

**I Wander Lonely As A Cloud**  
**Rev. Leslie Takahashi Morris**  
**March 7, 2010**

**Soliloquy:** (A Dramatic Reading For One Voice)

[waving] Good bye—thanks for coming! .. Yes, yes, see you soon!

Well, that was a good party. It was good to see them all....well, most of them.

Now I just need to clean up. It shouldn't be too bad. I thought starting the conversation about world hunger was a stroke of genius, kept everyone from eating too much....

Wow. There it is again. That feeling –it is like a wave that washes over me and totally swamps me. That feeling that I am---

No, it can't be that. I mean, I just had a WHOLE HOUSE of people here and I couldn't be—I just need to stop mollycoddling myself and do the few dishes there are to do and lock the doors and—

Wow. There it is again. It feels like grief and like longing and I can't help feeling—mollycoddling—I wonder where that word got dredged up from. I haven't heard it since my grandmother's day. Oh grammy, I miss you so. Where did THAT come from? She died years, no—DECADES ago. I don't know what is wrong with me. I might need to step up the pace on my morning walks, get more blood circulating in the brain, endorphins—

NO. I can't deny this. I am feeling—how can it be? Lonely. That is it. It doesn't matter if I just had the house packed with people (which reminds me that I am going to have to take the drapes to the drycleaner—that Tania should just drink white wine as a philanthropic gesture towards her friends!) Maybe it is just that they are gone.

No. If I am honest with myself—if I am really honest with myself, this is not just an after-party let-down. This is that feeling again. And it scares me. It makes me feel like the kid on the middle school playground who hated recess because she had no one to play with. It is loneliness. Only this time it is not about not having people to do things with, my calendar is screaming for mercy in that department. It is about something else, well, about friendship. Since Cindy died I haven't had a really close friend.

Yes, and while I am busy, all the time, that feeling, that wave, that sense that nothing is touching me, that I am not truly connecting with anything or anyone else....that I am searching for something, something I desperately need....

And then yesterday when I went for a walk through the hills where I really was alone and the air and the sunlight were all around me and I felt fine. I was solitary and yet I wasn't alone.

Loneliness. Me. Who would have thunk it?

No, I can't joke this one away. I feel it all through me, how true this is.

I Am lonely.

**Sermon:**

Here is an odd thought. Let's say you wanted to meet people. Let's say you really wanted and needed to meet people to fill an honest void in your life. Well, the most straightforward way to do so would be to say, "Hi, I'm lonely. Want to do something?" Which almost certainly would guarantee that you would STILL be lonely....Perhaps it is part of our more recent heritage as the nation of the rugged individual –it seems it is almost unpatriotic to describe one's self as lonely. It summons up those images of being the last chosen for kickball, the wallflower at the middle school dance, the one alone on Saturday nights and we just aren't supposed to admit that. Poet Emily Dickinson captures our national aversion to admitting loneliness in her 1863 poem:

The Loneliness One dare not sound --  
And would as soon surmise  
As in its Grave go plumbing  
To ascertain the size --

The Horror not to be surveyed --  
But skirted in the Dark --  
With Consciousness suspended --  
And Being under Lock --

The Loneliness whose worst alarm  
Is lest itself should see --  
And perish from before itself  
For just a scrutiny --

I fear me this -- is Loneliness --  
The Maker of the soul  
Its Caverns and its Corridors  
Illuminate -- or seal.

Dickinson's words speak to the great taboo about loneliness. Loneliness is a sign of weakness and it is a sign of something almost unpatriotic to admit loneliness. Though many people will not admit that they are lonely, the evidence is that many people are. Thomas Dunn, an Amherst college professor of foreign affairs, wrote a book called *Loneliness As A Way of Life* and he begins it by saying that loneliness is close to being a universal experience of human life, that, as he puts it, "to be human is to risk being alone in a way that is unbidden and unwanted... Loneliness is deeply entangled in all paths of life because it reveals in sharp profile some of the most important limits of who we are and how we are with each other."

He goes on to explain: "We are marked by loneliness when we register the death of other to us, when we cease to be connected to the things that surround us, and when we notice that we have somehow become something that we no longer recognize as ourselves."

And loneliness is not the same thing as solitude, Wordsworth's dance of daffodils, which can be a place of space and richness when people connect with themselves in new ways or have the time and space to literally touch their soul. I have come to think of it this way: solitude is a place of stretching out to touch something that may be evasive and yet which is ultimately reachable while loneliness is the experience of reaching out to trying to grasp something that isn't there. Loneliness is a longing for, it is a yearning, it is a feeling of being disconnected from something that is an intrinsic part of you. Dunn points out that solitude becomes loneliness when it is paired with isolation. "Three modes of being dominate our lives in the modern era—having, loving and grieving," he writes. "Each mode of being restrains the self in a kind of solitude that turns toward isolation. We learn to be lonely through possession and dispossession, through the experience of loving and the loss of love...and through the deaths of those we love. "

I suspect that everyone here can remember a time when we have been lonely, remember those feelings in our soliloquy. It might have been as a child or youth, when, devoid of parental attention and the company of friends and siblings, one faced a cavernous and somewhat scary place. Or perhaps after a loss of a friendship. Or in the isolation of caretaking or a painful marriage. Or perhaps at a time when life circumstances took you to a place where it was hard to connect in deep and meaningful ways with other around you. Some of us are born into a particular kind of loneliness because some part of our identity is denied by those around us and that isolates us.

If, as it appears, isolation is the front door into loneliness, then we are in discovering that whole neighborhoods of loneliness are being built in our nation. A 2006 study by sociologists at Duke University, found a dramatic increase in isolation over the last 20 years. CBS news compared this study to the landmark study in 1964 that warned people about smoking. The reporters felt the isolation reported signaled a comparable danger to people's health and safety. Here are the facts they quoted in the article that they called bluntly "Lonely Nation":

- From 1985 to 2004, "the number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled." Now, 24.6 percent report they have no confidants, family or non-family — that's one in four Americans. Another 19.6 percent say they have just one confidant. That means 43 percent of Americans have either no confidants or just one...doubled since 1985.
- More than half, 53.4 percent, do not have any confidants who aren't family. In 1985, 80 percent had at least one confidant who was not family; now only 57.2 percent do.<sup>i</sup>

The bottom line here is that those who are lonely are not alone! And why are so many more lonely? Working longer hours leaves less time for friends and family, as does commuting longer hours and spending more time on the Internet.<sup>ii</sup> Interestingly, virtual community also does not seem to fill the gaps of loneliness. All of this seems to have caused a decline in relationships with neighbors and the kind of relationships that get formed when people are parts of groups or

voluntary organizations. So people less frequently know much about their neighbors or form close relationships through their work with nonprofits and other groups in their communities.

As the Duke study said, "The number of people who have someone to talk to about matters that are important to them has declined dramatically... we have gone from a quarter of the American population being isolated ... to almost half of the populations falling into that category."

Think this doesn't have anything to do with you? Here's a simple test: Who do you talk to? Who do you confide in? Who are those people in your life? And if you can answer those questions with names, think of others you know and love. Can they?

And if your life and the lives of those you love pass this test, your greater frame may not be untouched because isolation does not just have to do with how we are in our private lives and our families or even in our towns and localities, it affects our views of our country and the world. Dunn notes that the tendency towards loneliness has affected our democracy. "Contemporary civilization is built upon the foundation of a deep estrangement that we experience more or less in common," he notes and certainly watching the health care debate, we can see that. As far as the world, a Pew poll in December showed that a record number of people, almost half of the people polled believed that our nation should "go our own way" and "mind our own business."<sup>iii</sup> Though this is not surprising after two quagmires of wars, this is the highest sentiment for isolation that our nation has seen in 40 years. The disturbing nature of a quiet creeping loneliness should not be ignored. Political theorist Hannah Arendt studied the political effects of loneliness and concluded that at the heart of the totalitarian experience is a deep loneliness.

So what are the antidotes for loneliness? Busyness is something our can-do, buck-up culture is quick to offer us and sometimes a minimum level of activity—especially if it allows connection with others—can help reduce isolation. And yet, busyness itself, the studies show, may actually eat up the time that would otherwise be used for real connections.

If loneliness is a longing, we may try to fill that void with possession. We feed our longings and cravings by acquisition which in turn makes us lonelier in a vicious cycle similar to an addiction. "Loneliness grows and the world, receded, eventually disappearing over the horizon," Dunn says, adding that loneliness can arise from our need to have that which we cannot have. "In our culture—a culture of consumption if ever there has been one—the lonely self seeks to possess something to call its own, and ends up by confusing that something with itself. ..Under the spell of things we own and the things we want, we are able to disappear in new ways, to lose ourselves in our collections, to withdraw into our possessions."

The rise of individualism, the sense of disconnection, and all the hard and impervious boundaries we construct around our lives seem not to be the answers. We can work out on our own private gym equipment, read our own private libraries, walk our own private streets where the etiquette is to pretend not to see our neighbors who pretend not to see us. So much of our technology is

about letting us do alone what we used to do communally. If you think about it, from the days of indoor plumbing which took away the need for the village well, we have been moving slowly and surely inwardly and towards isolation.

So what can we do? As a congregation, when we face a humanitarian crisis, we respond by offering aid and when we see injustice, we respond by being witnesses for fairness. So what is our religious response to this epidemic of loneliness? What can we offer, if anything?

I suggest a lot. Ours is an affirmation of wholeness, an affirmation of the love which the choir passionately reminded us is, in E. E. Cumming's words, "more thicker than forget." In practical ways, that love is the small "I" kind that comes when we invite people to bring themselves as they are, with their questions and foibles. At the heart of it, we offer people a chance to touch other lives—on Sunday mornings and more through classes, small groups, social events, and in our service to the community and on and on. The connection of company is even deeper when we allow people to be truly heard, even if they are different from us and the agenda is full. And at our best, we remember that no task here is as important as the need to minister to one another.

Our vision of wholeness embraces the arc of life. We can affirm the worth and possibility in each human life and the need for growth in every stage of life from the first moment of breath to the last. Some kinds of loneliness seem to come in particular times of life—in the heady and yet also dangerous years of youth and in the last years of life, for example, and having relationships across generations helps. Unlike schools or the communities where many live, we are a multigenerational place.

Loneliness, Thomas Dunn says, is "to be present to the place of your absence." The counter to this is to be present to what is present in your life, even if it is hard to admit: loneliness, fear, isolation. Small intimacies, real dialogue and places like this congregation become openings to practice connecting, not just as individuals, as communities with difference which, like nations, must learn to co-exist. Arendt writes, "Loneliness concerns human life as a whole." In our efforts within and beyond the boundaries of this congregation we get chances to practice being together, reaching out, forming deeper connections, learning to truly journey together across lines of difference.

If loneliness has come into your life, call it by its name. And then think about others you can call by their name to help banish it. Or reach out to talk about it. Or make a connection. If loneliness has been banished from your life for now, invite someone else in whom you suspect could use that connection. Let us broaden the depth of our connections, the scope of our outreach, the impact of our love, and in the process create a laboratory for a larger presence to be born in our world. May we be the ones to make it so.

Benediction Words of Starhawk

Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

## Meditation

Spirit of life, we come together this morning as people with wants and desires, some of us are here with great yearnings, for real connections, for depth of relationship, for the intimacy that adds richness and texture to our lives.

In this time that we have, let us think back over our week and reflect on the times when we touched other lives. It might have been someone handing us our receipt at the grocery store, or a friend dropping by to return something borrowed or a phone call on our messages from an old friend.

How did we take these invitations to connect, even if some were just passing interactions?

Were we too tired to notice? Were we in too much of a rush? Were we disdainful of those who were in our path—thinking them not smart enough, not well-read enough, not as enlightened as us? Were we in a fog of drink or drugs or too many hours on a computer? Were we too sad or too scared or too angry?

In the silence that follows, let us reflect on the many chances we have to touch our humanity to that of others.

May we remember the many precious opportunities we are given each day to acknowledge and salute the beauty and dignity of the lives around us. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/06/28/opinion/meyer/main1762234.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://news.duke.edu/2006/06/socialisolation.html>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/03/us\\_isolationism\\_at\\_an\\_all\\_time\\_high](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/03/us_isolationism_at_an_all_time_high)