

Loneliness

Loneliness is real and tangible. It is felt in the heart and actualized in the mind, at times as powerfully as sorrow, joy and love. It can be persistent and long-lasting, depending on the circumstances that initiated it. Examples of circumstances that can trigger loneliness include:

- the death of a loved one
- a geographical relocation initiated by a work or career change, perhaps causing isolation from God's children
- rejection or shunning by peers because of ways one is "different," especially poignant during formative teenage years
- unawareness of or insensitivity to an individual's needs—for advice, for a listening ear, for maintaining mental stability, for love
- changes in life circumstances
- leaving the farm and moving to the city
- when a dear one loses sight of God's kingdom and denies living faith

Loneliness, it seems to me, is defined by one's emotional response to his environment, not by his physical presence or place in it. If a person is shy, anxious or lacking self-confidence, she can feel lonely even in a crowd, at events such as graduations, Summer Services, Peace Garden Youth Days, even at haps or youth camps.

A Feeling of Craving, a Vague Emptiness

Loneliness is missing something, someone or some aspect of life. I sense it as a feeling of being unfulfilled, accompanied by a vague emptiness, a sense of loss. I feel it as a craving (in my case, for a departed spouse) as one might crave moments of stillness in a noisy, busy world. My loneliness is exacerbated when I'm alone—alone after 44 years of togetherness.

I frequently recall my mother singing to me this little ditty when I was a young boy: *There's a lonely little robin in a tree by my door. / And it waits for its mate to return evermore. / So remember, please remember, that I'm lonely too. / Like the lonely little robin I'm waiting for you.*

Although loneliness is usually an unpleasant response to isolation or separation, it is not always unpleasant, for in the verse above the bird also waits in anticipation to be reunited—as I do nowadays, after grieving has abated. This illustrates the difference between being alone and being lonely; they are not the same. I find that although being alone sometimes embraces loneliness, it is more often peaceful, restorative or creative.

Loneliness from a Believer's Perspective

In general, loneliness is a negative emotion—one that brings longing, sadness, a sense of loss, a feeling of disconnectedness and isolation. In some situations, it may be felt only momentarily and intermittently; in others it may be ever present, coloring one's thoughts and shaping one's actions. When severe, it can be felt to be draining, upsetting or constricting to the point of smothering joy.

This is what David felt when sin isolated him from God: "I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop" (Ps. 102:7 ESV). In another psalm, David prays: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses" (Ps. 25:16,17 ESV).

David's situation leads us to examine loneliness from the perspective of a believer. To become isolated or separated from God, as David was, means also being isolated from the Holy Spirit and hence from God's congregation, from the escorts and friends of the heart one has known. An isolated one surely experiences poignant loneliness, but don't we also feel sharp pangs of loneliness and longing in our heart for the one who has left God's kingdom? Although in time such loneliness abates for us, we would do well to follow David's example and pray that reconnection with God would vanquish the loneliness the departed loved one must feel.

Loneliness is softened when one dwells in God's kingdom and feels His presence. Humans have an innate need to connect, and to have connection with God through faith ameliorates many feelings of loneliness. We can say, as Jesus said, "I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (John 16:32). We are also comforted when we understand through faith Jesus' promise that He will send the "Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name...even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:26, 15:26).

The Holy Spirit Comforts and Unites

It is hard to imagine the depth of loneliness without the Comforter in our life. Through the Holy Spirit, a believer is a member in the large family of a caring and loving Father in heaven—the same Father of whom Jesus says: "He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone" (John 8:29). Nor are we alone, for Jesus promises, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). Further, we are connected through the Holy Spirit which dwells within us and in our brothers and sisters in faith. And we have a protective, guiding Mother in the congregation of God.

Although we can and do feel loneliness in our temporal lives, we are not left endlessly alone in it; God sends compassionate escorts to listen to us, to comfort us and to connect with us. And best of all, we can become intimately connected through the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. It's hard to feel lonely when we are united by the Holy Spirit.

Wayne Kallio

How I Lessened the Loneliness

So, how does one ameliorate or lessen the ever-present loneliness that lingers when we suffer deep loss or another significant life-change? I'm sure that psychological journals provide solid advice in this, but I'd like to also share my personal experience after being widowed for eight years.

1. First, force yourself *often* out of your comfort zone. Rather than avoid contact with others, which loneliness urged me to do, I complied when someone asked me to participate in some situation. For example, I resisted attending the local ministers and wives' evening since I no longer had a wife. But others encouraged me to come; they wanted to hear my psalms. They sensed my need to still belong. Being there helped me to unload a huge backpack of isolation and disconnectedness. The most significant of these situations was when I agreed, a year after Mary Anne's passing, to go to teach at Reisjärvi Opisto.

When principal Mikko Kinnunen invited me to do so, I first refused. But he then enticed me with a sweeter carrot, "What about coming to teach just half-time?" And so I did. It was terribly hard at first, to be there by myself—there where my wife and I had spent two wonderful years together many years prior. But the connection I experienced with all those understanding and loving students and staff was a healing balm. After the year was over, I realized it was the best thing that could have happened. That's how it is in God's kingdom.

Following a number of such restorative experiences I became courageous enough to seek them out. It wasn't always easy, but it was always restorative. It took my focus away from myself and onto others. It brought connectedness and it felt good—even in little things, such as talking with the stranger sitting next to me in the medical clinic waiting room, or on the airplane or standing in line at the post office. Especially rewarding was when I initiated conversation with someone I didn't know before at a seniors camp in Phoenix or at winter and summer services. Being engaged, rather than withdrawn provides a sense of well-being and belonging, at least momentarily, and chips away at those moments of aloneness and loneliness. And more often than not, it leads to further contact and pleasant future interaction.

2. Second, don't restrict your visits or relationships to only the social category (youth, married, single, aged) to which you happen to belong. We tend to think that only those in similar situations will be interested in what we say or do. Not so! Age is an artificial, self-imposed boundary; crossing it can create relationships as meaningful as those with your peers or family and thus diminish loneliness significantly. I began to visit young married couples and their families. I visited elders in a care facility.

I even attended a few haps and youth Bible classes. It's hard to feel lonely when you are engaged with others. Besides, it's refreshing, rejuvenating and often entertaining and enlightening as a bonus.

3. Third, make the first move. Don't wait for the other person to greet you; he or she is wishing you would say something to eliminate the unknown that hangs between you, so just do it! You can greet them—with God's Peace and a smile. Connection happens automatically with either of these. Loneliness vanishes.

4. Finally, resist the temptation to trade face-to-face contact for virtual chat. Sitting at home with your iPhone in hand is no substitute for connection through eye contact, facial expressions and gestures, a smile or a grimace, laughter and a hug. Virtual contact is fine, even great in many cases, such as when I talk, for free, on WhatsApp, Skype or FaceTime with my friends in Finland. But over-reliance on virtual contact when physical presence is possible is surely isolating and, over time, forges a pathway into loneliness.

Wayne Kallio

Discussion Points:

1. What kinds of loneliness have you experienced in your life?
2. How do you deal with, or lessen feelings of loneliness?
3. How does your faith help you handle loneliness?
4. What positive things could loneliness provide in one's life?