The Ache of Solitude

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In 2012, a down-and-out Manhattan actor posted flyers around the city asking people to phone him if they were lonely and wanted to talk. He expected to get a dozen or so calls. He received 65,000.

Today, more than a third of Americans describe themselves as “chronically lonely.” When asked what the greatest problem in modern life was, Billy Graham answered: “Loneliness. It is loneliness that plagues millions of people—the absence of meaningful relationships.”

Along with grief, loneliness is perhaps the most painful human emotion. Humans are the most social of God’s creatures; we crave the vital daily interactions of companionship and intimacy. Loneliness separates us from others and corrodes our happiness. It is the dark side of the “rugged individualism” and “self-sufficiency” long celebrated in American culture.

Being lonely is not the same as being alone. Solitude is a healthy condition. It can provide time for rest, renewal, reflection. By seeking solitude, as the poet May Sarton wrote, we explore “the richness of self.” People choose solitude but fight loneliness, for it is neither satisfying nor redemptive. It is, in fact, the poverty of self. Over time, loneliness can imprison us in a suffocating cocoon of self-pity and self-doubt.

Prolonged loneliness can even cause health problems. It contributes to obesity, smoking, alcoholism, as well as...
diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, high blood pressure, heart disease, and higher stress levels. Pathological loneliness can lead some people to kill others. Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old Californian who killed six and wounded 13 in a frenzied rampage in May, said in a blog that he had experienced nothing in his young life but “loneliness and misery.”

As a cultural historian, I am less interested in studying the clinical dimensions of loneliness than I am in analyzing why disconnectedness has become such a powerful theme in American literature and the arts since the end of the Second World War, when loneliness first emerged as a major societal concern.

Think about the aching loneliness that animates the stories of John Cheever, the poetry of Sylvia Plath (“God, but life is loneliness”), and the novels of Saul Bellow, Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, Raymond Chandler, Richard Yates, Joyce Carol Oates, and David Foster Wallace (“lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed”). Loneliness also populates the songs of Frank Sinatra, Hank Williams (I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry), Elvis Presley (Are You Lonely Tonight?), and Paul Simon (Sounds of Silence—“Take my arms that I might reach you”); iconic movies like Rear Window and Taxi Driver; and powerful plays such as Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie and Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman.

Loneliness is not unique to the United States, but it has become the defining emotion in modern American culture. As the comedienne Lily Tomlin acknowledged, “We’re all in this together—by ourselves.”

Since 1945, American culture has experienced both a decline in the power of traditional religious belief and dramatic increases in the scale and pace of how we live. The transition from rural and small-town America to the anonymity of big cities and sprawling suburbs has heightened rootlessness, isolation, and estrangement. In small-town America, people sought out neighbors as a defense against loneliness; in themselves around the nation. A fifth of American households moved each year during the 1950s and 60s. Executives for IBM moaned that the company’s initials stood for “I’ve Been Moved.”

With the advent of the commercial airline industry and the interstate highway system, workers were forced to travel more than ever before. In 1980, the Sun Company’s 6,000 employees spent 120,000 work nights in hotels far from home. During the 1950s, the emergence of television as the most popular form of entertainment aggravated loneliness by luring couples and families away from interacting with each other or their neighbors. The poet T.S. Eliot explained in 1963 that television was a new “medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”

Now, with people living longer on average, there are more widows and widowers, and the number of divorced people and young adults living as singles has been increasing for years. In 1950, only 22 percent of adults were single. Today, more than half of adults are single.

Of course, every person living alone doesn’t necessarily feel lonely, just as every couple living together is not well connected. But living or working alone makes it more likely to be lonely.

Some 30 percent of American adults now work at least one day at home alone. And 60 percent of them complain of loneliness. Loneliness is not simply the absence of people; it involves the absence of caring and a loss of intimacy.

In the 1980s, the New York Telephone Company urged people to fight loneliness by dialing someone: “Don’t be lonely, pick up the phone.” Today, many people prefer texting to talking. Some like the anonymity of Internet communications because they are afraid of intimacy. The painful irony, however, is that prolonged use of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter often worsens loneliness by promoting superficial contact and reducing face-to-face interactions. Few purely electronic “friendships” are very substantial. In 2009, psychologists reported that loneliness is a contagious malaise, and new forms of electronic communication serve to spread the contagion rather than cure it.

In 1967, when the Beatles were singing, “I get by with a little help from my friends,” Americans on average had at least three good friends to lean on. Now, despite Facebook networks numbering in the hundreds or even thousands, almost half of Americans report that they only have one close friend with whom they feel comfortable discussing important matters.

Loneliness is hard to cure but easy to recognize. More than any other 20th-century writer or artist, the New York painter Edward Hopper was a connoisseur of modern loneliness. In Office in a Small City (1953), Hopper depicts a man sitting alone in his bleak office, physically and emotionally detached from his surroundings. Lost in thought, he stares into the distance. The stark portrait brings to mind the old AT&T commercial: “Reach out and touch someone.” That advice remains even more relevant today.