

Negotiating Loneliness

"In the depths of winter, I finally learned that there lay within me an invincible summer."
Albert Camus

It can feel hard to admit to feeling lonely. With 800 million users of Facebook, aren't we supposed to be in possession of 134 'friends' each? Busy on Linked-In, Twitter-ing, emailing, texting, and taking calls? Or, as you sit there of an evening, you can play with your iPad, catch up on TV and films - receiving yet more communication reminding you of what you are part of – what you are connected to – what is happening in your community and society.

These are the presumptions of connectedness we hold and compare ourselves against. That there is family. That friends do really feel like friends. Or, if there are no family or friends, we feel held and connected by the community and wider society around us though the media.

You know, something is wrong. Why, when we are supposedly so connected, do so many people feel deep debilitating, loneliness? Old and young, rich and poor, fathers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, through every strata of society, every creed and ethnicity. The Campaign to End Loneliness estimates there are 800,000 people in England who feel lonely all or most of the time". (Campaign to End Loneliness)

Yes, there is a certain irony in considering that one of the experiences we **share** as human beings, is the unhappy experience of loneliness. When one is in the grip of loneliness, it is easy to consider it 'incurable', and something to 'suffer'.

Loneliness, however, is not some incurable, stigmatising disease. As you tip the coin of Loneliness over, you see the opposite side. Connectedness. Perhaps you have memories of being enclosed in a really good hug, by your mother, father, friend or lover. Or remember a time in your life how good it was to be listened to and understood by someone, and to understand them in return. Or you have a photograph of yourself centred in a family gathering – evidence of your connectedness. Think of the times you have been carried away, deep in

conversation, or felt a deep sense of connection or rapport. I am confident you will have experiences of this. Why am I confident of this? Because it is only because you don't have this as much now, or can remember that you once had this 'thing' – that you know what it is you lost.

The loss of connection, its shadow – is loneliness.

Yes, you are correct. Your experience of loneliness is an accurate state. You are not wrong for feeling this. After all, we are destined to live our lives locked in bodies we have no choosing of, placed on a time line that moves inexorably forwards. Staring out at a reality that we are left wondering do Others see life as we do? Do they experience it like us, or are we truly alone. Alone in our unique experience of our own lives. Yes it is true, and it is something sometimes easy to fear.

Therefore, outside of those 800,000 chronically lonely people mentioned earlier, you can add the random attacks of acute loneliness we can all experience at different times in our unique and special lives.

Why then, for a phenomenon quite so common, is there not more societal acceptance around loneliness? Why are our lonely feelings exacerbated by being kept 'secret', adding to the suffering.

For you are right. You are alone, and you feel loneliness because you **value** connectedness. Indeed, often, those who experience loneliness most, are those who **value** relationships. Our values often feed into our sense of meaning and purpose. Whether we realise it or not our values can guide what profession we take up, and how we live our lives. If you are someone who **values** all kinds of relationships – and for various reasons you are suffering the loss of this – your experience of loneliness will be exacerbated.

This is telling you something about yourself. A positive, personal quality you own that you may wish to celebrate. Your loneliness is showing you what a wonderful value you put on people and wanting to connect with them. It is telling you, you want to share yourself with others – and in turn to 'know' them.

For a counselling client who wishes to address their loneliness – the perspective above presents a starting point. It's telling you about your values – its telling you, you have experienced connectedness in your life (and feel the loss) – therefore you will have positive memories of how you got that sense of connectedness. In this way, it is possible in counselling, to re-discover your personal journey back to how you can feel connected. What actions can you take to improve your situation, what small changes make a difference. And – when, as you will, you experience loneliness. How you can accept, rather than fight, this 'shared' human experience.