

From loneliness to solitude

Dear Friends

The Covid-19 pandemic is bearing down on us and life has changed dramatically in recent weeks. Government directives restrict our movements. We are unable to gather for worship and normal activities –in ‘lockdown’. This ‘spatial distancing’ has caused me to think about the experience of loneliness, and how we can be with it.

Loneliness is a difficult experience, a negative state that enters everyone’s life at some point. You may have felt it as a child when other kids laughed at you because you were ‘different’, or as a teenager when you were the last one chosen for the team or not invited to the party, when your children left home or when you found yourself living alone for the first time. You may be feeling it now – a strange inner gnawing; mental and emotional hunger; boredom, ‘suffocation’, restlessness. We try to *avoid* this painful void by staying busy, ‘connected’, and distracted, but is this a life-giving strategy? What if we were to embrace it?

And the desert shall bloom

‘Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude’, Henri Nouwen advocates. ‘To live a spiritual life, we must first find the courage to enter the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude’.

So, what’s the difference between loneliness and solitude? If the dynamic of loneliness is resistance (something is wrong here), the dynamic of solitude is acceptance. Importantly, ‘acceptance’ isn’t just resignation, putting up with it. It’s a more active embracing or befriending of our aloneness. It’s a choice and a practice which involves the courage to be fully ‘with’ what is; a receptive, attentive and trusting way of being that grounds us in God (Holy Ground). When we stop resisting our situation, we become present to what is here, given – the play of light and shadow in the leaves outside the window... the song of a bird... the comforting stillness of the chair in the room... the steam rising from our cup of tea...

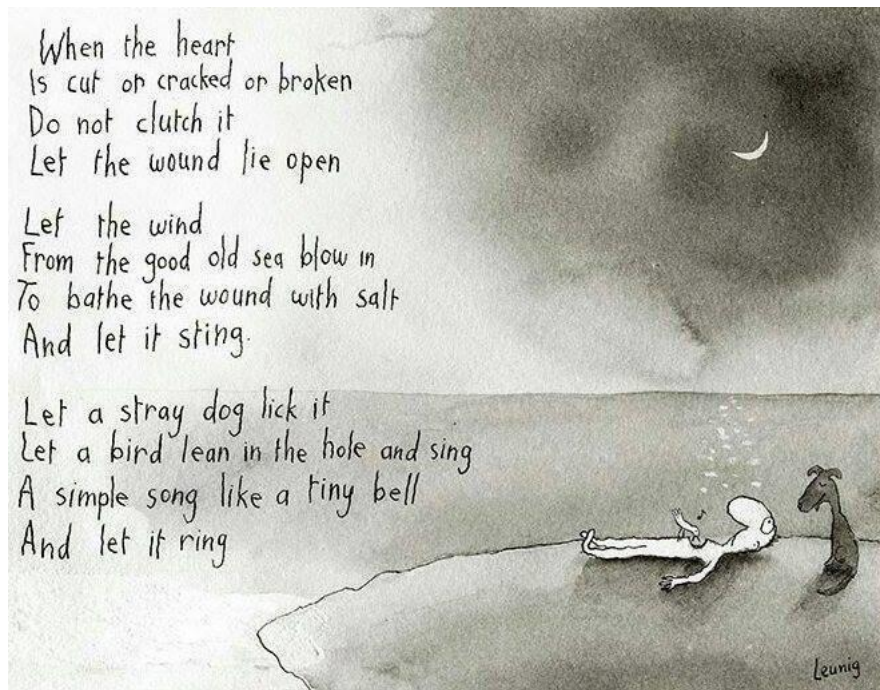
Paradoxically, solitude is where we discover we are not alone. ‘I have never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude’, Henry David Thoreau wrote. In the alertness of solitude, we begin to recognise our place in ‘the family of things’ (solidarity). Spiritual teachers speak of solitude as a springboard to greater self-awareness and creativity, as a source of clarity and insight, and as a pathway to growth – think of Jesus in the wilderness. ‘Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything’, taught the fourth century desert monk, Abba Moses.

In solitude, we receive what we need to love our own lives, and to reach out and care for others. It was in deep solitude that Trappist monk, Thomas Merton found ‘gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers’, and clarity to respond to the pressing issues of the time. The movement from loneliness to solitude leads ‘to a gradual conversion from an anxious reaction to a loving response’, Nouwen wrote.

Out of the miry clay

How do we practise this radical embrace of aloneness? A beginning is to notice the form of our resistance. When we’re feeling lonely, is there a story we tell ourselves? – *‘It shouldn’t be like this... if only my partner hadn’t died, or my children lived closer, or my friends weren’t so caught up, or I wasn’t so physically limited...’* These things can be genuine sorrows, and being alone can be difficult. But our tradition teaches that our wounds are also the site of our transformation – the crack where the light gets in (to

quote Leonard Cohen). Resisting our loneliness or seeing it as a problem to be solved, inflames the wound. Giving up the story that makes it seem as if something is wrong, leaning into the pain rather than pushing it away – these are the inner acts that allow grace to work. Let it be... be with it, and it will transform. Take Michael Leunig's wonderful counsel:



In this time of increased isolation may you know yourself nurtured in deep communion. With blessings, Neil

PS. If you have a computer you might like to google Laurence Freeman's reflection titled '*Solitude, the cure for loneliness*', and/or the restful '*Return to Now - Namaste Music*'.