ESSAY

Reaching Out to the Lonely
Against the Odds of Social Constraints

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Loneliness is a Scourge

It has long been understood that we humans are a social species. We require satisfying social relationships to sustain robust mental and physical health. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) have noted that impaired social relationships can often lead to loneliness and be disruptive to mental health. The single most prevalent reason people call suicide crisis lines is loneliness. Suffering from a sense of having no one in your corner to share your innermost fears and hopes inevitably leads lonely people to feel crippled with inaction. Furthermore, according to Cacioppo et al. (2008), loneliness impairs the ability to feel trust and affection. And people who lack emotional intimacy are less able to exercise good judgment in socially ambiguous situations.

The reason for loneliness is often difficult to identify, particularly by those suffering from this malaise. It may even require the wisdom of those with specialist skills to pinpoint it. Loneliness is often treated as an ailment peripheral to other mental disorder which brings on the sense of loneliness, including an inclination to self-harm. Loneliness can go unnoticed for long periods or be treated perfunctorily. Social mechanisms appear to be lacking when loneliness is the principal debility. The primary challenge appears to be in how to reach out to the person who is suffering from loneliness to assuage their situation before their condition becomes significantly manifest and thus debilitating.

Loneliness Exacerbated by Social Media

The Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns have compounded the problem of loneliness for many. It has been well-documented that long periods of isolation in custodial care or quarantine for illness have detrimental effects on mental wellbeing (Stickley and Koyanagi 2016). While connecting through social media might be useful to counter loneliness, ironically, excessive participation in social media can be a major trigger of feelings of loneliness. This is especially true when participants are confronted by "peer" achievements to which they cannot aspire much less emulate. Regular users of social media who lack requisite wisdom can be constantly besieged by messages that celebrate the accomplishments of those they know or know about, which can come in the form of "likes" and congratulatory signals such as "emojis". Inevitably, an urge may well be generated

among such social media participants to emulate the feats, especially of their peers, and they will unconsciously expect the same kind of affirmative response. Then, the absence of longed-for felicitations will probably create an inner dissonance about themselves and their lifestyle attributes, including their conduct, performance, and self-esteem, thus leading to gross disenchantment with life. Such disillusionment could evoke dark thoughts in vulnerable, lonely social media users, and trigger withdrawal.

Facebook and Google, the leading purveyors of social media, do not appear to care about generating such opprobrium, and the harmful effects that result for many of their members. We are becoming increasingly aware of the way algorithmically controlled social media encourages the dissemination of superficial and mostly positive portrayals of the lives of its users. This kind of manipulation panders to the generic user who can then be groomed by such affirmation. Why is this ignored by Facebook and Google? Are they not, in their search for social media dominance, keen to have users respond in such self-affirming ways, even when the affirmation is quite inappropriate, so as to further their commercial interests? They palpably encourage participation in this zero-sum game in which the need for user discernment is construed as "missing out," and ranks high on the "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) scale (Przybylski et al. 2013) which is a measure of distress related to missing out on social experiences. Through algorithms, social media companies curate information and decide what their users see. They amplify some players and mute others in mostly non-transparent ways.

The documentary-drama hybrid *The Social Dilemma* uncovers how social media behemoths track social media players and vary algorithms, themes, background information, and music to mesmerize and string their users to stay continually on track, receiving continued exposure to the feats of their peers that drive the urge to gain acceptance by imitation. I am reminded of what Gore Vidal (1925 –2012), an American writer and public intellectual known for his epigrammatic wit, once said: "whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies."

In a study by the University of Pennsylvania, Hunt et al. (2018) established that active participants in social media can often feel adrift, lonely, and as social outcasts when accolades from their friend circle dry up. Small wonder then that many regular users of social media, those who are exposed to the socio-psychological effects of the manipulations basic to Facebook and Google media-presentation, are facing ongoing challenges to their mental well-being should they continue to see their own social life through these "apps." Is this the way to show appreciation for and emulate peers? Social media vehicles can hardly claim to be involved in efforts to counteract loneliness by getting people in touch with each other when they do so by reducing human participation in society to emulation and being "liked". In their research study, Hunt et al. (2018) conclude that limiting social media usage has a direct and positive impact on subjective well-being, especially with respect to decreasing loneliness and depression.

Social Constructs Limit Engagement with Loneliness

While cautioning about the dangers of social-mediated reduction of human relationships via algorithmic manipulation, it must be noted that the concept of loneliness needs to be regarded within a broader social context. Loneliness rears its ugly head in a myriad of situations, which could manifest, for instance, in young children within a household, or a child in a school ground, or a "loner" at work, or someone who drifts into crime because of homelessness, or is incarcerated, a mother in post-partum, or even parents of the "empty nest". Loneliness need not always be a chronic condition bordering on psychiatric illness. Loneliness can also become latent because of the separation of distance, or unfriendliness in a workplace, classroom, or group setting, especially in situations in which a person is cruelly socially isolated by others. While "aloneness" can be chosen, loneliness can get sinister when it creeps up in a move to an unfamiliar place, such as going to a residential college. It is also common to believe that a lonely person is one who does not have any friends. The irony of social isolation is that people are often lonely in the midst of many.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Economist* underscored the specter of a quiet pandemic of loneliness that already exists, in its article*,* "You'll Often Walk Alone" (Coggan 2021). Several western democracies, recognizing the inexorable growth of loneliness, have initiated civic campaigns to educate and encourage their communities to call out loneliness lurking in distressed people. These civic programs intend to mitigate the menace of loneliness by encouraging a humane engagement with the lonely. The intention is worthy, but the impact of such civic programs espousing a compassionate approach may be blunted by constructs of privacy concerns and time management criteria imposed by contemporary society that do not encourage intimacy between sufferers and available help.

Unfortunately, the social order we live in does not always connect with the distraught in a way that gives their sense of loneliness adequate compassionate care, including adequate time for personal engagement. While compassion may be an inclusive term in dealing with those challenged by loneliness, this engagement is often constrained by privacy issues that take the mentally challenged outside the reach of true compassion. In contemporary liberal democracies, intimate communication that references personal information may be considered an intrusion of privacy, and thus be frowned upon. The disapproval of intimacy may well be the agent provocateur of the loneliness epidemic, having elevated the belief in the self-sufficiency of the abstract individual to be the raison d'être of life itself. Acknowledgment of an individual's privacy is ingrained in the ethos of liberal democracies and even in its selective abrogation, there is an abiding fear of potential perverse abuse. The fear of litigation in case of unsuspected contravention of privacy always seems to loom large. Therefore, a significant number of social interactions with lonely people is limited to litigation-proofed scripted inquiries and responses. This contrived protocol often results in perfunctory transactions with little potential for the type of familiarity that can engage with the soul sufficiently to alleviate loneliness.

It would indeed be unfortunate if the loneliness of the most fragile humans was approached with a skepticism that has been generated by a fear that "over-reaching" companionship might be intrusive. Zaman et al. (2018) lament that, particularly in the developed world, free-flowing compassion often struggles to assert itself in an atmosphere of apprehension and fear. Hofstede (1984), in his work on comparative cultural dimensions, had similarly suggested that in low context societies of western economies like the US, UK, and Canada, there is a cultural resistance to relying on others, particularly in the more personal and intimate tasks of daily living. In such societies that consider individualism in high regard, where a high value is placed on autonomy, not being able to share one's anxieties confidently can lead to a profound sense of loneliness.

Furthermore, communities in developed economies place a high value on the use of discretionary time. The compelling inclination of people in individualistic cultures to manage time optimally tends to inhibit their engagement with lonely people. On the other hand, in collectivistic cultures, sufferers of mental health disorders are more likely to be engaged with free-flowing compassion from families and friends, exemplified in the first instance by enough time being made available to them to engage with their high anxieties. This collective engagement of the family and community helps largely to assuage feelings of loneliness and build trust in the unofficial support mechanisms. Such informal arrangements are not always possible in jurisdictions that are circumscribed by privacy mandates.

Concerns with crossing privacy lines and fixation with time utilization ought not hold communities back from seeking to achieve a Christian state of society, which is neither individualistic nor collectivistic. Barney Zwartz (2019), religion editor and a fellow of the Centre for Public Christianity, Sydney, believes that in the Christian tradition, meaningful companionship begins even before Creation in the three persons of the Triune God. As Augustine of Hippo wrote in the fourth century of God: "You have made us for yourself. Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee" (et al. 2008). Zwartz (2019) observes that Genesis describes how God made humans in his image, which is understood to mean they have rational and moral agency and the ability and need to relate to others. After God created Adam, he says "it is not good for the human to be alone", and he creates Eve. According to John Dickson, Fellow in Public Christianity at Melbourne's Ridley College, the secret in creation is an unexpected plural in Genesis chapter one: "There's a pause in the creation story. God has been saying, 'let there be light, let there be vegetables, let there be animals'. But when we get to humans, God does not simply command human beings into existence, he pauses and talks to himself: 'let *us* make man in *our* image'." Dickson explains this as a reference to the community that exists in God himself: Father, Son, and Spirit. So human beings have been made in that image for one another and for God, fellowship, friendship, connectedness, service, and trust. That is our true nature as humans. Biblical scholar, J. Grisham Machen (1923) argued that the social element in Christianity is found not only in communion between human beings and God, but also in communion between human beings. The Christian view of the worshipping God is never to be conducted at the neglect of service rendered to one's fellow people. Christian worship is principled by the

greatest Christian commandment "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, is not able to love God whom he hath not seen". As C. S. Lewis (1942) asserted, "when you are tempted not to bother about someone else's troubles because they are 'no business of yours', remember that though he is different from you he is part of the same organism." Lewis explained that Christianity thinks of human individuals not as mere members of a group or items in a list, but as organs in a body, different from one another, and each contributing what no other could. In a Christian or Biblical view of human society, there is an understanding that God has arranged the members of the body, every one of them, according to His design—parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts considered less honorable, are to be treated with greater honor. Jesus' clear teaching is that the only possible way to serve God is through the service of humanity, no matter what the social conditions might be. He was moved by empathy for the distraught, rather than conformed to obscurantist social constructs. Jesus did not hold back on essential works of mercy and compassion towards the needy, whether it was Sabbath or not. An instance in point was when he challenged the prevailing dogmatism by making time to engage with the infirm man languishing by the poolside, and encouraging him to carry his mat on the Sabbath (John 5:5-16). Jesus' compassionate approach was, as it were, to get the infirm man up and onto his feet.

Social media over the past two decades has acquired significant popularity, especially with the advent of new platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These social media vehicles give their participants a large repertoire for communication, and provide their users with the technologies to share messages in text, visual, and sound formats. The prime benefit of social media vehicles is that they can communicate instantaneously in real-time, the transmission of messages not being constrained by time zones and space distances. Vehicles of communication can be effectively used for social good, but, often, perverse communication finds its way through social media waves. Unfortunately, perverse and sensational messages appear to have ready audiences and are quickly becoming the standard means of mobilizing dissent, hate, and resentment, galvanizing action among protagonists of dark ideologies. Large sections of these militant groups feel themselves deprived, disgruntled, and lonely individuals.

The march of social media adoption appears to be inexorable, and the social capacity to thwart the loneliness constructed among social media participants is difficult. However, Christianity's social and humanitarian outreach to the lonely in the manner of Jesus' engagement with the distraught man by the pool (John 5:5-16) can greatly help them regain their confidence, and a healthy form of meaningful existence.

Conclusion

The Biblical narrative of the healing at the pool is not commonly understood as Jesus viewing the dispirited man to be lonely. There also does not appear to be extant literature that pays sufficient attention to the nuances of how Jesus reaches out to the

man's loneliness. Jesus' effort at spending time and striking familiarity with the distraught man is an example of how loneliness is to be called out. Loneliness is a silent scourge that is taking hold of increasing proportions of society, many times in unseen ways, and is proving to be a profound challenge to how our social systems cope with this malaise. In Christian engagement with human society, a corollary of God's second great commandment of love for neighbor is that there is nothing more intimate in life to the weaker sections of community than simply helping them to be understood. To understand someone else is to help heal their wounds and to encourage them to let the restoration fill their souls. The Christian spirit concedes that it is hard to stay behind with the lonely, but also realizes that it is much harder for those who are distraught when they are left behind.

Importantly, spending time with lonely persons and engaging with them without prejudice in a language they are comfortable with can help win their trust. This trust should underscore a meaningful companionship, a connection in which mutual knowing and liking can grow. Supporting lonely people in places we live, work, and learn by patiently showing them empathy and building their confidence can help arrest expansion of mental health disorders such as cognitive decline and depression, as well as self-harm and heart disease. Those who feel all alone present with fewer medical issues when they sense concern and encouragement, thus putting less stress on the public health purse. Better health may also motivate the lonely to be involved in schemes or projects that augment meaningful social relationships, which in the long term could increase the width of social capital.

Cultivating relationships with lonely people by extending concern and encouraging them to pick up their mat and walk, as Jesus did, is a way to reach out to the lonely against the odds of social constraints. If this were done, and if such a Christian outreach were put into general practice, social constructs that limit engagement with the lonely would themselves be overwhelmed.

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