

The lonely will always be with you

Stafford Betty | Dec. 11, 2009



She walks her route at night across the campus, up this stair, down that, always alone,

like a ghost retracing its path for the thousandth time. She is tall, gaunt and plain. Rumor has it that her husband divorced her many years ago and she never got over it.

His resentful senior colleagues devise a plan to oust him. They prevail on a junior female teacher to claim that he is prowling around her and represents a physical threat. The administration falls for the ploy, and the man is exiled to the farthest reaches of the campus with instructions not to talk to any of his colleagues.

She is a bubbly nonstop talker. She comes home for a visit, but her relatives make excuses not to see her. She sponges off an old friend and talks incessantly about herself, uninterested in anything else, never offering a hand at the cooking or cleaning up. Her friend can't get rid of her soon enough.

All three of these people suffer from loneliness. Not the loneliness of solitude, which is self-chosen and often healing. Not the loneliness of isolation, which can be so extreme that a ghostly presence may be sensed to keep a lone explorer or mountaineer sane and on course. The loneliness of these three is something altogether different. It comes from being unwanted. And being unwanted, Mother Teresa tells us, is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience.?

In December 1980 I worked alongside Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity in their Home for the Dying Destitute. She had collected a warehouse of unwanted, lonely people left to die on the streets of Calcutta. While washing them, shaving them, walking them to the toilet, tending to their humblest needs, I never suspected that I, too, would someday be unwanted.

It happened on the heels of a divorce from my popular mate. One night I made the mistake of going to a party where I knew I would find a few of our friends. But no one would talk to me; I had been demonized. I slunk away to a vacant room in a student dormitory that was serving as my makeshift home, away from my small children. I had never guessed how unlovable I could be. It came as a shocking revelation.

My experience was short-lived, but it left me especially sensitive to loneliness -- especially when I see it creeping up on my loved ones, more than ever around Thanksgiving and Christmas. I worry about my son in graduate school living in an apartment by himself. I even worry about future loneliness. How would my wife cope if I died before her? And what if it were the other way round? It's scary.

Now that I'm in my 60s, I also worry about the loneliness of old age. I know that my social life will contract. The elderly are usually not as attractive as they used to be, often not as included, and recognizing that fact is scary too.

But loneliness of this kind has an upside. It explodes the presumption that we are fine just as we are. It makes us look closely at ourselves to see why people sometimes avoid us. Are we vulgar, insensitive, tactless, even cruel? Are we ungenerous, unhelpful, humorless, selfish? Are we so afraid of rejection that we don't even try to be friendly? Are we careless about our appearance? Are we just plain hard to take? Loneliness invites us to be honest with ourselves about our failings and limitations. And that is a decidedly good thing.

For those blessed with faith there is a different kind of upside. We realize that however harsh the loneliness, the One Who Understands will always be there for us, present and active in our deepest heart, accessible at all times, understanding us better than we understand ourselves.

Intense suffering has a way of freeing us from our usual distractions. In our darkest moments our prayers become laser-like. The absentmindedness that usually accompanies them is cauterized and vanishes as we sink into the depths of our mysterious selves where God lurks. We become utterly identified with the words, "Whatever happens, you will always be with me, and I'll get through it." We feel heard, understood, and in that feeling of being understood, redemption occurs. We know we can get through anything.

Hindus believe that God has a wife, his Inner Power, his divine Shakti, and the two never cease for a moment knowing they are loved. Loneliness, for them, is impossible. Christians rule loneliness out of the Godhead as well. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are locked in love perpetually. But what of us? Aren't we made in God's image? If so, then loneliness should be impossible for us too. But who is our partner? Does each of us have a soul mate, that unique being who alone can complete us, as some romantics claim?

As I see it, God's Spirit is so immense and powerful that the Spirit abides in all of us. The Spirit is the soul mate of each and every one of us.

When we suffer the loss of friends or reputation, or feel the harrowing absence of the person we love the most, or realize how essentially incommunicable one person's experience of life is to another, or remind ourselves how death cuts us off from all that is dear and familiar, it is good for us to remember the divine companion housed within. There are times when God is the only one listening.

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