

**FROM LONELINESS TO SOLITUDE**  
Unitarian Congregation of South Peel  
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Anyone who has followed my preaching for a while knows how important to me community is. I have said from this pulpit several times how community is part of reality: you are linked with others no matter what you do or where you go. Even a hermit is in community with his garden, or wherever she gathers her food. Community is part of reality.

But perhaps I have ignored another vital part of human life: the fact of separateness. It may sound paradoxical, to say that both separateness and community are part of human life; since it is paradoxical it is therefore probably true. In my experience, the truest things about life are paradoxes.

Yet what has motivated my preaching about community has been my awareness of isolation. Both community and separation from community are part of human experience, and that is why the truth is almost always paradoxical: Anything that wasn't paradoxical would only contain half the truth. So today I want to look at the other side of community: isolation, separateness, solitude.

I have long operated out of the assumption that community is the answer to isolation. I have considered isolation to be a problem and community its answer. Since I am a church person, the community of the church has been my favourite solution to the problem of isolation. Feeling lonely? Come to church. Want to tackle a social problem? Find a group to struggle beside you, and church is a good place to begin looking. Want to have a good time? Find someone from the church to break down your isolation.

I have also for a long time believed that the way our society increases isolation is part of the problem. I will launch a tirade against the walls modern existence raises between people. Parking lots are barriers between buildings, long seas which must be swum or sailed. Expressways cut communities apart, and sound walls isolate spaces as much as sound. Good fences make good neighbors, by keeping people isolated, not bringing them together. Modern life, I decided, was the creator of loneliness.

And I have assumed that community was the answer. If you're feeling cut off, alone, uncared for, then the answer was to go out and get involved. Break down a barrier by joining a community. Find a club or society or cause to get involved in. Stop being alone and you won't be lonely.

Confession time: I not only preached that doctrine, I practised it. For years now my approach to isolation has been to be very involved. I have turned my activities outward, become active in all sorts of groups, as a way of defeating my sense of isolation. I have been involved in social causes, community groups, arts groups, academic societies, political organizations.

church groups, professional societies, support groups, you name it. I have taken my aloneness and made it a shadow in my life. I have been an exemplary extravert, my energies exploding on the scene wherever I could bring them to bear.

Recently I have begun to change my mind about what the problem is. I used to think the problem was isolation, and the way society isolates otherwise communal human beings. When someone would speak about the fundamental aloneness of human life, I would respond with a ho-hum attitude of "so why don't you do something about it?" It has always seemed easy enough to me to cure loneliness with activity which brought me in contact with other people, to make friends and find lovers through common activities and interests.

That action approach has been useful for much of my life. Right now, though, I am finding I need to take a new road, live in a different way, though the old response pattern is hard to break. All that activity has made my life very, very rich. I have connections with people whose experience has expanded my view of the world. I have collected a storehouse which cannot help but continue to grow. I would have to throw away great riches if I wished to be poorer in experience, and I would rather let the store grow by interest and new investment than lose any of it.

Now I need more time to enjoy that richness, not to chase after more and more connections and communions but instead to look deeply at what those experiences mean to me. I have focused my attention outward, and now, for balance, need to look inward. If I am to understand what community has to teach me, I need to take inward looks at what it is giving.

Loneliness is what happens when we think of isolation as a problem and desire to solve it. We feel loneliness as an acute pain, connecting isolation with a sense of not being loved, of wishing for support. We seek comradeship as a way of making ourselves feel bigger, not so small in the face of the universe or of the task ahead of us in daily life. Hence the endless search for the way to make the right connection: is a computer dating service the right approach? Or a church-based singles group? What about the want ads? Maybe a psychic can tell me when I'll finally find the mystic match.

I have questioned very few of the weddings I have performed over the years. One, however, I have my doubts about. A couple I married years ago in California had met only a month before, through an ad in the personals column. Both were recently divorced and didn't like it at all. I wondered, but never really decided, if they both wanted to be married more than they wanted to be married to each other. I have feared that they were motivated out of a desperate need not to be alone and that this was not good grounds for a marriage.

I have seen marriages on shakier grounds than that succeed, but only with a commitment to time and change. Perhaps they have made it, but they would have had to grow in order to do it. Such growth was neither impossible nor unlikely, and in this distant moment and place, I hope it happened for them.

I still have my doubts. My doubt stems from an opinion of mine, that if you link up with someone solely to fulfill a need of your own, you are likely to be disappointed when they change, or you do and the need is no longer so great. Loneliness is a poor need to try to fulfill in one person. No matter how well their keys fit our locks, their parts meshing with our own, their complexities and ours mean that there will still be places where we sense isolation. Human beings are complex enough that we can never be completely clear to one another, and the mystery means that we will from time to time feel separate, even as there will be times when our communion is so complete we feel bound in one body.

I used to think that people who claimed that they were always alone even in the most intimate of moments were simply existential complainers -- kvetchers on the highway of life. It seemed so trite to say, "Everyone is basically alone," that I turned my eyes to how to get around it. Though I was empathetic, in my more reflective mood I would say, "Yeah, and so what?" Does the fact that we are always alone mean we should give up in despair?

My answer, like so many others, had been not to give up in despair but to seek connection in activity. I now would like to make a case for a third option: neither to yield to a depressed disgust with human isolation nor to seek to avoid it in frenzied connecting. The answer is to make a conversion from loneliness to solitude.

Unitarian Universalist ministers don't often harp on conversion, it skates too near to evangelical ice. Yet every step on the road of the spiritual life is in fact a conversion: a act of turning. Conversion means turning the mind, the attention, the values from one way of looking to another. It means changing one's orientation, choosing a new direction, based on new values and new insights, sometimes by an act of will.

So it is with loneliness and solitude. The two words carry with them feelings and associations; neither one is a statement of pure fact. When someone says, "I'm lonely," they're saying, "I'm alone and I don't like it. I feel a gap in my life and I want it filled. And the sooner, the better, thank you." It's not a fact of aloneness, it's a set of feelings about being alone which constitute loneliness.

Yet isolation can be an opportunity for conversion. Being alone can be an opportunity to swing from trying to meet an inner, aching need with outer resources to a chance to look inward at the riches of our own souls. And in so doing, we discover more of ourselves to bring to those encounters with community which we all have.

This sermon is not a recantation: I still believe that community is a fundamental part of the universe, that there is no such thing as hermitage, one cannot exist as a thing apart from everything else. But I no longer deny that we are also separate from each other, and that such separation can be interpreted with feelings of loneliness. What I maintain today is that isolation can be converted from loneliness to solitude, and in fact, must be so converted if life is to have any spiritual depth. A person who is running around trying to fill his or her holes is ignoring the depths of his or her

being. She or he will find that the pits are bottomless; they are not there to be filled but instead to be looked into, and even enjoyed.

The phrase, "From Loneliness To Solitude" I have borrowed from Dutch pastoral theologian Henri Nouwen. In Nouwen's thinking, to move from loneliness to solitude is the first of three steps on the spiritual path. Nouwen maintains that one must be willing to look inward, to spend time with oneself, to come to know oneself, before one can truly make room for other people or for the holy. His second step is learning to move from hostility to hospitality, and the third is to move from illusions about God to an openness to the divine mystery.

In each case, Nouwen calls this, "Reaching Out." It sounds contradictory to say that one must reach out to one's innermost self, and yet this is exactly what he suggests that we do. He uses that phrase to suggest that honouring our inner lives should be done actively.

Those who live seeking to fill the holes of loneliness, Nouwen says, live reactionary life styles. "As long as we are trying to run away from our loneliness we are constantly looking for distractions with the inexhaustible need to be entertained and kept busy. We become the passive victims of a world asking for our attention."

Nouwen points out that we associate solitude with hermitage, with people who live alone and apart, in isolated cells, seeing no one. But it is important, he argues, to cultivate solitude in the midst of a busy and active life. "It seems more important than ever to stress that solitude is one of the human capacities can exist, be maintained and developed in the center of a big city, in the middle of a large crowd and in the context of a very active and productive life. A man or woman who has developed this solitude of heart is no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center."

Moving from loneliness to solitude means facing one's own feelings, perceptions, insights, instead of trying to avoid them by filling them up with activity. In a consumer world, it's hard to do this, because the world around us is telling us all the time that the answer to our pain is in pain relievers, not aspirins or tylenols but movies, drinks, the latest sound equipment. But what good are all those inputs if they are only time fillers and attention distractors? They are only pastimes, and serve only to get us from today to tomorrow, leaving us with a today still empty and lonely.

The poet Walt Whitman told us that all poetry is what it does inside us. Even all religion is divine so far as it comes from inside us, and causes us to resonate with new feeling or inspiration. To convert from loneliness to solitude is to find the time in our lives to feel the feelings evoked in us by music, stories, television, whatever means the world comes to us and to use that time to get to know ourselves. It is the mystery we are which we take time to respect.

To respect the mystery in ourselves is to take time to live our own questions, rather than to seek to avoid them, or to rush off in search of easy answers. It is to recognize that in ourselves can be found that holy ground worthy of our attention. It is to recognize that we have a solitude worth protecting.

Last spring I spent time with a colleague who has been single for a few years now. We talked about the relationships she had had, the space they had claimed in her life before, and what had become of them, now that she lived a life without a primary relationship. After a while she smiled and said, "It's not true. I do have a primary relationship -- it's with myself."

What she has been discovering is the importance of attention to her inner world. She is learning to cherish her solitude, and paradoxically but truthfully, it is making her a better minister for it makes her better able to relate to others.

Henri Nouwen maintains that the conversion "from loneliness to solitude is not a movement of a growing withdrawal but is instead a movement toward a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time. The movement from loneliness to solitude," Nouwen writes, "can make it possible to convert slowly our fearful reactions into a loving response."

If you have not paid attention to your own pain, then you cannot act compassionately; you can only react with pity. There is a difference between pity and compassion; pity assumes a superior and distant attitude, while compassion means the empathetic response of one who knows what pain is like. Attention to oneself can create the place out of which a compassionate response becomes possible.

More importantly, however, is the recognition of the separateness of others which makes true compassion possible. An activist I know is constantly trying to blend causes: he always talks as if the pain of one person is identical to the pain of all others. I know he believes that the suffering is suffering, and so he often tells people, "I know exactly how you feel." Yet he says this before he has heard how people feel, or, having heard the similar parts, does not hear the differences. It would break off his attempt to fill his loneliness by owning everyone else's pain. Few things have been as useless to me as this man's sympathy masked as compassion. He does not recognize my separateness, he cannot afford it, for he does not recognize and honour his own.

Ironically, this man is one of those who has made a cult of developing his self. He has sampled every self-help method, every new therapy, every new spiritual movement. He believes he has drunk deeply at their wells, and perhaps he has. But I don't believe he has drunk deeply at his own well, or he would not flit from one to the other with such alacrity. He would not speak with their footnotes offering authority, for he could speak with the authority of his own experience.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke offered us this wisdom which most Canadians should find familiar:

Love consists in this:  
that two solitudes  
protect, and touch and greet  
each other.

Real love, real compassion, means honouring the separateness of the other. It means recognizing that they are a mystery worthy of respect because one respects the mystery within oneself. Real love and real service in the world means honouring the other for the solitude they are, for we recognize the sacred importance of cultivating solitude.

Knowing better who we are can only make us better persons, better able to serve, better able to make the world a better place. Spirituality and social action are intertwined; either is poor without the other; together they increase their power logorhythmically. Converting ourselves from loneliness-addiction to solitude-reflection as we struggle to convert the world from injustice to compassion are the two poles of the ladder. You must have both if you would climb.

--Mark Mosher DeWolfe