



# Loneliness: A Global Pandemic

*The frequency and intensity of loneliness are not only underestimated but the lonely themselves tend to be disparaged.* — Robert S. Weiss<sup>1</sup>

FR. GERALD A. ARBUCKLE, SM, PhD

Loneliness is an inescapable and painful fact of human experience. St. Teresa of Calcutta believed that loneliness, often accompanied by despair and hopelessness, is the virulent affliction in the West.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, it is estimated that 27-28 percent of the population feel lonely, an increase on the order of 3 to 7 percent over the last 20 years.<sup>3</sup> And among “middle-aged and older Americans, rates of loneliness have jumped from 14 percent in the 1970s to over 40 percent today.”<sup>4</sup> In England loneliness is considered so serious that people have created an entire national “Campaign to End Loneliness.”<sup>5</sup>

But, because of the impact of global economic, social and political turbulent forces, this disease is fast becoming entrenched in all parts of the world. Loneliness is now a worldwide pandemic affecting all age groups and cultures. Communities are fragmenting.<sup>6</sup> Once comforting personal and cultural identities are disintegrating as people lose their connectedness with each other and their past.<sup>7</sup> Loneliness exists where it did not before. The hearts of more and more people are being gripped by loneliness, fear and desperation.<sup>8</sup>

## HEALTH IMPACT

Current multidisciplinary investigation concludes that loneliness is “a serious risk factor for illness and early death, right alongside smoking, obesity and lack of exercise.”<sup>9</sup> It has been estimated that living with air pollution increases one’s possibility of dying early by 5 percent, being obese, by 20 percent; misuse of alcohol, by 30 percent. But the impact of loneliness is a 45 percent increase in the possibility of dying early.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers conclude that “loneliness not only alters behavior, but shows up in measurements of stress hormones, immune function and cardiovascular function. Over time, these changes in physiology are compounded in ways that may be hastening millions of people to an early grave.”<sup>11</sup>

Peter Shmigel, CEO of Lifeline Australia, a national crisis support and suicide prevention nonprofit, comments on an Australian national survey of loneliness: “Loneliness wears down your resilience to crisis...When you are lonely... your resilience drops...[Then the] risk of suicide increases.”<sup>12</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING LONELINESS

Since loneliness is a subjective feeling, it is hard to pin down or to define. It can be a feeling of isolation, of not belonging, a feeling that no one cares, no one notices. It is an agonizing feeling of emptiness or desolation, a feeling that we have all experienced at some time or other, for example, when a loved one dies, a sudden illness, the loss of



employment, the realization that we are aging and less mobile. It is a stressful disconnect between desired and actual levels of social interaction.

When people struggle to describe loneliness, there is a common theme of yearning to belong, a thirsting to be connected, a restlessness, a panting — to use St. Augustine’s expression<sup>13</sup> — at last to belong, to make a satisfying relationship, to feel valued, to feel there is a pervading meaning in one’s life if only it could be found. Yearning or thirsting for a relationship is so frequently and poignantly expressed by the psalmist: “God, you are my God, I pine for you; my heart longs for you, as a land parched dreary and waterless” (Psalm 63:1).<sup>14</sup> The psalmist pleads: “As a deer yearns for running streams, so I yearn for you, my God.” (Psalm 42:1), and “My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh’s courts” (Psalm 84:3).

Thus, lonely people yearn for the intimacy of social connection that is denied them. Listen to the cry of the psalmist: “You have caused my companions to shun me” (Psalm 88:9). Yet loneliness can be more than this emotion. If loneliness is not resolved, then people become prone to physical and mental illness.

It is not only individuals that experience this loneliness. Cultures do also. Entire cultures can feel politically, economically or socially oppressed, marginalized and excluded by more powerful groups. Such was the distressing experience of the Israelites in exile:

By the waters of Babylon  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion  
(Psalm 137:1)

The exiled Israelites have had their symbols of cultural identity destroyed — the temple, the kingship. Their resulting loneliness now slips into despair: “Our tormenters asked us for mirth... [But] How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:3-4).

#### CULTURAL TRIGGERS OF LONELINESS

What causes loneliness? Most loneliness is the result of cultural forces that socially exclude peo-

ple and cultures from a sense of belonging. These forces are multiple and diverse, for example: poverty, racism, refugee status, disabilities, economic and political inequalities, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. People

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unjustly are forbidden to participate in key activities of society in which they live. They are made to feel left out, lonely.

Pope Francis prophetically describes how poverty causes loneliness: “We fail to see,” he writes, “that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.”<sup>15</sup>

Pope Francis continues: “Today, everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized; without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.”<sup>16</sup>

In a world of increasing fundamentalist movements of “wall-builders, door-slayers and drawbridge-raisers,”<sup>17</sup> groups are being pushed aside, unwanted in the world, powerless, lonely.

#### HOW TO OVERCOME LONELINESS

**Foster Hope.** Loneliness is not the same as depression. They are “two distinct dimensions of experience...[They] are in many ways opposites... Depression makes us apathetic. Whereas loneliness urges us to move forward.”<sup>18</sup> Hope is integral to loneliness. Sadly, not so in depression. Loneliness is also not the same as being alone. One can be alone without feeling loneliness. An ancient Christian hymn exquisitely articulates this. The traveler is alone but feels no loneliness because he



is connected to God's abiding presence through hope:

Alone with none but thee, my God,  
I journey on my way:  
what need I fear when thou are near,  
O King of night and day?<sup>19</sup>

**Discover Solitude.** Loneliness also is not the same as solitude, but without the gift of solitude it can quickly turn into despair. The poet William Wordsworth explains the difference in his poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." He describes his experience of walking in the beautiful scenery of northern England's Lake District. He feels lonely, but his attention is suddenly drawn to "A host of Daffodils...fluttering and dancing in the breeze." With this, his loneliness evaporates as he ponders their inspiring beauty: "A Poet could not but be gay/In such a jocund company."

It is not just the splendor of the flowers that inspires him to react positively, but the beauty has its source in some higher power. He has hope that whenever he again feels lonely, the memory of this experience will once more remove his sad loneliness. He will reconnect with the beauty of nature and the presence of God within: "For oft, when on my couch I lie/In vacant or in pensive mood,/They flash upon the inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude; And then my heart with pleasure fills,/And dances with the daffodils."

Solitude thus is the ability to be alone, to be connected with one's inner self, without the emptiness and yearning of loneliness. Solitude provides the connection with what loneliness yearns for. Solitude is the entering into oneself to know oneself better, thus to learn how best to react positively to the loneliness that has been forced on one.

Fr. Henri Nouwen, theologian and author, describes it this way: "By slowly converting our loneliness into a deep solitude, we create the precious space where we can discover the voice telling us about our inner necessity — that is, our vocation."<sup>20</sup>

Loneliness is the yearning to connect. Solitude is the act of connecting with oneself, thus fostering hope that one can connect with others in com-

munion beyond oneself.

Consider the psalmist. He is in the depth of loneliness. He asks himself why this is so and what he must do to relieve the loneliness: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?"

He answers the question: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." (Psalm 42:6). In the solitude, hope restores meaning and energy to his loneliness.

Once more the psalmist reflects on his loneliness: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4).

On a previous occasion, the psalmist was in painful loneliness, but since God then came to his aid, he is again filled with hope that, whatever loneliness lies ahead, God will be at his side to relieve it.

**Cultivate Empathy and Listening.** Empathy is a mutual desire to understand the situations that cause loneliness in others — be they asylum seekers, frightened immigrants, Muslims who are dis-

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criminated against, LGBTQ fellow citizens — and to feel as they feel. Empathy evokes the gifts of listening and hospitality towards the excluded and lonely. True hospitality, as witnessed by Christ, offers people the space to feel free to unburden their lonely selves, to clarify what is holding them back from moving forward.

"Hospitality," writes Nouwen, "is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own."<sup>21</sup>

Listening also is healing, which is intimately connected to hospitality: "Healing means, first of all, the creation of an empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention."<sup>22</sup> Of

course, true listening assumes a deep respect and concern for people. It means an unwillingness to offer solutions until the issues worrying people are fully listened to and heard.

The supreme exemplar of these qualities of hospitality and healing is Christ. Ponder the many instances where he listened to the sufferings of people on the margins of society, such as the lepers, the blind and the bereaved. He heard, and they left their distress behind and moved forward to new lives. The gift of listening is not something to be confined to formal ritual leaders such as qualified counselors and pastors. All are called at least to the ministry of informal ritual leadership. For example, a traveler may be called to listen to the anguish of a lonely stranger sitting beside him or her and, in the process, no matter how brief, there is a healing.

**Seek Connections.** Ove is the central figure in a deeply moving, yet humorous, novel *A Man Called Ove*.<sup>23</sup> He is a grumpy 59-year-old person who frequently, in despair, attempts to kill himself following his beloved wife's death. Each time, he fails because someone crosses his path who is in need of help. He connects with his inner self and sees he must act. He creatively responds with compassion. Eventually he dies, apparently in his sleep, leaving behind him people who have been touched and enlivened by his simple love and compassion.

Surely this is at the very heart of our Gospel message: love thy neighbor as thyself, a point strongly emphasized by that apostle to the lonely, Dorothy Day. Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement and for more than a half century led crusades of social justice. She said, "We have all known loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love that comes with community."<sup>24</sup>

As St. Teresa of Calcutta said, "The only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love."<sup>25</sup> In fact, "love is a mirror image of loneliness."<sup>26</sup>

**Foster Social Justice.** Day teaches us yet another truth: to give to others in love and justice, in order to pull down the walls that exclude people, demands a change of heart.

"The greatest challenge of the day is: how to

bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." she wrote in *Loaves and Fishes*. "When we begin to take the lowest place, to wash the feet of others, to love our brothers with that burning love, that passion, which led to the Cross, then we can truly say, 'Now I have begun.'"<sup>27</sup>

## When human dignity is overlooked, and hope is in danger of becoming a forgotten word, people and cultures are thrown into loneliness.

To change one's heart ultimately requires that we be in touch with our inner selves in solitude. Pope Francis describes the challenge to connect with others through compassion and justice in this way. In light of the Good Samaritan parable, he calls for

the revolution of tenderness ... Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid of the future ... Tenderness means to use our hands and our heart to comfort the other, to take care of those in need ...<sup>28</sup>

### CONCLUSION

All the while, individuals and cultures in our midst feel the need to belong, to be accepted, to share common values, to participate in decision-making. These are fundamental needs. To be denied these needs as individuals and cultures is to feel abandoned, lonely. When human dignity is overlooked, and hope is in danger of becoming a forgotten word, people and cultures are thrown into loneliness. Such is the experience of countless individuals and oppressed minority cultural groups today. Little wonder there is so much loneliness and consequent health problems.

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## NOTES

1. Robert S. Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* (Boston: MIT Press, 1975), 12.
2. See Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *A Simple Path* (London: Ebury Publishing, 1995), 83.
3. John T. Cacioppo cited by Olga Khazan, "How Loneliness Begets Loneliness," *The Atlantic* (April 6, 2017). [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/).
4. Michael Harris, *Solitude: In Pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World* (London: Random House, 2017), 32.
5. See Khazan, "How Loneliness Begets Loneliness," *The Atlantic*.
6. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Fundamentalism at Home and Abroad: Analysis and Pastoral Responses* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 1-29. In China, for example, tens of millions have migrated from close-knit rural communities into cities in a relatively short period of time. Families have been broken apart and "left many sufferers undiagnosed [with mental diseases] or with no one to turn to." *The Economist* (Jan. 28, 2017), 53.
7. See Thomas H. Eriksen and Elisabeth Schober, eds., *Identity Destabilised: Living in an Overheating World* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 1-19.
8. See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) (Strathfield, New South Wales: St Pauls Publications, 2013), par. 52.
9. John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 108.
10. See Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al., "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (2015), 227-37; Timothy B. Smith and Julianne Holt-Lunstad, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review," *PLOS* July 27, 2010. <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>.
11. Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 108.
12. Calla Wahlquist, "Eighty-Two Per Cent of Australians Say Loneliness Is Increasing, Lifeline Survey Finds," *The Guardian*, Sept. 27, 2016.
13. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 10, Ch. 27, v. 38.
14. *The New Jerusalem Bible* translation (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).
15. Francis, *Laudato Sí* (On Care for Our Common Home) (London: St Pauls Publications, 2015), par 90.
16. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par 53.
17. *The Economist* (Oct. 29, 2016), 11.
18. Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 83.
19. The hymn is attributed to the Irish monk St. Columba (521-597 AD).
20. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 27.
21. *Reaching Out*, 69.
22. *Reaching Out*, 88.
23. See Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called Ove* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2014).
24. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 286.
25. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*.
26. Lori Bohm, "Introduction," in *Loneliness and Longing: Conscious and Unconscious Aspects*, eds. Brent Willcock, Lori Bohm, and Coleman Curtis (Hove, UK: Routledge, 2012), 8.
27. Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 217.
28. Francis, TED talk, April 25, 2017. TED international "The Future You" conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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