewhere, the winds turned against the loner, at least as a film character. And we got scary lunatics and freaks in films like "Psycho," "Taxi Driver," "One Hour Photo" and "Willard."

"The world has gotten much more tolerant of other races and creeds," says Rufus with a sigh. "But the one last type of person to earn that tolerance is the loner, the solitary figure."

In that sense, her "Loners' Manifesto" is almost a self-help book. "Right, I wrote this book so that other people like me can feel better about who they are. We're good people."E-mail Jane Ganahl at jganahl@sfchronicle.com.

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