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Arlington Street Church  
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## Ending Loneliness

“Loneliness is grief, distended.”

Jill Lapore, writing for *The New Yorker*, is speaking. “Plenty of people like to be alone. I myself love to be alone,” she continues. “But solitude and seclusion, which are things I love, are different from loneliness, which is a thing I hate. “We hunger for intimacy,” she continues. “We wither without it.... Loneliness is a state of profound distress.”

In the United States, before the 20th century, only about one in twenty people lived alone. Now, one in four people lives alone.<sup>1</sup> Radio, TV, and the internet all make it possible, though some would say that Facebook “monetized loneliness. So-called professional opinions are all over the place: “Some [say] the success of social media was a product of ... loneliness; some ... say it was a contributor to it; and some ... say it’s the ... remedy for it.” Everyone agrees, though, that there’s an epidemic of loneliness ... and it’s only getting worse.<sup>2</sup> Even before the pandemic, more than three out of five adults in the United States were either mostly lonely or always lonely.

Loneliness takes a physical toll. It can make us feel colder than those around us. It can increase our blood pressure and cholesterol. It degrades our immune system. It makes us anxious and disrupts our sleep. And it has a nasty way of leading us to addictive, self-destructive behaviors. Its effects on our health have been compared to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “You can live alone without being lonely, and you can be lonely without living alone, but the two are closely [linked].” Please see [newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/the-history-of-loneliness](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/the-history-of-loneliness)

<sup>2</sup> Please see [newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/the-history-of-loneliness](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/the-history-of-loneliness)

<sup>3</sup> Please see [greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/a\\_cure\\_for\\_loneliness](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/a_cure_for_loneliness)

John Cacioppo, known as Dr. Loneliness, explains that, in order to survive, “primates need to belong to an intimate social group.” This is especially true for humans, since historically, “humans we don’t know might very well kill us. To this day, being separated from your people — either finding yourself alone or finding yourself with those who don’t know and understand you — “triggers a fight-or-flight response. [John] Cacioppo [explains] that your body [reads] being alone, or being with strangers, as an emergency. Over millennia, this hypervigilance in response to isolation became embedded in our nervous system to produce the anxiety we associate with loneliness.... We act fearful, defensive, and self-involved, all of which drive away people who might actually want to help us,” and tend to stop us from the very thing that would end our loneliness: reaching out to others.

Another “tragedy of loneliness is that lonely people can’t see that lots of people feel the same way they do.” Many years ago, Unitarian Universalist theologian Dr. Thandeka spent an evening with members of a church who were interested in starting a program of small group gatherings in which people would meet regularly to share deeply on different topics as a spiritual practice.

At some point, she asked them “if they might be willing to talk about their unmet needs for community.” Dr. Thandeka writes, “One of the most respected elders of the church stood up and slowly walked to the front of the assembly, faced [them], and said he was interested in joining such a group. He had wanted something like this for years,” he said, “because he was lonely. [He concluded,] ‘I do not have any friends.’”

“Waves of shock rolled through the [room]. How could he be lonely? He was a revered and beloved member of the congregation, a pillar of the church. [He] spoke again. “Every man in this room who is my age knows what [I’m] talking about. Our social upbringing ... taught us not to talk about our feelings. We are not supposed to be emotionally vulnerable or close to anyone.”

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Vivek Murthy,<sup>4</sup> the U.S. Surgeon General from 2014-2017, wrote a book called *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. I was deeply touched by an interview Dr. Murthy gave on the *Greater Good* podcast out of the University of California at Berkeley. He, himself, was a very shy and very lonely child. He dreaded going to school. He dreaded the cafeteria and the playground. To make it worse, he felt shame about his loneliness. And somehow, he thought he was the only one.

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<sup>4</sup> pronounced VIV-ick MURR-thee

And then he became a doctor. He says, “I wasn’t prepared ... to see so many patients who would come in alone and at critical moments, when we had to have a really tough conversation with them about a new diagnosis or about a treatment decision.... I would ask, ... ‘Is there somebody you’d like me to call?’ And they would say, ‘You know, I wish there were, but ... there’s nobody....’

“I was seeing a profound problem,” he says, “but [didn’t] have the tools to know how to respond to it or how to help ... and that felt bad.”

And so Vivek Murthy created an inoculation against loneliness — just this: a quick conversation with someone — anyone — about something for which they feel grateful; a gratitude practice. He asks the person to tell him a few things for which they’re grateful — to share some points of light. It’s quick — five minutes, even — and Dr. Murthy tries to simply listen and be fully present.

“[What’s] really striking to me,” he says, “... is, number one, I just [feel] better about the world ... having the chance to focus on [what’s] positive.... Hearing [what’s] going well in [their] life [makes] me feel better. [And] number two, [I’m struck by] how little time it [takes]. I think we ... might assume that ... if we really want to have a positive interaction ... we [have] to put aside an hour to have a really thoughtful conversation.... But... just ... being fully present with somebody for a few minutes, we can actually stretch time. We can make five minutes feel like 30 minutes when we’re both fully there.”<sup>5</sup> “It’s really the quality rather than the quantity ... of time you spend with people.”<sup>6</sup>

“My mood [lifts],” he concludes. “I [feel] ... less weighed down by the challenges [I’m] dealing with, even though those challenges [haven’t] changed at all.... I [have] more physical energy, as well. [And I notice that these [positive effects last] for ... many hours [afterwards,] and I ... look forward to the next conversation.”<sup>7</sup>

The takeaway: Reaching out to others — healing loneliness — doesn’t have to be complicated. Here are some more ideas:

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<sup>5</sup> Vivek Murthy in [greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu) (*op cit*)

<sup>6</sup> Dacher Ketlner, interviewer, in [greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu) (*op cit*)

<sup>7</sup> Vivek Murthy in [greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu) (*op cit*)

\* Greet strangers. Get over the mask, say hello, and smile at people with your eyes. It's amazing that this helps, but it does. If you're a dog person or a baby person, say hello to their dog or their baby.

\* Call a friend. If you can't think of a friend to call, choose someone who regularly comments on your Facebook or Instagram posts and ask them if you might call them sometime just to say hello. Chat someone in our Zoom room and ask if they'd like to chat by phone this week. Call them. Then put it on your schedule and call them again.

\* Join someone for a walk. One of my most extroverted friends noticed which neighbors were out walking and when. One by one, she timed her walks to coincide, and as she just happened to be out at the same time, she greeted them by asking if she could join them for a few minutes. No one said no! She now has one-hour walks scheduled throughout the week with something like ten different neighbors; she says it's saving her. She also reached out to the daughter of a friend who has kids who are going to school online, and offered to help. Now she spends an hour a week walking with her friend's granddaughter, a high school student, talking current events and politics.

\* Join your local mutual aid society. For the past year, we've been delivering meals to people who were laid low by the pandemic. One guy on our route had already been housebound after a terrible construction accident. His only face-to-face (or mask-to-mask) interactions must come to him. Slowly but surely, instead of ring and run, I began ringing, leaving his meal, standing a safe distance back, and chatting with him when he came to the door. We started with the weather — he's a big fan of all kinds of weather. Now we're talking seed catalogs; he's working hard with a physical therapist on his goal to get out of the house this spring. He's completely delightful. And when I go on my way, I feel his delight lightening my heart.

\* Take on your boredom. Loneliness and social isolation are made worse by boredom. After escaping into books, film, and TV, try to choose something to do that has a social aspect to it. If you like to sing, Arlington Street sings together every Sunday and every other Thursday evening, and you can go online to see if your favorite musicians are hosting virtual concerts. A friend who decided this is as good a time as any to learn ukulele — if not now, when? — watched some YouTube instructional videos, but realized it would be much more fun to join a class. Her instructor is approaching 100 years old; in the first class, they learned to

play the iconic “How Much is that Doggie in the Window?” It’s utterly nerdy. She’s having a blast. And she’s not lonely.

Finally, let us never underestimate the power of Zoom. I spend hours every week in the Arlington Street Zoom room; it occupies a huge, beautiful place in my days.

\* I have it on good authority that there were those of you who, not so long ago, would have said *No, thank you* to poetry who are now among the first with your virtual hand up to share a new poem you’ve found.

\* Some of you who thought you could never sit still or quiet your mind enough to meditate wouldn’t dream of missing our gatherings for meditation.

\* Whether or not you share at our weekly tea party is not the point; you can join in for the companionship, the tenderness and the hilarity.

There is absolutely no reason to be lonely when we can visit [ASCBoston.org](http://ASCBoston.org); the beloved community is a simple click of a link away.

Actually, I want to toss in one more idea — one more stay against loneliness. I was inspired by columnist Thomas Farragher’s story in last Saturday’s *Globe*. The dateline is Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Here it is:

“An icy darkness tightens its grip ... as we sit huddled under tall, snow-crusted pine trees and a single, skinny birch. It is freezing. But there is heat here. And light. The heat comes from metallic propane heat lamps [and a fire pit] that have melted the snow in Nancy Clayburgh’s slick driveway. The light comes from the lively conversation among these friends and neighbors, wearing down jackets and colorful scarves, who have fashioned something strong and enduring and comforting.

“It’s a sort of COVID salon that has rescued a few precious commodities from this deadly pandemic’s merciless grip: Friendship. Fellowship. A determination that disease cannot destroy the sturdy bonds that bind us. Ernie Greenslade lives nearby and has become a driveway regular. ‘I’m an extrovert,’ she says. ‘To be able to have this opportunity to get together to talk face-to-face with my [neighbors], I mean, it’s a lifesaver.’” Her breath is visible in the air.

At first, it was a place to gather to grieve. Nancy Clayburgh’s husband died on May 1st. Nancy — Portsmouth’s former mayor — says, “People would call me to express their sympathy.... I would say, ‘Why don’t you come over and visit me? We can sit in the driveway.’” And so it began. They visited all summer and into the fall. And so it continued into the cold winter — chairs, tables laden with food,

coolers full of soda and beer, neighbors and friends and friends of friends offering support and love.

Todd Bohannon, whose fiancée grew up two houses away, says, “The act of sitting in a driveway ... is a little abnormal. But the social interaction ... feels normal — the catching up with each other about what’s going on.” *And what about when this is all over?* “We joke about that,” he says. “We say, ‘Hey, we’re still going to sit in Nancy’s driveway, ... right? Because now we’re all so connected to each other....”

We want COVID to go away.  
But we don’t want this connection to go away.”<sup>8</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we choose to end loneliness.

Share your gratitude  
Greet strangers  
Call a friend  
Join someone for a walk  
Give mutual aid  
End boredom with something social  
Zoom  
Create a driveway salon.

To close, in honor of Lawrence Ferlinghetti,<sup>9</sup> these few lines from American Beat poet Alan Ginsberg’s *Song*.

The weight of the world  
is love.  
Under the burden  
of solitude,  
under the burden  
of dissatisfaction  
the weight,  
the weight we carry

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<sup>8</sup> Please see [bostonglobe.com/2021/02/20/metro/an-icy-driveway-these-neighbors-find-warmth-comfort-merciless-pandemic-rages-around-them/?s\\_campaign=breakingnews:newsletter](https://bostonglobe.com/2021/02/20/metro/an-icy-driveway-these-neighbors-find-warmth-comfort-merciless-pandemic-rages-around-them/?s_campaign=breakingnews:newsletter)

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti (24 March, 1919 - 22 February, 2021): *¡Presente!*

is love.  
Who can deny?  
In dreams  
it touches  
the body,  
in thought  
constructs  
a miracle,  
in imagination  
anguishes  
till born....

... the burden of life  
is love,

but we carry the weight  
wearily,  
and so must rest  
in the arms of love  
at last,

must rest in the arms  
of love.