

ALONE...TOGETHER

This is the season of joy and light, family and friends, and well it should be. But it's also the season of insistent darkness, grief, and loneliness. We Unitarian Universalists are an upbeat, life-affirming faith, but we're relentlessly realistic too and refuse to sugar-coat the shadows and sorrows of December, even as we celebrate Winter Solstice and Hanukkah starting tonight at sundown, then the festivities of Christmas and Kwanzaa in the days ahead...with all the lights and hoopla and partying imaginable. Today I simply want to salute one of the profoundest paradoxes of our earthly journey: namely, being alone...together.

We come into this world alone. We emerge from the womb, naked, yelping as we burst from a sheltered solitude into an exposed, noisy scene. We also exit alone, and even the interlude between our birth and death—whether the moments are painful, loving, boring, or happy—finds us ultimately alone.

No modern commentator has written more powerfully on the theme of aloneness than Clark Moustakis:

The deepest experiences the soul can know—the birth of a baby, the prolonged illness or death of a loved relative, the torturous pain or the isolation of disease, the creation of a poem, a painting, a symphony, the grief of a fire, a flood, an accident...in all these experiences, we must perforce go alone.

Of course, we can share our experiences, and we do. We share feelings, exchange ideas, and intertwine bodies. We can join spirits, when a task or tragedy calls. That's why we belong to this beloved Fellowship. We can even love someone from marrow to marrow. Nonetheless, when all is said and done, there's an uncompromising sense in which we remain alone. There are

places in every one of us that can never be visited, let alone known, even by the closest of companions.

Utterly, inwardly, incurably alone. Alone.

And the experience of being alone is quite unlike any other. It's so total, direct, vivid, deeply felt. When we're immersed in its throes, there's hardly room for any other feeling or awareness. And there's no departure or exile. We're simply alone.

I'm not sure I really began to put words to this universal human condition until early in my ministry. I remember Unitarian Universalist troubadour/minister Ric Masten coming to Southern California and sharing poignant songs and poems on the theme of loneliness, even suicide. It was the very beginning of Ric's circuit riding ministry, but, frankly, loneliness, in one disguise or another, dogged all of his gigs for the rest of the nearly 40 years our lives crossed.

I must have escorted Masten around town that week to roughly ten performances: both congregations and colleges, adults and children. I found myself unfailingly tearful, touched, and twisted as his words dug into my being. Yet I felt embraced as well, in a strange yet supportive kind of communion.

Such is the unflinching paradox of life: we're alone...even when together.

We like to claim that only voyagers, public figures, creative geniuses and prophets are truly alone. Not so. Aloneness is a universal state from which we cannot flee. We're solitary travelers along life's journey no matter how many buddies we might take with us.

Here in mid-December, our solitude and community are laid bare. So, this is truly the right time to share some notes on our existential human predicament of being alone...together.

For some of us the inevitability of aloneness is plain scary, too much to endure. Such people tend to feel that when they're alone, they're somehow in bad company. Sure, facing our solitariness can be awkward, incur pain, even require spiritual readjustment, but it need not be bad. That's my main message today: you and I need not be bad company to ourselves. Indeed, spending time getting to know ourselves up-close, apart from the crowd, just may be one of the most satisfying gifts we bequeath our soul during these holidays and beyond!

On the other hand, there are those for whom aloneness is comforting. Such folks might say: "There are few enough comfort zones in my reality as it is. I truly suffer when I forfeit my solitude." There are even those among us who would share Henry David Thoreau's rather isolationist posture: "I have never found the companion so companionable as my solitude."

In short, I'm urging today a rhythm between our moments of aloneness and togetherness, to fully embrace both zones. I'm inviting you to accept not reject your aloneness, to live more comfortably amidst its respites and anxieties. For we can worship aloneness and become recluses. Or we can be consumed by togetherness and lose our identity. Or we can follow the balanced religious goal of spending adequate time in both realms. We can be alone...together.

Let me share some of my own struggles in feeling increasingly at home with aloneness.

As a minister, I found, early on, it was easy to get hooked on people. After all, as Dorothy Parker said: "People are more fun than anybody." Why, I went into the ministry to serve and celebrate folks. Being somewhat suspicious, perhaps fearful, of my own solitude, I presumed my mission was to keep others away from theirs. A sincere but misguided mission.

I had difficulty simply being with myself, by myself, for myself. When there were so many worthwhile things to accomplish and people to engage, solitude seemed like an unnecessary luxury, even a waste. I didn't change much in my adulthood until caring friends and parishioners began to challenge me: "Hey, Tom! You seem to be overdosing on company. You'll not only burn out doing that, but you'll miss out on becoming better acquainted with the special person with whom you're going all the way to the grave: namely yourself!" I finally got the message. And I've been saved, from suffocating myself in compulsive ministerial busyness and people-addiction.

In the last decade or so, especially since my month alone in the Temeculan woods, I've been growing easier with and, actually, covetousness of being alone. I find traveling incognito important. I'll feign sleep or hide behind a book, before I'll encounter neighbors on the plane. I'm friendly, but curt. I like walking the streets of new towns alone, a stranger in a strange place, free of pressures and expectations. When I go to conferences nowadays, I refuse to room with anybody.

I also relish time alone, when Carolyn's out of town. I fill it with my own company not that of other people. I also try to catch moments alone every day on these spacious Fellowship premises. You're graced with such a beautiful and restorative place to reflect and renew by oneself. I'm not the only that does that, since I've seen several of you seizing time apart on our sacred grounds as well.

I grab times alone in my music corner at home, strumming and crooning. I like walking with Carolyn, but I also enjoy walking alone. I regularly sit by myself handling my magic tricks or watching sporting events, alive or on TV. For someone who works steadily among people, you

see, these small breaks provide necessary havens for pause and nourishment. I've learned to take minutes, and I mean minutes, here and there, chanting, daydreaming, and simply aware of my breathing. I desire no formal program, and I don't hanker for a group meditation experience. Maybe post-retirement, but certainly not now.

Some of us boldly announce that we'll make time for personal quietude after work, after time with our partner or children, or after attending to our stimulating avocations. And guess what? We're usually drained after all that activity. As Dag Hammarskjold painfully reminds: "Too tired for company, we seek a solitude we're too tired to fill."

So, my fellow pilgrims, you and I need to give solitude some prime cuts of our lives, not left-over scraps. It may not sound very spontaneous, but I find it smart, in my hectic life, to schedule solitude just like I schedule people. I won't get it otherwise, and I bet you won't either. Especially during the Decembers of our lives!

Withdrawal and return, as historian Toynbee used to call it, is a pattern that can be found throughout human history, particularly in the lives of those who've creatively changed the course of human events, like Buddha and Jesus. Withdrawal is the journey into solitude, and return is the journey back into the human circle. Being solitary and solidary requires an exchange of one mere letter...but both are powerful spiritual necessities that you don't want to travel without!

Gotama, for example, when he was twenty-nine years old, withdrew into the forest, seeking enlightenment, and when he found it, he returned among people and shared his enlightenment. Jesus too, when he was about thirty years old—in fact, at the start of his ministry, withdrew into the desert, and then he returned again to preach his good news. Indeed, his life ended with a lonely vigil in a garden and then the cross. There was something hauntingly solitary

about Jesus. As the spiritual goes, "Jesus walked this lonesome valley; he had to walk it by himself..." So do we. Especially during the frantic whirlwind of the holidays—we hunger to be still, quiet, apart.

Now there exist useful distinctions between aloneness and loneliness. Aloneness comes with the territory of being alive. It can be our friend, if we face and nourish it. On the other hand, loneliness can be the result of estrangement from self, others, perhaps life itself.

Yet the rhythm of apartness and companionship, being alone-together, is so tough to sustain. A lot of times we get sidetracked or frightened into deadends and emerge lonely as hell. Some of us are hit so hard sometimes by the void, or by isolation, that we rush into instant intimacy. We get close to as many people as possible with the expectation that soon the constant pain of being alone will cease. Such a strategy invariably fails.

For even the most solid of friendships will never rescue us from the existential anxiety of being alone. Nothing will. We can't shed our human condition. Therefore, in these frantic, desperate flurries of pseudo, hasty togetherness, really popular around holiday time, we end up emptier than ever.

There was a powerful play years back called the *Gin Game*. It's a tragic-comedy about two elders who spend most of their time playing a few friendly hands of gin on the shabby porch of the Bentley retirement home. When Fonsia asks Weller why he plays gin, he replies: "Loneliness, it's as simple as that!"

Both players, Weller and Fonsia, are at the end of their lives; they have no one, and the humble porch outside their squalid nursing home is literally the last place for each to experience human contact.

Sadly, both cling to their old ways on the porch. Instead of enjoying each other's presence for the unexpected gift it could become, they resort to old habits and hurts, ripping into each other, severing their budding friendship and destroying any final chance for a fresh start. Unable to transcend their loneliness, they compound each others loneliness. "Loneliness, it's as simple as that." Loneliness, it's as crushing as that!

Not all loneliness is self-inflicted, of course. Loneliness strikes through unforeseeable external events: the death of a loved one occurs, students can feel powerless, and women are still objectified or denigrated. Such loneliness is caused by an undeniable rejection or irrevocable loss and painfully exacerbates our given condition of being utterly alone.

Unquestionably, solitude is improved by being voluntary!

Loneliness also strikes hardest at those who are suddenly alone after a death or a divorce or the departure of children. Nobody lends a hand. Or nobody needs our hand. We may waste long hours just sitting there, hands folded patiently, waiting for someone to need us, someone to say, "When's dinner?" or "Where's my math book?" so we can return to our old selves again.

The Chinese have a useful ritual for calling our spirit back to us when it drifts way, after a wrenching loss. They invite us to recite a litany of all our ancestors and relatives, place fond names and even former landmarks, so our wandering spirit can find us again.

Sometimes loneliness is a professional liability too. The mountain climber, the seafarer, the artist, the physician, the inventor, the administrator, the single parent, others too, all know moments of piercing loneliness just by the nature of what they do.

In ministry I've known the anguish of persevering doubt, the feeling of inadequacy, the risk of misunderstanding and occasional rejection. In ministry I've received misdirected flack and undeserved praise, both accentuating my isolation. In ministry there are occasions of unspeakable joy and unmentionable confession, both carried around, untied. The loneliness of trying to create when empty or sharing something born of sweat and anguish and then having others evaluate the birth of a sermon or book...with a rating of three or five, as if anyone should ever rate someone giving birth.

Yes, my ministry knows both aloneness and loneliness, and I often can't tell them apart.

So, whenever I'm lonely I try to ask myself whether the cause appears to lie without or within. If *without* I give myself as much fortitude and love as I can muster, invite the healing forces of grace to enter my life, and allow myself time for regeneration. If the source of loneliness lies *within* I try to evict any self-pity and face the fears keeping me imprisoned in my alienation.

A final word about primary relationships. Let's be clear: healthy relationships combat loneliness but cultivate aloneness. But love doesn't dissolve loneliness. It only makes us rich in our solitude. Out of the tension between separateness and union, love, whose incredible strength is equal only to its incredible fragility, is born and reborn.

I started by saying that we enter the world alone and leave the world alone. That's true but not the whole story. We're also born through and into relationship, and we even leave enduring influences upon others when we die. Therefore, the other side of the paradox holds true too: communion brings us in to being and we can depart in communion.

My marriage, my family, my religious community all continue to remind me to commit my life, no holds barred, to being alone...together, to fully salute both sides of this creative tension. My existential condition is aloneness; my essential call is community. I carry out my destiny in the interplay between the two. Religion is a lie, even hazardous to our health, if it promotes merely one side of the paradox without saluting the other.

So, my dear companions, let's continue this holiday season by having the courage to immerse ourselves in both worlds, solitude and fellowship, back and forth, forth and back, day in and day out...forevermore.

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