

Feeling Welcome: Joining out of loneliness for each other

By Bruce Anderson

William Stafford, poet and teacher from Oregon, writes that things join “out of loneliness for each other”. At the heart of all community building is the desire to connect citizens with other citizens. These acts of joining, small or large, form the fundamental cure to loneliness. Could those of us strategizing ways to build community make good use of our time by considering what the condition of loneliness means to each of us in our own lives? By joining together, telling our own stories of loneliness, and describing the pathways that guided us through those times, we may locate a collective wisdom we can expand and take back to our work on a larger scale.

Why aren't we talking more about our own loneliness? The stories of times when we have felt disconnected with others take us back to places many of us would choose to forget, if only we could. As part of our organization's community building work, we often ask groups to divide up—in pairs or threes—and have each person tell a story about a time in their life when they felt like they didn't belong. As those stories are shared, many of them told for the first time since the event happened, there is often an initial feeling of darkness and despair. What we have learned, however, is that the darkness is quickly replaced by a feeling of unity and strength as the similarity in the stories is noticed and people begin to remember that the condition of loneliness is part of our common story. We have also learned that each of us has wisdom and a unique understanding about loneliness that is useful to share. There is a strength resulting from the telling of these stories that binds people together and increases their commitment to community building action.

Is our unwillingness to “join out of loneliness for each other” because we want to be alone? Not me. I have persistent and haunting memories of each time in my life I have felt lonely... somehow unwanted or unaccepted by others even though I yearned for their touch or their particular nod in my direction. So now, as I consider my own quiet refusal to stand beside those who are lonely, I question the advantage my silence brings me. I get the comfort from not revealing my own stories of loneliness to others who may benefit from hearing them, but also the damaging turbulence that locked up stories bring to my soul. I get the advantage of thinking that my life is put together somehow more completely, and that I need less help than those around me, but also the daily burden of maintaining that false front. I get the “calm before the storm” advantage of delaying facing my own suffering, though not answering that knock at the door creates a deeper dissatisfaction with my own courage.

Sometimes I respond to loneliness by saying “but, in the end, we are alone in the world”. I know when I think or say these words it often comes on the coattail memory of its companion belief—another grim reminder—which begins... “You really can't trust anyone but yourself”. These two half-truths, usually erupting out of some situation in which I did not receive the love or attention I thought I deserved, serve to drive me further into my loneliness by carrying into my psyche the idea that the world is a dangerous and hurtful place. It is that small and afraid voice inside reminding me that when you go out in the world, this is what you can expect. You should have known better. These responses come from a desire to reconcile my feelings of loneliness by pushing them towards hopelessness. Far from courageous introspection, this comfortable hopelessness gives me permission to see loneliness in others and myself and not take action.

William Stafford, in a poem called *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*, reminds us of the deep obligation humans have to stay joined and act when we are a witness to disconnection. He writes about a band of elephants holding each other's tails on the way to the park. "But if one wanders", he says, "the circus won't find the park. I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty to know what occurs but not recognize the fact."

Loneliness comes from the unmet desire to feel the presence of another in your life. There is a sadness and disconnection with the world that comes with the feeling of loneliness. Being alone, on the other hand, is not the same as being lonely. Being alone does not, in itself, cause loneliness. Being alone simply states that you are standing by yourself, not in the presence of others. That you are "going it alone" for the moment, and acting by oneself. Being alone can involve courage, a feeling of wholeness, and a feeling of deep connection to those around you.

What are we doing to help those around us not feel lonely? And what are we doing to encourage those around us to know the power of standing alone? For myself, I know that helping others find ways out of their loneliness has shattered my own illusion that I am not lonely. I struggle with my own feelings of being unwelcome each time I witness another person taking courageous steps towards connectedness with others. As Wendell Berry says, "true social change may stick, not through large heroic acts of defiance, but rather through the small acts each person makes because their conscience and integrity would be shattered if they did otherwise". The small acts of standing by that we make each day tell more about our desire to cure loneliness than the heroic programs and principles we pledge our allegiance to.

My fear
is in getting to know you.
For in those moments of conversation
when I begin to see you more clearly,
I may discover I am not
the loving person I imagine myself to be.
Not loving. Me. Now I've said it.

My safety
is my silence and quiet refusal
to stand beside you when you need me or I need you.
I hold my breath tightly, silently,
trying to stop love from moving through me,
giving trouble a solid place to stand.
Forgetting that, like water,
love moves through all things.
Like the tides, it washes over dry souls who wait.

If I could have one thing,
just one thing different,
it would be to touch that stone-cold part of my soul
and give it light.
To walk, wet and shivering,
out of the river of fear
with a heart that no longer needs to hide.