

# The Wonder of Interpersonal Relationships III: Pushing Away to Loneliness from a Psychological and Existential Perspective

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It might be surprising to note that the bridge between a sociological and psychological perspective on loneliness was built by Karl Marx. His concept of alienation allows us to move from the “alienating” work conditions of those employed by manufacturing firms to the “alienation” of our sense of self from any sense of purpose in life. We are “hollow” men and women who wander and work aimlessly in a world that is dictated by profit and power.

Our loneliness, from a Marxist perspective, resides in the sacrifice of our sense of ownerships for the labor in which we are engaged and the attendant sacrifice of meaningful relationships with other people with whom we work. The “wounded” father at the end of a day of meaningful labor wants to be alone with his newspaper, television and (in contemporary times) Internet (Osherson, 1986). He is alone even in his home surrounded by his family. Mothers have now joined in the path toward alienation and wounding as they too enter the alienating workforce.

## Anomie and Loneliness

A related term was also introduced during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that provides an additional bridge between a sociological and psychological perspective. This term is “Anomie”. First offered by the esteemed social observer, Emile Durkheim, in 1897, Anomie is a psychological (and societal) condition that is created by the shattering of traditional societal values, norms and structures. In a state of Anomie, we are cast adrift on a deep and stormy sea (Kierkegaard, 1980). Without the traditional “glue” that binds people together, we are adrift in our own isolating boat. There is no one to hold the rudder or bail out the water that splashes over the gunnels. While we never drown, we do face the storm all alone. It should come as no surprise that Durkheim first uses the term Anomie in his book on Suicide (Durkheim, 1897). With loneliness comes sustained despair. With sustained despair comes the desire to end one’s life.

Durkheim (1933/1893) identifies a second source of Anomie. This is the division of labor that came fully into force during the Industrial Era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Whereas members of those families who owned farms (or owned small private businesses) tended to do whatever it took to keep their enterprise running, the worker in steel mills, cotton mills and the early automobile factories were assigned to do one job and perform one operation. Assembly lines came into fashion with Henry Ford, and even large, mechanized farms require hired hands to do one or two specific tasks. Silos were formed in which specialized language, acronyms and alphabet soups were bandied--about which “outsiders” could never really understand. What after all do we do about the N.S.F.Q. requirements that must be observed if we are properly to operate the *neospecificating thingamabob*. Do any of us actually know what any of this means—other than a few folks residing in a specific, specialized silo?

We are likely to find the emergence of new “neighborhoods” (Bergquist, 1993) In these specialized workplace silos. With long work weeks and evenings spent in front of the computer, there is little time for relating to the people living next door. There are no longer evenings spent on the front porch engaging in conversations with folks from down the street. If there is going to be a party or birthday celebration it is more likely to occur at the office than at the home of people living near us. We might not even know the names of our neighbors—and the mobility (frequent moves) of people living near us makes matters worse.

With attention being devoted to the new neighborhood of the workplace, we are also likely to increase the proportion of interpersonal relationships that are Transactional in nature. As I noted in the first essay in this series, the interactions we have that are “all business” can be identified as transactional. Quite different social norms operate when we are relating in a transactional manner with fellow employees inside our silo – or people with whom we are “doing business” outside the silo. The traditional norms that operate when we are relating to family members and friends do not work when we are being practical and engaging in work-related exchanges of benefits and attending to the formal needs of other people.

As noted by Durkheim, Anomie arises when traditional values, norms and structures are no longer firmly in place. This certainly is the case when transactional norms and values are trumped by the norms and values of business. The structures of large, industrialized businesses—founded on the specialization and standardization of operations—supersede the structures of small, family-owned enterprises as well as the structures of enduring, tightly-interwoven local neighborhoods. Anomie is to be found in abundance when people pass in the night without much to say to one another—and that which is said often is incomprehensible, misunderstood or of little interest to the other person. As David Riesman observed, we are truly living in a lonely crowd.

Having built the bridge between a sociological and psychological perspective regarding loneliness, it is time in this third essay of a five-part series on the wonder of interpersonal relationships to turn our attention directly to the psychological perspective.

## **A Psychological Perspective**

One of the major books that provides the psychological perspective was written by John Cacioppo and William Patrick, (2008). They provide a detailed psychological analysis—but first consider the evolutionary history of loneliness in the human species.

### **Evolutionary Psychology**

Cacioppo and Patrick, (2008, p. 11) offer the following summary perspective regarding the evolutionary implications of the human need for relationships (and the damaging effects of being alone):

The roots of our human impulse for social connection run so deep that feeling isolated can undermine our ability to think clearly, an effect that has a certain poetic justice to it, given the role of social connection in shaping our intelligence. Most neuroscientists now agree that, over a period of tens of thousands of years, it was the need to send and receive, interpret and relay increasingly complex social cues that drove the expansion of, and greater interconnected- ness

within, the cortical mantle of the human brain. In other words, it was the need to deal with other people that, in large part, made us who and what we are today.

Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 127) use the term “obligatory gregarious species” as a way to affirm this powerful push toward the formation of interpersonal relationships: “our brains and bodies are designed to function in aggregates, not in isolation.” They quote George Williams, a prominent evolutionary biologist: “an individual who maximizes his friendships and minimizes his antagonisms will have an evolutionary advantage and selection should favor those characters that promote the optimization of personal relationships.” (Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 57) This evolutionary advantage appears to be closely affiliated with the “pair bonding” of the male and female, leading to protection of offspring. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 70) push it even further: “parental teamwork meant not only that increasing numbers of children might survive, but that these creatures could afford to be more developmentally and behaviorally complex. Greater behavior latitude led to greater diversity, which led to innovation, which lead to more rapid cultural learning.”

All of this leads to the conclusion that evolution favors interpersonal relationships among human beings. Isolation is contrary to the survival of the human species—and even to its continuing improvement (via cultural learning). In order to keep people from choosing a life of separation, some biological mechanisms are built in to make this separation painful and alien from a life of physical and mental health. We are “wired” to be with other people and are biologically “punished” for choosing otherwise. Yet not all people suffer from being alone. The condition of loneliness might not apply to them. Why is this the case? The answer is to be found not so much in the study of collective behavior (the sociological perspective that I offered in the second essay in this series), but in the study of individual experiences with regard to being alone. This requires that we introduce a psychological perspective on loneliness.

### **Psychological Aspects of Loneliness**

Cacioppo and Patrick set the stage by citing some disturbing research findings. 20% of individuals surveyed in a major study indicate that they feel quite isolated, and that this isolation contributes significantly to a feeling of unhappiness in their life. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 5) propose that:

. . . the culprit behind these dire statistics is not usually being literally alone, but the subjective experience known as loneliness. Whether you are at home with your family, working in an office crowded with bright and attractive young people, touring Disneyland, or sitting alone in a fleabag hotel on the wrong side of town, chronic feelings of isolation can drive a cascade of physiological events that actually accelerates the aging process. Loneliness not only alters behavior but shows up in measurements of stress hormones, immune function, and cardiovascular function. Over time, these changes in physiology are compounded in ways that may be hastening trillions of people to an early grave.

Their exploration of the psychology of loneliness is based on more than 20 years of research conducted by Cacioppo, supplemented by their review of many other studies of loneliness. A good place to begin in summarizing their psychological exploration is a focus on the beginning.

*Etiology of Loneliness:* according to many psychologists, the experience of loneliness is associated with the level and manner of attachment that exists between the lonely person and other people in their life. Attachments, in turn, are formed during our early life. The founder of attachment theory, John Bowlby is quoted by Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 7) as identifying the critical role played by this developmental

challenge of childhood: “To be isolated from your band, and, especially when young, to isolated from your particular caretaker is fraught and the greatest danger.”

Bowlby (1973) identifies several sources of dangerous attachments as well as form of attachment that allow us to be alone but not lonely as adults. He bases his formulation of attachment sources on three propositions regarding personality functioning and development (Bowlby, 1973, p. 359):

The first is that, whenever an individual is confident that an attachment figure will be available to him when he desires it, that person will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual who for any reason has no such confidence. The second postulates that confidence in the accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures, or a lack of it, is built up slowly during all the years of immaturity and that, once developed, expectations tend to persist relatively unchanged throughout the rest of life. The third postulates that expectations regarding the availability of attachment figures that different individuals build up are tolerably accurate reflections of the experiences those individuals have actually had.

Given these three propositions, Bowlby (1973) offers his assessment of what a positive source of attachment looks like. This form of attachment is called “Secure.” As a child, we can rely on consistent, affirming relationships with our primary caregiver(s) (usually parents). As adults we can embrace intimate relationships, because of this history of secure attachments. As Bowlby noted, expectations regarding secure relationships tend to persist. We can balance dependence and independence in relationships—which allows us to live with the independence of being alone.

Things are not quite as sanguine when it comes to Bowlby’s other three types of attachment. There is “Preoccupied Attachment”. This is found, all too often, among children who are being raised by parents who are preoccupied with their jobs or other aspects of their life. Their child is simply an “afterthought” who might be relegated to “latch key” status. When the child is forgotten, they are likely to be quite anxious regarding their relationship with other people—even as an adult. They are obsessed with being attended to and crave intimacy.

As adults, these men and women are likely to be overly dependent and demanding in their relationships. They are terrified when left alone. While, as Bowlby mentioned, the expectations regarding indifference and preoccupation might build up slowly over the years, they are resistant to change once they are established. With only minimal provocation (such as a minor slight) there is regression back to the state of anxiety in which these adults lived during much of their early childhood.

There is a third type of attachment experienced by children that leads to not just a willingness to be left alone but actually a desire (at least on the surface) to be self-sufficient and independent of all people. This state of “Dismissive Attachment” is produced when the child seeks to avoidant their primary caregiver(s). The adult doesn’t ignore the child; rather they hurt or at least threaten the child. It might be a case of alcoholism, powerless frustration or simply a cultural norm of parental (and often paternal) dominance. Given that the child wishes to hide from their parent, they often appear detached and unable to establish intimate relationships as adults. They might even replicate their parents’ abusive behavior by being abusive to their partner and/or children.

Given that they are hesitant or even unable to establish close relationships with other people, the victim of a dismissive attachment will often end up alone—and ultimately resentful of their isolation from other (threatening) people. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 179) write about the negative feedback loop

that can take place: “if we expect a new acquaintance to be kind and nice, they will behave in a fashion that draws out the pleasant and enjoyable side of that new acquaintance.”

Conversely, if we are fearful of being ultimately ignored by the new acquaintance or of being treated by them in an indifferent manner, then we are likely to be withdrawn and suspicious. The new acquaintance is likely either to disengage from us or place us low on their list of interpersonal priorities. Our fears have been realized and we are even more inclined in the future to activate and perpetuate this negative feedback loop.

We are left finally with Bowlby’s “Fearful Attachment”. The parent is inconsistent in their relationship with the child. Loving some of the time, resentful at other times, and even abusive at other times. The child is whipsawed around and doesn’t know what to expect. In many ways, this is the most damaging of the four attachment types. The child is disorganized in their perspective regarding a healthy, sustained relationship with other people. Fear attends their desire for close relationships. They find themselves as adults being highly vulnerable—devoting considerable energy and attention to “figuring out” what another person wants and expects (without spending much time reflecting on their own needs and expectations).

The behavior of adults who have grown up with fearful attachments tends to be unpredictable—given the inability of these adults to receive and accurately interpret social signals from other people. Under these conditions, the fearful adult will crave isolation—and simultaneously fear being alone. The moments of being alone are filled with confusion and apprehension. Moments with other people will similarly be filled with confusion and apprehension. Clear and consistent expectations regarding social engagements are absent—the kind of expectations that Bowlby emphasized in his third proposition. These childhood-burdened adults are truly “alone in a crowd.”

*The Effects of Loneliness:* However, the fear and confusion associated with loneliness arises, this condition of loneliness has a powerful psychological effect according to Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 14) They propose that this effect involves the interplay of three complex factors. The first of these is the level of vulnerability (associated most closely with Bowlby’s fearful and inconsistent attachment):

Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 14) specifically focus on vulnerability to the loss or absence of an important social connection:

Each of us inherits from our parents a certain level of need for social inclusion (also expressed as sensitivity to the pain of social exclusion), just as we inherit a certain basic body type and basic level of intelligence. (In each case, the influence of the environment on where that genetic inheritance takes us is also vitally important.) This individual, genetically rooted propensity operates like a thermostat, turning on and off distress signals depending on whether or not our individual need for connection is being met.

It would seem that these distress signals are particularly likely to be triggered when the adult has lived with inconsistent attachments—though dismissive attachments related to abusive relationships can also elicit these signals.

At the heart of the matter regarding vulnerability to disconnection is not so much our genetic disposition toward fear and disorientation, but instead, according to Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 28) a propensity to view all relationships as potentially fraught with peril or at least inconsistency:

Our level of vulnerability to feeling disconnected is in part at the mercy of our genes. The self-regulation that keeps our social receptors free of static can be difficult when the environment does all it can to frustrate our pursuit of what our genes demand. But our thoughts are something we can address directly, which is why we can use social cognition as a leverage point for regaining control of our social experience. The way we think about social situations can prepare us to metabolize the almost medicinal qualities of social warmth, or it can set us up to confirm the cynical aphorism that "hell is other people." . . .

The second factor identified by Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 14) concerns the ability to self-regulate the emotions associated with feeling isolated:

Successful self-regulation means being able to cope with challenges while remaining on a fairly even keel--not just outwardly, but deep inside. As loneliness increases and persists, it begins to disrupt some of this ability, a "deregulation" that, at the cellular level, leaves us more vulnerable to various stressors, and also less efficient in carrying out soothing and healing functions such as sleep.

When we are "deregulated" not only are we fearful of interpersonal relationships but also try to escape from these relationships. Robert Sapolsky (2004) has proposed that human beings, unlike other animals, are inclined to imagine being threatened by entities that don't really exist at the present time and in the current location (such as an upcoming challenging meeting or future payment of income taxes). He writes about zebras on the African savannah who run away from real lions, unlike human beings who freeze in place when confronted with both real and imagined lions. Zebras don't get ulcers. Human beings do. Cacioppo and Patrick seem to be saying that those in contemporary times who are lonely tend to imagine terrifying lions in their social world that don't exist--and they "de-regulate" when confronted with these lions. Sapolsky might suggest that the lonely person freezes in place when imagining a threatening social engagement. The deregulation and freeze can do damage to the lonely person's heart and health.

In a state of social isolation and with the resulting feelings of loneliness we become even more fearful and even less adept at interpreting social signals. A vicious circle is at play (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 28):

Serving as a prompt to restore social bonds, loneliness increases the sensitivity of our receptors for social signals. At the same time, because of the deeply rooted fear it represents, loneliness disrupts the way those signals are processed, diminishing the accuracy of the message that actually gets through. When we are persistently lonely, this dual influence--higher sensitivity, less accuracy—can leave us misconstruing social signals that others do not even detect, or if they detect, interpret quite differently.

On the other hand, "a well-regulated, social contented person sends social signals that are more harmonious and more in sync with the rest of the environment. Not surprisingly, the signals he or she receives back are more harmonious and better synchronized as well. This ripple back and forth between the individual and others is the corollary to self-regulation." call it co-regulation—and later note that "co-cognition" (the simultaneous sharing of comparable perspectives) can take place under conditions of co-regulation (Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 167) I suspect that co-regulation and co-cognition are

related to the conditions of coherence that we explored previously with regard to the sociology of loneliness.

Finally, we consider the third factor that contributes to the powerful effect of loneliness according to Cacioppo and Patrick. This factor concerns the mental representations and expectations of, as well as reasoning about, others: (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 14)

Each of us frames our experience through our own perceptions, which makes each of us, to some extent, the architect of our own social world. The sense we make of our interactions with others is called social cognition. When loneliness takes hold, the ways we see ourselves and others, along with the kinds of responses we expect from others, are heavily influenced by both our feelings of unhappiness and threat and our impaired ability to self-regulate.

At the heart of the matter is an important social cognition concept that has received considerable attention in psychological circles over the past couple of decades. This concept is called “theory of mind.” It relates to our capacity (usually developed in early childhood) to understand and appreciate the way in which other people are thinking and how this way of thinking translates into action. With a clear “theory of mind” in place we can distinguish between our own way of thinking and that of other people, while also (ideally) being accepting (even empathetic) of this difference (Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 115):

Theory of mind, which is what we call the ability to have insights into other people's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, develops in humans when we are about two years old. This is the same time when we begin to recognize ourselves in mirrors. So self-awareness and the ability to understand the feelings and intentions signaled by others may be connected. The biologist N. K. Humphrey has even suggested that the adaptive value of being able to detect the emotional state of another person may be what led, not just to the development of human intelligence, but to the development of human consciousness itself.

Cacioppo and Patrick assert that our theory of mind is disrupted when we are in the thralls of loneliness. They point, in particular, to disruptions at a neurological level to engage this uniquely human capacity. It is at this point that our two authors introduce perspectives and research findings from another emerging subdiscipline (like evolutionary psychology) that interweaves social psychology with a once-separate discipline. In this case, the other discipline is neurobiology and the subdiscipline is called socio-neuropsychology.

### **The Neuropsychology of Loneliness**

Cacioppo and Patrick begin their socio-neuropsychological analysis of loneliness by pointing out that the feelings of loneliness are most closely associated with the emotional region of the brain (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 8). This is the region of the brain (dorsal anterior cingulate) that is also registering physical pain—and our body can't tell the difference. Other studies have similarly shown that the experience of shame activates the same region. There is physical pain when receiving strong (and unexpected) negative feedback from another person or experiencing a moment of embarrassment.

These moments of social disgrace are experienced just like being stabbed in the gut. Loneliness is similarly experienced as a stab in our gut or wrenching of our heart (as portrayed in many songs of lost love). Furthermore, as we will soon see, this physical pain produces physical illness. Damage lingers and

we can't, as Cacioppo and Patrick note (2008, p. 8) simply "come out of our shell" and spend time with other people. "The pain of loneliness is a deeply disruptive hurt." (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 8).

More generally, loneliness has to do primarily with the limbic system and its vital connection to the prefrontal cortex. Socio-neuropsychologists such as Joseph LeDoux (1998), Daniel Gilbert (2007), Jonah Lehrer (2009) and most notably the esteemed neurobiologist, Robert Sapolsky (2017) write about the critical role played by two components of the Limbic system--the Amygdale (site of emotionally-laden environmental appraisal) and Hippocampus (site of most stored memory)—in the regulation along with our prefrontal cortex (site of rational appraisal) of our emotional state. When we are isolated and anxious, this regulation tends not to occur. As Cacioppo and Patrick note, we become trigger happy regarding potential threats to be found in our interpersonal relationships.

Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 156) reach out to yet another region of the brain in their consideration of the way in which loneliness is processed by our brain. They note that the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior superior temporal sulcus and temporoparietal junction are activated when we think about other people or when we try to make sense of social relationships. With these regions activated, we are likely to be increasingly empathetic to the emotions felt and actions taken by other people.

Cacioppo and Patrick use the German word, *Einfuhlung* ("feeling into") to describe what is taking place. Altruistic (helping) behavior is also likely to increase. If nothing else, we might find that the forementioned "theory of mind" comes to the fore when we are relating to other people—and Cacioppo and Patrick's co-regulation is likely to take place. Conversely, when we are alone and feel lonely, these regions of the brain are likely to remain quiet. As a result, not only do we feel little empathy and lack any desire to be altruistic—we also lose much of the self-regulation that Cacioppo and Patrick emphasize.

At yet another level, we find that loneliness disrupts our neurochemical operations. As social animals we are reliant on the motivation provided by a neurochemical called "oxytocin" (the so-called chemical of bonding, nurturing and calming). This chemical is, in turn, boosted by a hormone called "vasopressin." Both of these chemicals are activated by physical touching—whether we are being touched or are doing the touching. Even petting the family dog will activate our bonding chemicals (as well as those found in our pet). When we are alone (especially against our will) there is no one for us to touch and there is no one touching us.

I am reminded of my meeting with a woman who was a hairdresser for my aging and widowed mother. This very observant hairdresser was attending to my mother and many of her widowed friends at least once a week—even though my mother's hair and that of the other women was in immaculate shape. The hairdresser wisely knew (and told me) that these women were getting their "hair done" so that they could be touched by someone (given that their husband had passed away). This caring and thoughtful dresser of hair also noted that she would very gently touch and caress the shoulders of these women. She noticed how they would gently sigh and gaze out the window (to a distant past).

### **Impacts on Physical and Mental Health**

It is not surprising to find that loneliness has a harmful physical impact on our physical and mental health given these accounts of physical pain and the disruption of neurobiological functions. Our two authors offer an impressive (and disturbing) list of five major pathways associated with the impact of loneliness—several of which relate to those I have already identified.



*Pathway 1: Health Behavior:* When one is living alone and seeking no support for or interaction with other people, they are likely to neglect their own health Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 99). The “guard rails” that loving members of the family, or caring friends provide are missing. The lonely person can eat too much (as witnessed in a recent movie, *The Octopus*), taking mind-altering drugs to ease the pain of loneliness, or simply fail to eat nutritious and healthy foods. A daily routine of frozen food (laced with salt, sugar and other nonhealthy additives) may prevail. What is the outcome? Loneliness takes its toll. As Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 99) note, loneliness is correlated in Cacioppo’s studies with depressive symptoms, chronic health conditions and elevated blood pressure.

*Pathway 2: Exposure to Stressors and Life Events:* while results from Cacioppo’s research suggest that young people who are lonely tend not to confront more stressors than do those who are not lonely, this was not the case for the older adults he studied. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 102) concluded that “over time, the ‘self-protective’ behavior associated with loneliness leads to greater marital strife, more run-ins with neighbors, and more social problems overall.” Using a more common phrase, it appears that old, lonely people become “grumpy.”

Cacioppo and Patrick point to another British study that suggests we tend to become easily stressed (and perhaps “grumpy”) if we are in jobs that offer us little opportunity for control. As I noted in my previous essay in this series concerning the sociology of loneliness, this condition might often be related to an absence of an internal locus of control. As I noted earlier in the current essay, Anomie might prevail when we are alone and alienated in our work life (and perhaps also in our home life).

*Pathway 3: Perceived Stress and Coping:* the results of Cacioppo’s studies suggest that those who are lonely are likely to be stressed out by events that most people take in stride. They even might be more likely as I noted above to imagine threatening lions in their social world. In other words, those who are lonely are likely to be not only “grumpy” and without any sense of internal control. They are also likely to be “trigger happy.”

In bringing this pathway to our attention, Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, pp. 31-32) return to their evolutionary psychology perspective—along with a scoop of socio-neuropsychology:

For creatures shaped by evolution to feel safe in company and endangered when unwillingly alone, feelings of isolation and perceptions of threat reinforce each other to promote a higher and more persistent level of wariness. To prepare us to react efficiently when confronting threats to life and limb, nature provided us with the ability to be cognitively hypervigilant, along with a chain of physiological reactions known as the fight-or-flight response. But the neurological wiring we depend on today evolved in response to the kinds of hit-and-run stressors we faced millions of years ago. As a result, our stress response (“fight or flight”) includes a prompt to immediate action that increases resistance in the cardiovascular system and floods the body with hormones that rev us up. If we were fending off wild dogs, those hormones could help save our lives. However, when our stressors consist of feeling isolated and unloved, the constant presence of these excitatory chemicals acts as a corrosive force that accelerates the aging process.

*Pathway 4: Physiological Response to Stress:* our authors bring in a bit of neurobiology at this point, noting that there are two competing biological systems operating in each of us. One of these systems (sympathetic) moves us forward, while the other (parasympathetic) holds us back from action.

Whenever the sympathetic system is activated, it must be followed by a parasympathetic “downshifting” of the system. The sympathetic system tends to be engaged under conditions of stress—with downshifting taking place after the stress is no longer present.

Unfortunately, for human beings, the stress is often low grade and chronic. The downshifting either never occurs or keeps reoccurring. If the parasympathetic system is rarely engaged then we are likely to have problems digesting food, relaxing or sleeping. If this system is frequently engaged, then the up and down causes great biological havoc. In either case, harm is being done to our body (especially to our immune system and cardiovascular functions). I would suggest that Sapolsky’s imagined lions are relevant here—for there doesn’t have to be a legitimate source of stress. We can make up the stress and without any outside source of correction, the lonely person is particularly inclined to imagine lions.

This initial analysis of sympathetic and parasympathetic interplay doesn’t yield the entire answer for Cacioppo and Patrick. They (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 32) offers a more complex picture of stress and loneliness than one might expect:

Luckily, the grinding effect of stress brought on by a persistent sense of being alone is only part of the story. Our research takes into account the whole constellation of social, psychological, and biological events, including the vitally important counterweight to the fight-or-flight system—what my colleagues and I call the physiology of “rest and digest.” Just as our cells and organ systems undergo wear and tear, often as a result of stress, they also benefit from inherent processes of repair and maintenance that are associated with restorative behaviors such as sound sleep. As you might expect from what we have seen so far, some of these maintenance and repair functions of the human mind and body are also heavily influenced by the social world.

What then are the social world conditions that aid the processes of repair and maintenance? Neither Cacioppo and Patrick nor others who have been studying the psychology of loneliness (or the sociology of loneliness for that matter) find that standing alone, outside of a supportive community, will typically provide this assistance. We often need some kind of assistance when addressing the “wild dogs”, real lions, and imagined lions in our life. This support comes in many forms, including a listening, empathic ear, a caring voice that challenges, and a source of expertise offering a clear vision of both reality and the future (Bergquist, 2023).

However, Cacioppo and Patrick’s perspective does set the stage for Pathway 5 and opens the door to conditions which promote healing while alone.

*Pathway 5: Rest and Recuperation:* Cacioppo and Patrick offer the expected conclusions that time away from work (“leisure”) as well as sleep are required for us to recover from stress conditions. People who are lonely tend to find fewer occasions for leisurely relaxation or for sleep. Furthermore, they are less inclined to seek out the assistance of other people when seeking to recuperate. Left alone, these people “stew” on their inability to find joy in their life and spend restless nights imagining lion. We need other people in our life.

Yet, this might not always be the case. While other people are often essential for us to rest and repair, there are institutions in our society that for many centuries have provided the opportunity and setting for us to engage in these healing processes. These are Sanctuaries (Bergquist, 2017). They are certainly of great value in a world filled with many stressful challenges. Typically, these sanctuaries are located in

physical settings—such as the *Heiau* found in Hawaii for the repair and restoration of defeated warriors or the Zen sanctuaries near major cities such as San Francisco and in more remote areas such as Taos, New Mexico. They also can be found in a special room in our home or even in our personal hearts and minds (what the songwriter, Billy Joel, has identified as that part of our heart which will always be "safe and strong" where we "heal the wounds from lovers past/Until a new one comes along." I will have much more to say about these invaluable settings in my forthcoming fourth essay of this series.

## Conclusions

Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 269) conclude their insightful and thorough analysis regarding the psychology of loneliness by turning to both a religious and scientific statement regarding the human need for interpersonal relationships. First, the religious statement:

Coming from the religious tradition of John Donne, C. S. Lewis wrote: "We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves."

Now the scientific statement:

Coming from the scientific tradition of Charles Darwin, E. O. Wilson wrote: "We are obliged by the deepest drives of the human spirit to make ourselves more than animated dust. We must have a story to tell about where we came from, and why we are here."

All of this adds up to a definitive conclusion. We need other people in our life for many reasons—if nothing else than to discover who we are individually and collectively. Yet, being alone for some people at certain times does not lead to a negative (damaging) loneliness. There can be "healthy" and productive times spent alone. Just as there is something called "U-Stress" that relates to forms of stress that produce health and productivity, so we might identify something that we can call "U-Alone" which results itself in health and productivity. Our authors put it this way (Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p. 13):

. . . being alone does not necessarily mean being lonely. . . . Think of a naturalist doing research in the rain forest, or a pianist in a marathon practice session, or a bicyclist training in the mountains. Prayer and meditation, as well as scholarship and writing, also involve long stretches of solitude, as do most artistic or scientific endeavors. Needing "time for myself" is one of the great complaints of men and women in today's harried marriages, whether they are multitasking their two careers and family or one spouse is putting in sixty-hour weeks at the office while the other stays home with the kids. In fact, fairly or not, people often judge individuals who are unable to tolerate solitude as being needy or neurotic.

This represents an important shift in perspective. While people who are lonely are portrayed as being filled with stress and resentment, those who can't stand to be alone are viewed as being "needy or neurotic." Apparently, there is a happy medium – as often seems to be the case at the conclusion of a lengthy psychological journey.

## An Existential Perspective

So, the verdict is not yet in with regard to the outcomes of loneliness. While many psychologists conclude from the accumulated evidence that loneliness hurts, there is a somewhat different case to be

made about the impact of being alone. There is a third perspective that offers a quite different set of outcomes regarding loneliness. It is in alignment with the comments about health and alone time that were made by Cacioppo and Patrick. This is the existential perspective.

This third perspective evolved in post-World War II Europe. It was formulated particularly in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre (1993). The existential perspective gained a strong foothold in 1960s America and was associated in particular with the humanistic writings of Rollo May (1969), Abraham Maslow (1998) and at an earlier time, Erich Fromm (1955) 21<sup>st</sup> Century representation of this perspective is to be found in positive psychology as represented in the writings of Martin Seligman (Seligman, 1991; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and those offering the perspective of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). We find it clearly articulated in the earlier book about loneliness written by Clark Moustakas (1961).

### **Condition of Life**

Moustakas (1961, ix) offers this summary of his existential (and humanistic) premise: “. . . loneliness is a condition of human life, an experience of being human which enables the individual to sustain, extend, and deepen his humanity.” He begins his exploration of loneliness by moving directly into one of the great challenges associated with this condition—that being the attending to people we love who are in distress and struggling to remain alive. Moustakas (1961, p. 7) writes this about these challenging conditions:

In such experiences [confronting and nurturing another person’s illness and impending death], inevitably one is cut off from human companionship. But experiencing a solitary state gives the individual the opportunity to draw upon untouched capacities and resources and to realize himself in an entirely unique manner. It can be a new experience. It may be an experience of exquisite pain, deep fear and terror, an utterly terrible experience, yet it brings into awareness new dimensions of self/ new beauty, new power for human compassion, and a reverence for the precious nature of each breathing moment.

Building on this ultimate challenge, Moustakas distinguishes between what he identifies as existential loneliness (which is inherent in all human existence and loneliness anxiety (which is artificially generated in contemporary society. According to Moustakas (1961, p. 24):

Loneliness anxiety results from a fundamental breach between what one is and what one pretends to be, a basic alienation between man and man and between man and his nature.

Insidious fears of loneliness exist everywhere, nourished and fed by a sense of values and standards, by a way of life, which centers on acquisition and control. The emphasis on conformity, following directions, imitation, being like others, striving for power and status, increasingly alienates man from himself. The search for safety, order, and lack of anxiety through prediction and mastery eventually arouses inward feelings of despair and fears of loneliness. Unable to experience life in a genuine way, unable to relate authentically to his own nature and to other selves, the individual in Western culture often suffers from a dread of nothingness.

### **Fear of Loneliness**

In many ways, Moustakas (1961, p. 31) is looking to the impact which a saturation of transactional relationships has on us—and our fear of loneliness. As observed by David Reisman (who Moustakas quotes in the following passage), loneliness can be a sociological “disease” that is found in particular among those people who are pulled into relationships (the outer-directed person):

Much of the loneliness anxiety in our society is not the psychiatric loneliness which results from rejection or abandonment in childhood. It is possible to live too much in the world, to try to escape loneliness by constant talk, by surrounding one's self with others, by modeling one's life from people in authority or with high status. Alienated from one's own self, the individual does not mean what he says and does not what he believes and feels. He learns to respond with surface or approved thoughts. He learns to use devious and indirect ways, and to base his behavior on the standards and expectations of others. Cut-off from his own self, he is unable to have communal experiences with others, though he may be popular, or to experience a sense of relation with nature. Many of these individuals love truth, yet their lives are predicated on appearances and false ties; they do not concentrate their energies enough to be able to become in fact what they are in inspiration. Literally millions of adults who are protected and loved, who experienced intimate relations in their early years, suffer the consequences of an impersonal, competitive world of self-denial and alienation. They often go to great lengths to escape or overcome the fear of loneliness, to avoid any direct or genuine facing of their own inner experience.

What is it that drives man to surround himself with the same external double-talk, the same surface interests and activities during his evenings at home as during his days at work? It is the terror of loneliness.

Like his fellow humanists, Moustakas (1961, p. 34) leans toward addressing the nature and nurturing of health rather than the treatment of illness. He also (like many liberal-leaning humanists) borrows from Karl Marx and many social psychologists when introducing the concept of alienation:

The experience of separation or isolation is not unhealthy any more than any condition of human existence is unhealthy. Ultimately each man is alone but when the individual maintains a truthful self-identity, such isolation is strengthening and induces deeper sensitivities and awareness. In contrast, self-alienation and estrangement drive one to void separation. The fear of loneliness is a sickness which promotes dehumanization and insensitivity. In the extreme, the person stops feeling altogether and tries to live solely by rational means and cognitive directions. This is the terrible tragedy of modern life--the alienation of man from his own feelings, the desensitization of man to his own suffering and grief, the fear of man to experience his own loneliness and pain and the loneliness and misery of others.

## **Love and Suffering**

Finally, Moustakas directly addresses the value of loneliness as it relates directly to the matter of love. More generally, the value of loneliness relates to what I identified in the first essay in this series as “autotelic” relationships. These are relationships that exist and are nurtured for their own gratification. They are not meant for the achievement of some outside goals (as is the case with transactional relationships. Accord to Moustakas (1961, p. 101):

To love is to be lonely. Every love eventually is broken by illness, separation, or death. The exquisite nature of love, the unique quality or dimension in its highest peak, is threatened by change and termination, and by the fact that the loved one does not always feel or know or understand. In the absence of the loved one, in solitude and loneliness, a new self emerges, in solitary thought. The loneliness quickens love and brings to it new perceptions and sensitivities, and new experiences of mutual depth and beauty.

Moustakas (1961, p. 101) now returns to his initial inquiry into the role played by suffering (our own or that which we witness in addressing the needs of other people):

All love leads to suffering. If we did not care for others in a deep and fundamental way, we would not experience grief when they are troubled or disturbed, when they face tragedy or misfortune, when they are ill and dying. Every person is ultimately confronted with the pain of separation or death, with tragic grief which can be healed in silence and isolation. When pain is accepted and felt as one's own, at the center of being, then suffering grows into compassion for other human beings and all living creatures. Through pain, the heart opens and out of the sorrow come new sensations of levity and joy.

We might ask if some suffering is involved in all autotelic relationships. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Sanford (1980) observe that all Flow and deep learning experiences involve some balance between competency mixed with support, on the one hand, and challenge mixed with anxiety, on the other hand. Perhaps the Flow to be found in autotelic relationships similarly involves a delicate balance between joy and fulfillment, on the one hand, and despair and potential loss, on the other hand. Moustakas (1961, p. 101) seems to be suggesting that this is the case—with the Flow-like outcome being deepened sensitivity:

All suffering which is accepted and received with dignity eventuates in deepened sensitivity. One cannot be sensitive without knowing loneliness. To see is to be lonely—to hear, feel, touch—every vital, solitary experience of the senses is a lonely one. Anyone who senses with a wide range of delicate feelings and meanings experiences loneliness. To be open to life in an authentic sense is to be lonely, for in such openness one hears and feels and senses beyond the ordinary. Through loneliness we are refined and sensitized and open to life's lofty ideals and influences: We are enabled to grow in awareness, in understanding, in aesthetic capabilities, in human relations.

The question becomes: is the Extravert's search for enriching experiences aligned with Moustakas's attention to the experiences associated with Love and Suffering? Or perhaps is the Introvert's orientation toward depth rather than breadth more closely aligned with Moustakas' conclusions. At the very least, we are focusing on autotelic rather than transactional relationships when approaching Moustakas's observations regarding loneliness.

### **A Powerful Proposal**

I have quoted Clark Moustakas extensively because he not only offers rather poetic accounts regarding the nature and dynamics of loneliness, but also because he (more than others I have cited) is particularly optimistic (positive) about the role played by loneliness in contemporary society. Moustakas (1961, p. 102) presents the following challenging proposal:

When man can leave himself to his own loneliness, he can return to himself with a new commitment to his fellow man. Not an escape from loneliness not a plan, not strategy and resolution, but direct facing of one's loneliness with courage, letting be all that is in its fullness, this is a requirement of creative living. To be worthy of one's loneliness is an ultimate challenge, a challenge which if realized, strengthens the person and puts him more fully in touch with his own resources. At first, the experience of loneliness may be frightening, even terrifying, but as one submits to the pain and suffering and solitude, one actually reaches himself, listens to the inner voice and experiences a strange new confidence. The individual is restored to himself and life again becomes me

Like David Riesman, Clark Moustakas has challenged us to reframe our loneliness as an interpersonal challenge. It is a challenge not just for those with an Introverted personality and those who are inner-directed, but also (perhaps even more importantly) for those with an Extraverted personality and an outer-directed orientation to life and other people. I will keep this in mind as I move on to the pull forward and the complexity of Carl Jung's Extraverted personality.

## Conclusions

It appears that we have choices to make. We can choose to be alone, or we can choose to be with other people. While in evolutionary history, human beings could not survive when they were alone, the modern institutions we have created allow us to be alone for extended periods of time. When we are alone, we can choose whether or not to feel lonely. When with other people, we can choose whether or not to feel lonely.

There are lonely crowds and there are lonely silos in which to dwell. We can feel lonely sitting for hours at a computer or when attending yet another lengthy committee meeting. We can thoroughly enjoy an evening reading a book or dabbling with some oils and a canvas. Placed in a corporate cubicle, we can take great pleasure in working with an Excel spreadsheet or preparing a market plan. This is especially likely if we are inclined toward Introversions. However, even as Extraverts, we can find time alone to be re-energizing and an opportunity for focus.

At yet another level, we can either dread or enjoy finding our primary identity as a member of some particular group—perhaps our family. We might prefer to stand outside this group identity and be outstanding in our organization or community. There might even be an instance when we enjoy a touch of narcissism. Imagine for a moment that you are one member of a group (such as your family or a team at work) and that the entire group has just entered a room. Someone who has been waiting for your group is delighted with the presence of your group. They declare: "Great to see all of you!" This person, of course, is referring to your entire group. However, just for a moment, imagine that the greeter is referring just to you.

This person is delighted to encounter each part of you and is thrilled that you, individually, have entered the room. For this one moment, you are experiencing a touch of "narcissism." This is not such a bad thing. There is nothing wrong with wishing, for an instant, that we somehow stand out from the crowd – that someone thinks we are special. We can always melt back into the group and assume our appropriate role as just one member of the group that has been greeted at the door. Yet, just for a moment, we are unique and noteworthy. We have been appreciated.

This final word is critical. With appreciation comes our ability to find and savor our personal identity. It is also with appreciation for its efforts that a group of which we are a member will feel like home and a setting in which we choose to spend time and talent. We are less likely to feel uncomfortably alone when our work individually and collectively is being acknowledged and honored by other people. It is when our life and work is filled with meaning (as acknowledged by our organization or community) that we are most likely to feel comfortable within our own skin and in a crowd.

With all of this opportunity for choice, we must always keep in mind that we, as human beings, are wired to be with other people. As “social animals” it is certainly easy for each of us to slide into a feeling of loneliness when we are alone—especially if this state of being alone is not something we have chosen for ourselves. We are inclined to feel profoundly alone and alienated when we are being excluded, isolated or left powerless. Anomie is a state that is rarely of our own chosen and is rarely something we savor. This may mean that choices regarding the feeling of loneliness are reserved for those of us who are fortunate to be living with some socio-economic privilege. The state of loneliness is likely to attend a dominant feeling of powerlessness and the grim reality of hopelessness.

At the very least, we know that the state of loneliness is produced at several different levels and is best addressed through multiple initiatives taken at the personal, organizational, community, national and even global level. As we are about to see in our next essay on interpersonal relationships, the matter of loneliness and, more broadly, interpersonal relationships are understood and confronted in large part through our construction of the social reality in which we live and work.

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