

## All the Lonely People

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A few weeks ago I was surprised and intrigued by the news that the British government had appointed a Minister of Loneliness. I did not see it, but apparently Steven Colbert made fun of this announcement on his late night show. Perhaps he thought it was odd that a people who pride themselves on having “a stiff upper lip and bearing it all in dignified silence” would be so attuned to this human predicament. Personally, I think what is odd about England is the traditional English breakfast. It’s odd and why they tolerate cold toast that comes to you at least 10 minutes before your beans ... I can’t even. But perhaps, I digress.

A recent study revealed that nine million Britons suffer from loneliness: fourteen per cent (14%) of the population. Among the more vulnerable populations the rates are much higher: In a survey of the well-being of disabled Britons, half reported feelings of loneliness at least once a day. More than a third of elderly people reported being overwhelmed by loneliness. Overwhelmed. Unlike toast and beans, loneliness is no laughing matter.

Even the Beatles (also very English) addressed loneliness. Somehow in the midst of their busy lives, they had the insight to compose and record a beautiful, touching, moving song about loneliness; “All the lonely people. Where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?” Not only is this song touching, it has become more and more relevant, both sociologically and theologically, not just in the UK, but in the US as well.

Our former UUA president, the Rev. Peter Morales, was also deeply concerned about loneliness. It was in part because of his passion that I read the book, *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the 21st Century*. Clearly people were lonely when the Beatles wrote “Eleanor Rigby,” but according to the most recent sociological research data, people are even lonelier now. A study by the general social survey group from Duke University found that between 1985 and 2004 the number of people with whom the average American discussed important matters dropped from 3 to 2. Even more stunning was the number of people who said there was no one with whom they discussed important matters. This number tripled. In 2004 individuals without a single confidant now made up nearly a quarter of those surveyed. Many, but not all, of the respondents lived alone. And speaking of living alone, almost one-third of our population lives alone -- although it is important to note that living alone and loneliness are not interchangeable.

A number of things contribute to loneliness, and the cost of loneliness is profound. Today we will explore both the things that contribute to loneliness and the cost of loneliness.

The first thing that contributes to loneliness is our unwillingness to name it. Many people seek out a doctor or a therapist and say that they are depressed. More and more people have become comfortable saying that they are depressed rather than that they are lonely. This has resulted in medicating for a depression that does not exist. One cannot medicate loneliness away, although there is a correlation between drug abuse and loneliness. Loneliness can be numbed by medication to treat depression, but not cured. And if one is not willing to admit that one is lonely, then one might not make the best decisions in how to live one's life. Sometimes even small decisions, small wrong decisions, can add up.

Here's a story about a guy named Josh. He was a regular guy who had a job that paid him well. He was lucky he lived in a town in which he had both relatives and acquaintances. But Josh was shy. Whenever his relatives or friends or acquaintances or coworkers invited him or tried to include him in a social gathering, he struggled. When Josh would receive an invitation, he would postpone replying. He was not sure he'd be in the mood for a gathering. By the time he finished ruminating about an invitation, it was usually too late (at least that's what Josh told himself) to RSVP. So he stayed home and tried to avoid thinking of those people in order not to feel guilty about his procrastination. To keep from thinking, he watched TV, checked his e-mail, and kept track of new bands that he liked online. Soon enough, Josh received fewer and fewer invitations. People felt like he was blowing them off, or that he was just too busy or that he just didn't like them.

Josh was lucky, like I said, and he had a job that still had decent benefits and he was able to go to therapy. He told his story, a story filled with disconnected, lonely weekends in which he slept too much, watched too much TV, and ended up disgusted with himself. During his conversation with the therapist, it became obvious that Josh's life was so empty because he didn't want anyone to know that he had so little to do and that he was lonely. He avoided social situations because he didn't want anyone to ask him what he was doing. His job was good enough, but it did not interest him. He felt self-conscious because it seemed like everybody else loved their job and worked 60 hours a week.

Occasionally, when people would inquire as to why he didn't come to a certain event, he would just say he was too busy. It seems like now, even if we are not too busy, being too busy has become a socially acceptable way to isolate ourselves, and this isolation has consequences.

There is another thing that contributed to his isolation. Like many people in his generation, he wanted to live an unconstrained life. He often found himself thinking, "I don't want to commit because I might not be in the mood at that time." He wanted to "keep his options open."

Many young people are clear that they don't want to live a life constrained by too many obligations, but deciding which obligations matter the most can leave them feeling indecisive and ambivalent. These feelings are directly related to feeling isolated and left out. And these feelings are important to pay attention to.

Often, we tend to treat socializing as if it were a frivolous diversion, rather than an activity that is essential to our well-being as individuals and as a community. There is a notion that time spent socializing for pleasure is not constructive and might be time wasted. Do you ever find yourself feeling that? Our busyness then becomes an acceptable excuse, "Oh it's too bad we've lost touch. That's just the way it is."

Another thing that contributes to loneliness is repeated periods of stepping back. Many of us have, or know people who have, really high stress demanding jobs where things come at them all day. They work at an intense rate, often more than eight hours a day, sometimes six days or more a week. Every now and then they will just switch off, or step back, or collapse, or take a timeout. We all kind of accept this as normal behavior. "Oh he's just too busy. She's taking some time off." But the danger with this is that it becomes the norm. Soon the periods of time that we don't see our friends or family becomes longer and longer. Then we often lose touch altogether. The result being, what was once a temporary disconnection becomes permanent.

An additional thing that contributes to our loneliness is the ever present American cultural myth of self-reliance expressed in the hero as the lone explorer, the outsider, the lone cowboy. Batman was lonely: Superman was lonely. Loneliness may be a founding element of our nation, as our founders and many of the immigrants who created this country are and have been the people who left. The people who left parents, children, relatives behind to come to this new world. This is an immense cause of loneliness -- systemic loneliness. This coupled with our hesitation to show weakness or ask for help really fosters loneliness.

Add to this, if you will, our sheer genius at devising houses and lives, routines and technologies to increase our isolation. When we spend so much money to create homes and lives that are so private, so individual, so isolated, we go against our biological nature. This has consequences to our health and well-being. This has consequences for our civil society, and for our planet. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the neurobiology of attachment and just plain common sense, human beings, both as a species and as individuals, survive only through attachment to one another. When things break our attachment or get in the way of our attachment to each other, we feel stress and our being is stressed. We, as physiological organisms, experience stress on an organic level. Our loneliness has physiological consequences and costs both spiritually and socially.

The first cost of loneliness is an increase in rigidity. People who spend a lot of time alone become set in their ways. They lose their ability to adapt and to make adjustments and to respond to conflicts and to seek compromises that are required when living with or relating to others. We spend a lot of time, attention, effort and money trying to "have it our way." This time, this energy, this money might be much better spent working for things that sustain and grow the common good and our collective sense of well-being. This work, this redirection of our attention, will offer us a much healthier, more satisfying, more connected life.

Another cost of loneliness is feeling left out. We have all felt left out. As children we may not have had people to sit with at lunch. During recess on the playground, we see others in small groups laughing, but we are alone. Later in life we hear or know that a party is happening, but we aren't invited. We may go to a lunch of coworkers or colleagues, and somehow it seems everyone is involved in a conversation, but somehow we are not. This feeling of being left out has consequences on our bodies and on how we make decisions.

Perhaps you have experienced being in love, or observed someone else being in love, and seeing the other person with what we call rose-colored glasses. No matter how hard you look at them, no matter how critically or closely you examine them, you can find no fault with them. They are the greatest; they rock! We also tend to do something similar to this when we join a group. We tend to observe, judge, analyze and interpret the actions of others that are in our group much more favorably than we do those who are in a different group. At the same time that this favorable feeling is going on, we are doing something else. We also - in part because of our evolutionary structure - engage in constant monitoring that includes being perpetually vigilant for the dangers that can arise within a group, including the possibilities of being outmaneuvered and left out. This happens in all groups and apparently, according to scientific data, we all do it.

As you know, we Unitarian Universalists are particularly fond of our six sources as we make religious meaning in our lives. Now turn to our cherished fifth source: the use of reason and the teachings of science. It turns out there is a neurobiology of attachment that involves two neuropeptides: oxytocin and vasopressin, which function as neurotransmitters. These two chemicals are only found in mammals. They help manage stress and are crucially involved in social bonding. Oxytocin, in particular, is released during positive social interactions and has a calming effect on both behavior and physiology.

When we feel left out, regardless of whether it's by people or groups that we care a great deal about, or people and groups that we care less about, we experience surprising disruptions in our physiological makeup. Social exclusion is being studied now in laboratories and yielding some surprising results. Here is what social scientists are now finding:

- Social exclusion, whether real or imagined, whether you are snubbed or feel like you have been snubbed, makes people more aggressive.
- Social exclusion causes self-defeating behavior.
- Social exclusion leads to a state of mind that avoids meaningful thought, emotion, and self-awareness. It is characterized by lethargy and altered time flow; feeling that time has slowed down and drags on.
- Social exclusion leads people to quit sooner on frustrating tasks.

All of these, when magnified on a grand scale, help explain so much of why we as a culture are the way we are and how unhelpful these traits are if we are to make

substantial progress toward developing the spiritual leadership we need to heal our planet and grow the common good.

We want it our way. We are rigid and know exactly what *our way* is. We are less and less inclined to compromise. As witnessed in our magnificent political conflict in the halls of Congress in Washington D.C., not to mention incidents of road rage, and mass shootings, we are increasingly aggressive and victims of aggressive behaviors.

As evidenced by our response to the continued and relentless damage to our planet, we as a society are engaged in a great deal of self-defeating behavior. And it is important for us to remember that when we feel lonely or isolated, our capacity for intelligent and creative thought is diminished and we tend to give up more easily, more readily, on complex frustrating tasks.

It turns out that attending to our loneliness and being compassionate towards others who are lonely and in need of connection has become crucial in this day and age of ours. We no longer face simple problems. All our issues as a society are complex and multifaceted, so if we give up too easily on the complex tasks that require our attention, where will we be?

As I understand this on a deeper level, I am no longer placing busyness next to godliness. I now view our attachment to busyness that prevents human companionship as dangerous to our souls and our planet -- which brings us back to our wonderful Church of the Desert. We say in our mission statement that, "we are a sanctuary for diversity, spiritual growth, and social justice." But if we are serious about facing the challenges of this mission we need to remember how important it is, how healthy it is to find meaningful ways to connect with each other, ways that release us from feelings of loneliness. When we feel connected and part of a group and supported by our church community, we will be able to engage with the complex tasks required to heal our planet.

We cannot be all things to all people, but we *do* do some things well. First and foremost, we are a caring community. I pause for a moment and I think about one year ago, star date February 2017. Let's head into the time machine for a moment. The congregation had been buffeted by many storms with conflict about finances, professional ministry, the sudden unexpected death of the settled minister, the sudden resignation of the interim minister and the sudden resignation of the board president. The bonds of affection and trust among the members and friends of this congregation were severely frayed. One year ago, I began my ministry with you and I could see right away, very clearly how much promise and potential for growth and health was present. And one year later, I can see how strong and beautiful you are and how much you care about this congregation.

This year I have seen us grow in financial stability. I have seen opportunities for collective spiritual development, leadership development, and pastoral care flourish. People have been enjoying the "Building Your Own Theology" class, the "Coming of

Sage” class, Girls Night Out, Men’s Breakfast, and connections made from the Auction dinners and service items.

We provide many, many ways for people to connect to each other and make friendships as they go about doing the work of the church. We create, support, foster and sustain many ways for people to connect with each other socially. We create many opportunities to lose our rigidity as well, because we do not come here to have it our way, we come to create and sustain something larger than ourselves, while tending to ourselves.

I am becoming more and more in tune with how important it is to be a caring community, to live with and for each other. It benefits our health, it benefits our civil society, it benefits the planet. Showing up, being counted, participating, loving and being loved, caring and being cared for, helping and being helped are a crucial part of who we are when we are at our best. And it turns out that once again the scientific and the spiritual perspectives complement each other and point to the same message: Caring and being cared for is crucial not just to our well being, not just to the healing of our somewhat uncivil society, but also to our planet. I am so glad we are together. Oh yes and don’t forget, our stewardship drive to support all this great stuff kicks off next week!

We need each other ... gloriously, radically, undeniably so. This is who we are and what we do. May we continue to offer this sense of connection and affirmation to each other and to our ever-widening community.

Blessed Be. Amen.

#### References

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