

Better Together
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Eleanor Rigby
Wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door
Father McKenzie
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?

There's a headstone for Eleanor Rigby in the graveyard of St. Peters Parish Church in Liverpool, dated 1939. Nearby is another tombstone with the name McKenzie. John Lennon attended St. Peters Sunday School as a boy, and he and Paul McCartney first met there at a church social. But the song could have been about anyone or everyone. Because we're all the lonely people.

In Britain, physicians in the national health service say that of their patients, one in five come in primarily due to loneliness. Here in the U.S., that's how many adults say they often or always feel lonely, twenty percent. Even more say they have no close confidants they can trust to share their personal struggles: not a single person available who might listen or empathize or understand. We're talking about fifty-five million individuals in this country. So if you're feeling alone, you're not alone.

"I'm Nobody!" wrote the poet Emily Dickinson. "Who are you? Are you – Nobody – too? Then there's a pair of us! Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!" Emily did have close friends despite being a recluse who hardly ever left the town of Amherst. Often she simply preferred the company of her own pen and poetry. But loneliness is different from solitude. Mystics and artists can thrive on solitude. Their inspiration and creativity come from within, or from above. Solitude can mean reading a book, with the liveliest of companions (think Bilbo Baggins or Harry Potter), or it can mean spending time in nature, where there's seldom a dull moment if you don't mind gazing at the clouds or watching the way wind moves through the branches of the trees (which I don't). Solitude is vital. Unless we're comfortable in our own skins and somewhat self-sufficient, we'll never be fit companions for others.

Loneliness is different. It arises not from being cast onto one's own thoughts and resources but rather from lacking real contact beyond that. It's the feeling of being left out, the sense of being invisible in a crowd, of being unnoticed, overlooked. And loneliness brings with it a sense of shame or stigma, of being not just single but being singled out as a misfit or nerd, creating a reservoir of self-doubt that renders ordinary social interactions more intimidating than necessary. Fear of rejection builds a wall, and

every perceived slight or awkward encounter adds a brick to it, encouraging us to withdraw still further into the shelter of a self-imposed cloister.

It's a cold place to live. Last winter, our furnace went out during the most frigid week of January. We called the neighbors, who were happy to lend us one of the space heaters until the repairman could come. But how hard it would be for any of us to call a neighbor and say "I need some human warmth, some tea and sympathy, because my own fires are burning low." Better freeze than admit we can't do it all ourselves.

"It is not good for man to be alone," say the scriptures. And isolation impacts our health and well-being in so many ways that are the opposite of good. People who lack social connections are at fifty percent higher risk of premature death. The experience of loneliness is the medical equivalent of smoking fifteen cigarettes—almost a pack-a-day. It's a bigger hazard than obesity or excessive drinking or lack of exercise. It shouldn't be surprising.

Children, we know, need cuddling and snuggling in order to thrive. The first three months of infancy have sometimes been called "the fourth trimester" because babies need just as much warmth and comfort outside the womb as before they were born. And little ones who lack that contact have markedly lower levels of oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, that facilitates our ability to trust and form emotional bonds with other people. Skin contact, physical touch, slows the heart rate and reduces the body's level of cortisol, the biomarker for stress. Human beings are not just social animals, it seems. Because of the prolonged dependency of our childhood, we may be more social than many other species, hyper-social creatures—more wired for intimacy, for closeness, for interpersonal attachments—and more likely to suffer when those connections are missing.

That suffering is palpable. A slap in the face and the sting of feeling ostracized trigger the same circuits in the brain. Ouch. It hurts to have no chums. But while Tylenol can help a toothache, loneliness is harder to cure, though many look to opioids and other drugs to dull the pain.

Over twenty years ago, the sociologist Robert Putnam wrote a bestseller titled *Bowling Alone* where he documented the societal costs of our disconnected culture. Falling rates of volunteerism, loss of civic engagement, drops in charitable giving, the decline of organized religion, the growth of gated communities, were all symptoms of a population retreating from one another into strictly private pursuits, he said. Instead of movie theaters, home entertainment systems. Instead bowling leagues, personal trainers.

Putnam identified television as the main culprit behind the loss of connectedness, noting that "People who say that TV is their 'primary form of entertainment' also tend to work

on community projects less often, attend fewer dinner parties, spend less time visiting friends, entertain at home less often, picnic less, are less interested in politics, give blood less often, and express road rage more often than demographically matched people who differ only in saying that TV is not their primary form of entertainment.” But of course, Putnam was writing at a time when the internet was still in its infancy, when cell phones had hardly been invented, before social media knew how to take the most disruptive and angry voices in the room and amplify them to a roar.

And it’s only gotten worse with the pandemic. Social distancing may have been necessary, but it came at a cost. Doctors have identified Zoom fatigue as a real ailment. Talking heads, wandering stares, and a muted audience fail to trigger the same rush of serotonins and other feel-good biochemicals we get from shaking hands, or hugging, or looking each other in the eye. One psychiatrist likens Zoom to the emotional equivalent of junk food: empty calories that leave you feeling hollow. You can probably survive on potato chips and soda pop. But you’re not going to stay healthy.

How much of the violence and insanity around us is rooted in our isolation from each other? QAnon. Conspiracy theories. Paranoia. Back in my parish ministry, I served a downtown congregation and we’d often have crazy people knocking on the door. One woman, for instance, was convinced her children were possessed by demons. One man was sure God was talking to him through the radio. Religious delusions are common psychotic features. Yes, I’d try to steer these individuals toward professional help. But I’d also encourage them to find a congregation, to join a church where their visions and private revelations might be tempered or moderated by a tradition, a community that had some grounding in reality. Take the voices inside your head out into the sunshine, into the town square, into the temple, I’d say. In seclusion, madness festers.

Congregations are like community mental health centers or free clinics. Walk ins welcome. No appointment necessary. Open Sundays. People who attend religious services live longer. They’re less depressed. They have better immune systems. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, the most detailed study of sexual behavior ever conducted in America, those who worship weekly have more satisfying intercourse. And it’s also true that those involved in a church or synagogue or mosque are less lonely. But people don’t really go to church just to lower their blood pressure, or to have better orgasms. More often it’s because they want to give back, to be part of something bigger than themselves, to become a force for love or justice, to leave the world a little better by their passing, to add value to the universe itself even if it’s only by their witness and praise. And that’s the beauty of it. The helpers are the ones who receive the help. The lovers see kindred spirits and soulmates everywhere. By tapping into their more generous impulses, the ones who give most lavishly are themselves enriched.

The healing power of congregations holds true even in Unitarian Universalist circles. Even though we have a higher percentage of introverts than other religions. Even though we are God's frozen people. Even though we are rugged individualists and independent thinkers. Even though we can be fairly stand-offish and prickly and critical ourselves, even we religious liberals have the ability to forge relationships that matter, to support each other in moments of need, to affirm our co-humanity, to ease the estrangement of these hard times, to enjoy the extraordinary pleasure of simply being together. We just have to work a little harder at it than most.

All the lonely people. Where do they all come from? Where do they all belong? I don't have the answers, only questions for you, good people of Taos. How can this congregation live out its covenant: to engage each other with respect, compassion and generosity in all our endeavors? To enable people to feel safe within their personal boundaries while risking deeper, more lasting commitments? How can we encourage the shy ones and the reticent to remove the humiliation of admitting that loneliness is a human condition we all face to one degree or another? How we can make it easier to ask for help, or better yet create norms and expectations that don't require much asking at all for everyone to feel included and valued? I don't have the answers, but I believe answers do exist, not in any one of you singly but among us and between us all. Because we are, truly, better together.