

A MEDITATION

In the Genesis paradise story God says to Adam, "It is not good for man to be alone..." This, of course, was God's rationale for bringing Eve into the picture, but it is a true statement, as well as a pertinent one, as we struggle with this new social phenomenon called 'self-distancing'. Suddenly, the whole idea of 'being alone' comes front and center for some of us. The question is, how do we deal with it?



Looked at from a philosophical point of view 'being alone' does not necessarily mean being isolated from other people. I can remember one day walking down 5th Ave. in Manhattan surrounded by the bustling crowds, and suddenly realizing how it is possible to feel utterly alone in a city of nine million people!

Paul Tillich pointed out that it is basic to the human experience when he said, "Being alive means being in a body, a body separated from all other bodies. And being separated means being alone". Perhaps we can consider that which is contained within that body - that aspect of ourselves which in a sense remains hidden even from those who we are close or intimate with and will always feel alone. Long before we began self-distancing, we found ourselves trapped within ourselves!

Sorry to wax existential, but the reality is that there is more than one way to experience being alone. To quote Tillich again, "The wisdom of our language has sensed two sides of man's being alone. It has created the word loneliness in order to emphasize the pain of being alone. And it has created the word solitude in order to emphasize the glory of being alone." Loneliness and solitude! Two different ways of being alone.

The experience of loneliness is a reality for many, perhaps especially for those in advanced years dealing with separation from loved ones, in particular, the death of those dearest to us. But right now, I would like to focus on the "glory of being alone", i.e., the experience of solitude. Perhaps there is no ultimate cure for loneliness, but maybe the experience of solitude can help. Someone once suggested that religion is what we do with our solitariness. This opens the door to the idea that we are never truly alone.

I have recently been spending time reading aspects of the thought of the 20th century Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner. (Don't ask me why, but I've always found Roman Catholic theologians more interesting!). If I am understanding his anthropology correctly, he says that human experience is made up of two ways of being - the categorical and the transcendental. The categorical is our everyday experience encompassing all things that can be categorized, i.e., people and objects, and the transcendental is that experience that we cannot identify in any specific category. However, these are not to be thought of as two distinct experiences, but, rather, two dimensions of one experience.

Again, if I hear him right, the transcendent is always a part of our human experience, although we may not be aware of it because of our propensity to focus on the categorical. At the heart of that experience is God. Although we may be totally oblivious to the fact, God is always an intricate part of our human experience.

(My sincere apologies to Fr. Rahner's memory if I have misunderstood!)

It seems to me that it is our experience of the transcendent that differentiates solitude from loneliness. The experience of solitude is made up of the aesthetic as well. As a child I loved to roam the woods near our home alone, yet never felt alone. Perhaps there was a transcendental aspect of the nature that surrounded me.

Likewise, "Solitude can be found in the reading of a poem, the hearing of music, the seeing of a picture, the thinking of significant thoughts. We are alone, perhaps in the midst of multitudes, but we are not lonely. Solitude protects us like an armor, without isolating us. But life calls us back to its empty talk, its unavoidable demands, its daily routine, its loneliness and the cover it spreads over our loneliness." (Tillich)

Yes, loneliness is a fact of life we can never totally escape, but those moments of solitude enriched by the transcendent can help us cope. Plus, if Rahner was correct, which in this case I believe he was, then we can embrace the knowledge that God is with us in both our loneliness and our solitude!

Peace, David

Let us pray: Dear God, the loneliness that has suddenly come into our lives has been hard to bear and seems impossible to overcome. We turn to you in this hour of need to claim your promise that in your mercy you will always be with us and will always care for us, that you will be our constant companion and our dearest friend. Embrace us in your love, we pray, and, as hard as it seems now, start us on the road back to life as you show us how to reach out to others in their loneliness as you reach out to ours, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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