

Loneliness

I recently read that over 40% of Americans often feel lonely. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to the increasing use of technology, such as smartphones, which tend to diminish actual human contact. Whatever the causes, in our lifetime it is very likely that we will come face-to-face with the fact that we are, in some fundamental sense, alone. Indeed, loneliness can certainly be one of the most difficult emotions we ever have to deal with. And until we face this directly, we will fear it.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal said that much of man's misery derives from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone. Fortunately, our practice often entails sitting alone with ourselves. Still, most people will do almost anything to avoid the fear of loneliness. We distract ourselves, get busy, or look for escapes. We can even use our relationships to run away from feeling this fear. Ultimately, however, the willingness to come to terms with one's loneliness is an essential aspect of learning to live with equanimity.

This doesn't mean we can't still rely on relating to others for comfort and enjoyment. After all, human beings have an innate need for social contact—and if we ignore this need we may suffer unnecessarily in isolation. For those who might have a tendency to isolate, or those who find themselves alone after a death or divorce, it's important to be wary of building walls to protect ourselves from possible pain. Unless we can drop the walls of protection we will continue to experience the unhappiness of feeling separate and lonely.

In fact, part of the wisdom of getting older is finding people and activities that fulfill our need for human contact, without resorting to superficial attempts to fill up time. Relationships and social activities have



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Questhaven Sesshin will be June 6–9. Applications will be accepted starting on April 9. If you would like to attend please apply early as this sesshin tends to fill up.

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to feel genuine if they are to be truly satisfying. To experience the sense of connection that comes through the presence of another is part of the wisdom that may be revealed as we age. It is to understand the paradox that, although we are basically alone, we are at the same time truly connected.

Even though we may want to engage our need for social contact, it doesn't mean we can't still enjoy being by ourselves or being quiet. Enjoying solitude can be wonderful, although often it doesn't take long for the urge for activity or entertainment to arise. When this urge arises, we can choose to follow it, or we can notice it and return to—and remain in—solitude. In fact, the capacity to be alone is essential in transforming the pain of loneliness into the settledness of solitude—that is, of being at home with oneself. And yet when loneliness hits us, the ability to feel at home in our own skin will not come to us naturally. When we experience loneliness, perhaps the main thing we feel is isolated and separate, and this can be painful. It can trigger our deepest fears of not being enough or not being connected.

We may realize that our need for another person is in part to have someone to witness our life, someone we can tell our ongoing story to. Without their presence we may feel emptiness—the feeling that we don't really exist, or perhaps that we don't really matter. If we don't have our story and someone to hear it, we may feel a fundamental shakiness. And when we no longer cover our loneliness with busyness and with our roles and our story, there may arise the deepest existential question—what *is* my life really about? After all, for many years our story has defined who we are and what our value is. Without our story we will no doubt feel anxiety; yet one of the great benefits of getting older is that we can get more in touch with what's truly important, which transcends our story.

When we begin to question our story and our life direction we may choose our activities with more intention. For example, with our social activities, we may decline to choose old patterns like idle social interactions. This means we don't speak just to speak, but instead converse about things that we find more meaningful. But this ability to speak and live with conscious intention isn't something that is

given to us as a gift simply because we are getting older. Without reflection and effort, growing older will most likely guarantee a continuation of whatever habits and reactions we've been repeating up until now. And it's very unlikely that these will help alleviate the pain of loneliness.

There's a specific practice that many have found helpful when faced with difficult emotions like loneliness. Elizabeth named this practice RRR—an acronym for *recognize, refrain, and return*. Simply put, first we must *recognize* what, specifically, we are feeling, and the "story of me" that may be repeating. Sometimes it's not so clear—because loneliness can feel like restlessness or boredom, and then morph into depression. So the first step is to recognize with clarity that the underlying feeling is in fact loneliness.

The second step is to *refrain*. Refrain from what? Primarily we want to refrain from allowing our thoughts to run rampant—thoughts such as: "It wasn't supposed to be this way." "This is too much to bear." "Why go on?" When we find ourselves spinning with thoughts like these, we can use the phrase, "*Don't go there!*" as a way of cutting through the mental spin cycle. But this is not the same as suppression, since we are not cutting off our feelings; we're only setting aside the thoughts that tend to immerse us in wallowing.

Once we can put space between ourselves and our thoughts we can go to the third R, which is to *return*. What do we return to? We return to the present moment of loneliness, starting with feeling exactly what bodily sensations are present. Remember, in *refraining* we only turned away from the *thoughts* that exacerbate our loneliness, yet we didn't suppress our physical feelings. This makes it possible to truly feel what we're feeling, even if it's intense or painful. And the way we do this is with the "heart's breath."

Just as we do in working with grief and loss, we follow the in-breath into the center of the chest, and with each successive in-breath we breathe the sensations of loneliness into the chest center. Then, on the out-breath, we softly release. By breathing the sensations of loneliness into the heart, and by allowing ourselves to feel them fully, the experience of loneliness can gradually transform into something

very different.

Over time, although we may still be alone, we are no longer lonely. When we stay really present with our discomfort, which may at times feel like a hole in the heart, it may open us to a basic understanding of the human condition—the realization that everyone suffers. When we can endure this existential space, and stay with it without answers, and without pushing it away, it can become a doorway into what is most real.

Ezra Bayda, adapted from *Aging for Beginners*

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