

“Solitude and Loneliness”

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It’s one of my favourite *Peanuts* cartoons of all time.

Young Lucy is sitting in her small wooden booth with a sign that reads: “Psychiatrist, five cents.”

Charlie Brown walks up and asks Lucy: “Can you cure loneliness?”

Self-assured, she answers: “I can cure anything.”

Charlie Brown then says:
“[But,] Can you cure deep-down,
bottom-of-the-well, [dark]-forever loneliness?”

And, Lucy responds: “[You mean] all for the same nickel?”

. . . Charlie Brown was certainly expecting a lot for his five cents.

Loneliness of the sort he described—
that deep-down, bottom-of-the-well variety—
is, indeed, hard to bear and often harder to overcome.

Yet, such loneliness—
loneliness that makes us feel like we’re staring into life’s deepest void—
is so very common to our times.

A few years ago, Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker* offered something of a snapshot of our situation, telling the story of his daughter, an only child, who had recently made for herself an imaginary friend.

As my colleague Rob Hardies explains the story, “this little girl’s imaginary friend was different from all previous imaginary friends in one significant respect.”¹

¹ As told by Rob Hardies in his excellent sermon “From Loneliness to Solitude,” All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2003.

And this is what so concerned her father:
that his daughter had created an imaginary friend
who was “always too busy to play with her.”

As he tells it, “the little girl open[ed] her imaginary cell phone
and, imitating her parents clipped New York speech,
bark[ed] into the phone,
‘meet me at Starbucks in 25 minutes.’”

“Nervously, the girl’s parents watch[ed] to see, if this time,
the friend would make good on the play date.”

“After a long pause, the mother gingerly asked,
‘What did your friend say, sweetie?’

[And then,] unperturbed, the [little] girl replied,
“He already had an appointment.”

I’m not quite sure what to make of this story.

On one hand, it seems the little girl had done an amazing job
of normalizing the difficulty of making human connections,
but I worry for our future
if our children can’t even find imaginary friends that are free to come out and play.
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Across the years, when I’ve invited your ideas for future sermon topics,
living with loneliness has often been at or near the top of the list,
along with concerns about aging, and death and dying,

Each of these concerns begs fundamental,
existential questions about the human condition,
questions that get right to the heart of what it means to be alive,
and what it means to be, oh, so very mortal.

This morning, I’m taking up once again the topic of loneliness.

Though I’m sorry to report I can’t do much
to reverse the effects of aging or death,
I do believe I actually may have at least a nickel cure for loneliness.

And I’m motivated to share it with you this morning,

because I believe that part of the cure for its numbing pain is to be found within this community.

Yet, so often, loneliness is a pain that remains unspoken.

It's hard to admit to loneliness,
for fear that we'll come off as overly-needy,
which is something it seems our hectic world—
much like that little girl's overbooked playmate—has little patience for.

And, harder still is to share the real depths of despair loneliness can bring—the kind the poet Cindy Thompson gets at in her poem, "The Tree," when she asks:

Do you know
of loneliness
When the burden of apples is
so great, the branches split
And red drips into green grass.²

That's quite the image;
and it's quite the question: Do you know of loneliness?

Do you know the pain it brings?

Do you know its questions of self-doubt and worthiness?

The suspicion that we might be lonely for some well-deserved reason?

It's easy to internalize what has long been part of the human experience.

Whether we see it coming or not,
it's likely that loneliness has been or will be

our unwelcome companion somewhere along life's way.

Sometimes, it arrives with a shock when we head off to university,
or retire, find ourselves suddenly divorced,
or widowed long before our turn.

At other times, it creeps up on us,
as friends move away or pass away,

² Cindy Thompson, "The Tree," in *Cries of the Spirit*, ed. Marilyn Sewell. Beacon Press, 1991.

as a relationship slowly grows cold
or the world around us just no longer resembles
the shape of the life we once knew.

By design or by default,
wrestling with loneliness is a burden that weighs on most of us at some point.

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As we dig into this more deeply, it's important to point out
that loneliness and being alone are two very different things.

Whereas time alone is a state of being,
and is often intentional and a deeply-welcomed thing,
loneliness is a state of mind—
an emotional, and I would argue a spiritual, condition,
that we can find ourselves in,
regardless of whether we're completely alone,
surrounded by friends and family,
or lost in the crowd at the Eaton Centre or a sea of people at a Leafs game .

Loneliness isn't merely an immediate,
physical absence or lack of meaningful relationships,
but often more a qualitative loss of intimacy in our relationships
that can leave us feeling disconnected, isolated, and alone.

The difference, then, between solitude and loneliness,
depends on our outlook, and a deeper orientation.

As Judith Walker-Riggs puts it:

For every person stuck at home on Christmas Day,
with nothing but a box of Kleenex and a good book,
an orange and a mug of Cocoa,
weeping in their isolation,

there is another person [out there]

stuck in a mélange of mismatched family members,
bombarded by Uncle Thorvald's political opinions,
and Aunt Mildred's religious rantings,
and sister-in-law Sylvia's greasy corn[bread],
not to mention a group of high-pitched, excited children,
carelessly breaking whatever they can before bedtime,
[amid all of that, there is that other person out there]

who would give anything in the world to be alone,
with a good book, an orange, and a [nice, hot] mug of Cocoa.

So, have you ever had that feeling?
Of craving a bit less connection?
Yearning for solitude?

There's much to be said for solitude.
And for choosing solitude,
or at least making the best of it, or even the most of it,
when we find ourselves alone.

This means there is a choice to be made between loneliness and solitude.
And part of that choice is rooted in our perspective.

I, for one, would argue for embracing solitude for the gift it can be,
as would the Unitarian poet, May Sarton,
who wrote, in the first entry of her book, *Journal of a Solitude*:

September 15th

Begin here. It is raining.
I look out on the maple,
where a few leaves have turned yellow,
and listen to Punch, the parrot, talking to himself,
and to the rain ticking gently against the windows.

I am here alone for the first time in weeks,
to take up my "real" life again at last.

That's what is strange—
that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life,
unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover
what is happening or has happened.

Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening,
this life would become arid.

Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here
and 'the house and I resume old conversations...

The ambience here is order and beauty.

This is what frightens me when I am first alone again.

I feel inadequate.

I have made an open place, a place for meditation.

[But] what if I cannot find myself inside it?

I hope to break through into the rough, rocky depths,
to the matrix itself.

There is violence there and anger never resolved.

And, my need to be alone is balanced against my fear
of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge, empty, silence...

That sometimes daunting silence can be found
only through the doorway of solitude.

It is a door that has been spoken of by many of the world's great religions:
it is the door Moses took when he climbed the heights of Mt. Sinai,
it is the door the Buddha took when he retreated to the forest,
and it is the door Jesus took when he went into the desert for 40 days.

It is a door open to us in solitude,
if we will but enter through its portal.

In the deep silence of solitude,
in true and quiet contemplation,
we may begin to find or rediscover the truth of our lives,
we may uncover old hurts and neglected dreams,
and we may even connect with that most central core of ourselves
that gives us the courage to live more fully
into our lives and our relationships.

That's why solitude can be something we try to keep at bay.

Sometimes we're just not able
to enter into that kind of space with and within ourselves.

And sometimes, while we're more than capable, we're not ready,
and may find that we're doing whatever we can to drive ourselves to distraction.

It's not unlike the challenges that many of us encounter when we try to meditate.

As we contend with what's so aptly called monkey-mind.

Susan Browne gets at this in her wonderfully poignant poem, "Buddha's Dogs," which I've shared with you more than once:

I'm at a day-long meditation retreat, eight hours of watching
my mind with my mind,
and I already fell asleep twice and nearly fell out of my chair,
and it's not even noon yet.

In the morning session, I learned to count my thoughts, ten in
on minute, and the longest
was to leave and go to San Anselmo and shop, then find an outdoor cafe
and order a glass

of Sancerre, smoked trout with roasted potatoes and baby
carrots and a bowl of gazpacho.
But I stayed and learned to name my thoughts, so far they are:
wanting, wanting, wanting,

wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, judgment,
sadness. *Don't identify with your
thoughts*, the teacher says, *you are not your personality, not your
ego-identification*,

then he bangs the gong for lunch. Whoever, whatever I am is
given instruction
in the walking meditation and the eating meditation and walks
outside with the other

meditators, and we wobble across the lake like *The Night of the
Living Dead*.

I meditate slowly, falling over a few times because I kept my
foot in the air too long,

towards a bench, sit slowly down, and slowly eat my sandwich,
noticing the bread,
(sourdough), noticing the taste, (tuna, sourdough), noticing
the smell, (sourdough, tuna),

thanking the sourdough, the tuna, the ocean, the boat, the
fisherman, the field, the grain,
the farmer, the Saran Wrap that kept this food fresh for this
body made of food and desire

and the hope of getting through the rest of this day without
dying of boredom.
Sun then cloud then sun. I notice a maple leaf on my sandwich.
It seems awfully large.

Slowly brushing it away, I feel so sad I can hardly stand it, so I
name my thoughts; they are:
sadness about my mother, judgment about my father, wanting
the child I never had.

I notice I've been chasing the same thoughts like dogs around
the same park most of my life,
notice the leaf tumbling gold to the grass. The gong sounds,
and back in the hall.

I decide to try lying down meditation, and let myself sleep. The
Buddha in my dream is me,
surrounded by dogs wagging their tails, licking my hands.
I wake up

for the forgiveness meditation, the teacher saying, *never put
anyone out of your heart*,
and the heart opens and knows it won't last and will have to
open again and again,

chasing those dogs around and around in the sun then cloud
then sun.

It is not always easy to be alone with our thoughts.
We're not always our own best company.

But when we can—and if we can—
there is often healing to be found there,
as well as the sacred work of an examined life.

In solitude, we may deepen our relationship with the spirit or force of life,
as well as with ourself, the one and only companion
who travels with us throughout our entire life.

There is, then, in befriending solitude,
a bit of a cure to be found for loneliness.

And if one cure to loneliness is to be found in nurturing our inner life,
stretching our roots deep into the soil of our own being,
another cure for loneliness is surely to be found in reaching beyond ourselves,
in branching outwards to engage with the life that is all around us.

The central feeling of loneliness is, I believe,
a deep yearning for genuine connection,
and I believe we can find that connection
by opening our lives to music and art,
to dogs, and cats, and guinea pigs,
to the quietude and rugged splendour of the natural world,
to perfect strangers and our partners of many years,
and I believe we can find that connection
in deepening our relationships with those around us,
including with those here within this community.

When I've heard many of you speak to
loneliness being a central concern in your lives,
I'll confess, the matchmaker in me
wants to plan a big dinner party
so that I can get you all together.

Truth is, though, that this community is that big dinner party.

I realize in saying that that it's not quite that easy.

Connections are still sometimes hard to make.

There are lots of reasons we might not gel together in the ways we might hope.

But I believe in our determination to come together
that most of us come looking for connection.

So, my deep hope is that we open ourselves up
to the possibility of making meaningful connections, here and beyond.

That we grow ever more intentional about reaching out to others,
that we risk sharing our hearts and our lives with those around us,
and that, ultimately, we "get real" about our lives,
sharing honestly with each other of our successes and our struggles.

For over a decade now, many of you have been experiencing
some part of this by participating in Journey Groups.

Others of you have experienced it through the choir, or in groups with other parents.

There is no shortage of ways to get to know other people around here.

This is important because multiple studies are showing that we are living through an epidemic of loneliness, with people feeling incredibly isolated from one another.

With people feeling they don't have a friend they could phone up in the middle of the night to ask for help in an emergency.

This is not good for us as a society.
And it is not good for us as individuals.

And all of this has only been made worse by the pandemic.

Isolation and loneliness are literally taking years off of people's lives.

So, we who covenant to "serve life"
need to strengthen the sacred ties of community,
both within this congregation and beyond,
nurturing the quality of our connections,
giving ourselves over to genuine engagement.

If not for ourselves and our own needs,
may we reach out for someone else's sake.

Because it may just save their life.

As a minister, I know that on any given Sunday,
my few words and the handshake or hug I give at the door
may well be the only loving touch
some people in this congregation have in their lives.

That breaks my heart a bit,
but it breaks it open
in the hope that a bigger love might abound for us all.

May this congregation be a people with hearts open wide,
to each other and to everyone.

While doing this will not spare us, at all times, from feeling lonely,
when loneliness does come,

may we recognise its deep yearning for connection as an abiding gift—
one that moves us to connect with ourselves and with each other
to build up the life-saving fabric of community.

So may it be.

Amen.