

March 14, 2021

LONELINESS TO SOLITUDE

Dear Friends,

It was St. Patrick's Day last year that I last saw my brother Patrick. His nursing home went into lockdown on March 18th, and he died on March 28th. I can hardly believe it's been a whole year. In grief it can feel like 20 years and 20 days at the same time. - It's such a strange experience of time when you are grieving. They say March comes in like a lion and out like a lamb, but last year March, as well as the rest of the year, remained a roaring, ravenous lion. We have many new people in our groups who have lost loved ones to this insidious virus, with similar heart-breaking stories of not being able to visit, nor to say goodbye, nor to hold their hand when they crossed over, nor afterwards to have a funeral or service or anything to somehow mark the catastrophic loss.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt says, "Because funerals are so effective at helping us embark on a healthy mourning path, anything that delays the funeral also delays the natural healing process." It seems that the pandemic has delayed the 'natural healing process' for most of us, whether we lost someone to Covid or not. It is not 'natural' to be so alone, to be so isolated and disconnected from others. Many who have been pretty much alone this past year have experienced intense loneliness and the psychological and physiological effects of isolation.

One of the goals in the 'healing' process of grief, I believe, is to somehow move from the experience of loneliness toward solitude. Solitude is different from loneliness because it is the state of being alone without necessarily feeling lonely. In solitude we can engage ourselves in inner growth and reflection. While there are various ways we can still reduce loneliness through connecting to others, such as our support groups and other virtual or socially distanced gatherings, this time has also ironically offered many of us the 'opportunity,' if you will, to consider the relationship we have with ourself and how we can possibly enrich it, even in the midst of heartbreak and sorrow. This 'movement' is almost impossible during early, raw grief, but it is quite possible as we move forward in grief and mourning.

“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.” (Henri Nouwen) This is a painful journey of self-awareness and it is certainly not a journey we would have chosen for ourselves, nevertheless it is the journey on which we are currently embarked. “To transform your loneliness to solitude, you need patience and have to consciously work with your painful emotions,” says Dilpreet Bhatia in her article, “*Journey from Loneliness to Solitude*,” she goes on to say, “Knowing yourself better can lead to your becoming your own caring friend. This can reduce loneliness. Learn to enjoy your own company. Being alone, you have a rare kind of freedom: to be who you are, to do what you want, with no compromise or sacrifice, to be independent... Discover your true self, your passions and dreams buried deep. Ask yourself- who are you really? Use this time alone to revive that person you used to be...” I think an essential, and one of the most difficult parts of this is learning not to judge ourselves, and to be kind and gentle and loving with ourself. We need to stop listening to our inner saboteurs who may constantly tell us that we are too weak, too fragile, too unlikable, unlovable, too wounded or too old, or too whatever... We need to slowly and methodically let go of the negative energy and voices within and turn to loving and compassionate thoughts and actions.

Connecting with yourself doesn't mean turning inward and calling it a day. We are social beings and we need others. Aside from solitude, the other antidote to loneliness and isolation is connecting with others. Our groups provide some of this connection, but often this is not enough. This may remain difficult until more people are vaccinated, but if you feel the need and desire to connect with others perhaps consider volunteering in some way, as it can sometimes very much help to alleviate loneliness. I found this website that may be helpful in finding volunteer opportunities: www.volunteermarch.org and if you love animals try the ASPCA. If you are looking to meet new people or meet people who have similar interests as yourself, you may want try www.meetup.com if you have not already done so.

I share all of this today as a fellow griever, and I understand how difficult some of this may sound, but I have experienced, both in my own life and in others, what self-care can do, how it is essential to healing, and how transformative it can be not only for ourselves but for those

who we know and love. The best thing we can do for others right now is to take care of ourself. Think of the oxygen masks that drop from planes, they tell us to put ours on first before assisting others. We can't help someone else if we can't breathe. So take a nice deep breath and take good care of yourself.

Peace and Serenity, Kevin