

In so many ways, aloneness defines our human condition. Though we are relational creatures, constantly in the company of others, we are ultimately alone. Though we’re umbilically attached at birth, and often dependent in old age, we come into the world alone, and must die alone. We spend the years in between coming to terms with our aloneness, which is to say exploring who we are in relationship with all that surrounds us. In a sense all of psychology and all of theology deal with understanding our aloneness.

In an earlier time we could at least nurture a relationship with the divine, and trust in the comforting assurance of God’s love. But today most of us no longer experience God in this way. Where then shall we turn for comfort, for companionship for our lonely souls?

I want to suggest this morning that even without traditional understandings of God there is hope, maybe especially without them. We *can* overcome our loneliness. Aloneness does not *have* to mean loneliness. We can find a deep sense of *at homeness* in the universe, as we are able to reach outward and reach inward for connection and embrace life in all its rich depth.

Andrew tells me that this month at UUFP, you have been reflecting on the *intergenerationality* of your life as a religious community. This morning I will speak of it in relation to these broader connections with others of all generations, which we make and we lose as we go through life. And I will speak of it also in relation to the connections we experience, as it were, as a succession of generations *within ourselves*, as we go through life, and grow in spiritual maturity.

Whether we fear our aloneness or are able to embrace it depends on its quality: Do we experience it as loneliness or as solitude? This is a

spiritual question which we must revisit from season to season and from day to day. It takes effort, recurring effort. It is easy to slip back behind the walls we erect to protect us from our vulnerability, or sometimes just from having to look honestly at ourselves. It can be a struggle to overcome our fears. It's this struggle I want to talk about this morning.

Carl Jung told of an exhausted clergyman who came to him on the edge of breakdown.¹ Jung told him to work just eight hours a day, to sleep for eight, and to spend the other eight in his study, in quiet.

A piece of cake. The man went home, and after dinner, went into his study for several hours. He played some Chopin on the piano, and read a book by Thomas Mann. Next day he did the same. And the end of the week, he went back to Jung, as exhausted as ever. Jung exploded: "I didn't ask you to spend your time with Chopin or Mann. I wanted you to be all alone with yourself!" Terrified, the minister said, "Oh, but I can't think of any worse company!" And Jung responded, "And yet this is the self you inflict on other people fourteen hours a day."

So often we fill our lives with activity, anything to keep us from loneliness. But we can feel lonely even in a crowd. I can remember, when I was young, leaving more than one party, or dance, and walking for blocks, feeling utterly alone.

It's in *connection* that we find the meaning of human life, and escape from loneliness – deep connection at the level of the soul -- with others, with the universe, with the creative spirit. It's in the alchemy of transmuting our loneliness into connection in this way, that we can eventually find ourselves alone with the Alone. Now, though we are still by ourselves, we

¹As told by Morton Kelsey in [The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation](#) (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 84.

feel the companionship of life itself, of Being. Our loneliness has been transmuted into solitude. But there's nothing automatic about it. And it passes.

The story of our mortal lives is a story of cumulative loss and change. From an early age, we lose those we have loved, and good friends move away. Sooner or later we lose our grandparents, and other family members we have loved, and we experience other kinds of loss as we age. Our losses leave us feeling bereft, and alone. Our spiritual health depends on our keeping alive our memories of the connections we have lost, and on continually opening ourselves to new connections, across the years and across the generations, even the generations of our lives.

Though we can't bring back what we have lost in the flesh, we don't have to lose these connections. We can learn from the ancient Hebrews the art of remembering – “re-membering,” as in putting back together pieces of our lives that have been dis-membered. No matter the mortality that takes away our loved ones, we can bring them back to life in memory, and rekindle the love and connection we have known.

This process is helped in our modern era by the pictures now so easily accessible on our computers and our cell phones, and by sound and visual recordings. It is helped by the letters and writings others have written. But even without such help, the ancients kept the past alive from generation to generation, in an oral culture, through the stories they told. We do this, too, as in memorial services and around the table at holidays, we tell the stories of people and places we have lost; as we tell them to our children, at bedtime; and as we “re-member” them in the privacy of our minds. As long as memory lasts, we can keep our past alive. We can balance the sadness of loss with memories of love and joy.

I want to suggest another practice as well, and that is *imagination*. Imagine our parents' joy when they learned we were on the way, and when they first held us in their arms. We were someone's dream. If this does not work, for some unfortunate few of us, we can imagine the resilience and courage that has sustained us as survivors. And we can imagine, all of us, our hopes for those who will come after us. Imagination, like remembering, can warm our lonely hearts. There can be joy even in imagining a past we did not know, a future we will never know.

We can also remember, and imagine places – it's not just about people. It might be a garden, as with Rabbi Nachman, or a forest watercourse, as with Thomas Merton. Here in the life of the city, I try to remind myself, as I walk my dog at night, to look up and see the beauty of the stars, or to imagine the beauty which the clouds obscure but which I have seen when the night is clear. It has been said that the first step in the spiritual life is to open our eyes and look about – and second follows instinctively, as we say, “thank you!” Colleague Kate Braestrup adds an intermediate stage. She says it's “look,” then “WOW!”, and then “thank you!”²

To be sure, both to remember and to imagine, and sometimes even to look, all require effort – and when we are lonely it can be a daunting effort. We must force ourselves to *let go* of our preoccupation with our sadness. And sometimes there is also fear to overcome. The writer Edward Dahlberg once wrote of having longed to meet the great novelist, Theodore Dreiser. But he held back – Dahlberg was just starting out, Dreiser was nationally known – what did Dahlberg have to offer? “Should I telephone him [Dahlberg wrote], he would surely hang up the receiver, and I would be mortally wounded.” But finally Dahlberg screwed up his courage and called

²Beginner's Grace (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

– and far from hanging up, Dreiser invited him to come over to his apartment, right away. But even so, though they met several times, Dahlberg always felt that he had to hold back – surely he was imposing upon the great man’s time.

Many years after Dreiser’s death Dahlberg would he learn that at about the time he first called Dreiser, a close friend of Dreiser’s had just died, and Dreiser had hoped, said his biographer, that Edward Dahlberg might take his place.⁶ Elizabeth O’Connor, who wrote about the Dahlberg-Dreiser relationship, speaks of this holding back as the “sin of withholding ourselves.” I might not call it a sin – but rather a tragedy, a self-inflicted wound. How easily we allow our lives to be marked with the scars of just such wounds.

But if we can just take this first step of letting go and opening our eyes, opening our hearts, love and meaning can come to us. In the words of a Zen saying,³ –

Sitting still,
Doing nothing,
Spring comes
and the grass grows by itself.

It can be a flash of insight. It can be a spark of friendship. It can be a glimpse of the stars. Our eyes are opened, and now we see. Some two centuries ago, in a poem which recalls for me of the beauty of this Tidewater

⁶As told by Elizabeth O’Connor in Search for Silence (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1986), pp. 29-30.

³Quoted by Thelma Hall, in Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 47.

Spring, the poet Wordsworth wrote of wandering through the English countryside, wrapped in a cloud of loneliness⁴ –

When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance. . . .

At the time, it seemed enough that the beauty which unfolded before him lifted his cloud of loneliness, and that was it. He felt revived, and gave it no more thought. But long afterwards, he would realize that the mere memory of this vast field of daffodils was enough to do the same, again and once again.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

As it did to Wordsworth as he wandered in that cloud of loneliness, the beauty of life can come to us, if we can but open our eyes – again, and again.

Happily, the effort doesn't always have to be ours alone.

⁴See Wikipedia, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

You may have struggled this morning just to get out of bed, and dress. Yet it is part of the joy of a community like this one that on any given Sunday, not all of us who have had to struggle, not today anyway. We care about each other, and we need each other. On any given day, while some struggle, others can reach out. We can greet each other. We can ask how life is going, and give our full attention.

It can make our day when someone reaches out. Kathleen Norris is better known for writings inspired by the austere emptiness of her beloved Dakota plains. But she has also written of a time much earlier in her life, living in New York, with other aspiring young writers, alone and far from home. She recalls a woman, named Betty Kray, who became a mentor to her and to many a young writer, inviting them to read from their work, and stay in her house for a time. Kray enjoyed housing and feeding people, Norris writes, and would “not be above urging an extra layer of clothing on a guest determined to take a walk in the bracing spring winds off the Hudson River.” One of these guests, named John Haynes, would recall the experience and the difference it made, in a poem called “The Sweater of Vladimir Ussachevsky.” Referring to Kray’s Manchurian husband, he wrote⁵

—

Facing the wind of the avenues
one spring evening in New York,
I wore under my jacket
a sweater given me by the wife of a genial Manchurian.

The warmth in that sweater changed
the indifferent city block by block

¹¹⁵Kathleen Norris, *The Virgin of Bennington* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), p. 181.

It's in gestures like these that we help each other turn our loneliness into solitude, bringing comfort as we walk, leaning forward into the chill winds of life. We're still alone, but no longer lonely. Now we're sustained by a sense of connection with others, with the universe. It could be a sweater. It could be a cup of hot chocolate. It could simply be an affirming word or smile.

Even these little gestures can make a real difference, because they touch us at a place deep within. They may remind us of times when we have been loved in the past, perhaps in childhood as we were held, or tucked into bed, or just taken seriously. They remind us that someone cares and love is possible.

But my message this morning is that with continuing effort, and with the help of others, it is possible to turn our loneliness into solitude, and feel the embrace of life. We can feel it across the generations, with others and within our own lives, as we move from self-absorption to a deeply grounded connection with life itself. Though still alone in this life, we are now alone with the Alone, held in the abiding love of the universe. We are alive again, with love.

May it be so, for each of us.