

What do we do with our lonely moments?

Loneliness can be described as *a depressing feeling of being alone, dejected by the awareness of being alone, unhappy as a result of being without the companionship of others*. These descriptions certainly do capture something of how loneliness might feel. The loneliness of aloneness. The pain of being alone. But loneliness can also be deeply felt when surrounded by people, when busy and leading a full life, or in a relationship with someone. Loneliness can be crippling and destructive. It can eat away at the spirit. So what is aloneness and what is loneliness, and how might we live creatively with them?

The early to mid-twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich writes: “Man is alone because he is man! In some way every creature is alone. In majestic isolation every star travels through the darkness of endless space. Each tree grows according to its own law, fulfilling its unique possibilities. Animals live, fight and die for themselves alone, confined to the limitations of their bodies. Certainly, they also appear as male and female, in families and in flocks. Some of them are gregarious. But all of them are alone! Being alive means being in a body – a body separated from all other bodies. And being separated means being alone.” Tillich then goes on to say this about the particular human experience of aloneness, “He is not only alone; he also knows that he is alone. Aware of what he is, he asks the question of his aloneness. He asks why he is alone, and how he can triumph over his being alone. For this aloneness he cannot endure. Neither can he escape it. It is his destiny to be alone and to be aware of it.” Long before Tillich, the Psalmist of ancient Israel, in the Book of Psalms, uttered this cry of awareness too, “Turn to me and be gracious for I am lonely and afflicted.” (Psalm 25)

The experience of loneliness can come upon us quite suddenly or it may grow steadily over time. It can come about for many reasons. Sickness or chronic ill health can lead us to feel we are isolated within our suffering, loss of loved ones through death or other separation, loss of work or meaningful occupation, ageing, rejection, isolation from a community in which we have previously found support and meaningful encounter, or indeed never having found such a community or such love. Then there is the loneliness which comes about through a sense of loss of self, a disappointment with self, a sense that one has betrayed what is held most dear – the loneliness of being alone with our conscience. And of course the prospect of the aloneness of our own death may lead to a profound and anguished loneliness. And then there is the loneliness we can feel while surrounded by loving people, supported by and immersed in community, engaged in meaningful work. Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and spiritual writer, knew all too well the pain of this loneliness and he wrote, “In community where you have all the affection you could ever dream of, you feel that there is a place where even community cannot reach”. However, he also went on to say, “That’s a very important experience. In that loneliness, which is like a dark night of the soul, you learn that God is greater than community”.

We can remain stuck in loneliness and the deep pain of all that might go with it – apathy, self-pity, bitterness or cynicism and a host of other feelings. But loneliness may be a spiritual path, a path to holiness, to encountering God, a path to *finding* our self rather than losing our self. Loneliness invites us to seek something deeper. We can spend our lives

running from aloneness because we are afraid of loneliness, or we can embrace aloneness and befriend it. That will require courage. The courage of solitude. When we feel lonely, the one thing we most want to run away from and avoid at all costs is solitude, when in fact it is the thing we most need. That fear of loneliness can drive us to ever greater efforts to fit in, to be part of something, to seek to be liked, loved, noticed and affirmed and indeed to be *like others*. Our world today is set up to encourage such a frantic search. So much mitigates against solitude and the loudest voice is the one calling out to us to establish more widespread connectedness through the ever increasing means of doing so. Yet, as we well know, that kind of connectedness more often than not falls short of real encounter, engagement and relationship, and the loneliness grows.

There is a longing at the heart of being human for life-giving solitude, yet we often fail to recognise that and name it, let alone act upon it. We talk a lot about 'getting away from it all', but this is not the same as integrating the practice of solitude into our days. "Loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude. We want to feel what we are – namely alone – not in pain and horror, but with joy and courage." (Paul Tillich) To move from loneliness we need to be patient. We need to stay in the pain and not run away from it, stay with the hurt and sadness of it and not try to fill it up with what can only partially and temporarily satisfy. There is a certain powerlessness in this staying in the pain which we may initially feel is unbearable and the question is whether we can tolerate not being in control, not being a fixer. Can we let ourselves be powerless? Saint Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians offers us a marvellous insight into this sense of powerlessness when he says, "When I am weak then I am strong." It is when we stop our frantic search and allow ourselves to be alone, to taste solitude, that we create the opportune moment for God's constant self-disclosure to enter our awareness.

Henri Nouwen's insight into loneliness and solitude came out of his experience of living in community where, for many years, he struggled with the pain of needing affection and affirmation. "To live a spiritual life", he says, "we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play." His words, "fearful clinging to fearless play" suggest a great release and unburdening. In solitude, embraced deliberately and regularly, released from the fear of it and the compulsion to fill up the space, we are able to develop the practice of listening – and this essentially is the practice of prayer. As we remain faithful to this practice, we will develop the ability to become more deeply present to our surroundings, to the people we meet and to ourselves. Ultimately we will become present to the One who is always present, to Eternal Presence, to God. As Nouwen says, "Why is it important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you 'my beloved daughter', 'my beloved son', 'my beloved child'. To pray is to let that voice speak to the centre of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in

your whole being.” In this solitude, this prayer, this listening, something is done *to* us, something that cannot come to be while we frantically run from our fear of loneliness.

Paul Tillich sums this up beautifully: “Now perhaps you can answer a question you may have already asked – how can communion grow out of solitude? We have seen that we can never reach the innermost centre of another being. We are always alone, each for himself. But we can reach it in a movement that rises first to God and then returns from Him to the other self. In this way man’s aloneness is not removed, but taken into the community with that in which the centres of all beings rest, and so into community with all of them. Even love is reborn in solitude. For only in solitude are those who are alone able to reach those from whom they are separated. Only the presence of the eternal can break through the walls that isolate the temporal from the temporal. One hour of solitude may bring us closer to those we love than many hours of communication. We can take them with us to the hills of eternity.”

For some people solitude comes more naturally than for others. The introvert personality will seek out solitude as the place where energy is replenished. The more extrovert personality will enjoy this life-giving energy in interaction with others. But the age-old spiritual counsel of the sages of Religion always invites us into solitude. Jesus himself went there often. We hear of many occasions when he ‘withdrew from the crowd’ or ‘went to a lonely place’. It was at those times, alone, that he entered into deep communion with God. It was those moments that enabled him to ‘come down from the mountain’ or ‘return from the desert’ and engage with those whom he loved, taught, challenged, inspired and nurtured. It was his profound prayer that enabled him to feel the kind of compassion for those who were suffering that can only come from deep communion with them. His own living of the Jewish teaching, ‘love your neighbour as yourself’, broke down those walls of separation which turn us in on ourselves and lead us into loneliness and took him to a place where he could indeed become the face, voice, heart and incarnation of God’s self-giving to the world. Solitude nourished him and took him there.

Ms Kerry McCullough
Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator