

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
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Is There A Cure for Loneliness?

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. For he who seeks finds, she who knocks has the door opened to her.” Jesus.

Halloween has just passed. Did you hear the joke about the lonely skeleton who went to the Halloween party?

Why was he lonely?

He had nobody to be with!

On January the 26th 2018 Theresa May of the United Kingdom added a new minister to her cabinet. **A Minister of Loneliness.**

At first people thought it was a joke but then the stats came out: nine million Britons suffer from loneliness or about 14% Of the population.

In the United States 46% of the population feel lonely and 47% feel left out. The study says that loneliness in the United States is at “epidemic levels.”

David Brooks of the New York Times writes about the latest Synagogue shooting in the US.

There is always a pile of bodies at these massacre sites. Whether it's at a synagogue, church, nightclub or school, there's always an assault weapon, or a bunch of them. There's always the survivors clutching each other, weeping in little clumps outside. And there's always one other thing.

A lonely man.

There's always one guy, who fell through the cracks of society, who lived a life of solitary disappointment and who one day decided to try to make a blood-drenched leap from insignificance to infamy.

There's always a guy like the Pittsburgh synagogue attacker Robert Bowers, who, according to Times reporting, was friendless in high school and a solitary ghost as an adult, who spent his evenings sitting in his car smoking, listening to the radio, and living, as one acquaintance put it, “in his own little world.”

Guys like that are drawn to extremist ideologies, which explain their disappointments and give them a sense that they are connected to something. Guys like that convince themselves that by massacring the innocents they are serving as a warrior in some righteous cause.

The stats in Canada reflect the same trends where 1 in 5 Canadians suffer from loneliness. People in Nursing homes and in their adolescent years suffer most.

It is a serious health issue as well: diabetes, heart- attacks and strokes, depression and suicide and early deaths from other challenges related to loneliness make up a rather grim array of statistics. More people die from loneliness than smoking.

I was thinking about what loneliness was about in 1961. I was on board a transatlantic liner bound for Britain. It was a beautiful star-studded night. I noticed on the after deck a tall beautiful girl who had just broken up with her boyfriend just before coming on board the ship. She looked utterly dejected and alone. The lights and sounds of the party below decks did not call to her to join the fun on the dance floor. She just looked back over the rail at the ship's wake. She said it was like her life. She could see it stretching out into the distance and oblivion. Nothing seemed to be of value any more. She could not bring herself to go to the front of the ship where the wind freshened, and the spray came from time to time, almost up to the deck...

In James Hillman's The Soul's Code he breaks loneliness down into several parts. He says, "When we look, or rather feel closely into the sense of loneliness, we find it composed of several elements: nostalgia, sadness, silence and a yearning for something not here not now."

1) Nostalgia comes from the Greek word nostros or a return to home. It means homesickness or a strong desire for family and friends. People who have left their native land for another world in a different country know what nostalgia is about. The reason I was shipboard in 1961 is because in 1953 I had come with my parents to Canada. At the beginning, when I said goodbye to family and friends in England, it all seemed like high adventure! But when we got to Canada, things were tough for us as a family.

Father was in a job that did not pay well; I got very sick with asthma and nearly died; I lost a year of school; I was costing my family big time in medical bills. So after awhile I began to miss England. It seemed like my childhood had been a paradise that had been shattered. But I could do nothing about it. I felt like I couldn't really talk about how I felt, to anybody.

Year after year. I felt this feeling building inside of me as a kind of loneliness.

And so, in 1961, the very first chance I could take, I returned to England alone. I can't tell you the thrill I experienced when I first saw Land's End. Soon I saw Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. I could hardly contain myself. This was my home and native land and it felt good to be back.

Then 6 months went by. One morning I woke up nostalgic for Canada. I was strangely cured of the nostalgia that had dogged my steps since the winter of 1953...

I wonder if we have never moved away from where we were born and grew up, whether we experience nostalgia?

2) Sadness

Lots of things can make us sad. The loss of a parent, a spouse, a grandmother or mother, a daughter in a tragic accident, a son lost to addiction, a beloved husband or mother to Alzheimer's. Perhaps for you it was a love affair that crashed, or a marriage that came to a sudden end, or a job that was downsized into a soul-destroying task, or church the way it used to be in the good old days!

Perhaps for you its money- never enough- and no way to change that. We can be depressed at midlife when we see that our dreams have not come true and our death is nearing without any possibility of fulfillment. We can be sad about our good friends who are doing themselves in with an unhealthy lifestyle that is slowly killing them, or who have an out of control with a legal addiction. Sadness can come in a thousand ways to us. It flies in unbidden through an open window in our lives. A gift can turn sour, families can suddenly fly apart- mother or father isn't there to hold us together anymore. When you are a widow or widower how do you celebrate the old anniversary?

Worse still sadness and nostalgia can merge...

3) Silence

There is at the heart of loneliness, a silence. Sometimes there is just nothing to say. Words cease to work. Silence is often at home at a graveside. The true feelings won't express except in silence. Silence seems to be at the very heart of loneliness. The party may be going on below decks, but you don't want to be there- to be forced to talk, to smile, and to deal with people. What you need most is silence...

4) A yearning for something else not here not now

Loneliness is not just experienced in adolescence or in seniors' nursing homes. It can occur in childhood with parents who punish to solve problems. It can come from a Facebook post that bullies. Mothers, who give birth, can experience it when the little life is no longer within. What must it be like to bring a child into this world and then be forced to give it up for adoption?

I have a friend who was forced to do that. Today she is unable to have a child. But her original child lives... somewhere... Suppose they connect through DNA testing and then the mother's loneliness is met by rejection? What then?

Oh for something else, someone else, not here not now! The present can be cruel when we yearn!

There are a lot of attempted answers to loneliness. Modern life is alienating and rootless. Connecting on Facebook as friends may be a very shallow experience. Many well-meaning folks think that Prozac, joining recovery groups, just getting involved in a project might work to lesson

the pain. Some people think that all people need to do is pick up the phone and talk to someone. But according to Hillman there is a problem below the surface that needs to be dealt with. This he calls **the loneliness of the soul!**

The ancient story of Adam and Eve tells of a day when human beings and God were friends. The story explains how that friendship was lost. When Adam and God walk in the garden in the cool of the day, one does not get the feeling that loneliness is present. **Instead there is something wonderful taking place which in fact might be the cure for loneliness of the soul.**

In the story of Abraham, we discover him looking for a place to bury his beloved Sarah. He has no property because he is a rootless nomad. Thus, he has nowhere to bury his dead.

Abraham has spent his life searching for a place where his spirit can rest. Driven by a yearning for something not here not now, he seeks a city whose builder and maker is God. Abraham is searching for that primary relationship that Adam and Eve had when they walked with the One who made all things...

St Augustine was no stranger to loneliness. His first years were wild by any standard. Driven by a deep restlessness he tried to answer his inner longings with multiple relationships with women. Gradually he came to see that his yearnings could only be satisfied with the **Source** of all things. It was St. Augustine who wrote these wonderful words: "Lord, you made us for Yourself and we can find no rest, till we find our rest in Thee."

If we accept the Christian teaching that the yearning for loneliness is a longing for the Creator, then there might be a healing beyond psychology and Prozac- we might discover that in fact St. Augustine is right.

There is something else we could consider. M.D. Darcy once wrote "The saints reveal to others what a person can be...they unearth the hidden beauty in human beings...the saints possess a kind of peace as if like the successful lover, they were in possession of their heart's desire, and in this fulfillment some joy sang to them, to which all their faculties made response. They are not lonely; they are well acquainted with sorrow and they embrace pain. But everywhere they go, they are accompanied by the sunshine of Spring..."

One year I went to Rome, which is the administrative head of Roman Catholicism. Here is the formalism, the weight of tradition and the administrative wing of the church. Here the faith was more cerebral and notwithstanding all the magnificence of St. Peter's basilica, Rome has a reputation for being a little cold.

One writer of a tourist brochure said that this was not so in Assisi. If one wanted to experience the very heart of Roman Catholicism one had to go to Assisi. The writer said that there was an inexplicable joy about Assisi just as if the saint had never left!

I didn't give this writer's words much thought until I went to Rome. Rome itself as a city, the Vatican, St. Peter's, all so incredibly impressive, vast huge, the weight of the centuries there and a feeling in my heart of sadness especially in one place, one spot in the Basilica of St. Peter's.

If you go to St. Peter's one day, stop in front of the Pieta. Stand there for some time. Let the statue speak to you.

It is the exquisite carving in marble of Mary holding the body of her crucified son. It is most of all about a mother holding the son of her womb in her arms in death. There is in this statue the profoundest human pathos. It is all there: the tragedy, the loss the utter sadness.

How Michelangelo conveyed this in stone is quite beyond belief. But it is there. In this statue there is no coldness but a deep tenderness, an angst, loneliness and a yearning for something not here and not now...

One day I went to Assisi. Below the double Basilica, there is a crypt where the body of St. Francis is buried.

When I entered that crypt, I felt an energy. It was mystical...beyond words. I sat there for quite awhile and took it in. It was a joyful presence **And there was in it not a scrap of loneliness.**

One day when I was having a talk with Wayne Dyer, we talked about it. His eyes lit up. "Did you feel it too?" Then he talked of this deep joy that seemed to be resident in Assisi.

This morning we began by singing St. Francis great hymn. To him the sun was a brother, the moon his sister. Like Meister Eckhart, he could say, "If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature, even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon so full of God is every creature."

Is this perhaps the secret of the saints? They see God in EVERYTHING!? Was that Who Mother Theresa saw in the dying?

Can loneliness be healed?

Sure, we can mask it, distract ourselves, drug it away, search for the perfect lover, but healing may not finally be there. What if St. Augustine is right? That we can find no rest until we find our rest in God?

Jesus speaks on this. He says "Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. For she who seeks finds. He who knocks has the door opened to him."

Have you ever asked yourself the question **where is the dwelling place of God?** Where is the walk in the cool of the day? Where is the quest's end for the City of God? Where is the end to loneliness?

Rabbi Kotzk asked this question to his students. “Where is the dwelling place of God?” They laughed at him and said “What a thing to ask. Isn’t the whole world full of God’s glory?”

They thought that they had it all figured out.

But following the laughter the Rabbi said this” God dwells where people **let God in.**”

What is the cure for loneliness?

It is finally spiritual. It is the Presence of God... in the deepest depths of our souls and always only by our invitation.

No one else can do this for us. It is up to us. We can invite God into our loneliness, and as a light banishes the darkness in a room, so God enters in.

On Jesus instruction we go into our room. We shut the door. We kneel down at our bedside and we pray. We deliberately invite God in to the very centre of our life, and then a miracle occurs... **God comes in to be with us.**

“Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and they with me.”

This is the secret of the saints, of the peace that they possess, this is the heart’s desire above all desires, this is the joy that sings within. And...this is the true healing for the soul’s loneliness.