

Week 26: The Opposite of Loneliness

I remember the first time I witnessed loneliness, and I can still feel the way it ruptured me.

I was in grade school, playing hooky on a Friday afternoon, traveling with my father to a Chicago Bulls game. While munching on fries at a roadside McDonalds, I glanced at the table opposite us. My eyes suddenly itched and I felt something throb behind them.

Sitting several feet away was a man whose image was instantly seared into my mind, because his loneliness was oozing from every pore. A youngish man, mid-30s, bushy red hair, eyeglasses thick and slightly askew, weak chin, a short sleeve shirt and a clashing tie, big-sad eyes staring into the distance, nibbling on a French fry of his own. He spoke to me with those eyes, and they said, “I’m all alone and I’m used to it and I’m resigned to it—there is nothing more for me.”

I think he broke my heart because he was a mirror for my own loneliness—a painfully shy kid who felt completely unanchored in the world. The years have rolled by, and now *I*’m that man’s age. And I’m a therapist now, instead of a kid. I’ve put down roots in the world. But one thing remains unchanged by time: lonely hearts still rupture me.

As a therapist, I’ve come to believe loneliness is at the heart of human suffering. It’s the shame telling us there is nobody truly with us because we aren’t worth being with. It’s the depression convincing us we are alone in the darkness and no one notices. It’s the haunting fear we are on our own without protection and there is nothing solid to land on. It’s the pulse of a thousand addictions. It’s a child’s rebellion shouting, “If I can’t be looked upon with a warm eye, I will settle for a frustrated, angry, disciplinary eye.”

The world we live in is aching with loneliness. Yet, we are rarely aware of it, because in a loud and crowded world, loneliness has a thousand busy disguises. We sit in traffic jams thick as quicksand. We work in offices cramped with a hundred cubicles. We tweet our thoughts to a thousand followers. We instantly upload photos to Facebook, updating friends and family about our every move. We share videos of ourselves on YouTube with the tap of a finger, and within hours we have thousands of viewers. We feel connected—sometimes even *too* connected—and yet loneliness is spreading like an epidemic.

It’s spreading like damp mold behind seemingly pristine walls.

Our loneliness is growing because it is only eliminated by being seen. It is only relieved by a slow, careful attentiveness and a deep knowing of who we are. And in a world of traffic-jam-relationships and friendship-by-appointment,

being *really seen* has become an antiquated experience. But the good news is, it isn't extinct. About one quarter of a century after my McDonalds encounter with loneliness, I was sitting in a different restaurant, and I witnessed the opposite of loneliness.

I witnessed belonging.

I had just settled in to do some writing, when I noticed an attractive sound behind me. I turned around to find a group of nine clearly retired, silver-haired men, sharing coffee and the quiet murmur of conversation, punctuated by comfortable laughter at the telling of familiar jokes and anecdotes. My heart hummed and longed. These were the least lonely-looking men I had ever seen. There was a kind of connection and belonging here that sang to me. I wondered if I was witnessing the fruit of a people able and willing to really *see* each other.

I didn't have to wonder for long.

You see, I can't write without music, and I'd left my headphones in the car. So I snuck out the building's back door to retrieve them, and when I tried to re-enter, the door was locked. But one of the men *saw* me. He eased himself out of his chair and slowly hobbled across the restaurant, past a number of patrons who had already looked at me and glanced away. He opened the door, and he said, "Come on in, son."

Come on in, son. I see you and I welcome you.

In an instant, I felt like I *belonged* to that group of men, and I knew the companionship I was witnessing was no accident. These men had a way of *seeing* people that gave birth to a sense of belonging in others. This time the pressure behind my eyes felt like freedom instead of emptiness.

Loneliness isn't a problem; loneliness is an alarm clock, waking us up to our deep, aching need for connection and belonging and relationships in which we are *seen*. The alarm is ringing, and we need to wake up and *see* each other. And in order to do that, we need to *grossly* mismanage our time. We need to start really screwing up our agendas and schedules and expectations for life. We need to get out of the plans in our own heads and get into the moment, noticing the people around us and taking the time to slow down and *see* them. We need to decide that *taking* time is sometimes more important than being *on* time. We need to blink ourselves awake in line at the restaurant or supermarket or post office, really *seeing* the person in front us as someone who climbed out of bed this morning and brushed their teeth and has a story worth telling. We need to disconnect from the seduction of high-definition displays and, instead, connect with the inner lives of the ones we love.

When we receive the gift of belonging, we bubble over with the gift and become the gift-*giver*. Where we once ached *to* belong, we now ache to become a place *of* belonging in a crowded-lonely world. We become a people set ablaze with the ability and the desire to really *see* our spouses and children and friends and neighbors

And every locked-out stranger.