

# Loneliness Then and Now: Reflections on Social and Emotional Alienation in Everyday Life

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Loneliness, social isolation, and emotional alienation have become an all-too-common way of life to millions of North Americans; to those who succumb to it and become immobilized, to those who are in the midst of their life's race and do not want to admit it, and to many of those who seek psychological intervention for problems which are seemingly unrelated to loneliness.

Being so fundamental to human experience, loneliness merits a closer look and examination of its effects on daily living and its relation to time and space. The present paper describes the various facets of loneliness and looks at man's search for refuge from its devastating pain—a search that is as old as the history of man, and which transcends geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries.

Rebeca is a 32-year-old woman who is married and a mother of two children. We met in her office, and as I asked her to talk about her loneliness experience, she was observing her 10-year-old daughter who played with her dog in the backyard. Rebeca's eyes became misty and seemed to indicate that she was only partly attending to our meeting. A few minutes later she explained that seeing her daughter sitting alone in the backyard revived her memories of her own loneliness in childhood.

Rebeca started speaking about her loneliness as a child and recollected the pain and alienation that she felt since about the age of four. She was not accepted by her peers, and those she did manage to relate to were outcasts themselves. Her family seemed distanced and she did not fit in with them. Consequently, at the age of nine she was sent to live with her grandparents and helped them on their farm. Getting to know the other workers on the farm was a slow and painful process for her, though once she felt somewhat more comfortable amongst them, she was sent back home to her parents, being accused of relating too much to the other farm workers and thus lowering their productivity. She continued to experience bouts of loneliness throughout her adult years.

Debbi is a 19-year-old female. When asked to reflect on her loneliest experience she wrote: "I had not been very happy at home for many years as a teenager. My older sister had already left home five years before at the age of 15. My brother was only seven years old so he couldn't leave. I was 17, the legal age to leave one's parents

without being dragged back by the court. I always told my mother “when I’m 17, I’m leaving.” So on October sixth, on my seventeenth birthday, I told my parents I was going. I went to work that morning and after work at five o’clock my boyfriend and I went in his car to pick up my belongings from my parents’ house. When we arrived I saw all of my clothes, etc., on the grass in front of my house. My dad had gone to my room upstairs, opened the windows, and threw everything out for me to pick up off the grass. The final separation had come. I was leaving. What a way to go. No goodbyes, no good lucks, nothing. Picking up my clothes was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. We drove off. I felt totally alone. I wanted it but I really didn’t want it that way at all. I wanted my folks to beg me to stay. They didn’t. I was walking, but couldn’t feel it; I was looking but couldn’t see; I was eating and couldn’t taste; I couldn’t feel anything, except totally and absolutely alone.”

Fred is a 69-year-old retired teacher who writes: “Upon returning home after a two-month stay in hospital (following my retirement) I was all alone in our apartment, heavily medicated, depressed, and longing for my wife who had to return to work. At my age, being sick, I found that I was also not doing all that well socially. My children (all three of them) got married and left the house, several of my friends died of old age, others were put in old folks homes which were too far for me to visit, and still others moved away. My wife is my only comfort, though I am fearful of the day she dies. I am lonely and accepting that which I cannot change.”

These three letters, which were amongst more than 750 that I have received over the past two decades, as part of the research I am conducting on loneliness, were written by people who were very different from one another in age, marital status, educational background, occupation, and race. Nevertheless, there are some common themes that run through them, which also appeared in almost all the other letters that I have received.

- 1) Loneliness is a universal phenomenon which is fundamental to being human. Everyone, regardless of ethnic origin, religious beliefs, socioeconomic or social status and age or sex can identify the pangs of loneliness at some point in their lives.
- 2) Although common to all of us, the nature of loneliness as a subjective experience is varied across different people, under many conditions, with a multitude of causes and enumerable results and consequences.
- 3) Although, loneliness is a complex and multifaceted experience, it is always very painful, severely distressing and individualistic (Moustakas, 1961; Rokach, 1988b; Rokach & Brock, 1997).

### *Research on Loneliness*

No person has ever walked our earth and been free from the pain of loneliness. Rich and poor, wise and ignorant, faith filled and agnostic, healthy and unhealthy, have all alike had to face and struggle with its potentially paralyzing

grip. It has granted no immunities. To be human is to be lonely (Rolheiser, 1979; p. 9).

Many tend to think of the past in nostalgic warm ways, assuming that previous generations have not experienced, or at least suffered less, from loneliness. Even if we accept that dubious assumption that previous generations were not lonely, we still cannot (and never will be able to) go backward. Instead, our society (at least in the Western hemisphere) is bound to acquire more leisure, either through affluence or unemployment, we will live longer, increase our interaction with computerized equipment, and continue to respond to various financial and corporate demands by frequent mobility. Accept it or not, there will be more solitude which, if experienced and perceived as loneliness, will result in more widespread pain and agony.

If loneliness is indeed such a widely distributed phenomenon, a painful and distressing experience and one that can have significant effects both individually and socially, why then has there been only limited research on loneliness? That lack of theoretical formulation, which may help researchers understand the manifestations of loneliness, is ironically deterring scientists from an in-depth attempt to explain and treat loneliness. Weiss (1973) believes that individuals underestimate their own past experience with loneliness, and consequently underestimate the role it has played in the life of others. Hartog, Audy, & Cohen (1980) suggested that "we are unsure of ways to cope with others' loneliness, as we are unsure of how to deal with our own. We are uncertain of the causes of loneliness as well as the consequences of it. This uncertainty and embarrassment may in part explain why there has been so little substantial investigation into loneliness" (p. 35).

Peplau and Perlman (1982) pointed out a phenomenon that I have noticed repeatedly as well. Many lonely people feel awkward and embarrassed. A stigma of failure and inadequacy is often attached by society to those who are brave enough to admit that they are indeed lonely (Perlman & Joshi, 1987). Consequently, a social stigma may also be attached to those investigators studying loneliness. That may contribute to a preference among scientists for studying more exotic and socially acceptable disorders, rather than the very basic and commonly shared experience of loneliness. Indeed, people sometimes look suspiciously at me when I make public presentations on loneliness, wondering if my research is motivated by some unresolved personal loneliness.

Although increased in the last decade, loneliness research is only in its beginnings. Despite the paucity of research on loneliness there are several reasons why such research is urgently needed. Firstly, loneliness is a fact of life for millions in the Western World. All people have experienced loneliness at some point in their lives, and it is one of the more basic commonalities among humans. Secondly, loneliness is a very unpleasant state of being that can have serious individual and social consequences. Loneliness has been linked to depression, anxiety, and interpersonal hostility (Hansson, Jones, Carpenter, & Remondet, 1986; Lau & Kong, 1999), to drug and alcohol abuse (McWhirter, 1990), to an increased vulnerability to health problems (Jones, Rose, & Russell, 1990), and even to suicide (Cutrona, 1982; Tundo &

Baldessarini, 2001). In a more global way, breakdown in social interactions, alienation, high divorce rates, and widespread crimes have been seen as symptoms of social decay which are closely related to loneliness (Mijuskovic, 1992). As such, it becomes an important factor in personal and societal dysfunctions, and research on this topic may provide added insight in an era characterized by computerization and fragmentation (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis; 1998). Thirdly, loneliness is an exciting and interesting topic. Naïve curiosity and personal experiences thus make loneliness a readily available target for social research.

Interpersonal relationships, friendship, and love are not only dominant North American values, but closely affect the quality of our existence. Interpersonal attraction has been studied for some time by social scientists, however loneliness, which may be seen as the opposite phenomenon, has received relatively little attention to-date. Thus, a fourth impetus for investigating loneliness may be found in an attempt to gain better understanding of intimacy and friendship.

The present paper was initiated by personal interest in the topic; by many unanswered questions about alienation that I found disturbing; and by the great number of people whom I have met as friends, acquaintances, or patients, who were struggling with the pain and torture of loneliness. This paper is based on: existing literature, my own research, and observations I have made of human behavior, family functioning, and societal conditions that contribute to create and maintain the experience of loneliness.

### **LONELINESS: A COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

Life in America has exploded, and loneliness  
is one main ingredient in the fallout.  
(Gordon, 1976; p. 15)

Loneliness has become an almost permanent and all-too-familiar way of life to millions of North Americans; the single, divorced, adolescents, housewives, and the scores of people who call suicide prevention centers and hotlines. It is so widespread and aversive that a billion-dollar loneliness industry has been developed to meet the desire of those who don't know what to do about their loneliness (Meer, 1985; Rokach, 1988b). The loneliness business includes videotaping clubs, health spas, self-help books and mate-finding agencies, and is an extremely fast growing business. It tempts us with an array of relational possibilities, social skills upgrading, and semi-forced joined activities. Many lonely people join the ride in an attempt to become unlonely, and frequently end up more hopeless than they were when they started.

Ours is the age of relationship. We tend to believe in the uniqueness, importance, and availability of relating to others, thinking that we know how to conquer the barriers against closeness that we erect. Whereas in the past, work was seen as the valued solution to self-fulfillment, today it is relationships which appear to be the main, if not the only means, by which self-esteem can be affirmed.

A paradox is thus created, whereas on one hand we yearn for close intimate relationships, on the other hand our social conditions are not conducive to the development of human relations. Our lifestyles in the dawn of the twenty-first century both create isolation and make it more difficult to cope with it (Rokach, 2000). Everyone is seeking companionship and everyone seems to be having trouble finding it. Good, close, intimate relationships have become scarce, and when scarcity occurs, there is usually somebody around to exploit it (Gordon, 1976; Meer, 1985).

People need intimacy, warmth, a sense of worth, and frequent confirmation of their identities (Maslow, in Coon 1992). Since lack of quality human contact is so painful, people will go to great length to fulfill their need for others (Rokach, 1988a). However, the need for others is not only a basic human need, but it is also fueled by the North American society's preoccupation with strength, success, and achievement. It has been frequently pointed out (Sermat, 1980; Schneider, 1998) that loneliness is prevalent in, and may even be encouraged by the North American culture. Ostrov and Offer (1980) had reasoned that the North American culture emphasized individual achievement, competitiveness, and impersonal social relations. Consequently, loneliness may be quite pronounced in the face of such alienating social values. Saxton (1986) argued that in contemporary North American society, there is a decline in the primary groups' contacts. Those are the face-to-face, intimate contacts with family members, relatives, and close friends which were much more prevalent several decades ago. In addition, large metropolitan areas, with their large apartment complexes, social prejudice, and fear of crime, add to people's reluctance to interact and get involved with each other (Medora, Woodward, & Larson, 1987). In our society which presumably offers an abundance of opportunities to succeed, lack of success in business or in our personal lives means failure. And since the opportunities are supposedly all there, failure indicates a terrible individual flaw. Gordon (1976) summarizes it very succinctly:

To be alone is to be different, to be different is to be alone, and to be in the interior of this fatal circle is to be lonely. To be lonely is to have failed (p. 15).

Although the human race is made up of many different people, and despite the many dividers among us (such as language, culture, religious beliefs, and socio-economic levels) there are some fundamental similarities. One of those similarities is our yearning for love, acceptance, and understanding (Rokach, 1988b). Since reality does not always work according to our yearnings, we go through life experiencing frustration, restlessness, and loneliness. We live knowing that others do not fully understand us, and may not know us. The world around us, as accommodating as it may be, is "out there," while we are "in here." We are part of, yet distinctly separate from, all which is around us. That very separation is the core of our loneliness, the root of our alienation. And although we all share this fate, most people tend to hide their pain, deny their loneliness, and assume that others do not experience such a phenomenon. Carl Rogers (1961) related his experience, and those of his clients, in the handling of such "private" experiences:

I have almost invariably found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared and expressed, speak most deeply to others (p. 14).

### LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

Most people think about loneliness as aloneness, geographical distance from other people, physical isolation from important others. However, being lonely is not necessarily being alone. Being alone is simply the objective reality of being without others, geographically being away from company. One can be alone physically or may be alone in a crowd and still not be lonely. Being with others, daydreaming, reliving past memories, or planning an upcoming trip, are all examples of aloneness which is unrelated to the presence of others, and which is *not* loneliness. Therefore, being alone as a state of being is neither positive nor negative. It may be a purely cognitive experience, a geographical reality, or a crisis in one's life.

Theologian Paul Tillich noted that "Loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude" (in Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982; p. 14). Although the words "alone" and "lonely" come from the same English root meaning "all one," they are not synonyms. Many who live in unhappy marriages or with family or friends who "don't understand," are much lonelier than others who live or exist alone but have close ties with friends and relatives. It is possible to be lonely without being alone, and alone without being lonely.

Loneliness is the very painful and agonizing longing to be related to, to connect to others and to be accepted and valued. As many others who have gone through personal tragedies, loss, shattered dreams, and emotional upheavals, Moustakas (1975) found himself in the center of others' attention and support and still felt totally alone.

If being alone and lonely is terrifying and painful, being lonely in a crowd is much worse. Having others around, being geographically close to other humans and even relating to them socially, is being seen in our Western culture as a remedy for loneliness. There is an expectation that being with others, one would feel part of the group, belong, and be fulfilled. Hence, being with others and still being unable to connect to them, not belonging, and lacking the intimate closeness and acceptance that we all yearn for, evokes not only loneliness but self-doubt, anger, and shame (Rokach, 1998b).

Being alone could be very painful; a time of utter despair. But it may also serve as a time for writing, meditation, and other solitary concentrated activities such as reflection, imagining, planning or reviewing one's life, and making decisions about the future. Being alone, one can stop the hectic pace of life, and experience solitude. Solitude is thought to promote individuality, creativity, and self-awareness (Andre, 1991; Garfield, 1986).

Parkinson (1980) noted that solitude enhances the imagination and allows the freedom for contemplation and exploration. Van Gogh used art to turn painful loneliness

into the blissful solitude that provided him reflection, study, inspiration, and fantasy. Veith (1980) noted that the Coptic Church of Ethiopia placed its monasteries on nearly inaccessible mountaintops believing that restricting access from the crowds and fostering solitude, enhanced the monks' closeness to God. Henry David Thoreau removed himself to the remote Walden Pond for 26 months in order to find solitude, which he considered the best possible companion. His prolific writings were the result of a creative and well directed solitude. Moustakas (1972) viewed solitude as a self-initiated capacity of humans. It comes and goes and serves a purpose when it exists. In solitude we are limitless and free. We renew contact with our self and discover another part of who we are.

In being alone I can keep in touch with my own thinking and know more surely that my thoughts are coming from me and not from someone else. Hopefully, I can pursue my life in a way that will enhance my growth and lead to significant learning, based on the voices within rather than from without. (Moustakas, 1972; p.19)

Rubenstein & Shaver (1982) view solitude as positive aloneness, and suggest that paradoxically solitude may help alleviate prolonged loneliness. Amongst the benefits of solitude Rubenstein & Shaver mention its calming effect on us, its enhancement of our ability to distinguish genuine from false needs for contact with others, and its central role is preparing us for social responsibility and intimacy (see also Rokach, 1988a).

In some societies solitude has been treated as a rite of passage in transforming boys into men. Boys were sent off into the jungle and ordered to remain there alone for varying periods ranging from overnight to several months. Later when they returned to their tribe they were accepted as men whose boyhood ignorance, dependence, and existential confusion were gone forever.

Some time ago, I participated in a television discussion panel on loneliness and its effects on people. The three people on the panel were a founder and director of a mate-matching club, a writer-director, and myself. The matching club's director maintained (in line with his business interests) that being alone means being lonely and in pain, and being lonely spells rejection, self-doubt, and much suffering. In contrast, I suggested that being alone does *not* necessarily constitute loneliness. When one is alone *against* one's wishes and despite his attempts to belong, the result is pain and alienation. However, at times one may *want* to be alone, to step out of the daily rat race, not to have to interact with others and communicate when one may prefer not to do so, and to take time to sift through, sort out, and assimilate the barrage of information we are usually exposed to. Doing all that requires time and space that cannot be shared with others. That aloneness would then be solitude, a welcomed change from everyday reality.

In response to these two seemingly opposing points of view, the third member of the panel then related some of her recent experiences. She had actually reiterated that being alone is not necessarily some evil that we should try to avoid. The writer came

back from Los Angeles, just a week prior to that television show. In L.A. she had produced and directed a show and as such was constantly busy, relating to, communicating with and directing scores of people on a daily basis in quite an intense way. She related that she had experienced what she termed *Interaction Fatigue*. A condition characterized by interacting with others to such a degree that one's self gets lost in that outwardly aimed activity, a constant need to practice one's social roles with its demands and expectations, and a feeling of being overwhelmed and stressed by all that kind of buzzing activity. According to the writer, she would not be able to continue and function effectively had she had to stay there any longer than the four months her contract required her to spend there. She added, "loneliness was the last thing on my mind. All I wanted was to be able to, and have the choice to, get away from people, be on my own, not speak to anyone, and just indulge in the luxury of quiet thinking."

### LONELINESS ANXIETY

Moustakas (1972) was the first contemporary writer to develop the concept of *Loneliness Anxiety* which is different from what he refers to as existential loneliness. Existential loneliness is the reality of being human, realizing and facing experiences of tragedy, and upheaval; being born and dying as a separate entity, all alone. A condition Moustakas sees as the fate of every human being, everywhere.

Loneliness anxiety on the other hand, is not true loneliness, but the fear people have of being lonely. The very same fear that creates the blind running away, the denial of pain, and the hectic social activity which are all aimed at one thing—relieving the fear of loneliness, and blurring the realization of alienation. Because the capacity to be lonely is so much a part of being human, and since in the course of living, all people encounter separation or loss of some kind, we all grow to fear the agonizing pain of loneliness, and its gnawing, saddening, and terrifying effects on us. As was previously mentioned and elaborated on by Moustakas (1972) I, too, evidence on a daily basis a heightened level of loneliness and anxiety amongst clients, friends, and acquaintances. While most people usually eat when they feel hungry, those unfortunate humans who in their history have experienced the excruciating suffering of prolonged hunger, later, upon leading a more healthy and nourishing life, do not wait for hunger pangs to begin. They may eat continuously, store food unnecessarily, and be preoccupied with ensuring that there will not be a similar condition of hunger again. They have become anxious about experiencing hunger and thus eat—not so much to avoid hunger, but to reduce their *anxiety* about being hungry. Loneliness has a similar effect on us. Since every human being has experienced it at some point in his life, many have acquired the dreadful loneliness anxiety.

Most people fear loneliness and the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness that are often part of the vicious cycle of loneliness. Lonely people are often deeply involved in desperate attempts to structure their lives and social involvement in such a way, as to not allow themselves to experience the agony of loneliness, and thereby maintain their denial of such feelings. As a result, we can often observe people accepting poor compromises, engaging in superficial social involvement, and engaging in a



kind of clinging attachment to anyone who seems to be amenable to such attachment, grasping for any hope of companionship in order to assuage the suffering.

Most people are reluctant to admit, even to themselves, that they are lonely. We tend to deny the very same loneliness that is probably responsible for many of our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. People seem to feel ashamed when they do admit to loneliness—which is socially stigmatized and is seen as a weakness in the Western culture (Perlman & Joshi, 1987). As such, it is widely believed that loneliness should not affect normal, healthy, and strong people. We tend to identify it not with ourselves but with others, those that are considered marginal to the mainstream of our society, namely the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the handicapped, and the criminals—those we perceive as the ones who feel unwanted, unloved, and alienated. That denial, although an expected reaction to pain, does not eliminate loneliness. We still hurt, live with pain, and feel alienated at times. The drawback in our self-deception is that we cannot work through our loneliness since we refuse to recognize and accept it (see also Rokach, 1998a).

Despite our denial of loneliness, it is evidenced everywhere. All one needs to do is look around oneself, or inside oneself, to see the painful evidence of loneliness and alienation (Andre, 1991; Moustakas, 1961; Rokach, 2000). The increased use of drugs and alcohol, the sale of pornographic material, the thousands of calls to distress hotlines, and the suicides, are some of the consequences of the pain of loneliness. The increase in stress management courses and clinics, marital separations, and religious fads are other phenomena which are associated with loneliness.

Other areas of our life reflect the felt loneliness. We can see the motif of loneliness emerging in renewed vigor within philosophy, art, literature, psychology, and religious and social thought. The pop arts, modern music, movies, literature, and popular magazines have covered and sometimes focused on the theme of loneliness. However, even if there were no poets, no artists, no musicians, and no professional commentators to point out our loneliness, we would know it and feel it within our self—the pain, agony, and suffering would be a constant reminder of its presence.

### THE DANGERS OF LONELINESS

It has been said repeatedly, that loneliness can be a potential for strength, self-acquaintance, creativity, and self-knowledge (Andre, 1991). However, the consequences of loneliness when it is denied, repressed, ignored, and minimized are dangerous, and can wreak havoc with our lives. It can paralyze our energy and propel us into destructive activity. What are, then, the dangers of loneliness?

1. *Loneliness can be damaging of human love and intimacy.*

Although intuitively one may expect that the lonely would want and be able to maintain good relationships, it is often reversed. Loneliness brings about jealousy and possessiveness which destroy relationships. The lonely need love so desperately, that once they find it, they hold on to it too strongly, desperately. Being so needy of love and intimacy they may im-

pose restrictions on their loved ones, deprive them of time and space to be themselves, and not allow them to have room to grow and become. Such desperate and all consuming clinging often chokes relationships to death. And instead of rejoicing with their partners' social accomplishments, and other relationships they have found and which are supportive of them, the lonely demand exclusiveness and are deathly afraid of losing them. That very same possessiveness, forced closeness, and suffocation of individual growth is destructive to friendship and intimacy. And the other partner, who is being watched, "suffocated," and demanded of is trying to get some personal space, some freedom and individuality, and when it fails, he or she start to run, get away from the desperate clinging. And thus, there is a high price for allowing loneliness to arouse such intense fears that eventually destroy our relationships.

On the other hand loneliness often leads us to over-exert ourselves in relationships. At times of loneliness, pain, and suffering, we may try so hard to get closer to people that we end up alienating them from us. Some people try to talk too much in order to appear approachable and friendly, others become "pleasers." They continually try, at all costs, to please the one whose friendship they want. Being a pleaser at all costs, being untrue to oneself, avoiding challenging others, and denying one's own wishes—leads to self-alienation, frustration, and often losing the very same person we want so much.

Finally, loneliness may result in unrealistically high and logically impossible expectations of our relationships. Unless we get a better understanding of loneliness, where it comes from and what it means, we may go through life with false expectations of finding a special person who will take away our loneliness forever. Unfortunately, no relationship, as deep and intimate as it may be can ever fully eliminate loneliness. However, many expect just that from relationships and are thus constantly disappointed, frustrated, and dissatisfied. It appears, for instance, that a good number of marriages start as a panacea to loneliness (Rokach, 1998a). Following the wedding individuals discover that they are still lonely, at times even lonelier than before. And so, a marriage that started because of loneliness usually ends with loneliness in addition to the pain and suffering that divorce causes. Our spiraling divorce rate suggests that such high and unreasonable expectations of the marriage are quite common. The pain of loneliness causes us to look feverishly for someone to soothe our suffering. It causes us to expect what cannot be fulfilled, and what we cannot achieve. Allowing loneliness, our loneliness as individuals, to be an unexamined force in our lives may lead us into behaviors which are destructive to love and intimacy.

2. *Loneliness can disturb and distract us from channeling our creative and effective energies in a meaningful way.*

It is a basic understanding that humans want to go through life being able to love and to be creative (Coon, 1992). However, most people cannot, unfortunately, achieve that goal and can never properly harness their energies for love and work. The expression “get it all together” refers precisely to the lack of the ability to do so. Since we cannot “get it all together” we go through life bitter and frustrated, letting our restless energies push us into different directions, never able to sit down and figure out what we want to do. Our restlessness and disorientation contribute to our “lack of presence in the moment,” i.e. we may be somewhere, doing something or talking to someone, but our heart is not “in it,” we are not there psychologically. And as such we miss out on the richness of life, the beauty of nature, and the humor of a moment. This is a result of our inability to understand and come to grips with our own loneliness. Unless we understand our loneliness and handle it in a meaningful way we can’t love appropriately and work creatively (see Andre, 1991).

Loneliness prevents us from experiencing creative solitude. The fear of loneliness is a driving force that keeps people in a perpetual state of motion and prevents them from stopping their activities long enough to take an inward journey. Yet this journey and getting to know ourselves is critically important for us. Solitude is almost a prerequisite to reaching our inner depth and richness (Moustakas, 1961).

3. *Loneliness is a very potent force within us and unless it is dealt with it may rule our lives.*

Often, people who are driven by loneliness may reach premature, poorly thought out and at times even irresponsible decisions. For instance, lonely people may rush into premature and irresponsible marriages. People engage in dehumanizing and detached sexual encounters. Sex that is aimed at soothing the pain of loneliness, calming our mounting anxiety of alienation, and quieting our restlessness. Far too frequently, unfortunately, such purposeless and cold sex leads us not out of loneliness as we may have hoped, but rather intensifies the pain. Such sexual encounters were termed “antiseptic sex”—sex which does not generate true intimacy, does not provide respite from loneliness, but that which dehumanizes and lowers our self-esteem and our respect for ourselves and others (Rokach, 1998a).

4. *Loneliness which is not faced and dealt with in a meaningful way can create hard and desensitized people.*

Loneliness is a pain and like every pain that is not being dealt with it leaves emotional scars. By not attending to the emotional and psychological pain of loneliness we harden ourselves to our suffering, our needs and yearnings and to all that is deepest, softest and meaningful within us. The result is a hardened and embittered person—who is as insensitive to others and their needs as he is to his own. That hardness comes through in everything that person does, can be seen by those he relates to, and by keeping

others distanced, it perpetuates the very same loneliness that caused it (Rolheiser, 1979).

5. *Loneliness was found to be related not only to poor health, but to overall poor quality of life.*

Current research suggests that psychological variables including loneliness have been associated with changes in immune functioning and may weaken the body's capacity to fight disease (Kennedy, Kiecolt-Glaser, 1988). The immune system protects the body from illness through the recognition and destruction of antigens, foreign disease causing substances like bacteria, viruses, and cancer cells. Once an antigen enters the body, lymphocytes (T cells or B cells) multiply in order to combat the antigen. T cells directly attack and destroy antigens, while B cells create immunoglobulins that act as antibodies which combine with and neutralize harmful antigens (Barlow & Durand, 1995). Lynch & Convey (1979) linked loneliness to illness and premature death. They suggested that loneliness brings on self-destructive behaviors such as recklessness, excessive eating, and drug and alcohol abuse (was also reported by Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982; Hornquist, 1984; and Rokach, 1998a). They have also suggested that long term loneliness may cause sleep disturbances, anxiety, and poor eating habits, which may in turn alter the physioneurochemical processes in the body causing the immune system to break down, resulting in diseases and various somatic complaints (Barlow & Durand, 1995).

From the selected examples presented above, it appears that loneliness can be quite dangerous and potentially damaging. Loneliness, if not understood, accepted, and worked through could be a destructive force within us (Moustakas, 1961; Rokach, 1990).

### **EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS AND THE DAWN OF TIME**

Since the dawning of time there have been billions of people who have walked this earth, each with his unique history, each struggling with loneliness. Man is seen, by the proponents of this point of view, as intrinsically alone and irredeemably lost. Continually struggling to escape the solipsistic prison of his painful alienation. Moustakas (1972) suggested that man is and has always been lonely, since "to be lonely means to experience the agony of living, of being, (and) of dying as an isolated individual" (p. 20). Those who view loneliness as an historic, rather than contemporary phenomenon suggest that since being human (and sharing the experience of living, being, and dying) means being lonely, there can be no escape from, or transcendence beyond, loneliness—so long as man exists (Mijuskovic, 1979).

If loneliness was indeed a disturbing experience and a prevalent one in the past, we ought to find this theme in writings from previous generations. I would like to briefly review references to loneliness in the Bible, philosophy, and the arts.

### *The Bible*

The first mention of loneliness in the Bible is Adam's solitary existence in the Garden of Eden. Nice, comfortable life, but essentially pretty lonely. Eve was created *not* to fill this void, but to *help* Adam cope with it. Cain who killed his brother Abel, was not destined to die, but was handed an even more painful punishment—a life of restlessness, without roots in any community, an existence of alienation, social rejection, and loneliness. The attempt to build the Tower of Babel, which was a unified effort by mankind, resulted in division, frustration, and inability of man to understand fellow man. The inevitable result was social alienation, distancing and, of course, loneliness.

“Vanity of Vanity! All is vanity.” These words symbolize that all which we come in contact with during our lives eventually passes away. Nothing endures ultimately. Due to this inherent truth we live in constant loneliness. Qoheleth, the preacher, maintained that everything in life is simply a vapor, is unsubstantial, and eventually vanishes. He actually tested his hypothesis, in order to see if anything in life can provide him lasting satisfaction and happiness. He tested pleasure, wealth, the arts, accomplishment, hard work, power, prestige, philosophy, and wisdom. He concluded that each is “vanity and a striving after the wind.” From this transitory character of things comes loneliness. It is similar to the kind of loneliness we experience upon hearing of the death of a loved one, when children grow and move away from parents, and when we ourselves are nearing death (Rolheiser, 1979). To this list of Biblical figures we could add Job and Jeremiah, who were noted for their painful and lengthy experiences of social isolation, rejection, and loneliness (Mijuskovic, 1979).

### *Philosophy*

Man is a social animal who is motivated to escape his loneliness, by reaching out to other humans. “It is not good for man to be alone” is a biblical notion that has been interwoven and repeated through the tunnel of the ages. The idea of loneliness has continually dominated man's consciousness.

According to existential philosophers, man is always free to create and recreate his world and existence anew, and to introduce changing (and at times) novel meanings to his existence, or to submit to what Mijuskovic (1979) referred to as “environmental determinism.” It is indeed widely accepted, both in philosophy and in psychology, that man is free to choose and when he deems necessary to change the essence and purpose of her existence. However, some things transcend beyond man's grasp and are determined—such is the finality of life, and the fact that man is alone, and fundamentally separated from anything or anyone else in the universe (see also Moustakas, 1961, 1972).

In Lucretius' *De Revum Natura*, the poet-philosopher sees man as essentially living apart from others (*De Revum Natura*, in Mijuskovic, 1979). Leibnitz, in the eighteenth century, addressed as well the state of singleness and self-contained existence of men, which he desperately seeks to escape, by companionship with another individual.

Mijuskovic (1979) suggests that “the natural desire to meet, communicate, and unite with another human being is really motivated by the instinct to overcome a desperate feeling of aloneness” (p. 12).

It seems that in the Latin mind, acute loneliness was achieved by exile. Ovid’s Tristan in *Letters from Exile* can be understood as a powerful expression of loneliness and alienation due to the author’s exile from Rome. Furthermore, the Stoic, Epicurean and Sceptic philosophy schools of the Roman period assumed that man exists alone and the wise man is the one who can accept that state of affairs (see Mijuskovic, 1979).

During the middle ages there was only slight recognition of man’s loneliness, although the central philosophical theme at that time was man’s relation to God, and the constant fear of being abandoned by that being. Loneliness, thus, highlights our self-awareness which fuels our desperate attempt to transcend beyond our mental prison and alleviate alienation by communication with another being—as unreal as that being may be.

### *Literature*

Despite the hiatus of time, we can readily see the solitary suffering of Richard II, Lear and Anthony in Shakespeare’s plays. They are all bound together by the common theme of the lonely nature of man. When man reflects on himself, he is compelled to realize his isolation from others who are different from him. The confrontation with her own uniqueness, promotes mental anguish which is related to man’s separated state of awareness and alienated existence. That very existence is what makes it possible for us to identify with tragic heroes. Although they are “noble” statures, their suffering makes them similar to the rest of us who have to go through, and try to escape, loneliness and alienation. We understand, identify with and pity those tragic characters because we know and have experienced being utterly alone. Similarly, we recognize in Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, the concept of alienation. Willy Loman, the hero, travels from town to town, lives in hotels, and is a stranger everywhere. He is starved for human affection and companionship and is “terribly lonely.” The salesman, who seems to know and get along with so many people, realizes at the end that he doesn’t actually know anyone and belongs to no other human being. While in his youth he was pleased with being so socially skilled and associating with so many people, in his later years he sadly realized how little he, and his existence, mean to others (see Mijuskovic, 1979).

In our day and age, literature is permeated with images of radical human alienation. Malraux (1961), in *Man’s Fate* illustrates as existence where no one knows another, each human being is unique, isolated, differentiated and alienated from others. T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* illustrates the loneliness and futility of human existence:

I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only.

We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.  
(in Mijuskovic, 1979)

The closed doors in a prison-like existence symbolize for Eliot the separation and alienation that humans feel. The closed doors, which prevent human connectedness and the empty room are his conception of our existence.

This brief synopsis of how the theme of loneliness and isolation have prevailed in the literary and philosophic writings of the West, was included to demonstrate, not only that man has always suffered the pain of loneliness, but that he is eternally trying to escape it.

I believe that loneliness is as natural and integral a part of being human as are joy, hunger and self-actualization. Humans are born alone, they experience the terror of loneliness in death, and many times there is much loneliness in between. To be human is to be part of, yet distinctly separate, from the rest of the universe. As our technology improves, as mankind matures, and as we come to understand more about the magnificent universe that houses our tiny planet, we come to realize the extremely small stature and impact that each of us has upon life and the living. Such a situation seems to me to be instrumental in inducing anxiety and awareness of our limitations and finality. The present structure of modernized Western society appears to magnify the alienation and separateness that man feels while at the same time being aware of his need to belong, be needed and lead a meaningful and satisfactory life. Love, intimacy, and connectedness to other people are amongst the most satisfying experiences for humans, and a great and pressing need which can be compared to hunger—both cause suffering when unfulfilled.

In our limitless and awesome universe, which humans have not fully grasped, under harsh social conditions and high personal expectations, a feeling of self-alienation, emptiness and a sense of meaninglessness are almost inevitable. However, although an existential phenomenon, loneliness may not be felt continuously, nor is man necessarily aware of it in himself at all times. I see loneliness more as a “potential” aspect of humans, rather than as an undifferentiated segment of our existence. In other words, to be human is *to be able* to experience loneliness. Consequently, loneliness is like a recessive, non-dominant trait, which is fully experienced under the “right” conditions. These conditions almost always include dramatic changes in one’s world. Examples of such changes are the unfulfilled needs of love, belonging, attachment and intimacy; estrangement from one’s self; a move to another geographical region, be it another town or another country; chronic illness; unemployment; divorce; emotional alienation from one’s children—especially in old age; and realization of the continuous and never ending walk along the path that leads to death.

## NOTES

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