

# FEAR AND LONELINESS

By MARY P. GRANT

**N**O ONE IS immune from fear, not even the Lord Jesus in his human nature; for fear is endemic to the human condition. The important thing to recognize is that fear, like confidence, can be an emotional carry-over from one experience to the next, and from one day to another. Chronic fear is our enemy, not fear as such; and subtly or not so subtly, it undermines and erodes our confidence, our hope and our ability to meet changing circumstances constructively. Chronic fear is debilitating; it reduces us to a passive existing and to a mere dependence on survival techniques. Take, for example, the fear of being misunderstood and therefore rejected, which can prevent husband and wife being frank with each other. Over the years, such fear digs a ditch of misunderstanding between them. Consider, again, that fear of a hostile world peopled with men capable of bringing it to destruction through misuse of atomic power. This fear has persuaded married couples not to have children, lest they might have to live in such an horrific world. There is also a sense in which fear creates what it fears; stage-fright, for example, inhibits speech.

There is no doubt that to be subject to fear is to be human. As soon as we attain, we fear lest we lose; before we reach, we fear lest our striving will prove in vain. We fear war and its weapons; we fear disease in all its deadly forms; we fear death, our own or that of those we love; we fear poverty in all its many aspects, material and spiritual. We fear because we are human, and to be human is to be vulnerable and to be subject to pain and loss. But of all the fears that we can conjure up, it seems that for most people none is more terrifying than the fear of loneliness in all its many shapes and forms. Perhaps it is true to say that the quintessence of fear is this fear of loneliness, which seems to contain within it not only the fear of alienation, but a threat to our being and to our very existence itself.

The subject of loneliness is one on which each of us is his own expert. Yet how helpless we find ourselves to be when we try to share this experience with another; perhaps still more so when we try to reach out and touch the loneliness of a fellow human being.

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

Even if we have shared similar or analogous experiences, we sense that the meaning of that experience has a unique and incommunicable quality; a quality of mystery which is of its very nature in some sense isolating and fraught with fear. Perhaps this is why loneliness is much more often a subject for songwriters and poets than for social scientists or psychologists. Leiderman suggests that psychologists neglect loneliness as a subject for study, 'because we have no theory with which to begin to cope with its manifestations'.<sup>1</sup> Weiss, in an attempt to work out some such theory, distinguishes between loneliness as emotional isolation resulting from loss or lack of a truly intimate relationship, 'usually with spouse, lover, parent or child', and social isolation, 'the consequence of lacking a network of involvements with peers such as fellow-workers, kinsfolk, neighbours or friends'.<sup>2</sup>

Harry Stack Sullivan is among the few who have made a study of the subject and attempted to describe the symptoms of loneliness. His description, though brief and sketchy, is characteristically perceptive. He sees loneliness as a uniformly painful experience. In particular, he comments on the driving force of loneliness, a force great enough to cause people who are normally painfully shy to seek out social activity with determination. He concludes: 'the fact that loneliness will lead to integration in the face of severe anxiety automatically means that loneliness itself is more terrible than anxiety'.<sup>3</sup> Others who have observed the pressures under which the lonely seem to act are in agreement with Sullivan's appraisal. Among these, Fromm-Reichmann notes that at least one reason why we have no very satisfactory theory regarding loneliness is to be explained by the threat that such a subject presents to our well-being: 'loneliness is such a painful, frightening experience that people will do practically everything to avoid it'.<sup>4</sup> Weiss, while conceding this point, notes that much research has recently been done on the very painful phenomenon of grief and the intensely anxiety-arousing phenomenon of dying. Loneliness would not seem to be more frightening than these conditions. What then, he asks, is the additional quality in loneliness that leads to its neglect as a subject for study and research? Times of loneliness are later difficult to recall, so that

---

<sup>1</sup> Leiderman, P. H.: 'Loneliness: a psychodynamic interpretation', in *Aspects of Depression* (ed. E. S. Shneidman and M. J. Ortega, Boston, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Weiss, R. S.: *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* (Boston, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan, H. S.: *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York, 1963), p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, F.: *Loneliness* (New York, 1971), p. 1.

many of us tend very markedly to underestimate our own past experiences of loneliness. As a result, we underestimate the role it has played in our own lives and those of others. Sullivan rates it as an experience so terrible that it practically baffles clear recall. Fromm-Reichmann goes further. She believes that many of those who have once been lonely are aware that the memory of that state would be threatening to their present well-being: 'It is so frightening and uncanny in character that they who have once suffered loneliness try to dissociate the memory of what it was like and even the fear of it'.<sup>5</sup>

Erich Fromm writes of the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness, as being of the very essence of the human mode and practice of life. To feel completely alone and isolated leads to mental disintegration, just as physical starvation leads to death. This relatedness is not the same thing as physical contact or proximity. One may be alone in the physical sense over a very long period, yet related to the ideas, values or social patterns which give a feeling of communion and of belonging. On the other hand, which of us has not experienced being overcome by a feeling of utter isolation, where the outcome, if it were to transcend a certain limit, could in certain cases lead to severe schizophrenic disturbances? This lack of relatedness to values, symbols or patterns, Fromm calls moral aloneness. Physical aloneness becomes unbearable, he says, only if it also implies this moral aloneness:

The spiritual relatedness to the world can assume many forms; the monk in his cell who believes in God, and the political prisoner kept in isolation who feels one with his fellow-fighters, are not alone morally. Neither is the English gentleman who wears his dinner jacket in the most exotic surroundings, nor the petty bourgeois who, though being deeply isolated from his fellow-men, feels one with his nation or its symbols. The kind of relatedness to the world may be noble or trivial, but even being related to the basest kind of pattern is immensely preferable to being alone.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, part of the process of individuation is 'growing aloneness', as Fromm calls it. The immediate world of primary ties to parents, home and so on offers the child a security and basic unity with all that is outside himself. As the child emerges from that world he becomes aware of being alone, of being an entity separate

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich: *The Fear of Freedom* (London, 1942), p 15.

from all others. This separation creates a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety. When one has become an individual, one stands alone and faces the demand for integration into the wider world, in all its perilous and overpowering aspects. This crisis can be faced in one of two ways: by regressive submission and conformity, or constructively, through what Fromm calls 'spontaneous relationship to man and nature', a relationship that connects the individual with the world whilst affirming him in his individuality. Such a relationship is expressed through love and productive work. Even so, the process of growth in a human person rarely proceeds harmoniously. What sometimes happens is an unbearable feeling of isolation and powerlessness, a quality of desolation that creates intense anxiety and insecurity. Nevertheless, the growing separation should lead towards a new kind of closeness and a solidarity with others, as long as a person has been able to develop the inner strength and ability to contribute, which is the premise of this new mode of relatedness to the world. In Fromm's view, it is this ability to contribute or produce, along with his power of choice between different courses of action, that enables man to master nature rather than to adapt passively to it. While mastering nature he separates himself from it more and more. He becomes dimly aware of himself – or his group – as not being identical with nature:

It dawns upon him that his is a tragic fate: to be part of nature and yet to transcend it. He becomes aware of death as his ultimate fate even if he tries to deny it in manifold phantasies.<sup>7</sup>

Man's growth towards individuality and human freedom is thus seen as having a dialectic character. On the one hand it is a process of growing strength and integration. There is a gradual mastery of nature and the environment. The power of human reason develops to its full potential and is brought to bear on fresh experiences, solidarity with other human beings and a measure of inter-dependence, as opposed to over-dependence or excessive independence. On the other hand, this growing individuation means growing isolation and insecurity; and therefore also growing doubt concerning one's role in the universe, the meaning of one's life, and (contingent on these feelings) a growing feeling of one's own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual.

The experience of loneliness, then, is necessary for the develop-

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 27.

ment of a person into a responsible adult human being. This is a dynamic process, continuing throughout the whole of life. The self-actualizing person, to use Maslow's phrase, is one who is able to range freely and appropriately between the polarities of relatedness and separateness, dependence and independence, autonomy and contingency, and so on. In this sense, as we shall elaborate later, both loneliness and its attendant fears have a positive, creative part to play in the life of each one of us.

We know from experience that this loneliness is part of our human condition; but many, if not most of us, are so averse to being alone, to feeling alone, that we do everything we can to forget our solitude and escape our lonely moments. Pascal refers to this escape mechanism as *divertissement*; that is, diversion by systematic distraction. We occupy and preoccupy ourselves with every variety of amusement, occupation and diversion, 'so mercifully provided by society', as Merton puts it, 'which enable man to avoid his own company for twenty-four hours a day'.<sup>8</sup> Yet the lonely moments of life contribute to both psycho-social and psycho-spiritual growth. They force a person to face his true self, and allow him to discover and face the obscure forces that he bears within himself. The man who does not know how to be alone does not know, maybe does not wish to know, the conflicts there are in the depths of his heart, conflicts which he may feel that he is incapable of untangling and sometimes even of touching. As has been well said: 'Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities'.<sup>9</sup>

This fear of self-discovery is a strong motive for avoiding loneliness. So too, the fear of others discovering our inadequacies and deficiencies can frequently drive us to isolate ourselves from those around us. It is for these reasons that we read and hear much today describing modern man as alienated and estranged from himself and those around him. This theme pervades nearly all existentialist writing. Various explanations are propounded to explain this condition of man in our times, ranging from the impact of technology and the results of urban living, to the inherent *angst* which is part of every man's heritage. The ways which people seek out to cope with this sense of unease and alienation vary greatly; but all could

<sup>8</sup> Merton, Thomas: 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', in *Disputed Questions* (New York, 1953), p 178.

<sup>9</sup> Bouyer, Louis: *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York/London 1960), p 313.

be summed up as the search to achieve some sense of belonging, of worth and of meaning. Charles A. Curran makes this point cogently, showing how, in view of this search, the definition of man as a religious animal takes on greater significance. Whatever man does, even his most abject failures, represents his struggle to create a bond with something beyond himself. It is only in achieving such a bond that he can extricate himself from his alienation and redeem himself in some measure from his alienated state. Since man is also a community animal, it is fundamental to him to seek unity in all that he does. Hence unity and communication are essential if he is to achieve fulfilment. For ultimate fulfilment, he must communicate beyond himself and others to the Total Other (which presupposes his ability to believe). Before man can be in community and communion with another, and with the Total Other, he must be in communion with himself. He does this, says Curran, by being a Friend-to-himself.<sup>10</sup>

Here we are touching a fundamental christian tenet: the two great commandments of love, which presuppose that one's love of oneself will affect one's whole mode of being-in the world. It is also the area of the first of Lonergan's four major kinds of conversion, identity. The conversions have a logical sequence: identity, responsibility, religious and specifically religious (for example, christian). These conversions, though they have a logical sequence, also describe a continual process, in which each influences the other, as the person is called forth to an ever fuller mode of being. The stages of conversion are a series of transformations, leading an individual towards the commitment of his total being, in love towards self, others and God. (Sadly, it is also possible for fixation to take place at one or other stage or level; and fears are the great inhibiting factors of this growth-process.)

The first conversion occurs in the area of self-identity. It involves the realization of one's intrinsic self-worth and lovableness, together with the growing awareness of one's selfhood as a unique human person with one's own needs and special talents. This identity-conversion is on-going, as the individual adjusts to his various life-stages and crisis points, whether joyous or fearsome.

The responsibility-conversion takes place within the moral dimension; it includes the realization that others have their own intrinsic value, that one has the power to influence them for good or

---

<sup>10</sup> Curran, C. A.: *Psychological Dynamics in Religious Living* (New York, 1971).

ill, and that one's own values affect and interact with those of others.

A religious conversion stems from the realization that one is not the ultimate explanation of one's own identity and existence, together with the consequent desire for some sort of personal union with a 'something beyond', whether this be viewed as the source of all life, universal goodness, ultimate fulfilment, or whatever may speak to the individual in some way of transcendent values. Religious conversion in this sense marks a radically new attitude toward self, others and the world.

The fourth level or mode of conversion makes the religious conversion more specific. It implies some form of adherence to the creeds or tenets of one of the great world religions, or at the least, some system of belief. The ground of one's existence and being will be interpreted in the light of this belief.

Noble and beautiful as are many of the attempts of existentialist and humanistic philosophers and psychologists to come to grips with contemporary man's experience of alienation from himself and others and the feelings of fear and loneliness which such experiences evoke, they can only speak at the level of abstractions. These, while they may attract the intellect and even the feelings and emotions with their tragic and poetic qualities, cannot assuage man's yearning to find himself and immerse himself in some relationship beyond and greater than himself, a relationship corresponding to his deepest longings, giving meaning to his very selfhood and enabling him to transcend self. In the christian revelation, relationships are found to be the *raison d'être* of all personal existence. St John, for example, links God, the human person and the brethren in one and the same love, when he says:

We love, because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.<sup>11</sup>

'Loneliness is a readiness to believe that no one else cares, that no one else is there in any significant way or at any significant depth of relationship'.<sup>12</sup> One might want to quarrel with those words, 'a readiness to believe', though here loneliness is being contrasted with

<sup>11</sup> 1 Jn 4, 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> O'Shea, Kevin: *On Trial for Hope* (New York, 1970), p 130.

solitude seen as 'a readiness to believe that someone is there and to listen for his presence'. In externals, loneliness and solitude are much alike. Only in the inner core of faith, hope and love do they differ. But this is a momentous 'only', since the difference is between relatedness and the total absence of any meaningful relationship whatever.

Loneliness in the latter sense is a loneliness of rejection, a cry of despair. The fear of ultimate rejection becomes exacerbated in a person who has the experience of physical or moral isolation, or both together, over any long period of time, and who lacks the inner resources of relatedness to cope with this situation. You might as well be rejected if there is no one around to accept you. What exactly is the intolerableness of this experience of loneliness which can lead us to the despairing conclusion that it would be preferable to end it all rather than to endure through it? Is it intolerable precisely because it breeds this fear, this fearful feeling, this sorrowful feeling of rejection; and then, the most intolerable and haunting fear of all, that death itself may be the gateway of the fulfilment of one's fears, and will lead to the ultimate rejection in the same sense that hope, its opposite, is the expectation of ultimate acceptance and homecoming?

This prompts us to pose the question: what fears are irreducible? Can we see all fear-and-loneliness experiences in terms of fear of death leading to possible dissolution or rejection? This would include the prior fear of disorganization and disintegration: that is, psychological death, with its corollary of loss of conscious control over myself and my environment.

In the light of the recent work done on attitudes to death and dying, especially that pioneered by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross<sup>13</sup> with patients facing death through terminal illness (helping the patients themselves and those around them to understand the psychological processes involved in death, bereavement and grieving), we are better able to understand the death, dying, bereavement syndrome. The five stages of Denial, Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance will show themselves to a greater or less degree in other crisis points in life, and can be seen as necessary and natural mechanisms of the psychological adjustment of the person in face of stress. That is, they are to be seen in a positive rather than a

---

<sup>13</sup> Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth: *On Death and Dying* (New York, 1969), and *Death, the Final Stage of Growth* (New Jersey, 1975).



negative light, and to be allowed and encouraged to do their work rather than being denied or repressed out of conscious awareness. They can be recognized, accepted and used constructively in terms of Dabrowski's notion of 'positive disintegration', a concept which he uses to explain the process of psychic maturation.<sup>14</sup> This concept can prove very enlightening in the existential diagnosis of psychic growth, especially in the fundamental growth transformations of moral, intellectual and religious conversion.<sup>15</sup> Briefly put, Dabrowski's thesis is that in order to reach high-level maturity, an individual needs to go through a positive kind of disintegration, a process which involves the dissolution of lower-level functions and structures so that a higher level of integration can be achieved. This movement of positive disintegration is heralded by an intensified experience of negative feelings and experiences, with all the fear, threat and pain of loss that accompanies such an experience. These so-called negative experiences can have a very positive function, and be seen as signs and symptoms of the need for dying to a present level of being and functioning, so that one may rise to a new and higher level of integrated being-in-the-world. Both Kübler-Ross and Dabrowski present us with the gospel-theme of the Grain of Wheat in terms of humanistic psychological insights, for example, Abraham Maslow. While this can never explain the mystery of death and resurrection, a knowledge and awareness of these insights can help us to enter into it more consciously and fully: that is, in a more truly human fashion as Christ himself did, rather than consciously or unconsciously through fear or ignorance to stunt and impede the growth process.

To state this is to say that growing involves a measure of suffering. Not to grow, or the refusal to grow, also involves suffering, and a joyless suffering at that. Here in some way the individual fails to meet the disintegrative elements in the experience with that truth and authenticity consonant with his present state of being. In the existential situation, one is rarely able to make an unbiased judgment as to how one is meeting it. Part of the pain is the disintegration itself, a pain deepened by the fact that the known and hitherto to some degree efficacious ways of meeting analogous experiences are no longer of any validity or avail. The principalities and powers, hobgoblins and foul fiends with which we try vainly to wrestle and

<sup>14</sup> Dabrowski, Kasimierz: *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration* (London, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Cf Tyrrell, Bernard, J.: *Christotherapy* (New York, 1975), p 115.

grapple are proof against defences and strategies which stood us in good stead until this moment. Or, to continue our death and dying theme, our organism has as yet built up no antibodies with which to meet and encounter this new and seemingly death-bearing disease. To ourselves, alone and afraid in our ward of isolation, there seems only one outcome, death. Doctors and nurses, therapists spiritual and temporal may surround us; but they are the experts, kind and attentive though they may be. Their language cannot speak to us in any meaningful fashion. We have neither the understanding nor the requisite experience to enable us to stand outside the actual experiencing sufficiently to objectify it and achieve the necessary measure of understanding. Sometimes, too, those ministering in various fields are inexpert, inept or, worse still, irresponsible. They impede rather than advance the process of healing. But let us hypothesize and say that gradually recovery comes and the patient returns to life and health. He is the same person yet not the same person, for if he reflects on his experience he looks back on it from a vantage point quite other than the way he experienced it as protagonist. Maybe more important still is the way he can compassionate with others enduring similar experiences. Now he possesses a new-found ability to be with them where others would panic or abandon them, fearing to come close, lest they too might catch the disease; or, more fearful still, be drawn into too close intimacy with the sufferers and have to face in themselves the very fundamentals of existence which an intimate relationship with a friend at such a time would demand.

Kirkegaard states that while to venture causes anxiety, not to venture is to lose oneself, while to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become conscious of oneself. So much psychic energy goes into avoiding facing our fears; yet it is only in accepting them that we can move freely among them, grow through them and release this energy constructively. This, after all, is what courage is; not the lack of fear which could be mere ignorance or foolhardiness, but the ability to live through one's fear in a positive manner rather than allow ourselves to be paralysed by it. So it is that Kübler-Ross's work is aimed at allowing people to die with dignity.

'It belongs to the nobility of the human person to be able to face his fears and especially his fear of death'.<sup>16</sup> Guillet takes up this point of von Balthasar in his consideration of the Lord's foreknow-

<sup>16</sup> von Balthasar, Hans Urs: *La Foi du Christ* (Paris, 1969), p 181.

ledge of his death.<sup>17</sup> Jesus had no special knowledge in a sense of *déjà vu* of what it would be like to die. He experienced all the apprehension and fear of the unknown in face of death that is the lot of everyman. It is the assurance of being able to act responsibly which makes for growth, and the ability to meet the changing situation in a fully human manner. The overprotection with which we in our society tend to surround the dying and the terminally or chronically ill can be equally dehumanizing, implying as it does that those near to death must be cushioned off from the reality of their situation.

If there is one thing certain, it is that we die alone. Somehow, in some mysterious fashion, we recognize that it is at this supremely conscious moment of our earthly life that we are most truly ourselves, most truly in possession of ourselves, as we are on the threshold of relinquishing all that has hitherto been the means of knowing and recognizing ourselves. Philosophers and theologians have expressed this in many ways such as 'the moment of truth' and the *option finale*. To see in the mind's eye ourselves at our own deathbed and pose the question, 'What will you wish you had done when you're dying',<sup>18</sup> is a time-honoured stratagem for clarifying values and untangling mixed motivation in those moments in life when we are faced with serious choices. As Rahner expresses it:

Our death is a culmination of the unrepeatable oneness of our personal human existence as it was for Christ (Heb 9 and 10). A dying man is pitilessly lonely. No one can do anything for him. We can share our life with others, but not our death. But the loneliness of death is especially a being alone before the hidden, living God. It is either the blessed abandonment of Christ, or the unholy expulsion into the outer darkness that is eternally impregnated with hate.<sup>19</sup>

From the human Jesus, too, the living God was hidden at the moment of death. His experience was one of loneliness and abandonment as he cried out with the psalmist in his God-forsakenness. Yet for him, this loneliness was not one of unrelatedness, but of the absence of presence, for the loneliness of abandonment implies a presence-to-be-absent. The heart-rending cry, 'My God, my God,

<sup>17</sup> Guillet, Jacques: *Jésus devant sa vie et sa mort* (Paris, 1971), p 166.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Hewett, W.: 'Teaching Prayer: Cave of Living Streams', in *Supplement to the Way* 22 (Summer 1974), p 92.

<sup>19</sup> Rahner, Karl: *Spiritual Exercises* (New York, 1965), p 91.

why hast thou forsaken me!’, carries implicit within it an appeal to the inherent relationship in this very experience of non-relationship.

The loneliness and isolation of death, with all the fears and pains which this implies, is here accepted as mysteriously creative of new life for others. In that positive acceptance, for every man who follows in the steps of Christ,<sup>20</sup> is the ultimate choice of relationship – a love that is human and divine.

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf 1 Pet 2, 20.