LONELINESS AND LOVE

By RUTH T. DUCKWORTH

But little do men perceive what solitude is, and how far it extendeth. For a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk is but a tinkling cymbal where there is no love.

So WROTE Francis Bacon nearly four hundred years ago; and few would contest the truth of his words. In our own day, when crowds have assumed a magnitude which Bacon never knew, the poignancy of loneliness in the physical presence of one's fellow-men is felt perhaps more deeply than ever before. The child, passive and withdrawn in the corner of a romping play ground; the youngster, friendless and alone in the concourse of a mammoth secondary school; the vacant-eyed young adult, betraying by every gesture his sense of isolation among the pavement throngs; the old man dying alone in his bed-sitter in a house where many dwell: these are extreme and recognizable illustrations of a truth which every one of us knows at heart. There is no loneliness quite like the loneliness of being surrounded by many and feeling no relationship with any. Loneliness is essentially not a matter of being alone; one can be alone but not lonely, lonely when not alone. What transforms a crowd into company is love.

Love given and love received. The capacity to receive love, to let oneself be loved, is at least as important as the ability to love. Children who in early years have been deprived of care and tenderness often suffer from an inability to receive love which is more deeply indicative of the damage they have suffered than is their obvious inability to love. They reject every advance, and remain bafflingly unresponsive to any care or affection, however deep and sincere, that may be offered them. Foster parents and adoptive parents feel their advances rejected, and often turn to guilty self-examination to discover the roots of their failure. The root is in the child: in a deeply damaged personality which has been so wounded by rejection that it lowers the portcullis of its self-defence mechanisms and refuses to let love enter, for fear of the vulnerability to further rejection which love inevitably brings with it. Those who are thus afraid to let themselves be loved are among the loneliest persons on earth, with a loneliness that seems past redemption.

It is therefore almost a common-place that love alone banishes loneliness: that there is between loneliness and love a polarity, almost a mutual exclusiveness, so that if one is loved one is not lonely, and one is lonely if not loved. To say this, however, is to accept too facile an interpretation of human relationships, which are far from simple. Looking more deeply, we perceive a different kind of polarity, a strange paradox, a much more subtle relationship between loneliness and love. Bacon's dictum expresses but half a truth. It is true that love transforms a crowd into company, true in one way that there is loneliness where there is no love; but it is also true, though perhaps less obvious, that without a certain loneliness there can be no love. And here we touch paradox.

In the first place, as far as our human experience can reach, there is at the heart of every great love the ache of loneliness that comes of union desired but never wholy achieved. 'Once near, one is too far . . .' There are moments of ecstasy when union seems fulfilled, but they pass, and the severalness of self remains. It is taken up again into the rhythm of love, and hope is constantly reborn. But each moment of union, however much it tastes of eternity, proves fragile and ephemeral, and the loneliness of separateness wells up again as the ecstasy fades. In every expression of human or divine love this note is heard: not as pure pain, but as an integral part of the total experience, inseparable from the ecstasy itself.

For the paradox lies in the fact that without this loneliness the ecstasy could not be. Our essential loneliness (which is not tragic, but rich) is inseparably linked to the mystery of creation which makes us each unique. And love is the dialogue-encounter of one uniqueness with another. If the uniqueness of one is totally surrendered, utterly lost in the other, there is possession, but not love. One has to be oneself to love: to accept the mystery of oneself, the uniqueness of self, which means to accept a certain fundamental loneliness. And one has to respect the other to love: to respect the mystery of the other, the uniqueness of the other self, which means to respect in the other too a certain fundamental loneliness. To Jean-Paul Sartre these lonelinesses were the reality which love destroys; to the christian they are the mystery out of which love grows, which makes love possible, which sustains love as the bass chords sustain the melody, or like the silence without which music cannot be. Without alone-ness respected there can be no love.

This kind of loneliness makes love possible, sustains love, because

it is not a negative in man's experience; on the contrary, it is the imprint of the creative finger of God. The wonder of creation is in the uniqueness of each one, the mystery of person. What can help us to perceive it as such, to bear the strange and apparently isolating weight of our own uniqueness, of our incommunicable selves?

The answer, by another twist of the paradox, is communion: communion with others, communion with creation, communion with God.

Communion with others is vital from the first moment of life. In the child-parent communion of early childhood, the self is first discovered, then affirmed. Every subsequent experience of loving and being loved gives our uniqueness value in our eyes. Not a value to be cherished and protected lest it be lost, but a value which affirms us more and more in a freedom to trust and to abandon. The gospel bids us love others as we love ourselves, and there is a sense in which this is inevitable. We shall be able to love others to the degree to which we have learned to love ourselves, and to assume the singularity, the uniqueness of our own persons and the kind of loneliness which this implies. This acceptance of self in turn enables us to love, and to learn by experience that only he who is prepared to lose his life will save it.

Communion with creation. There is the communion of contemplation, when for a while one's separateness is balanced by the sense of one-ness with all that is. The spirit of man has an affinity with life in all its manifestations: animals, birds; the beauty of landscape, seascape, skyscape; wind and water, fire and the good earth. All are mediations of God who is the source of life, and in contemplation or in the easier communication of toil, we are again enriched and affirmed. A different kind of communion comes in artistic creation, when shape, mass, colour and sound lend themselves to the imagination of man. The artist wrestles with his material as Jacob with the angel, this material which claims and demands his repect. The sculptor does not possess his stone, the potter his clay, or the painter his oils. Rather he enters into communion with it, that a new creation may be achieved. In the concentration and absorption of the struggle to create, a man comes to grips with his singleness in a new way, and is made whole.

Communion with others and communion with nature are both ways of communing with God. In prayer a deeper and more conscious advertence to his presence and action within us anchors our loneliness in his creative love and frees us for love and self-giving.

Communion with nature and communion with God both require solitude. Solitude is ambivalent: men justly fear it, and the direst punishment ever given by men to man is the penalty of solitary confinement. Without companionship a man loses touch with reality. Yet some solitude a man must have; and in a society where it is hard to come by, some degree of solitude is tenaciously sought. It is in solitude, and especially in solitary prayer, that we come to terms with the dialectic of loneliness and love; we need a rhythm of solitude and companionship in order to discover ourselves; and the ability to be happy in solitude is one of the signs that we have so come to terms. We need space – psychological and physical space – in order sometimes to be alone. Psychological space is the more important, and it can be achieved even in the midst of people. A girl once tried to tell me why she found pop festivals so attractive. She said: 'You sit there on the grass happy just to listen – or not to listen – in the company of people who like the same kind of music as you do, and you are let be. There is a wonderful freedom. No one worries about whether you are listening or not listening; no one makes demands on you; you are free just to be'. She was expressing an experience at once of communion and of inner space, a kind of solitude which affirmed her, in the midst of what might appear to the outsider a crowded and a noisy scene. In that crowd she 'dwelt apart'.

No relationship between two people can endure which does not recognize and respect each one's need of solitude and inner space. Two people who love but are unsure of each other cannot bear to be apart. When friendship deepens and mutual trust grows firm, then one is less jealous of the other's presence and more respectful of his reticencies. The inexhaustible quality of love, the power each one retains of surprising the other, comes from those unmapped areas in the personality of each which both create and need a certain alone-ness. No lover ever thinks that he knows the loved one through and through.

I know of few authors who have written directly of this paradox, this dialectic of loneliness and love; though most love-poetry expresses it indirectly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, in his *Life Together*, recognizes it explicitly insofar as it applies to life in community:

> Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had

> to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ's call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called . . .
> But the reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the last day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ . . .
> We recognize, then, that only as we are within the fellowship can we be alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in the fellowship. It is not as though one preceded the other; both begin at the same time, namely with the call of Jesus Christ.[1]

Religious communities, which aim to live more intensely and more absolutely the mystery of fellowship called into being by Christ, need to recognize fully the twin need of loneliness and love and their deep relationship. The very structures of religious community can either foster or be an obstacle to the fulfilling of these needs. But structures are expressions of an inner spirit, and it is above all at this level, and at the level of values, that balance must be achieved.

Until the recent renewal of religious life, which has effected radical changes in the life-style of religious communities, there was apparently much opportunity for solitude. Communities in general were large, and in large buildings, with large grounds; in such conditions it was easy to escape and to be alone. There were long hours consecrated to silence, which provided a framework for inner space and made it possible. On the other hand, a highly regimented life prevented the development of that interior freedom which creates inner space. So opportunities for solitude were there, but the dynamism of the spirit which makes solitude creative did not necessarily exist, was not necessarily called into being by the framework. Solitude could so often become a negative and destructive loneliness if the climate was not favourable to the growth of warm and loving relationships. In all too many communities the climate was not so favourable. A hangover from Jansenism meant that relationships

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[1] *Life Together* (London, 1954), pp 57–58.

were suspect; all family ties were abruptly broken, and real friendships even with one's fellow-religious were discouraged or made impossible, because the spontaneous gestures which express and foster it were forbidden. Where there is no love, man's singleness is experienced as a terrible loneliness productive of nothing more than isolation and alienation.

One of the fruits of the renewal of religious life since Vatican II has been a significant change of mentality in this area. Smaller communities have been deliberately formed because of the opportunity they give for building up real relationships, for a 'living with' rather than a 'living beside'. Contacts with one's family are frequent and easy, and friendships are valued both within the community and outside it. This is a profound and beneficial change, especially when it is accompanied by an abandoning of uniformity in favour of a frank acceptance of and respect for pluriformity: for that diversity of temperament, of gifts, of callings which is the living out in community of the uniqueness of each. The danger might be of a certain superficiality in this abundance, which would ignore the delicacy and the depths of human relationships and pretend to an easy commerce of affection. This danger is not present when there is respect for the otherness of the other, and for the areas of solitude and silence in his life. Where this respect exists, there will be a solicitude too for the space which is needed that one may be alone. Silence and solitude are of course harder to come by in a community inserted into a christian or natural community, and by deliberate choice open to that community and allowing itself to be invaded by its needs. A regular daily and weekly pattern of life, regular set hours of silence and prayer – these will often be impossible. But when there is a real respect for the uniqueness of each, where the singularity of self is acknowledged in a spirit of worship, then opportunities will be made for the necessary degree of withdrawal, all the more effective and creative because it has been positively and firmly desired. And as the maturity of each one grows, it will become easier to find one's solitude in the market-place, to keep an interior stillness in activity, to realize the intertwining of what appear to be the separate strands of alone-ness and love in one's personal life and in the life of the community.

One of the signs that this dialectic of loneliness and love is taken very seriously in the life of religious communities today is a renewed emphasis on sharing (that is, communion) and on prayer (the solitude dimension). Religious community, as the very word suggests,

has always been based on sharing, on a community of life and of possessions. But we are not satisfied today with a merely external expression of this, in what used to be called 'the common life' and in shared ownership. Religious wish to share at a much deeper level. There is a sharing of experiences (which are often very varied in the diversity of their activities) and of inner experience, a sharing of faith, a sharing of prayer; and these are depths of sharing which, not easily attained, bring their own reward in the affirming of community. And together with this has come a deepening of the spirit of prayer. When the old structures of prayer (what a friend of mine used to describe as 'going to chapel with a book in one hand and a watch in the other') were deliberately abandoned, and no structures put in their place, the immediate result seemed to be that no one prayed any more. But this did not last long; spontaneously a great desire for prayer made itself felt. The shared prayer of the liturgy became much more personalized, as individual contributions and creativity helped to make it a real focus for the day-to-day life of the community. And long periods of private prayer are sought, 'desert' moments are achieved at some cost, and highly cherished. This twofold movement, towards deeper sharing and towards prayer, represents a unifying of experience within the community, a bringing together of communion and solitude, an expression in life of the mysterious unity of loneliness and love.

This unifying of experience comes to fruition and has special significance in the final period of life. Old age inevitably brings a great increase in actual loneliness. As activities necessarily diminish, and enterprises have to be abandoned or left to younger hands and heads, then one's circle of acquaintances, even one's context of relationships, inevitably dwindles. One after another, contemporaries are removed by death; the family thins out around one as a whole generation passes away, and younger generations have other interests and move forward into a different world. Even if one does not literally live alone (as so many elderly people do today) the drift of life and the gradual failure of the faculties produce an ever greater degree of isolation. People make a point of coming to see you in case you are lonely – which is very different from the easy and spontaneous companionship of one's friends. The way in which this increase in actual loneliness is coped with will depend very much on the degree to which, during the whole of one's life, one has been able to love and to be alone. We admire the serenity and selflessness of an elderly person who retains to the end his interest in others,

who is there to listen, to receive the tale of trouble, to sympathize or merely to convey comfort by his very serenity and peace. Such an acceptance of loneliness both springs from love and is a springboard to further love in a life that remains out-going and creative to the end. We see, too, the opposite: the sadness of one who cannot cope with the loneliness of old age and closes in upon himself in self-pity and querulous complaint. Most of us, I suppose, will grow old somewhere between these two extremes; but the degree of our serenity, our ability to accept the inevitable loneliness of old age without being destroyed by it, will depend surely on the richness of love which has been ours in life, and the strength it has given us in grace to accept our single selves at depth, as given significance by and contained within the love which is universal.

And men move through old age to the loneliest moment of all – the moment of death. However much we surround the dying with love and care, however convinced we are of the comfort which love can bring as death approaches, we experience again and again that inscrutable moment when the dying person seems to withdraw into a great loneliness. What the experience of this moment is we simply do not know. We know only that the dying man goes alone into the presence of his God – and yet that still he is not alone. For we believe that into his aloneness he takes all the moments of communion that have been through the whole of life, for they are built into him, have become part of him; and that, as his uniqueness, his loneliness, and his experience of love are caught up into the power and love of God, all dialectic disappears, and loneliness and love are one.