

Only the Lonely

If you are anywhere around my vintage you may remember Roy Orbison's tenor voice (sometimes sweet, sometimes shrill) singing a song with this name. '*Only the lonely, know the way I feel tonight. Only the lonely, know this feeling isn't right.*'

'We are all in this alone' the comedian Lily Tomlin once quipped. I think most of us worry about loneliness. I know I do. It isn't the same as being alone. That can be joyful and serene. The reality is we are a single discrete entity amongst all the other entities that make up a world so large we can't imagine its enormity – we are tiny fragments of a larger whole that have been given an autonomous existence as individual living beings. This includes an ability to connect with other entities and still be ourselves, which is never going to be quite straightforward; sometimes it can feel like an impossible mountain to climb.

In 2000 Robert Putnam wrote a rather controversial book called *Bowling Alone* about the worrying loss of 'social capital' in US society. Many people thought he exaggerated the problem. Since then interpersonal communication styles and habits have changed more dramatically than in any similar period of history, so where do we stand now? *Alone Together* is now a TV series as well as the 2011 book by Sherry Turkle in which she reports hundreds of interviews over a 15 year period with young people who are learning to adjust to the social interaction that relies so heavily on technology.

You don't really notice loneliness as you look around your neighbourhood because it's hidden away behind garden gates and the front doors of houses. Where I worked in my late twenties and early thirties few people would have noticed how lonely my life felt at that time. I'm surprised there aren't more non-fiction books about the solitary confinement that many people experience because there is plenty of evidence that their numbers are increasing. Perhaps as many as one in four people are affected now according to the latest Australian study mentioned in the Sydney Morning Herald last week.

Loneliness - Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection by John Cacioppo and William Patrick, written 10 years ago, documented the adverse effects on physical and mental health that make feeling lonely just as big a risk factor for early death as obesity, high blood pressure or smoking. In a Chapter called *Finding Meaning in Connection* they call it a 'hole at the centre of your being' that lacks nourishment – as if it needs to be fed – but it can't be satisfied just by feeding yourself, nor by other people dropping in provisions.

There's a clue to the condition in the words of the song: 'only the lonely know the way I feel' implying that others would not understand. You feel sorry for yourself as well as lonely. We make ourselves lonely by the way we are using our minds. It's a closed in, self-centred place that can seem like a prison from which there is not going to be any escape. Visitors might drop by, but if your mind is closed, no real connection is made. So the question of how to help lonely people is an important one.

Cacioppo and Patrick suggest that you have to step outside the pain of your own situation long enough to begin 'feeding others.' The ancient 'parable of the long spoons' depicts two groups of people: one living in hell and the other in heaven. The problem is the spoons they have are too long to get food into their own mouths. In heaven they learn that this necessitates feeding each other.

A new book I found this week by Peter Charleston (a Melbourne psychologist) is called *Closer* and it outlines **7 Principles of Connectedness** (that word again). His starting point is that these are the seven fundamental **emotional needs** for all of us. Although the book has a self-help kind of format I don't like so much, I like the seven words he uses to capture different aspects of connectedness and I found it an interesting book to read.

The first one is **Attention**. If you want to connect with someone you first have to notice him or her. And, of course, that includes deliberately listening and directing your mind to what they say. John O'Donohue wrote in his beautiful book *Anam Cara* that love begins with paying attention to someone. The lonely person finds this hard to do so it often has to be triggered by someone else in the first instance.

The second – and he says these are in order of priority – is **Affection**. I found that interesting because it implies that your own state of mind – whether it's basically loving and therefore interested in the relationship itself, not just the transaction – makes a difference. He uses the word **love** freely in the book, which I find refreshing for a psychology writer. An attitude of affection opens the door for empathy and compassion to flow naturally at a subconscious level. I agree with him that this is a basic human **need** for everyone, yet often overlooked in our busy lives.

The third 'principle of connectedness' is called **Acknowledgement**, which means that you identify something very specific that is important for the other person at that time so it becomes a point of attachment between you. You might identify this in your own mind, but if you don't express it in words, the other person won't know that.

If a wrong has been done, the fourth one is an **Apology**. Sometimes you need to apologise to yourself for judging yourself so harshly. The last three are **Acceptance** – allowing people to be who they are, **Approval** – an expression of support or commendation, and **Appreciation** – showing gratitude for what has been given to you in the conversation.

There's a large rock in the bush near where I live that I walk to on my own. From there I can see a vast valley of green treetops that meets an even bigger expanse of blue sky and makes a picture that seems to satisfy and nourish my mind and soul. It's a chance to experience what many of us call the **joy of solitude**. I'm sure people have been going off to quiet spots to find pleasure and satisfaction on their own for a long time, but Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is often referred to as a milestone in the recent written history of the virtues of a simple '*life in the woods*.' It seems to me what made Thoreau so happy in his isolation was that he **loved** his surroundings – the trees, birds and animals – and so he came to **love** his own part in their existence.

Whereas loneliness is a feeling of separation, solitude is a precious part of the human spirit whereby we can connect with **everything** around us. The smaller the ego, the stronger the connectedness. You can sense the **wholeness** of your existence as a tiny part of something incredibly large and more powerful than you are. Can you also feel that it loves you? John O'Donohue (again in *Anam Cara*) says there is 'a lantern in your soul that makes your solitude luminous.' He says you sense your own beauty in the beauty around you.

Keats said beauty is truth, but beauty is also love and perhaps 'that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.'