

Lonely In a Crowd



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LONELY IN A CROWD by April Hersey

Loneliness is a recurring theme in life. Only in the months of pre-birth is there complete integration for the human being. And even then the unborn child may suffer a curious isolation which has not been determined. It is known that the unborn child sleeps and wakes so that perhaps there are other fears and pressures placed upon the infant even in this supported position.

Certainly once the human being is born, he is likely to suffer extreme stress from loneliness.

Infants can die

Infants can literally die from loneliness. If they are not petted and comforted and made aware of other people being close to them they will become ill and die.

Young children who are rejected by busy mothers are subject to a loneliness which can lead to problems. The child who comes from a home where he is accepted, even though a nuisance at times, and is allowed to help and stay close to his mother, is better adjusted than the child who is placed second to the house. The little child who is continually sent out to play so that he will not untidy the house may become a lonely child.

Supreme example

The autistic child, who has himself rejected everyone, is probably the supreme example of loneliness in infancy.

But children do not need to be disturbed to be lonely. The editor of a children's

newspaper has received hundreds of letters from children who claim that they were lonely before the publication of the paper. They actually use the word lonely to describe their state, although many of them are under the age of ten.

The things to do, the puzzles and stories published by the newspaper, are welcomed eagerly as occupations for the child with time on his hands.

Fill void with TV

Many children whose mothers work are faced with lonely afternoons. They often fill the void with television but these empty hours may be the sad beginning of an acceptance of loneliness as part of life.

Although children seem to flock together eagerly from kindergarten age, there are always some children who draw back. These loners may need a special amount of care to make them a happy part of the group or the sense of being apart may remain with them.

Loneliness in childhood is rarely a continual theme. In the pattern of home, school and Sunday School, the child usually finds at least some acceptance. There is usually one place in which he feels comfortable and surrounded.

Potentially dangerous

Adolescence is the most likely period for the reappearance of loneliness. The adolescent often feels clumsy, ugly, and unwanted. He tends to withdraw from social situations, to wander away by himself. A lot of this private introspection is healthy and necessary for the growth of the human being. But often the

phase can be very serious. The young adult is subject to periods of real depression and melancholy. It has been said that the teenage years are potentially dangerous for suicides, and it is often during this period that the seeds of serious psychiatric illnesses are sown.

The unhappy adolescent is very difficult to deal with, and cannot be pushed or induced into social activity without making the situation worse. He can and should be gently drawn into family activities that he will enjoy. A continual barrage of complaint against his laziness or lack of co-operation is an excellent way to widen the communication gap.

Crisis of identity

The student who is reaching the end of his tertiary or high school years and is facing the prospect of work is often subject to a crisis of identity that leaves him frustrated and alone. The years of travelling are over and suddenly he is approaching the goal. It may suddenly be seen as not the goal he thought he would reach, and he can become depressed and irritable, afraid and lonely.

It is a natural outcome of a civilisation which tends more and more to disregard the individual. The human touch is gradually being removed from our daily lives.

Take the ritual of shopping. There was a time, not so very long ago, when the householder went to the market in the square and haggled for food with the farmers who had produced it. Now the same householder goes to a supermarket where everything has been pre-packaged and

clearly marked with a price. The purchaser places her goods in a trolley and silently trundles down the alleys of the market until she reaches the check-out point. Here she listens to the computerised rattle of the machine adding up the prices. All that is said to her is the total price and a "thank you" from the attendant. She may well return home with that one phrase the only comment she has heard in her shopping adventure.

Butchers still joke

Few shops are still friendly. Butchers are still inclined to have a traditional joke. Chemists lend a kindly ear to the voice of the public. Garage attendants may say something other than how much the petrol has cost, and boutique owners may take the trouble to welcome a customer, but for the most part the fun of shopping has been replaced by an efficient silence.

The housewife in the suburban desert may suffer from a genuine loneliness. Often left all day in charge of tiny children who cannot yet talk, she has only the perpetual chatter of the radio or the television set for company.

All around her there are other women in similar states of anxiety, but unless she makes a supreme effort to link up with neighbours, the suburban woman waits for the neurosis brought on by loneliness to catch up with her.

Often feelings of inadequacy prevent her from meeting her neighbours. She will make excuses that her house is not nice enough to invite them to visit, that she hasn't enough money to spare to have people for lunch or even coffee.

Sometimes it is the difficulty of her children's sleeping and waking schedules that keeps her from making friends. Sometimes she genuinely feels that she has far too much to do to be able to cope with new friends. She relies on old school friends whom she sees occasionally and leaves her own street untapped.

Super-wife

The image of the super-wife which haunts women is partly responsible for the great loneliness suffered by women when their children are young. This incredible super-wife is the one whose house is always perfectly clean and polished, who has her washing finished and the ironing all done and put away.

Every room in the house is perfect, the garden is weeded. She makes her children's clothes, is a perfect mother and is still able to complete the shopping, cook magnificent meals and be ready to meet her husband looking like Mrs Australia with every curl in place.

The super-wife doesn't really exist outside the television commercial, but there are millions of women who believe in her.

Suffer loneliness

Often added to all her other virtues she is a supplementary breadwinner. She holds down an interesting and rewarding job. Is it any wonder that women who do not measure up to this concept feel anxious and depressed and are inclined to stay within their homes and suffer loneliness.

The success of playschools which have

begun to come to life in many centres are not only providing a happy outcome of stimulation for children, they are giving the added bonus of providing women with other women to whom they can talk.

Isolated in their little cocoons of never-ending, never-finished activity, it is a wonder that women can remember how to talk at the end of the day when their husbands return. For many of them the whole day may have passed with nothing more stimulating than a chat with the baby.

Concrete and glass

If women in suburbia are lonely, women in home units are faced with a bitter sense of isolation which even excludes the comfort of nature. Housewives may feel angry that the garden is also waiting to be worked in, when they have so much else to do, but those who have only the spatial environment of a few rooms enclosed in high walls of concrete and glass are in a frightening position of encroaching loneliness.

The terrible spate of suicides in high-rise Housing Commission flats in Melbourne recently is mute testimony to the eroding quality of life being endured by many people in the arid atmosphere of home units. Although people living in home units are actually surrounded by other people, there is an even greater sense of isolation in living across a corridor than there is in living across a street.

In a normal suburban street the householder sees his neighbours. At night he sees the comforting presence of their lights. He is always aware of other lives co-existent with his own.

Stairs like silent precipice

This is not the case in a block of home units. The unit dweller may hear a step in the corridor, a door closing, the lift ascending. But usually when he opens his door the corridor will be empty, the stairs stretching away like a silent precipice.

The only contact with other unit dwellers is likely to be in the garage or in the communal laundry. Because the dwellings are really too close for comfort there is even less tendency to make friends with neighbours. Difficult neighbours, if they exist, are bad enough in a suburban street. They are impossible a few steps away in the next unit. Rather than find out if neighbours are pleasant or not, the unit dweller is inclined to remain completely detached.

A survey being conducted by the Sydney Council into one of the major home unit buildings in the inner city in an attempt to evaluate the style of life, asks residents to state what their neighbours do for a living, how often they meet, how often they have conversations with each other, and so forth. The answer to almost all these questions would probably be a question mark.

Unless specifically introduced by the manager of the building the residents and tenants pass like ships in the night, with scrupulous politeness.

In Australia at the present time there is a great breakdown of the structure of families.

One in four families are breaking up in the divorce courts with the subsequent disruption of family life.

Usually one partner in the marriage lives alone at least for a time after the divorce. Even with custody of children the isolated parent is in an unsupported position as far as companionship is concerned.

Death of marriage

All break-ups do not end in divorce. The percentage of the population suffering desertion or separation in the unstructured death of a marriage, without the relatively neat legal break of divorce, is very high.

These people are in the unenviable position of being neither one thing nor the other. They are often left without proper maintenance and have to wait a long time to prove that desertion has occurred. Those whose husbands or wives return periodically suffer a continual repetition of the original rejection which leaves them each time a little lonelier.

Sadly prevalent in modern Australia are widows and widowers. With the road toll one of the highest in the world and an increasingly high death rate in the middle years from lung cancer and heart attacks the family unit is frequently shattered by that ancient enemy death.

The loneliness of bereavement is something that we can all understand. It is desperately sad but somehow much simpler than many of the other kinds of loneliness that beset the human creature. We all know that with the passage of time, hard though it is to bear, the shock will recede and lives can be taken up again.

For all those who are suddenly left alone, for

whatever reason, there are organisations which will help. **Parents Without Partners** is an exceptional organisation which provides support and a social life for those who are trying to bring up children without the other partner.

Birthright is another fine body which offers the guidance of a "father" to families who have suddenly been deprived of their own fathers for any of a number of reasons.

"Spotters" are few

It would be nice to be able to say that the lonely person would receive warmth, friendship and help at any church, but this is not the case.

For most lonely people who attend a church service for the first time in their district, or possibly for the first time in many years, there will only be a token handshake and a few words from the busy minister.

Churches which use "spotters" to notice new people and make sure that a real contact is made are few and very far between.

Beginning of the slide

Sociologists in recent years have been noting the tendency of serious breakdown of normal lives for those who are in their forties.

The young student who suffers a crisis of identity when he faces real life for the first time does not seem to have the same problem as his father who is inclined to look back in dismay at what he has done with his life.

Both men and women suffer great doubts and anxieties during the period that is being

called the "middlescence" as opposed to adolescence.

Usually their children are grown up and making lives for themselves. The whole purpose of living seems to be in doubt. The house the couple struggled to buy is now theirs. The education of the children is over.

They find themselves taking startled stock of themselves — two mature people with nowhere to go.

To some people the revision is good and stimulates them to make the second part of their lives more interesting than the first. To others it is the inevitable beginning of the slide down to old age. They seem to give up trying.

They cease to care what they look like, accept the lack of goals and settle into a long grey twilight which is often desperately lonely.

For those who have lived almost exclusively for their children, communication disappears when there is nothing left to talk about.

Old age creeps

Old age is probably the period in which loneliness can be expected to appear. Some people never seem to grow old. They continue to develop and are as much sought after in their nineties as they were when they were very young. Nor do they need to be talented Picassos. For some men and women the talent seems to be life itself.

But for most of the human race old age creeps inexorably towards us with its accompanying ailments, disabilities, lack of energy and just plain loneliness.

Family and friends move away or die and the old linger on talking of memories and excluding the day in which they are living.

One evening an old woman in a city terrace called out to a passer by: "What time is it?" When she was told that it was eight o'clock she asked if it was in the morning or the night. Obviously day and night had become one to her, the endless day ticking on into an endless night.

Just talking is one of the main recreations of the lonely old as anyone knows who has become enmeshed in one of their endless never-take-a-breath conversations. There are rarely any listeners.

The present day thinking that places old people together in special enclaves of aged citizens isolates them from the ordinary pattern of living. The old had a place in previous civilisations. They were the wise ones, the people who had lived longer and knew at least a few of the answers.

By cutting them out of the society of all age groups and placing them only with other aged people, except in rare instances where careful planning makes a life for them, the old are made to be lonely.

The only common denominator in many of these nursing homes and aged citizens' groups is age itself.

Battle difficult language

If loneliness is something that we must all face at times, it is a continual theme in the lives of many migrants coming to Australia and the first Australians, the aborigines.

Displaced from all that is familiar they must also battle a difficult language problem in many cases before they can really settle into the community.

Loneliness is an inherent part of Australia. It is a lonely country. In many places the only contact is by radio telephone. Men talk companionably to their dogs in the lonely heart of the country. Here loneliness is accepted and even sometimes sought. Men and women still "go bush" when the pressures of urban society become too much to bear.

Sound of lone voices

There is still a lot of bush in which to lose one's heartache. The P.M.G. has 20 million miles of wire cable laid in Australia. The sound of lone voices humming along the wires is a very real part of being an Australian.

But if it is natural to expect dingo trappers and drovers to be talking to themselves, we have also come to expect and acknowledge extreme loneliness in the cities.

Loneliness has been defined by social workers as being the state in which a person has fewer than three contacts which include conversation in a week.

This is a standard which must embrace a great many of our fellows. It is not really necessary to speak to many people. Life can be lived in a neat pre-packaged vacuum. But everyone is seeking the contact with others.

Shrink from contact

The lonely heart aches for the comfort of a friend. It is important to recognise the need for friendship and contact in lonely lives,

even though those who are living them may seem to shrink from contact.

Despite the affluence of society, the self-sufficiency of the modern home, the overpowering inward turning influence of television, man is still a gregarious animal.

Need of faith in God

There has never been a time in history when he has been more in need of faith in God and in his fellow man.

It is right at this point of personal need that the Christian gospel has its impact, for it declares that no person is so unwanted, or so ugly or so needy that Jesus Christ does not want to be his friend.

At heart the Christian message is a personal invitation to a friendship with God based on felt need rather than attained merit.

Many an individual has become a Christian because of personal loneliness. It may be said that Jesus is the one friend who never turns away and never holds a grudge.

Not a magic answer

Flowing from that relationship with God, the Christian is then able to call on inner resources, supplied by God's Spirit, to combat anxieties and frustrations and lead a fuller, more integrated life.

While becoming a Christian is not a magic answer to personal inadequacies, it nevertheless enables a person to call on new resources to cope with the daily grind.



***Published by Anglican Information Office, Diocese of Sydney.
Further copies available from publishers.***

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***Published 1975 by AIO PUBLISHING, 507 Kent Street, Sydney
2000.***

***This leaflet, together with the "Issues & Answers" series and
the "Christian Lifestyle for Youth" series, is designed to
present Christian principles and insights to help the family in
facing life situations and maintain Christian relationships.***

National Library of Australia ISBN 0 909827 54 0

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