

# “Loneliness and Love”

by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, November 25, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Two years ago Mary and I heard Lily Tomlin at Duke’s Artists Series say about loneliness, “We’re all in this alone, together.” And psychologist Clark Moustakas said that “love has no meaning without loneliness.... Because real love is unique, it is inescapably lonely.”

What does that mean? As each relationship of real love is unique, the individual is at the same time profoundly aware of her or his solitariness in that experience, even when love flows back from a loving partner. That solitariness frequently is experienced as loneliness.

“Why should we make such a thing of loneliness when it is the final condition of us all?” asked John O’Hara in Sermons and Soda Water. I think it’s because it is the basic condition also underlying love, even though we act as if love could be an antidote to loneliness. Of course it is not.

One of the great experts on this was the short story writer and wit Dorothy Parker who remarried her second husband Alan Campbell years after they had divorced in an acrimonious separation. At their wedding reception she commented about the uniqueness of the occasion, “People who haven’t talked to each other for years are on speaking terms today—including the bride and groom.”

She was not one to give in to sentimentality. When Campbell died, she handled his death with distance too. Among those standing with her on their front porch as his body was being removed from the house was a Mrs. Jones who had liked Campbell but only pretended to like Dorothy Parker.

Noted for meddling in other people’s troubles, Mrs. Jones said “Dottie, tell me dear, what I can do for you.” Dorothy said “Get me a new husband.” There was silence, but before those could laugh who would have laughed, Mrs. Jones said “I think that is the most callous and disgusting remark I ever heard in my life.”

Dorothy Parker turned to look at her and sighed, and then she said, “So sorry. Then run down to the corner and get me a ham and cheese on rye and tell them to hold the mayo.”

She truly hated being alone. Once she moved into a private office in an office building where no one visited her. When a sign painter was hired to paint her name on the door, Parker, being lonely and really liking men, got him instead to print on the door, in all caps, the word “GENTLEMEN.”

There are times when companions seem to push loneliness away. I’ve had moments of communion with others so intense my sense of self and boundaries vanished. There was no “I” there, only “we.” These were fleeting moments that came on wings of grace.

More often I’ve been painfully aware of the separation between my partner and me. I can’t call up moments of communion at will. When they occur I can only go with them or retreat. If I step back to try to understand what the moment of intimate communion means, it disappears and I’m back in my own skin. Then self-consciousness stops me from re-entering that mystique of “we”. Ah, but it was sweet while it held us!

Loneliness sometimes is sweet too. It's not only the crushing sense of alienation and isolation, pain and disappointment that it can be, especially in a crowd. Nothing is so lonely as being in a space filled with people one does not want to be with—except being with a lover one does not want to be with. Sometimes loneliness leads one into sweet epiphanies of what is no more, or perhaps never really was, the way it's recalled.

In his book Loneliness and Love Clark Moustakas quoted theologian Paul Tillich saying “two words were created in the English language to express the two sides of [our] aloneness—‘loneliness’ to express pain in being alone and ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” (p. 146) I think both states feed the depth of a committed relationship.

Often our lives get so filled with doing things that we wonder when we finish who we are that we committed so much of ourselves to what we were doing. “Was that really me? Is that really what I am about?”

We bring that to committed relationships just as we do to everything. Our busyness makes it hard to break through to being close to those we care the most about, so we can experience them fully for who they are and we can open ourselves fully to them. We are cursed with practicality. We want to do to one another rather than be with-and-of-another.

To be with-and-of-another person, I think you have to be alone first, to go into solitude to discover who you are there. That experience of oneself is drenched with significance. It is both joyous and sad. When we know ourselves as whole persons, we recognize both sadness and joy as essential parts of our being. Opened to one's lover, they becomes the seeds from which real knowing grows. That knowledge grows best, I think, in committed relationships. Gay and lesbian lovers experience it in their committed love relationships exactly as straight lovers do.

I think this is different however, for men and women. For many men, opening ourselves up is difficult. They find it hard to talk about their feelings. Men have been trained from childhood to guard their knowledge, to use it for work. It's called “making a living,” as if real living were something you have to be paid to do. We use our learning and skills to measure our lives and sustain them, to gain material things, money and prestige. Some men try to get intimate relationships that way too.

Opening up seems different for women (Do I know this? No. It's an educated guess, based on what women have told me, an outsider.) Women seem less naturally competitive, less stimulated by the need to guard their vulnerability so tightly. Yet when confronted by the density of a partner's defenses, women also find it difficult to stay open for intimacy.

It's so easy to close up, so hard to be patient with a partner's resistance in a caring relationship. As a result some women say they seek and experience intimate closeness (not sexual intimacy) more with other women than with their own spouses or committed partners. That closeness is so powerful that it pulls one in wherever it is found.

A few years ago a young woman taught me something about how an intimate relationship can extend even beyond death. “My husband saw him first,” she told me. “It was late at night three weeks after Dad died. Bob woke me up and pointed to the doorway of our room. Dad stood there for five minutes silently, looking at me as if he wanted to speak before his hazy image faded and he was gone. We went back to sleep but in the morning my husband and I both remembered it clearly. My husband had been the first to see him.”

It was several months after the slow death of her father in an illness, and the young woman was still deeply affected by both his death and the experience she and her husband had had after he died. They both loved the father a great deal.

She had taken a leave of absence from work through the last weeks of her father's illness to be with him in his dying. It hadn't been a long illness as cancers go—six months from discovery to death—but they had become closer than ever before, or than either would have thought possible, sharing their most private aches and joys that previously had been hidden from one another.

Then came the great hollowness she felt after his death before she and her husband “saw” the father's spirit. It was ironic that her husband had seen the father first and awakened her, she said. The husband didn't—most emphatically did not—believe in such things. But there he was, three weeks after his death. He couldn't explain it, the young woman said, and he wouldn't have believed it if he had not seen it himself. But he saw.

They had to accept the vision that was uniquely part of their life together. The young woman had an easier time with it because she believed things like that do happen, pointing us to the beyond, she said. She saw her father once again a couple of weeks later by herself. No words were heard either time. There had been no similar experiences during the months before she came to talk with me, still shaken by it. Alistair Reed said in a poem:

Never to see ghosts?  
No, they are there. Let your ear be gentle  
At dawn or owl cry, over doorway or lintel,  
Theirs are the voices moving night toward morning,  
The garden's grief, the river's warning.  
Their curious presence in a kiss,  
The past quivering in what is,  
Our words odd-sounding, not our own—  
How can we think we sleep alone?

We don't sleep alone, ever. Our lives are filled with epiphanies, moments saturated with significance from the passionate experiences of our comings and goings, our joinings with one another and our leave-takings from one another.

Those of you who, like me are addicted to objective reality and trust objectivity a bit more than subjectivity as a means of determining what is real, may not know that half of all people in serious grief report either seeing an appearance of the deceased, feeling that person within them or just around them, hearing or touching or being touched by the person they loved. A number of people I know have had experiences of the kind reported by San Diego State professor Stephen Shuchter in his book, intended primarily for therapists, Dimensions of Grief (1986, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco).

We are never far from the epiphanies if we permit ourselves access to them. We can choose not to, but some people, in their solitude are open to their passions that allow them to re-experience both joy and pain so vividly, so life-fully, that it is as if their friends beloved were with them again. Such deaths may be felt as a loss of part of oneself. The young woman and her husband not only saw her father but, rearranging the letters of the verb “saw” to “was”, she “was” her father returning in her solitude to her.

All of us must lose persons we care about. To successfully accept the loss and reconstitute oneself is to grow more alive, aware of the precious-ness of the person who remains within you, nourishing you in your life and being. When in life one has held close both loneliness and love, in death the loneliness grows athwart a love that never goes away. Conrad Aiken said in one of his poems:

Music I heard with you was more than music,  
 And bread I broke with you was more than bread.  
 Now that I am without you, all is desolate,  
 All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,  
 And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.  
 These things do not remember you, beloved:  
 And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,  
 And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes.  
 And in my heart they will remember always:  
 They knew you once, O beautiful and wise!

So it is that once we have known and truly loved another, we never can unlearn what we have known. Though we be lonely, never in our deepest solitude can we lose that love.

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