CWL Loneliness Talks Monday July 11th, 2022

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Talk 1: The Difference Dances of Loneliness (10:45 – 11:45)

Introduction

- "All the Lonely people. Where do they all come from? All the lonely people. Where do they all belong?" Maybe Paul McCartney and John Lennon got it right with their 1966 hit, "Eleanor Rigby" – but I suspect in ways they didn't consider.
- Loneliness today is more easily associated with young people and their entanglements with technology – ironic given their digital networks – and also with seniors. But it's broader than that, and we're not very good at accessing the more discreet experiences of loneliness. It's one of our cultural taboos that whispers, "I shouldn't be alone", terrified to admit "I don't seem have any close friends nowadays" or "I can't stand being between relationships." We immediately go to negative implications that "something is wrong with me because I'm lonely." We've been schooled to think different about it with a reflex that says, "Something is wrong with my life!" This aversion can be so strong that it prevents us from seeing our inner complexity. And in addition to the very real pain that comes with it, there's the added judgment of shame because it admits weakness and vulnerability. In my opinion, we've pathologized loneliness even though everyone all of us experience it.
- The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) poses these questions to gauge people's inner state:

  How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?
  How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
  How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?
  How often do you feel alone?
  How often do you feel part of a group of friends?
  How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?
  How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?

How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?
How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?
How often do you feel close to people?
How often do you feel left out?
How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?
How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?
How often do you feel isolated from others?
How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?
How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?
How often do you feel shy?
How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?
How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?
How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?

- If you answered "yes" to any of these, you're not alone. *Admitting* loneliness might be rare, but *feeling* it isn't. Contrary to popular thinking, loneliness *isn't* pathological and it's not a sign of some innate inferiority.
- No culture in history has had more spare time than our own. Most human beings who have walked this earth had to scratch out a basic subsistence level of living. Their lives weren't buffered and eased with complex food distribution systems. Daily life was more vulnerable to the physical demands of the day; people were literally concerned with their "daily bread". For instance, in medieval times, 8 hours each day were required to gather, prepare, and cook meals. As a result, people didn't have the time, space, or the energy to delve into their inner lives.
- Our situation is profoundly different, as Ron Rolheiser writes in his gem of a book, *The Restless Heart,* "We have the luxury, perhaps never before afforded a people, of being able to experience our loneliness in its utmost depth." (p. 9) People today can devote energy and time to their inner spiritual and psychological lives. Even if this isn't always immediately available to us, as often happens with the demands of family life, we will eventually reach those shores of loneliness.
- At the time of Jesus, the average life expectancy was about 35 – that is, if you survived birth and early childhood. In the Middle Ages life expectancy was about 40 years. With the Industrial Revolution the life conditions began to change at a massive scale, and people could reasonably expect to live to 50 or 55. Today in

North America our anticipated longevity is about 78 years for men and 81 for women. My point is that as a society we're living something that wasn't available to most of humanity - the senior years and everything that goes with it - and we're not quite sure what this means spiritually. Ironically, with this new longevity in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the word "alienation" starts to get tossed around.

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- Undoubtedly, with the pandemic the subject of loneliness became less taboo. When *everyone's* feeling vulnerable it's not a stretch to admit *specific kinds* of vulnerabilities. "Social bubbles" was an elegant term coined for the reality of feeling isolated and lonely.
- But the heightened profile of loneliness that came with the pandemic is part of a wider trend in our society with several paradoxes at play.
    - On the one hand, a characteristic of our time is that we have fewer *confidantes*. Sociological studies comparing the 1970's with the early 2000's indicate that people in the 1970's felt they had more connections and friends than people of recent decades. It's now "normal" that our closest relationships, including marriages and friendships, don't necessarily last a lifetime. We experience impermanence in our relationship networks; people move away, or we move through different stages of life. For previous generations, it was either marriage or the religious life that took you from your family, and even then, you would likely have lived in proximity to your family of origin.
    - On the other hand, today our relationships are intertwined with technology but with less actual time cultivating face to face encounters. The circle of friends is partly virtual, even with texting, which is why young people claim to have more "close friends" than the previous generation: 72% say that they have four or more close friends.[1] Yet there are serious questions raised as to whether these electronic meeting spaces compromise a level of emotional depth and intimacy.
- Our attitudes toward others have also changed. For most of history "to be exiled" was a punishment universally feared. It meant that you were cut off from the community and therefore cut off from your identity; "[it] was worse than death….

[1] Reginald W. Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials*, (2009) pp. 25-31.

[it] was to be cancelled as a human being."[2] By contrast, many of us *seek* exile; we often find ourselves wanting to *get away* from others and periodically decide to "self-exile". We treasure our independence and increasingly protect and value our privacy.

- The American comedian **Sebastian Maniscalco** touches on this in one of his sets where he talks about the phrase "having company" and how its meaning has changed in just one generation. (**EXPAND**)

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- Frankly, our biggest battle with loneliness is meeting it, admitting it, sitting with it… and only then can we connect the dots to the diversionary tactics we develop to avoid its pain. These diversions can be minor such as turning on the TV to fill the unbearable silence of the moment, but also major diversions when someone jumps from one romantic relationship into another because they can't be without a partner even for a little while. Sometimes a life pattern becomes conspicuous – we notice that we can't sit still - we're always fidgeting – we can't stand a weekend alone - or we always have the radio on. As we learn to read these "signs" we can reverse engineer from the conspicuous avoidance patterns to its deeper causes.
- Loneliness can be **acute**: a searing, screaming, aching loneliness that echoes off the walls. There's **chronic** loneliness, less acute but always there, like white noise. Rolheiser describes it broadly as a "nagging dissatisfaction with the quality of our life and our relationships to people, a yearning without a particular reference, a nostalgia for past moments and friends, a restlessness that prevents us from relaxing and from being present to the moment, a feeling of alienation, … a sense of missing out on something, an inexplicable emptiness." (p. 7)
- What can I do with the pain, the restlessness, the emptiness, the longing? It's maddening because it isn't always clear *why* I feel lonely. How can I name it? What does my loneliness mean? Where does it come from? What can I do with it? Should I reach out for help? What steps can I take toward freedom?
- One of the key strategies with it – and this is the heart of my presentation - is discovering that loneliness has different *types*. Learning to tell the difference between them is a process called **discernment** or **differentiation**.

[2] Robert Solomon, *The Passions* (University of Notre Dame Press; Notre Dame Indiana) 1975, p. 93.

- For example: … an engine and a car mechanic…
  … a starry night….
- I'll give an example of how differentiation and discernment work in our inner lives. We're aware that **anger** has different energy levels and moral textures. In fact, there are many different types of anger – some scholars identify as many as 10! ***Rage*** and ***fury*** are explosive, often destructive emotions and actions, like road rage. If you grew up in a household that was subjected to rage, you know how destructive and intimidating it can be. **W*rath*** seeks vengeance or punishment; ***resentment*** refers to ill will rooted in an unaddressed grievance; **hate** is hardened anger where forgiveness seems impossible and unwarranted. There's also a strong kinship between anger and **fear**. ***Indignation*** is a moral anger, the anger that's without sin because it's a *proportionate and reasonable* response to something judged to be wrong, unjust, or evil. Anger can therefore be a sign of **moral health** because someone recognizes the contrast between what "is" and what "ought to be". By the way, the vice for those who ought to be angry and aren't is called **lack of spirit**.
- My point is that with these differentiations of anger we're better equipped to take steps toward a healthy resolution.

PAUSE

- I think we already have some capacity to do this with some distinctions we've heard with loneliness. **Loneliness** is associated with painful feelings; we just *feel* lonely. (Rubin Gotesky) Being **alone** is just a physical fact and may or may not be accompanied with pain. **Solitude** is the state of being by yourself but being peaceful and unperturbed.
- Still, without deeper insights into the nature and types of loneliness that inhabit us, we can become clingy, possessive, and controlling of others, easily prone to jealousy because we're threatened by losing our relational security. Sometimes we try *too hard* to fit into relationships and thereby compromise ourselves for the sake of having someone, anyone, in our lives. We can become superficial because our energies are dispersed as much as we're looking for connections on a playing field that has become too broad. We cast our net too wide and are no longer discerning about the people we choose to be with. At other times we find ourselves unable to stay with one activity or to just sit still because our loneliness

comes through, and we become like monkeys jumping from branch to branch. Or we might expect too much from others, looking for that perfect match informed by an internal list of 10 qualities that need to be fulfilled. By looking for that perfect match and refusing to compromise some of our expectations we might isolate from *everyone*. Our inability to accept a time of loneliness can also lead us to betray our principles and drive us into social networks and fellowship circles that our better selves would never choose. The causalities of loneliness are also found in the abuse of alcohol and prescription medication, busyness, sex, workaholism, porn, jumping into relationships, and even some forms of religious practice – *anything* can be made into an escape hatch. Rolheiser, I think, nails it on the head with this description:

> What are we lonely for? We are lonely for many things: We are lonely for more: more love and communication, more unity and understanding than we have at present; We are longing and restless for a wholeness we do not yet possess. We are tormented by feelings of insatiability, thirsting constantly, wanting to know more people, wanting to be known by more people; wanting to be in more places, and wanting to be "Where it's at," in every sense of that cliche. We are frustrated because our relationships are too frequently fraught with ambiguity and misunderstanding, with pettiness and betrayal. We feel empty and incomplete because we are missing out on so much of life, constantly living at the fringes, as through a glass, darkly, away from the action, unable to completely sift through the riddle of life, at the door without a key, unable to fully enter. We feel nostalgia and death as precious friends and precious moments leave us, never to return, as youth and fullness slowly leave our bodies, as the clock ticks away and we lose so much of what we have had. We feel both agony and ecstasy in our loneliness as we experience both the tension that makes for life and the loss that makes for death. (*The Restless Heart*, p. 41)

- When any of these experiences of loneliness aren't met, related to, listened to, and understood, it becomes a wild energy that's let loose onto our families, friends, workplaces, and fellow Christians. It's a form of imprisonment under the

domination of what psychologists call the unconscious. The car is moving but we're not entirely in the driver's seat. Welcome to the human condition, and all of us are susceptible to any of these outcomes.

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- Some will argue that if you have God in your life and are spiritually centered, you'll never be lonely. They'll quote Saint Augustine who wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you". It's true that restlessness *is* one of those types of loneliness, which I'll get to in a few moments, but our restlessness for God isn't the only loneliness that we experience. Augustine is saying that we have a built-in desire for God, an inner space that is exquisitely hospitable to God's love. THAT space can't be satiated in any other way, and if it isn't we will experience a restlessness no matter how else we might choose to fill that gap.
- To identify all loneliness as a problem of one's relationship with God is not only theologically unsound and foreign to our Sacred Tradition, but it's socially, psychologically, and spiritually disastrous. Many, many people are spiritually centered and nourish their relationship with God - and are *still* lonely. You can be a person of deep, personal faith and still be searching, longing, and wandering because you're unaware that other kinds of loneliness are part of the human condition. You can imagine how someone could misconstrue their loneliness because they figure "I'm praying regularly, I go to mass, I have fellowship in my life, but why am I so lonely? What's wrong with me?"
    - I knew a religious sister living in Rome, and one of the outreaches of her community was to help some of the older cardinals with their household tasks. She told me that many of them were just plain lonely and needed the routine of warm human contact.
- **We can give our lives to God and have a solid prayer and liturgical life, but we still need meaningful contact with other human beings.** Even monks are kept within the embrace of a community. We don't become holy and loving by isolating ourselves from the risks and pain of relationships. We may feel we have God in our lives, but without human friendship and intimacy, we'll still be lonely.

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Types of Loneliness

- Now I would like to start getting into the types of loneliness, those "differentiations" I referred to earlier.
- Restlessness, fantasy, rootlessness, psychological depression, and alienation.
- Some of these overlap… Each has a different cause, meaning, and way of finding a resolution. (*The Restless Heart*, 42) For some of them it's crucial that they're correctly matched with the precise countermeasures, others, not as much. Some are more spiritual and theological in their roots; others are more social and psychological in nature. Some types of indicate that you're healthy and that something is *very* right with you; others are a sign of some deeper spiritual or psychological ailment.

1. Restlessness

- I want to begin with restlessness because I alluded to it a few moments ago with Saint Augustine.
- This type of loneliness is a longing/hunger for "something more", which can be meaning, intimacy, security, peace of mind, or God. Sometimes it may come in the form of a question, "Is this all there is to my life?". I'm looking for "something" but can't quite name it. It's a gnawing feeling that, to quote the U2 song, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for". It's a homesickness with no home to go to, nostalgia for a time of fulfillment, or wanderlust.
- The driving force of restlessness is "more". Rolheiser:

> At the center of our being an insatiable burning pushes us out in wanderlust and eros, in restlessness and desire, to pursue some unknown timelessness, infinity, and wholeness…. [We are] driven by a perpetual inner disquiet that we do not always fully recognize or understand, pushing, always harder, to fly faster, to go more places, to break through, to break out of the asphyxiating confines of our place and condition in time and history." (*The Restless Heart*, p. 49; 53)

- The capacity for restlessness is built into us; it's part of what makes our hearts what they are. We have ***infinite*** longing in us, we're built for eternity, we're

created to outlast time. If this part of us isn't respected and listened to, that is, to be related to God or framed within some kind of spiritual practice and vision, it will begin to cause problems. Unaddressed restlessness could come to us in the guise of greed where the insatiable desire for God and deeper purpose gets entangled with the desire for stuff. Or it could be masked behind sexually inappropriate behaviour because "Sex becomes our only means of periodically experiencing ourselves as selves"[3] It can be channeled into careerism and blind ambition, leading to a situation described by Thomas Merton, where "People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success, only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning on the wrong wall."

- Scratch below the surface of greed, promiscuity, or careerism - underneath it might be the loneliness Augustine wrote about.
- Restlessness comes in many forms, and depending on our psychological and spiritual condition, some will flail with it in consumerism and serial relationships because they can't connect the dots of their inner disquiet; others will more easily see the connections between their inner restlessness and what it points to. Even the saints experienced a kind of restless longing, but unlike many of us they learned to name it and knew what it meant - not a problem to solve - but as a beckoning by God to go deeper in their relationship with him.
- There's a place in us built for God, and no thing, no person, no project, no role, no status, no career, no office, no amount of stuff, no spouse, no friend – nothing can fill that ocean of the infinite within other than the Infinite One. And isn't this the longing of our time and culture? Catherine Doherty, the foundress of Madonna House, addressed this problem in her *Poustinia*:

> Stand still, and allow the strange, deadly restlessness of our tragic age to fall away like the worn-out dusty cloak that it is – a cloak that was once considered beautiful. The restlessness was considered the magic carpet to tomorrow, but now in reality we see it for what it is: a running away from oneself, a turning away from that journey inward that all… must undertake to meet God dwelling within the depths of their souls.

William H. Willimon, Bishop of N. Alabama United Methodist Church, in *The Christian Century*, April 19, 2005, 21.

- One of the best ways to deal with restlessness is to incorporate *silence* into a daily spiritual practice. It's not the only way, but for some forms of loneliness it's the right start. The restlessness will gradually become less acute and will be a garden of solitude. It will occasionally still rear its head, but we will have learned to befriend it and allow it to be transformed into spiritual depth, wisdom, and compassion.

2. Fantasy

- We don't usually think of fantasy as a type of loneliness. It's living in a world that's only in our minds, our own creation of what is true and real that doesn't connect with truth and reality: "We live with certain fantasies and illusions of who we are and how we fit into the scheme of things." (*The Restless Heart*, p. 58) We see ourselves in a particular way, but it doesn't always square with reality. This is as true for those of us who struggle with lousy self-images as much as an inflated sense of self. How we see ourselves – what passes in our minds as self-identifications - isn't necessarily how others experience us. I could over-estimate my importance and deem myself indispensable. Others, however, see me as overbearing or a control freak. On the other hand, I might not think too much of myself, and others see me as a jewel. I might see myself as holy and the "ideal" Catholic; others see me as petty and angry. I might imagine myself as profound and interesting; others find me pretentious and opinionated. The loneliness of this close fantasy life are the lies that I tell myself and the ruses of self-deceptions that that I employ to keep myself from the truth. I've isolated myself from reality: "All of us are more or less lonely in this way, somewhat alienated from the real world, other people, and "alienated from our true selves" (*The Restless Heart*, p. 59.)
- This is tough inner work. Differentiating and entering our interior topography, which is accessed by feeling and image, is a venture into a tangled world. **Carl Jung**:

> People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls. They will practice Indian yoga and all its exercises, observe a strict regimen of diet, learn the literature of a whole world – all because they cannot get on with themselves and have not the

slightest faith that anything useful could ever come out of their own souls. Thus the soul has gradually been turned into a Nazareth from which nothing good can come.

- Reality checks are one way out of this. In Catholic spiritual tradition there are two pillars of spiritual growth: self-knowledge and humility...
- How can I feel understood and met by you if I don't really know who I am? Without this sense of self, relationships with others become frustrated possibilities for intimacy. No amount of encounter with the other can become a surrogate for the peace that I must first have with myself. I must *like* who I am if I am to feel that you find me likeable, or as Jesus put it, "Love others as you love yourself." Otherwise, I'm trying to get something from relationships that only I can give to myself.

Talk 2: Learning to Dance with Our Loneliness (2:00 – 3:00)

3. Rootlessness (this is a difficult section because it raises delicate questions…)

- Rolheiser describes this as feeling a lack of moral boundaries where there are no "absolutes, anchors, adrift without a harbor in which to feel secure, without security zones, without meaningful grounding in tradition, and without something that anchors us…" (*The Restless Heart*, pp. 62-63.) The feeling is that nothing is permanent, and that nothing is constituted by solid moral lines.
- This isn't only a personal experience. What distinguishes our culture is the question as to whether ***truth*** has a **transcendent, enduring, and universal** quality. It's a world view espoused by a philosophical and cultural movement called **postmodernism**. For a diehard postmodernist the claims of moral truth are in fact the consequence of a decades and centuries-long power struggle over competing *versions* of truth: "The only truth is the history of the way truth has been defined and produced, deployed, subverted, and perverted."[4] Truth is like the **eight ball** left on the table at the end of a pool game thanks to the ability of the most skillful player.
- Theologian Peter Jonkers thinks that as a consequence of this view of reality, [We're] "never quite able to take [ourselves] seriously because [we're] always aware that the terms in which we describe [ourselves] are always [changing], always aware of the [impermanence] and fragility [of the words we use to identify ourselves]… [we're] constantly redescribing ourselves, society and the world in ever new ways, by constantly recreating [ourselves] without referring to any normative eternal examples like God, the Absolute, reason, truth, etc… [we're] constantly inclined to give up one vocabulary in favor of another, but never find peace in any of them."[5] **The best summary I ever heard about this cultural undertow came from a student, when at a gathering of the University community said of herself and her peers: "We're lost."**
- It's this cultural trend that brings the loneliness of rootlessness closer to all of us.

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[4] *Dictionary of Postmodernism*, 149.

[5] Peter Jonkers, "From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers, Eds. The Council for Research in Values and Ethics 2015, p. 173

- You may have noticed that our world is changing very quickly, and that we're seeing the stability we've enjoyed in the West beginning to slip away.
- **The pandemic was and continues to be apocalyptic.** I want to clarify that apocalypse doesn't mean the end of *the* world; it means the end of **one** world, a **familiar** world. As Saint Paul put it, "… the present form of this world is passing away." (1 Cor. 7:31) Apocalypse means "to unveil" and "reveal". So, what was revealed by the pandemic?
    - The Czech theologian Thomas Halik believes that it uncovered "the state of our civilization [which is sick]... In biblical terms this all-pervasive sickness is a sign of the times." (*Christianity in a Time of Sickness*, p. 1)
    - … the disparate resources across the world to deal with the pandemic, even at a rudimentary level of providing masks and basic health care.
    - In Ontario we saw the condition of our senior's residences…
    - We went through a national trauma with the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children.
    - In the United States we saw the collective impotence and denial of the severity of the pandemic among its highest leaders, and how much of this was caused by the breathtaking incompetence of the egomaniacal President Trump. The Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis noted that America's "political process made possible the ascendancy to the highest office in the land a national disgrace, a demagogue as morally and ethically compromised as a person can be." **What the pandemic revealed is that many Evangelical Christians and a conspicuous number of Catholics supported Trump, a man who by every metric of Catholic morality is, among other things, narcissistic, indecent, racist, and an instigator of social division.**
    - We witnessed their democracy teetering because of a splintered political will. *The Irish Times* reported that "the United States has stirred a very wide range of feelings in the rest of the world: love and hatred, fear and hope, envy and contempt, awe and anger. But there is one emotion that has never been directed towards the U.S. until now: pity." (*The Unraveling of America*, Wade Davis)
    - We're also coming to the end of a privileged place that Christianity has occupied in Western culture, beginning with the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. A 1,600-year chapter in history is closing;

we're seeing the end of Christian culture. This can be very unsettling. But it's not the first time that Christians have had to adapt to radically changing social and cultural conditions of faith. When Saint Augustine wrote *The Confessions*, he too was experiencing the cultural breakdown of the Roman Empire. Other Christian communities at other times in history and in other parts of the world have similarly fallen out of favour with the prevailing culture and became a minority church. But they changed, adapted, and found new ways and expressions of being Christian! This generation is seeing the end of 1,6000 years of Christendom, but it's definitely not the end of Christianity in the West. Something different will emerge.

- And just 5 months ago, Russia's attack on Ukraine rejigged the international order and introduced a global insecurity not seen since 1945.

- With all of these things happening – and there's so much that I've left out - rootlessness could become the new normal.

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- So, what's the solution to this kind of loneliness, the feeling that nothing is permanent? That our foundations are giving way? That life is constantly changing?
- The Jesuit priest and social advocate **Daniel Berrigan** once said, **"Unless you somehow have a foot outside of your culture, the culture will swallow you whole."**
- **Rolheiser**: the ark as a symbol of interiority to weather the storms of the culture.
- It will require new ways of interiorizing our faith: "To survive as a genuine believer, the Christian must now personally integrate what tradition did in the past."[6] We can't look to the culture to integrate the functions of religion - this must now be internalized, personally seized. This points to the importance of cultivating a deeply personal spiritual life that is "… not derived from the force of inherited [family] habits nor from people's tendency to yield to social pressure. To attain [the spiritual life] the believer must be alert to the inner voice. (*Seeking Interiority*)

[6] Seeing Christian Interiority: An Interview with Louis Dupre," in *The Christian Century*, July 16-23, 1997, 654-660.

4. Psychological depression

- I'm touching on this very briefly because it raises medical questions that I'm not equipped to diagnose.
- In its more severe forms, the loneliness of depression is triggered by body chemistry, a painful event, or a trauma. At a minor level, it's also what Rolheiser calls our propensity for the "blues" (p. 66.) which tends to be "sporadic" and random but can be intense. For those of us who are depressives, this can be a major burden, and it can become a all-consuming feeling of loneliness.
- The causes for depression are so diverse that a generic strategy is inadvisable. It's dealt with on a case-by-case basis. With the more severe forms of depression, obviously, the best recourse is to seek professional help and likely medication.

5. Alienation

- At the most basic level, we experience alienation when we feel that our relationships are insufficient or frustrating. We don't feel "met" or understood. We want to connect at a deeper level, but others either seem incapable or uninterested to meet us at that level. With alienation not only do you feel excluded, but you also limit self-disclosure because you don't expect to be understood or you want to avoid the risk of being *mis*understood.
- Unlike restlessness which is "built in", alienation is caused by interpersonal and social conditions that "otherizes" a person or group. The "alien" interacts with individuals, groups, and institutions as if he she is a foreigner, an adversary, a stranger, an outsider, a deviant, an outcast, or a misfit. The suffering of alienation emerges in the space of that contrast: I'm lonely in a group, a foreigner among citizens, an outsider among members, a misfit among people who click with each other. It's the woman with health issues who is forced to retreat from her customary social contacts. It's immigrants and indigenous peoples who are estranged from the opportunities afforded by mainstream society. It's the unemployed in a society with a healthy workforce. It's a child bullied at school, or the adult at work. It's an elderly person who feels disconnected from family conversations or isolated in a senior's residence.

The Alienation of Authenticity

- We can also experience alienation by a heightened moral sensitivity. For instance, a woman often notices things around her that others don't; she reads her environments very quickly, such as a toxic dynamic at a meeting or at the workplace. She raises the issue afterward, but no one notices or is bothered by it, and she wants to scream, "The Emperor has no cloths!"
- When people see undercurrents and problems that others don't it can engender a profound sense of alienation along with self-doubt and self-alienation because one is tempted to think, "Something's wrong with me."
- **But this kind of loneliness indicates that something is *very right* with the individual.** "Suffering in a superficial, activist, apathetic and… dehumanized society can be a sign of spiritual health." (Moltmann) The depth psychologist Erich Neumann put it this way:

> … when a [group or institutional] crisis in values has occurred, the individual lacks a collective orientation. They fall sick because of the problem for which there is no longer a collective answer and a collective procedure for reaching a settlement. They then become involved in a conflict from which no institution is any longer in a position to set them free, but for which they must suffer and experience an individual solution in the living process of their personal destiny.[7]

- It's important to underscore that one doesn't *choose* alienation but makes a choice knowing the risks of ostracization and the pain of alienation. By contrast, someone can be alienated because they're a troublemaker, contrarian, opinionated, egoistic, or a malcontent. They're quarrelsome *by character*, not on *principle*. Their alienation is self-imposed because others push back on their hostility.
- Learning to dance with the loneliness of alienation means acquiring skills to read and then strategize with these different scenarios. With some types of alienation, having a spiritual director is important. For others we need professional help or an intervention. For some people it may mean being more careful with their choice of friends. With other types of alienation, we need legal redress or the

[7] Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1990)

intervention of an authority such as a parent or the head of an institution. Some experiences of alienation require that we learn how to reach out. We strategize a new program, we initiate contact with an institution to see if there are solutions that could be generated.

- Coming back to the individual experience, battling alienation means risking vulnerability with others, and fighting the temptation to withdraw. Am I afraid of rejection? Inner work is vital so that by taking these risks we aren't hanging ourselves out to dry or holding our hats in our hands. Navigating relationships is not too different from the Parable of the Sower: not every encounter will grow roots. But we need to connect with others and get into the "game" (without playing games) and risk vulnerability.
- A friend offers a **second self** to whom we say, "**What, you too? I thought I was the only one!**" "You get me." We're often looking for this level of connection. **St. Augustine** wrote that "A friend is someone who knows all there is about me and *still* loves me." Aristotle described the properties of friendship as being temperate, pleasant to be around, those not too quick to show us our mistakes, who are not cantankerous or quarrelsome, those who have tact in taking and making jokes, **"And we also feel friendly towards those who praise such good qualities as we possess, and especially if they praise the good qualities that we are not too sure we *do* possess."** (*Rhetoric*, Book II, 4; 1387)

The Alienation of Christ

- The biblical scholar John P. Meier describes the life of Jesus as the epitome of the experience:

> By the time he had died, he had managed to make himself appear obnoxious, dangerous, or suspicious to everyone from pious Pharisees through political high priests to an ever-vigilant Pilate. One reason Jesus met a swift and brutal end is simple: he alienated so many individuals and groups in Palestine that, when the final clash came in Jerusalem in A.D. 30, he had very few people, especially people of influence, on his side.[8]

[8] Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 9.

- Jesus was alienated by his refusal to compromise his character, what we would call personal authenticity. He was alienated from the political and religious authorities and the power networks of his day. He offended the Jewish religious sensibilities and threatened the Roman political order. He was a reformer and a prophet but was rebuffed as a heretic, a blasphemer, a false prophet, and a rabble-rouser. He challenged the religious and social status quo. He imparted new meaning to the Law and to the standards of justice, mercy, and the love of God. He unsettled his contemporaries by his disposition toward the socially alienated such as the poor, public (unrepentant) sinners, and social outcasts. By refusing the honors of being made into a miracle worker or a king he protected his identity from being defined by others, but by the same honor system he was eventually brought to shame. At his crucifixion he experienced alienation from his closest friends while Mary and others stood in with him solidarity.
- Jesus' alienation also extends from earth to heaven, for, as biblical scholars have shown, crucifixion was interpreted as the administration of the justice of God: "The one hanged [on a tree] is accursed by God." (Deut. 21:23)[9] He was not only rejected by his followers, but his crucifixion was seen as God's rejection of Jesus. The Son of God who was sent by God dies alienated from God. Jesus sought solidarity with his people but was met with rejection, as it says in John's gospel: "He came to his own and his own people did not accept him." (Jn 1:11)
- Jesus' life is an extreme example of one type of alienation. It's not about the alienation of bullying, or sickness, or growing old, or feeling unmet and unknown by others - each of these require different strategies. What I'm suggesting is that in view of the life and death of Jesus, recognizing alienation should be second nature for anyone who calls themselves Christian.

[9] *Ibid*, 8.

Conclusions: Towards Strategizing

- All of these types of loneliness have different causes, come from distinct facets of the human experience - and all can be crippling. Knowing how to name and then connect the type of loneliness is half the battle.
    - For example, the loneliness of some forms of alienation can be addressed by being more careful about the people we admit into our lives; other experiences of alienation are overcome by reaching out in solidarity, such as with the elderly or a struggling teenager. The alienation of authenticity sometimes means knowing when we can no longer connect with old friends and fellowship circles. The loneliness that comes from clinical depression can't be solved with prayer and will power, but with medication and counselling. What's decisive is knowing which loneliness I'm struggling with to make the right steps to correcting it.

…….

- In those early anxiety-filled days of the pandemic, I came across a column by Bishop Barron that really spoke to me. The gist of his message was inspired by a famous philosopher who believed that some of our deepest problems could be remedied by bearing our loneliness long enough for it to be transformed into an experience of solitude. Barron felt that at least the pandemic potentially opened that door for us. He wasn't arguing that the solution to our problems *is* solitude, but that we must be present to ourselves and feel the pain if we are ever to name it and come to wisdom with it. A well-known retreat master in the southern States similarly councils his retreatants to go into the surrounding desert and with a twig etch into the dirt an eight-foot diameter circle and stay in it for five hours. Don't move – stay. Don't explore that crevice over there – stay. Don't walk to the next hill to see what's in the distance – stay. The point of the exercise is learning to remain present to oneself to *allow* what is already within us to be recognized and felt, even if it's painful. **It isn't a solution, but it gives us a chance to name what we're experiencing so that we can move to the right solution.** It means acquiring new habits and making concrete lifestyle changes.
- Christianity teaches that silence, not words, is the supreme form of prayer. It's only in silence that we meet ourselves, and this meeting cultivates depth and interiority; it gives us substance. The condition of our inner life becomes

apparent, and we begin to see how much we try to control so much – including our spiritual lives.

- We religious persons aren't always *transformed* persons because our deepest desires remain unknown to ourselves and are therefore kept from God as the ultimate object of discloser. Unknown desires – not bad at all, but just the uniqueness of our own hearts trying to get a hearing – and the loneliness that is part and parcel of life, continue to live in the darkness of our unconscious, like a vampire avoiding daylight.
- I find the story of Moses' parting of the Red Sea very helpful… We must find our "Moses" in the oppression of loneliness to part those waters so that we might walk through them to freedom. That "Moses" is having the right insight into the type of loneliness that plagues us.
- The richness and depth of Jesus' words "Seek, and you shall find, knock, and the door will be opened, ask, and it will be given to you…" is a word of hope for these deeper and sometimes difficult undercurrents of our lives, including loneliness. In other words, we're not only *seekers*, but we can be *finders* as well. Our loneliness and the loneliness of the world can be assuaged and transformed into something beautiful.

Loneliness
CWL Conference: Monday July 11th, 2022
(Fr. Mark Slatter, Ottawa, ON)

Talk 1: The Difference Dances of Loneliness

Introducing the Topic

Types of Loneliness

1. Restlessness

2. Fantasy

Talk 2: Learning to Dance with Our Loneliness

3. Rootlessness

4. Psychological Depression

5. Alienation

The Alienation of Authenticity

Conclusions

Sources consulted for this conference:

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Mark Slatter, *Insights While Suffering* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).