

Rest in Yourself

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 17, 2021

I was often lonely as a child. My parents divorced and as a result I moved frequently between towns and states. Until middle school, I didn't have time to truly dig in roots, to anchor myself and draw within those relationships that nourish life. There were times I was surrounded by other children - air filled with the aroma of myriad lunches and sounds of laughter and yet, in my heart, I may as well have been in the cafeteria alone. Even once my family settled, I didn't know how to cultivate relationships and was held back by anxiety that makes these seemingly simple tasks so hard. And yet, I think the biggest obstacle was grounded in my own insecurities, my unhappiness with who I was. Since those days of angst, I have cultivated a grounding in my spirituality, compassion and love for myself, and created around me like a halo a community of those I love. In doing so, the loneliness has ebbed away, although from time to time it rears its angry head.

Loneliness is pervasive and crafty in how it presents itself. We may be surrounded by people and yet feel utterly alone. We may hold within us a timidity, an anxiety, a feeling of "not good enough" or of being "damaged" that keeps us from cultivating relationships. Loneliness may have nothing to do with who is or isn't around us at any particular time but is cultivated in our own inability to express those emotions and ideas that are in our very core, to share that which is important to us¹. I wonder about that special loneliness that serves as the seeds and roots that produce and nourish and sustain these other forms of loneliness - our own inability to be comfortable within ourselves.² We need to be comfortable with

¹ Carl Jung "Soul Matters Worship Packet, October 2021"

² Mark Twain "Soul Matters Worship Packet, October 2021"

ourselves before we can be comfortable with others; we need to engage with and love our own inner voice.

Artist Louise Bourgeois reflected about that sacred time between the bookends of our precious lives - birth and death. She wrote in her journal, "The value of the space in between [birth and death] is trust and love,"³ The artist jotted down these words after reflecting on a life of solitude - alone and yet fulfilled in that she took this space to engage with her own inner voice; to connect with the sacred; to produce art, to cultivate that space to respond ever more deeply to those around her - to be encapsulated in the self, in "trust and love." Loneliness, in contrast, if felt strongly enough, traps us in a prison - trust and love on the other side of those metal bars. We don't hear within us a caring inner voice but a lament of pain - a wound - radiating out to those around us and perpetuating our own loneliness.

One stark contrast between solitude and loneliness is spirituality - is faith. The faith of Unitarian Universalists in human goodness, divine goodness, and love. The faith of a Christian in God or a Muslim in Allah. The faith of a humanist found in the sacredness of the world we inhabit. The faith of an atheist in poetry or nature or kindness or love. Each bond connects us both within our own inner being - giving focus towards understanding and loving ourselves - and with that which is so much greater than ourselves that we cannot fathom - that which is always with us, never apart. Faith serves as a moral compass as we navigate our priorities, it calls us to embrace what is most important to us and gives us the strength to overcome what lays ahead of us - faith cultivates within us that which destroys loneliness. Faith- the understanding that, even if we are by ourselves, we are never alone. I think of the power of prayer, whether in connecting with a deity or singing a song to the trees - how prayer connects

³ https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/07/11/the-lonely-city-olivia-laing/?mc_cid=1d875ee9e9&mc_eid=04e3c8a6e2

us to ourselves and that which is greater. I think of the prayers I offered my aunt who died tragically that served to connect me with the beyond to escape the loneliness of grief, or the prayers I now send to my stepfather as he transitions to another realm. Even if something is missing, even if it feels all is missing, in these connections, in conversing with that which is sacred, we can cultivate a wholeness. Spirituality can be the catalyst towards cultivating a relationship with ourselves, towards trusting ourselves, towards creating a space to retreat inwards when we need it and be met with love and trust and not anguish and despair. I was speaking with today's worship associate, Ostara, about loneliness when planning for this service and she shared with me an anecdote about her advisor in college. Her advisor, Dr. Eleanor Zelliott offered a special lecture entitled "Friends and Lovers." In this lecture the professor shared her own story of being in a place where she tried to connect with others and found she could not - she understood that, in this time and place, she had no friends, and yet she knew that she was not alone in this, and that we all face loneliness. Dr. Zelliott offered her students wisdom, she told them to "rest in themselves," and at least one of her students never forgot this. We are each invited to rest in ourselves. I know when I shut the door on my pervasive loneliness, I was able to rest in myself, to cultivate a relationship with myself, to love myself and accept myself for just who I was. There are things we all do not like about ourselves, and yet who we are is just right.

Much of my life, as a volunteer and as a chaplain, has been time spent with folks in recovery circles, in 12 step groups, and through working with these extraordinary folks I have learned so much. This wisdom is not profound only for those in these groups. We each carry within us what we may call "character defects," things we struggle with, perhaps anger or self-pity or self-condemnation, and yet we are just right. Self-love comes when we intentionally engage with the causes of these character traits - when we ask ourselves, why do we do these things? Often - they served to protect us as children against any dysfunction or upset we may have encountered, and yet, as an adult, they are no longer helpful. Instead of begrudging these things we may carry within us, can we thank them for what they

did for us as children? Can we thank self-justification, or thank evasiveness? Can we hold gratitude towards our tendency to people please? With this gratitude, we can let go, we can release, we can connect with those good and sacred pieces of ourselves - we can love ourselves for just who we are - and it can serve as a catalyst for healing and improving - for shedding woes of loneliness. In understanding we find freedom - a chance to grow and thrive.

Each of our lives serves as a constant opportunity to grow closer with ourselves, an opportunity to improve within us those things that cause us harm, of becoming and embracing our true selves, of connecting with exactly who we are. Not fixing - but cultivating growth - cultivating relationships with ourselves! In connecting with and truly loving ourselves, we combat that pervasive loneliness. We find strength and courage within us - we are filled, again, with trust and love.

Once we find this inside, once we connect with our holy and love and understand ourselves, once we are no longer behind those bars and are embracing trust and love, once we are truly resting in ourselves, we are ready to introduce ourselves to the world! Laughter comes easier, conversation becomes easier; confidence serves as a magnet. We project beauty when we love ourselves; we cannot truly love another unless we have found that love within ourselves. Then, as we love ourselves, we are ready to love another - we are ready to make those sacred connections.

There is a phrase with no known original author: "My friend is one who knows my song and sings it to me when I forget."⁴ What better way to combat isolation than to hear one's own song. We each have our own song. In mine, I hear the flute I played in childhood, reminding me of innocence and fun. I hear the drums that give me the rhythm to dance. I hear that operatic solo that sounds to me like all the

⁴"Soul Matters Worship Packet, October 2021"

sacred beauty held in this life. I hear the chirping birds in nature connecting me to my holy. What do you hear? What do the strings of a violin mean to you, or the thud of a bass guitar, or the lyrics a guardian sang to you as you fell asleep at night? Find your song - hold it tight - and find that person who sings it back. Just like Herman and Rosie in our Time for All Ages - in hearing each other's songs - a jazz solo and the tunes of an oboe - they found each other, and in this budding relationship, their loneliness came to an end.⁵ We may find this connection in a new friendship, or perhaps with a romantic partner or a seemingly forgotten family member. There are potential friends all around us. Some of us may need to realize that those who say they love us actually do love us - and not push them away with our own insecurities.

And beyond these individual relationships lies community - the sacred embrace of a group who loves you for exactly who you are. Like this faith community. Like a biological family or a chosen family. There are groups who shout out "you are not alone!" Groups for women or gender diverse people who do not want to be parents. Groups for people who want to be parents but cannot. Groups for those who are grieving or suffered a traumatic injury or are facing a recent, tragic diagnosis. A plethora of folks who would feel alone but who do not because they have found others with this exact same potentially isolating condition - groups of folks whose songs harmonize as common chords are struck and love and acceptance are found and cultivated. Within these groups - whether joined together because of an intimate love for each other or because of a common connection to a certain hardship - people heal their loneliness not only in finding solidarity but in helping one another escape the bonds of loneliness.

⁵ *Hermon and Rosie* by Gus Gordon

In musing on ideas for this service, I came across a blog of a man named Dallas Hartwig⁶ who suffered from loneliness. Hartwig grew up in a household where he felt consistently “minimised” and “dismissed,” who said the most important aspect of his journey towards healing was being listened to - truly being listened to. A man who healed when he felt validated in his experience, and not dismissed. Listening - this is something each and every one of us can offer one another. To beloved friends or aching acquaintances, to those in our sacred communities. Simply listening without fixing or validation, is an act of compassion, is an act of love. We may never know how lonely a person is, we never know many of the internal hardships others face. But we can pause. We can listen with our whole hearts. We can validate whatever experience another is having, simply by being fully present with another. In offering companionship, we find it ourselves.

The pandemic has amplified this loneliness. Those who lived alone were suddenly perpetually alone. Those who lived in an unhappy or unhealthy relationship found a new sort of emptiness. Others found there was no way to find refuge from home life, no matter what that may be, and with life all around them, still felt solitude. This has been a long, arduous journey. Everyone has found their own route towards survival. An article in the Atlantic offered a nugget of wisdom as we make our way through this time of isolation and loneliness - reach out to others. Help others. Care for others - what the article calls “other-care.” Offer company towards an elderly neighbor. Engage children in volunteer work. Through this work, we heal those around us, we make a difference. And in doing so, we heal ourselves; we strip ourselves of isolation.⁷

⁶ <https://dallashartwig.com/work/>

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/other-care-self-care/620441/>

Loneliness is pervasive. We all experience this pain to one degree or another in the span of our lives, between those bookends of birth and death. And yet throughout this short, sacred span of time we have all been offered, let us cultivate and embrace love and trust! We are each good just as we are. And we can each cultivate a lifetime of growth. We are strong within ourselves - each and every one of us. Let us find our songs and sing them, lifting up as a chorus of all that gives us life, and learn the melodies of another. Let us explore the depths of our faith and relish what we find! For in the sacred, in ourselves, and in each other - we find the remedy to isolation and emptiness - we find love.

May it be so, and Amen.