

Loneliness and friendship

When friendship disappears then there is a space left open to that awful loneliness of the outside world which is like the cold space between the planets. It is an air in which men perish utterly. - Hillair Belloc

How many close friends do you have? I define a close friend as someone you would invite to a family dinner without first having to make any excuse for them or some aspect of them, or otherwise feel embarrassed about them when they're sitting with your family - someone whom you accept without compromise or condition.

Research indicates the average American has two close friends. Twenty-five percent say they have no one with whom they can be authentic and/or discuss deep personal or emotional issues. Without true friendship, what remains is loneliness. In its most serious form, loneliness is considered a serious, even life-threatening condition, heightening the risks of heart disease and depression.

Interestingly, we live in a time when we feel a kinship with Oprah, and engage in non-stop communicating with folks on My Space and Facebook, witness folks vent and emote on the talk shows, and cozy up to watch Friends - although we actually don't have many friends, or any.

Also, interestingly, many folks say they engage within huge networks, online and off. However, what's the difference between connecting online or with local business or social networks and true deeper connections?

Who supports you, really, really supports you, when you feel lonely, unhappy, overwhelmed, lost, stressed or sad?

Many folks have created a lifestyle of the "just-in-time" buddy or acquaintance who they attempt to convert into a "friend" so they can feel supported in time of need. But, transpose this immediacy into a long-term, deep and true friendship? Probably not.

From a mental-health standpoint, what's striking is the rise of depression in our society. Depression is rising in geometric proportions - among the poor and the rich, the affluent and the not-so-affluent - every demographic sector. One causal factor - loneliness.

In spite of the quantum growth of connecting through online and off-line networks, people are isolating themselves emotionally and psychologically at ever increasing numbers.

We have created the tools that reinforce "the casual" and augur against deeper connection - email, IM, and social networking, etc....all the while reducing and eliminating the opportunity for soul mates to connect. Moreover, we've come to expect things instantly, and don't spend the time it takes to have real intimacy with another person. The sad truth is that the frequency of contact and the number of contacts in our network does not necessarily translate into the quality of contact.

Take the phenomenon of Facebook.com, the social-networking Web site where members proudly announce their huge numbers of friends. Some members say they have 1,000 friends. The pity is they probably don't even "know" half of them. Is it any wonder that in "real life" so many folks say they have difficulty making really satisfying connections?

We spend thousand of dollars on home entertainment centers, without focusing on deeper, heart-felt connecting. "Family time" for many has become an event focusing more on "doing" rather than on a deeper process of sharing and truly "be-ing" with one another.

Many of us say we belong to the "church of true friendship", but in reality very few of us show up at the

services. We say friendship is important, or very important, but then engage in lifestyles that take us away from the path of friendship...too busy. It's no different from the folks who agree with their doctors that they need hip replacement, but never get around to having the procedure.

Many think, or thought, Starbucks was a solution — a Marshall Plan for creating connections and friendships. But, lo and behold, what has happened? Folks get their lattes to go, or "connect" with their laptop.

I'm curious if so many of the major disconnects we feel in today's culture, disconnects driven by fear, anger, hate, isolation, insecurity, and the like are a function of loneliness and the lack of true and meaningful friendships.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- How do you define friendship?
- Would your friends describe you as a true and real friend, or more as an acquaintance? Would you feel comfortable asking them?
- What are loneliness and friendship like in your life at work, at home, or at play?
- Do you feel safe disclosing your innermost thoughts and feelings to your friends? To your partner or spouse? If not, why not?
- Do you ever feel alone or lonely when you're in a group, even at home?
- How do you deal with your loneliness?
- What was your experience of loneliness, aloneness and friendship as you were growing up?
- Does your lifestyle exclude time and room for developing meaningful friendships?
- Do you find friendship risky? If so, why?
- When was the last time someone referred to you as a "real friend"?
- How much time do you spend in social networking a week? Do you pride yourself in amassing a huge number of social network "friends"?
- How many of your social network "friends" do you really, really, know in the sense you would invite them to family dinner tomorrow night?

Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible. - Carl Jung

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