

David Susman

A Fine and Lonely Place

“Everybody wants to get into the act,” Jimmy Durante used to say. Lately, the act is loneliness. Not that we’re *not* actually lonely—because brother, are we ever! Surely you’ve heard the news. Poor or rich, single or married, childless or waist-deep in adorable urchins, you feel truly and miserably alone. If you don’t believe your own heart, believe the experts. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy in 2023 declared loneliness an epidemic, and proposed (damningly, one fears) a “national strategy” to address it. Meals on Wheels, rubbing it in nicely, has run magazine ads reminding us that social isolation “is as deadly as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” Meanwhile, the British have for some years allowed an official to be referred to—in what feels like a knowing nod to Monty Python—as a Minister for Loneliness. (Japan has one also, though the title somehow sounds less daffy in Japanese hands.) Unsurprisingly, books and articles about loneliness abound, with some pretty heavy hitters in the lineup. David Brooks, connecting the personal to the political, reminds us in *How to Know a Person* that we’ve made a wreck of it in both realms, since “The crisis in our personal lives eventually shows up in our politics” and “Loneliness . . . leads to meanness.” Bill McKibben, our most trustworthy chronicler of the apocalypse, uses his book *Falter* to catalogue the greatest threats to the human race: climate change, bioengineering, artificial intelligence—and damned if loneliness doesn’t ride shotgun, a cause as well as a symptom, since “social separation damages us” and leads us to not share our existential toys. The *New York Times* has poked at the issue from all imaginable angles: When are we lonely? Why are we lonely? What are we doing about it, and why the hell isn’t it working? *The New Yorker* frets about it. *The Atlantic* stewes about it. National Public Radio won’t shut up about it.

We’re lonely, is the point. I don’t doubt it for a minute. If I sound at all peeved, it’s only the foot-tapping impatience of a jogger who reached this corner twenty minutes ago. Just now arriving, are you? What’s notable about the recent surge in loneliness is its un-recentness. Yes, yes, the pandemic. Of course, social media. The statistics, I’ll admit, are nothing to be blasé about: one in five American adults reporting daily loneliness, the reward for which is a 29% greater likelihood of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and, for the aged, a 50% jump in the possibility of developing dementia. But the thing at the center, our *capacity* for loneliness, our vulnerability

to its curious gravitational pull, seems to me unchanged. We're good at it, being lonely. We're naturals. Anyone who thinks loneliness isn't our primary condition is whistling determinedly in the dark. And whosoever is surprised by today's emotional landscape—the depressed and isolated elderly, the anxious and holed-up teenagers—has been watching too much Hallmark Channel. “We live, as we dream—alone,” says Conrad's Marlow, to whom our attention is more productively paid. Loneliness is what we do. Many of us.

I am fifty-seven. Unmarried. Never married. Living alone, as I have for almost all of my adult life. An expert, I suppose.

It's a strange business, being an old-time loner in a world suddenly keen on the subject. Even the lingo feels foreign. People make a distinction between being alone and being lonely, but to me, it's all one soupy, single-serving casserole. To be alone most of the time is to wonder, as you ride out life's highs and lows, whether this wouldn't all be a little easier with company, but to not be so sure. The companioned don't seem much happier. (Outweighing the number of articles about loneliness is, as always, the number of articles about relationships.) Besides, loneness is my baseline, so thinking about loneliness is akin to thinking about the stiffness I've had in my shoulder for twenty years: it's *there*, sure—what's your point? But undoubtedly, I am solitary, weirdly so, a prime example of someone who, as NPR thoughtfully puts it, “lacks connection.” Odd, as I say, to have been so out in front, when other trends have passed me by: depression, stress, high blood pressure, those other “silent killers” that ravaged our land. But I sure got in on the ground floor *this* time, an early buyer of a lousy stock. The path, I'll admit, has been jagged. I was standoffish as a kid, despite, unaccountably, having friends; in high school, I half-heartedly joined a club or two, and attended occasional parties, from which I scooted as soon as I reasonably could. In college, I had what is now fashionably called a tribe, and cavorted as much as the next guy, though I also found myself drawn, almost hypnotically, to long walks and drives, anything that would get me *away* from those goddamned people. I made it to the new millennium in relatively good shape, human-interaction-wise, sticking close to a few valued chums while affording myself the luxury of avoiding the company of imbeciles. It was in the aughts that I went fully solo, in spirit if not always in social practice. A move to Maine did the trick. In this land of the chilly New Englander, one bundles up and, if not careful, never quite unbundles. My interactions now are all silently measured against the option of being alone, which is almost always favored.

So, alone. A lot. And lonely, yes, much of the time. Shall we settle the obvious questions? There are still friends, sure, some dear and

distant ones, and a few nice-enough nearby ones, to whom I am not very attentive. (*Choosing* loneliness doesn't make one less lonely, if that even needs to be said. In loneliness, as David Brooks uncomfortably reminds us, "You come to fear the thing you desire most, which is relationships.") There have been romances, a few biggies—though the last one was some time ago—and even the hope that it might happen again, though history suggests I will eventually smash a good thing all to hell. That goes for plain old acquaintances, too. Other than some grandfathered-in associates, pals don't last. Having met and hit it off, you and I are unlikely to stay connected, and it will almost certainly be I who delivers the pink slip. Nothing personal. But an evening spent longing for friendship is far better than an evening spent enjoying it.

All this, you understand, takes place against a backdrop of out-and-out normalcy. I am the smiling bloke who thanked you at the supermarket checkout (and wonders why you couldn't muster a thank you in return). I offer a firm handshake and un-creepy eye contact. In the college classroom, I am just what my students bargained for, an easy-mannered fellow, good humored, a facilitator of communication. I do not romp around on social media; I neither troll nor am trolled. My YouTube account, now that I investigate it, suggests a history of not very colorful viewing, other than the occasional British starlet (who among us is not captivated by a young Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia, by a dewy Emma Thompson as Beatrice?) and, I'll admit, a disproportionate number of clips from the movie *My Cousin Vinny*. I am neurotypical. So far as I know, I am not represented in the DSM-5. I have no plans to do anything that would cause my neighbor to one day look somberly at a news camera and say, "Well, he was very quiet."

But don't be fooled. I am exactly what Murthy warns about, a walking, talking isolate. The loneliness bar is set pretty high these days, with every other American self-reporting some "measurable" amount of it, but I outpace most. Consider my prodigiousness: I fall outside the famed loneliness curve, a U-shaped design that suggests that loneliness hits us hard in youth, declines at midlife, then regains momentum after sixty (and batters us silly around age eighty). Here in my fifties, beyond all odds, I have successfully clutched loneliness from the jaws of companionship! More to the point, I have made loneliness my everyday apparel. This, I suspect, is what the nouveau lonely do not understand. To be truly lonesome is not to agonize about it noisily ("Enough with the blogs!" the fogey in me wants to cry), but to wear it as ordinarily as a pair of pants. It is a daily cognizance, a resigned understanding of what's in store from one hour to the next. In this sense, loneliness is, as much as anything else, an approach to the world: a way of ordering one's emotional life.

It is also a motif that rarely fails to appear. Even those of us

who are comfortable alone—in a museum, at the movies—are aware of others' awareness. The *notion* of loneliness can be harder to manage than the actual condition. Funny, too, where it shows up. "The grave's a fine and lonely place," suggests Andrew Marvell's narrator in "To His Coy Mistress." Except he doesn't. A fine and *private* place is his actual take on the matter. Why, until just recently, did I think it was the former? To how many classes did I recite the damn thing incorrectly? I, who can deliver passages of Melville with the accuracy of a Reuters bulletin! What curious and pitying looks did I receive? Why did nobody say anything? And what does *that* tell you?

That's nothing, says the unimpressed reader. Have you heard about . . . ? Yes, I have. The truly walled-off, the self-sequestered, the pathologically unsocial. Buster, I've heard them all. In Japan, the hikikomori ("pulling inward") go to their bedrooms and stay there, confounding their parents and showing the world how this shut-in game is really played. Robert E. Harrill, North Carolina's "Fort Fisher Hermit," left a life of sorrows at age sixty-two to live in an abandoned bunker in a salt marsh, where he stayed for seventeen years, fishing and foraging, until his death. Here in Maine, Christopher Knight took to the woods in the mid-eighties, set up a makeshift camp, and survived by burgling area homes, successfully avoiding conversation for the next twenty-seven years until he was captured and returned, glumly, to civilization. I admit it: others pursue their seclusion with far more panache. But so what? These are not my brethren—they can't be. Their renown undoes their solitude. At the core of isolation is anonymity; a famed loner is immediately ruined by their own status. No more, then, about the spectacularly withdrawn. That goes, too, for the artists whose souls selected their own society: Emily Dickinson, of course, but also Glenn Gould, Howard Hughes, J.D. Salinger. No fault of their own, but they lost my interest as biographical subjects the moment they became biographical subjects.

Enough also from those who would sing rapturously *about* solitude. Montaigne's words on the topic—"Let us cut loose from all the ties that bind us to others; let us gain power over ourselves to live really alone"—were written for people who haven't already sealed their fate. Emerson is more measured ("Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one, and our hands in the other"), but he's had America's ear for more than a hundred and fifty years. That will do. And of Thoreau—who, despite the loner mythology, gabbed freely with his fellow townspeople, and hosted plenty of guests at Walden Pond—the less said, the better. If I must look to a literary spokesperson, I'll make it Philip Larkin, who not only wrote pungent and truthful verse on the subject of solitude, but lived an aloneness I

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can understand: possessed of friends, work, sex, even love, but never quite at home, never giving himself over to the life that was offered him. Childless and spouseless, he existed plainly (even as, somehow, he managed multiple lovers) and wrote gloomily. What could make better sense?

But of course, it is our contemporaries who have the most to say on the subject of loneliness. And say it they do, in volume. This is loneliness's golden age, not because more people than ever are feeling it—though possibly that's true; experts bicker on the point—but because loneliness is so relentlessly *addressed*, so very much having its moment. The advice flows freely: Join a group! Take up a sporty pastime! Put yourself “out there,” in the fabled land of the accompanied. Almost as abundant are the theories that explain the rise of modern loneliness. Such hypotheses rankle precisely because of their truth. What nitwit wouldn't see that social media is a pillaging beast? That cell phones ruin every spare moment? That the American economy demands a busyness that only the sturdiest relationships can survive? The phrase “loneliness-industrial complex” actually yields a hit on Google (though happily, no one has yet bemoaned the political influence of Big Lonely), and there is no doubt that a socio-cultural superstructure keeps people isolated and forlorn. Still, we *built* the bloody thing. Loneliness, like mortality, is one of our great grim fascinations, attested to by generations of thinkers. Do we really need to break out Epictetus, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche? Have we traveled all that far from Thomas Wolfe, who declared loneliness “the central and inevitable fact of human existence”? Perhaps loneliness has indeed reached a pinnacle these recent years—if so, what hasn't? Modernity is a ramping up of everything. No cultural amp *isn't* at eleven. We're lonely louder.

For us legacy loners—we who paved the sad, isolated path—this newfangled loneliness is a thing to behold, weird but engrossing. The hikikomori confer with one another on Reddit, sharing housebound lifestyle tips, sometimes schmoozing it up pretty good, leaving me to wonder whether they're getting this seclusion business all wrong or whether they've actually figured something out. Naturally, “A.I. companionship” is also on the rise, promising to make users feel as listened to—and, through occasional hallucination-based responses, as un-listened to—as they would with actual persons. For those who still prefer flesh-and-blood comrades, a thriving rental market is available: fill-in spouses, friends, partners, siblings, even children. (The trend seems to have started with a Japanese company that rented out full surrogate families as early as the 1990s. Oh, that company's prophetic soul!) It's one strange practice after another, each a testament to our screwy, lonely times. But what I see, Ecclesiastes-style, is a generation

picking up where another left off: one cometh and liveth lonely, another doeth the same, with a little more gusto. We may be, as evolutionary biologists tell us, programmed for companionship—the primal need for tribal inclusion, and all that—but solitariness forever lurks, a dark attraction of its own. Many people go there. Some of us stay.

But why survey the landscape? Loneliness is best testified to by the person smack-dab in the middle of it. And yet, I can cite very few clear lessons. I know that my solitude reflects a deep-down impatience with human beings, those braying, tiresome creatures. To listen to one is to suffer through torrents of trivia and nonsense, and to regret the squandering of life's precious hours. Isn't every moment of solitude an exquisite reprieve? The rub, of course, is people's capacity to surprise and delight, which can soften even the most calloused heart. Honestly, no one appreciates people so much as the lonely. Stumbling into a moment of human connection, I practically swoon with gladness. No, not gladness—relief. The universe is benevolent after all! Soon, though, I will be reminded of the impossibility of lasting collegueship. An ill-considered remark. A daft political opinion. Frequently, I'll discover that my newfound friend is just a crashing bore—or, worse, that they are unable to detect *my* tediousness, which is a sure sign of a dullard. (Groucho's reported line "I do not care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members" provides as fine an explanation of human isolation as any full-length treatise.) And so, off we travel, in our inevitable and opposite directions.

All the same, nothing pains me quite like the kindred lonely I have left behind: the calls unreturned, the gestures disregarded, the ties cruelly severed. In each instance, I feel as though I have lapsed in my duty to fellow soldiers. Of course, that kind of fellowship is precisely what we don't have in the first place. "*All solitude is selfish*," writes Larkin, and there is surely something to it. But it may also be that solitude leaches the decency from us, so caught up are we in our own emotional survival. If so, it's another thing to be miserable about, another way in which isolation feels like a deliberately commissioned sin. Built into aloneness is the fear that you will be discovered for the detestable creature you are. Why else would you be alone? Larkin, many years dead now, has been reassessed as a racist, a pornography enthusiast, a mama's boy—charges not without some basis (best not to let old letters fall into the wrong hands), but also capturing the worry of every recluse: being found out. Today's lonely youngsters, availing themselves of technology, appear determined to have their full selves seen from the get-go, but I don't buy it. In these hyper-visible times, the ancient dread—being known—is undiminished.

And so the sea rolls on, as it rolled five thousand years ago.

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If there is nothing very new about the current brand of loneliness, there's nothing new about mine. I will accept credit for longevity, but otherwise, I have little to offer in the way of original reportage. Loneliness is full of the familiar: empty evenings, dark nights—who hasn't been there? The devastation comes in the suggestion of permanence. In loneliness, one imagines having reached their final and true condition, as indeed, some of us have. The affinity to death is hard to miss: solitude, silence. Rational people avoid such things at all costs. To accept them is to be puzzling even to oneself. Then again, and despite the world's inquiries, the truly lonely do not ask to be understood. In the end, what I know about my own loneliness—and all that can be known—is the fact of it. Sadly, strangely, and blessedly, it abides.

