

Loneliness: the silent killer

Clay Nelson © 5 June 2016

I once had the opportunity to go to Liverpool on business. As luck would have it, it was Beatles Week. The business didn't take as long as expected, so I got to spend a week exploring the city and immersing myself in my beloved Beatles and their music. I have lots of memories of the city, but one in particular has haunted me. It was a sculpture of a woman sitting alone on a park bench. I saw it from across the square, but immediately recognised her. I was moved to sit next to her on the bench, remembering her song:

Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been
Lives in a dream
Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door
Who is it for?

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?

The next verse about another lonely person made me want to hold her hand, because I understand:

Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near
Look at him working, darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there
What does he care?

This anthem to lonely people everywhere concludes with a verse where the two lonely people meet, but it's too late:

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name
Nobody came
Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave
No one was saved

While the song was not written about her, I did learn during my visit that a real Eleanor Rigby once lived in Liverpool. She is buried in St Peter's Churchyard where Paul McCartney and John Lennon first met. That coincidence has raised much conjecture about and interest in her. It turns out she was one of "all the lonely people" during her brief life of 44 years. But aren't we all.

The song's popularity is due not only to it having broken new ground musically, but because it speaks to what is part of our human condition. Last week I proposed that life is accidental and has no meaning and purpose unless we create it. Professor of philosophy and author Ben Lazare Mijuskovic has looked at the theme of loneliness in philosophy, psychology and literature and has found it to be a universal concern from the time of Greek myths to the present time. He attempts to demonstrate that we

have always felt lonely and that it is the overarching meaning of life. We are then condemned to inescapable loneliness.

While I don't dispute that it is impossible to get through this life without experiencing loneliness, I wonder if it is more extreme for us now than it was for our ancestors. Our humanoid forebears in East Africa wouldn't have survived one night without the tribe. We have been social creatures from the start. Our ancestors lived in less urban environments where, like in the Boston bar, Cheers, "everybody knows your name." Hunting and gathering, doing the laundry, childcare and cooking were communal activities. Families were not geographically fragmented. There was no belief in a right to privacy. Everyone knew your business before you posted it on Facebook. No one needed pets for company because they spent their time with work animals. Different generations were not isolated from each other. They lived together or just down the street. It seems to me that loneliness wasn't so much the problem then, finding some solitude was.

But times change. Journalist George Monbiot asks:

What do we call this time? It's not the information age: the collapse of popular education movements left a void... Like the stone age, iron age and space age, the digital age says plenty about our artefacts but little about society. The [human] impact on the biosphere, fails to distinguish this century from the previous 20. What clear social change marks out our time from those that precede it? To me it's obvious. This is the Age of Loneliness.

While the question may seem banal, what is loneliness? I suppose in Unitarian-speak it is when we feel disconnected from the interdependent web or all existence. It is feeling cut off from everything and everyone else. Adrift. Without meaning or purpose. Invisible. Judged. Isolated.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. As a strong introvert I treasure my alone time. It is in times of solitude I can process the world beyond my skin. It is a time to reflect and connect with what is going on inside me. It can be a time of creativity, from writing sermons to solving problems. It refreshes and restores me. Many activities such as reading, listening to music, enjoying nature, exercising are best suited to times of solitude. Extraverts tell me too much solitude makes them anxious, for me too little does. Extraverts shouldn't assume that when we are alone people like me are lonely. I am more likely to feel loneliness in a crowd. Cocktail parties, New Year's Eve extravaganzas, malls at Christmas are more apt to leave me feeling lonely than walking alone in midwinter on Takapuna Beach.

Nor should extraverts assume I'm a loner. I crave connection with others as much as they do, just in smaller doses. I enjoy in-depth conversation with a few more than small talk with many.

When Monbiot speaks about us living in the age of loneliness he is not talking about the transitory loneliness we all experience. When we move geographically, lose a friend or a spouse, change jobs, and retire are all instances where loneliness can feel overwhelming. But this loneliness generally passes.

Monbiot argues we have entered a time of chronic loneliness as a society. A study by Independent Age shows that severe loneliness in England blights the lives of 700,000 men and 1.1 million women over 50, and is rising with astonishing speed. The consequences of this are harmful to our physical and mental health. A researcher at the University of Chicago found loneliness to be twice as bad for older people's health as obesity and almost as great a cause of death as poverty.

But shocking as this is, such studies overlook the loneliness epidemic among younger adults. In 2010 Britain's Mental Health Foundation found loneliness to be a greater concern among young people than among the elderly. The 18- to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely often, to worry about feeling alone and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s.

"Loneliness is a recognised problem among the elderly – there are day centres and charities to help them," says Sam Challis, an information manager at the mental health charity Mind, "but when young people reach 21 they're too old for youth services." This is problematic because of the close relationship between loneliness and mental health – it is linked to increased stress, depression, paranoia, anxiety, addiction, cognitive decline and is a known factor in suicide.

So why has this happened? Certainly technology has made being isolated easier. With refrigeration shopping isn't necessary on a daily basis. Even when it is necessary you can order your groceries online and have them delivered. With Netflix or cable or YouTube you don't have to go to the cinema to see a movie. You don't have to visit friends, you can Skype them. Phone calls are declining thanks to texting. Telecommuting is becoming more common, making the water cooler conversation an endangered species. When we do get out of the house we are more likely to leave in a car than take a bus.

But this does not alone account for the epidemic of loneliness according to Monbiot.

These structural changes have been accompanied by a life-denying [neoliberal] ideology, which enforces and celebrates our social isolation. [C]ompetition and individualism... is the religion of our time, justified by a mythology of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone. For the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love, there is no such thing as society, only heroic individualism. What counts is to win. The rest is collateral damage.

We have changed our language to reflect this shift. Our most cutting insult is loser. We no longer talk about people. Now we call them individuals. So pervasive has this

alienating, atomising term become that even the charities fighting loneliness use it to describe the bipedal entities formerly known as human beings. We can scarcely complete a sentence without getting personal. Personally speaking (to distinguish myself from a ventriloquist's dummy), I prefer personal friends to the impersonal variety and personal belongings to the kind that don't belong to me. Though that's just my personal preference, otherwise known as my preference.

Political philosopher Thomas Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature, before authority arose to keep us in check, we were engaged in a war “of every man against every man.” It is a myth. He wrote this during the English Civil War when civil society seemed to be lost. We are social creatures but, in this new age, Hobbes’ myth seems to be coming true. The social contract that knits us together has been made null and void by this ideology, leaving us isolated, powerless over our lives, and fighting each other for scraps tossed to us by those who make up the 1%.

Monbiot’s view of our future is quite dark, but I think there is hope. It turns out that the pain loneliness causes us has a function. Just as physical pain protects people from physical dangers, loneliness may serve as a social pain to protect people from the dangers of being isolated. It may serve as a prompt to change behaviour, to pay more attention to the relationships that are needed for survival.

The idea of loneliness as a social pain has been demonstrated by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The emotional region of the [brain](#) that is activated when you experience rejection is the same region that registers emotional responses to physical pain.

What gets in the way of our responding to the pain of loneliness is our reluctance to acknowledge that we are lonely. Researchers have found that the stigma around loneliness is so great we would prefer saying we are depressed. We [fear](#) being judged as unlikeable, a loser, or weird so we don’t discuss our sense of aloneness, alienation, or exclusion.

Not feeling free to talk about loneliness adds to the problem and to our judgment of the experience. If we judge ourselves for feeling lonely, it makes it even more difficult to take steps to change the situation. Then we may judge ourselves for not taking action to solve the problem.

But when we are feeling lonely it is not a unique experience. In this age of loneliness we are all in the same boat. The answer is to reconnect by first acknowledging our disconnection without judgment, blame or shame. Our reconnecting is what those who benefit from neoliberalism fear most. Together we are a threat. That is why they work so hard to make us fearful of each other. Fear keeps us divided and unable to help ourselves and all the other lonely people. But when we know we are all feeling the same way, seeking connection is no longer quite so scary.

It could be as simple as sitting on a bench with Eleanor Rigby to defeat loneliness. A school in Canada has put a green bench on the playground. When a child is feeling lonely, excluded, or bullied he or she can sit on the bench. The other children know that person wants to connect. They can go sit with them or invite them into their play. One child observed that there are a lot fewer kids walking around alone during recess.

It has worked so well, numerous schools are putting benches on their playgrounds.