

## **The Most Lonely Time of the Year**

Alison Wohler, December 7, 2008

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

Something I have come to realize about myself over the past few years of writing sermons for you, is that I can get very “into” my topics. Over the week when I am preparing the order of service and researching the readings I want to use and thinking about the sermon and trying to relate it to my life, so that I can speak to you from a place within myself, the subject of the service and I become as one. This week loneliness and I have been circling each other in the kind of dance where you have an idea that you already know this partner and then suddenly you realize that not only do you know this dance partner, but you have danced this dance before. And it is not the kind of dance where you want to run home and tell your mother about the exciting person you just met and how you hope you will see them again soon.

This month, this week, working on this service and thinking about this sermon, loneliness and I have become reacquainted. I, who am among people or on the phone with people or emailing people all the time, have been feeling uncharacteristically lonely the last few days. In order that I might speak to you from the truth in my heart, born of my own experiences, I have found myself reliving some of the loneliness from my past. It is remarkably easy to slip back into those feelings from another time in one’s life. I hope my next sermon is about something more positive.

I can say with 100% confidence that there is not a person in this room who does not know what it means to be lonely, in one way or another. My aim this morning is to acknowledge some of those ways of being lonely, especially as they might be accentuated at this typically celebratory time of year. The truth is, though, that many of our “lonelinesses” stay with us throughout the year, becoming a regular and expected part of each day.

For some, their loneliness is for a special person – one known and lost – or one anticipated but not yet found. This is the loneliness we often think of at Holiday times, when memories of times gone by or hopes of finding love and companionship are closest to the surface. Even among crowds of new acquaintances and friends, this kind of loneliness has no cure other than to “let it be with you” and to keep your heart open to new connections. There is a difference, though, between loneliness for someone you wish was still here, and nostalgia or sentimentality for a time long gone. Sometimes our lives move on and loneliness is able to become fond memory.

There is another kind of lonely heart that I find described in this letter to the authors of a book I recently purchased called loneliness.

*I am fifty-six and have been divorced for years. When I was still with my husband and told someone I was lonely they responded with “but you’re married.” I have learned the difference between being alone and lonely. In a crowd, at work, even in a family setting, I always feel lonely. It can be overwhelming at times, a physical sensation. My doctors have called it depression, but there is a difference. I read once, you are born alone and you die alone. But what about all the years in between? Can you really belong to someone else? Can you ever*

*resolve the inner feeling of being alone? Shopping won't do it. Eating won't do it. [Casual intimacy] doesn't make it go away. If and when you find any answers, please write back and tell me. (loneliness, John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, p. 1)*

Is this your loneliness? The loneliness of crowded lives, full of people others assume are the antidote to feeling alone? I think the difference is not in the number of our relationships but in the quality of our relationships. Janis Joplin is quoted as having said, shortly before her death, that she was working on a tune called "I just made love to twenty-five thousand people, but I'm going home alone." (p. 12) When our relationships do not bring meaning into our lives they leave us continuing to feel empty and alone. When our relationships suck away our self-esteem or batter our psyches into shadows of what we have the potential to be, we become, or remain, lonely people.

In their book, loneliness, Cacioppo and Patrick propose that "the need for meaningful social connection, and the pain we feel without it, are defining characteristics of our species." Being lonely is an inherent part of being human. "Loneliness," for these authors, "becomes an issue of serious concern," however, "only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations, and behaviors." (p. 7) This is why, too, it is easy to slip back into feelings of loneliness, even when it is not necessarily the real thing. I think there are also times when we can deleteriously convince ourselves that we will be lonely no matter what – I am miserable and I'm always going to be miserable – and in doing so close the door on opportunities for the miracle or the moment of grace waiting around the corner. Negative expectations have a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. I wonder if one could actually become addicted to, or at least so comfortable with one's loneliness that opening up to being a different kind of person could actually be frightening as well as difficult?

Have you been in this place? I have, and it is very hard to come out of it. The loneliness of not feeling a part of the larger group, of feeling rejected, can very easily become that self-reinforcing loop of negative thinking. Relevant to that, there is a bit of scientific information in this same book on loneliness that I found personally interesting. You know I love to add a little bit of science here and there in my sermons if it will contribute to our understanding of some questions about our lives or the world. Cacioppo and Patrick write that "Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) shows us that the emotional region of the brain that is activated when we experience rejection is, in fact, the same region – the dorsal anterior cingulate – that registers emotional responses to physical pain." (p. 8) In other words "if social rejection (isolation) and reactions to physical pain share the same hardware" it becomes more apparent why it is not just a matter of "coming out of your shell, losing weight, getting a fashion makeover, or meeting Mr. or Ms. Right" to overcome the burden of our loneliness. Being lonely creates a pain response that is every bit as real as our aching knees.

Here's another thought: Have you ever found yourself lonely for yourself? Do you know what I mean? Have you ever found yourself missing the person you used to be? Not just the thin one! I mean the person who was resilient and more easily held onto hope? Or the person you know you are, but who has temporarily lost her way?

Sometimes we feel alone in a world gone mad..... This is a loneliness becoming more prevalent these days.

I remember feeling very alone as a young girl in the junior high years, when the popular thing to do was to try and make trouble or break the rules just to break them. I didn't know what was wrong with me that I didn't want to do these things. I was a good girl, I was a people pleaser, I liked to do well in school, and I was lonely because of these things. I guess I was suffering the loneliness of nerd-dome. I got over it.

One kind of loneliness not mentioned in the book I've been quoting this morning is what I would refer to as existential loneliness. This may be something more frequently experienced by Unitarian Universalists than by some in other faiths. I had two young men at my door on Friday from a certain religious persuasion, and when I explained to them that I was a minister and busy working on my sermon for this Sunday they of course wanted to know what my topic was. When I said "loneliness," they confidently patted their Bibles and said "Well, we know the answer to that!" I didn't have the heart (or maybe the fortitude) to explain to them that this answer does not work for everyone.

For some of us, there is no Word of God to fall back on. There is no sense of unconditional love or direction-toward-good to the Universe that can give us hope in the middle of the night. This can be a loneliness beyond the capacity of many to withstand. Living with the uncertainty of our Unitarian Universalist openness to different beliefs, with our acceptance that an omniscient, all powerful God may not exist, leaves many of us without the standard fall-back position of much of the rest of the world. This is a loneliness of which we seldom speak, but which I know can be troubling. If no one cares, what is the purpose of it all? It is our existential angst.....

The thing is – "someone" does care, and I am standing right here, and we are sitting right here, among billions of others. That we care about each other, not just generally as in "inherent worth and dignity," but personally, helps us get through the day, through the night, through the years. That we care about each other gives our relationships quality and meaning. That we care about others and have the capacity to let others care about us makes us persons, not just bodies. That we care is the antidote to loneliness.

In "A Woman in Amber" Agate Nesaule wrote "We have to believe that even the briefest of human connections can heal. Otherwise, life is unbearable."

If you are feeling lonely, for whatever reason, this Holiday season, you are not alone – and there is nothing wrong with you, either. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Loneliness is the precursor of the human condition. Our attempts to get past this essential loneliness are what religion is all about.