

In the beginning there was loneliness. An empty universe and a lonely Creator. And God stepped out of space and He looked around and said, "I am lonely. I shall make me the world." And as far as the idle God could see, darkness covered everything. Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. In the beginning there was loneliness, a garden of many delights inhabited by a lonely God. (Poem by James Walden)

In the beginning there was loneliness, but loneliness was not forever. Up from the bed, the river, God took the clay and by the bank of the river He knelt down and the great God Almighty who lit the sun and the moon in the sky, who spread the stars to the most far corners of the night, who rounded earth in the middle of his hand, this great God, like a mother, bending over her baby, knelt Him down in the dust, toiling over a lump of clay until He shaped it in His own image. Then into it He blew the breath of life. And man became a living soul, a lonely soul.

What is loneliness? The experts say that loneliness is inherent in the human condition. Because we are all separated from one another, we are inevitably alone. We are born alone, and we die alone. Advocates of the existentialist position reason that although we may falsely assume that connection with another is possible, that delusion shatters at death.

The essence of loneliness is an unavoidable condition of humanity. Because we are distinct from one another, this is the nature of life. There is no way to break through the natural barriers that separate us. We just have to cope with it. We all recognize our separateness. We all experience moments when we realize our true distance from others, even those we have known intimately.

When a loved one dies, friends try to help. It often seems that the harder they try, the more difficult it is for us to make use of their efforts. In our grief we try to share our feelings, but we feel paralyzed. The crowd of people only accentuates the emotional gulf. In a state of crisis, we feel lonely, frustrated, without an ability to communicate, combined with a sense that no one can help, adds to our loneliness.

So, loneliness is innate to human nature. but it is intensified by social change. Rapid technological growth, geographic motility, the change in the family structure from an extended family to a nuclear family, all contribute to our feeling of being alienated, unconnected, not belonging to a larger home.

At one time we shared our homes with persons of a common background. At a time of crisis our extended family was there to help us bear our burdens

and pull us through. With frequent moving, we have a crisis today. We are lucky if our immediate family is with us to provide similar support.

Due to such social changes, we need to cope with loneliness at practically every stage in our lives. With the high divorce rate, parents are moving children around. These children are finding it difficult to join as a group with people who will confirm their identity.

Loneliness is a particular problem for adolescents who are trying to become adults and live apart from their families. As they break away from the family, they have nothing to latch onto, so they become pre-occupied with themselves.

We used to think that as people reached their 20's and 30's, loneliness was not a problem. But as they pursue their careers, they delay marriage and the possibility of a lasting relationship. There is the case of the solitary individual pursuing his or her own best career and trying to be his or her own best friend. From the observer's viewpoint, they are active, competent, successful, and involved. But this is only on the surface. Inside they are aching. They are avoiding commitment and intimacy and suffering loneliness. Later on, in adult life, they might feel less alienated only to reach old age and feel lonely again. They feel useless without a function in society. They have to cope not only with the loss of function but with the loss of contemporaries.

Loneliness can lead to illness. In an article entitled "Alone, Yearning for Companionship in America," the author speaks of an epidemic which had invaded America. The loneliness epidemic. The article mentions the work of a physician who had made frightening connections between lack of human companionship and physical disease.

Loneliness does not just lead to depression and mental illness, but to physical diseases such as hypertension, migraine, and even heart disease. The pervasive condition of loneliness in our society is just not healthy.

Without the stimulation of others, many of us, at any age, tend to stagnate and become too involved with ourselves. Yes, we need solitude. Yes, we need time to reflect, to be introspective, to create, to reassess our goals and our lives. We need to be alone. Solitude is by choice. Loneliness is by circumstance, something over which we have little control.

To those of us who viewed the movie, E.T., this condition was presented so vividly that it was next to impossible to hold back the tears. The tears for the lonely and helpless creature were tears for us. The major themes in E.T. are home, loneliness, and the inability to communicate.

At Harvard, psychologists commented "these are the major psychological themes in the American psychosis." As society becomes more complicated, we

all feel alienated, defective at some time. We want to go home, a place which presented a safe, simpler time.

Loneliness is conquered by a true reaching out to each other; a true caring for and about each other; a sharing of pain and joy, of tears and laughter. Loneliness is conquered by a commitment of souls to one another.

Martin Buber, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of our time, saw the problem of loneliness clearly. Conquering loneliness requires the development of a new type of relationship. When we think of someone without being personally involved, we think of that person as an "it." But if we find ourselves truly conversing with another, exchanging ideas in the spirit of friendship and intimacy, then we address the other as "thou."

That is how we can cope with loneliness. When we can attain an "I and Thou" relationship with another, we fill the void; we fill the void in another's life as well as in our own.

In his book, Between Man and Man, Buber wrote, "Only he who turns himself to the other human being and opens himself to him, receives the world in him. Only the being whose otherness is accepted by my being, lives and faces me in the whole existence, and brings the radiance to eternity to me."

We, the descendants of Avraham, have known intense moments. Like him, each of us knows what it means to be a stranger, a displaced person. Perhaps we are in the best position to empathize with the lonely. In reaching out to another, we overcome our loneliness as well as theirs.

In the beginning there was loneliness. But we are lonely no more. We have outgrown our infantile selfishness and learned that man does not live by bread alone. We have lived together in communities throughout the world. Is it any wonder that the Jewish people are everywhere characterized by their sense of community?

Here in Omaha look around you -- people, fellow Jews, who care to come together and relate as human beings. When we feel lonely, we can know that we have each other. We can laugh together and cry together. We can realize that loneliness is truly conquered by a commitment of souls to each other.

A popular song tells us to reach out and touch somebody. Somebody's hand. Make the world a better place if you can. We have reached out and touched each other's hand and each other's hearts. This evening, at this moment of rededication to all that is good, we pray that this will always be so. We thank God for the ability to talk, and touch and reach and feel and love. We remember the moment as it can exist and on occasion, we feel it. But we remember that we have the capacity to overcome loneliness, to conquer it. And most of all, we thank God for the gift of each other.