

2001 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, Second Place Winner

LONELINESS

By Robert A. Rees

I am lonely, lonely
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so.

—William Carlos Williams, *Danse Russe*

EVERYONE IS ACQUAINTED WITH LONELINESS. Even in the midst of a crowded room or in the presence of those dearest to us, we sometimes are aware of our existential loneliness, our aloneness. From infancy to our last days there are times when we feel alone in the universe, disconnected from all beings, human and divine. As Thomas Wolfe says in his novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, “Loneliness . . . is and always has been the central and inevitable experience of every man [and woman].”

I was aware of being lonely from the time I was very young. My parents separated and then divorced when I was an infant. My mother, no doubt in despair as to what to do with her life in the face of separation from my father and stark poverty, was not able to provide the kind of nurturing that every child needs. At times, she neglected my physical needs, and she was often distant, partly, I realize now, out of her inability to handle her own loneliness.

My childhood loneliness was rooted in many experiences, most of which I was incapable of understanding and which are not necessary to describe here in detail. A short version of my childhood is that my brother and I (and later my sister from a different father) were often shuffled back and forth between our parents, who each had multiple marriages; once we were even abandoned completely, causing us to be placed in foster care for a time. This happened when my father had been fighting in the war in the South Pacific. When he returned, I went to live with him and never again lived with my mother. Often, during the years I was growing up, I was so lonely for her, or more accurately, for what I imagined she might have been had she and my father not divorced.



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One of the first moments I became acutely conscious of the deep loneliness I felt during my childhood was, when, at the age of six, I got a paper route. As I would walk down the street throwing newspapers onto people's lawns and front porches, I remember looking into their houses. The lights would be on, and a woman would be cooking dinner, or people would be sitting around the table listening to a radio. I was lonely for what I imagined was the warmth and completeness of those families. I wanted to walk into those families' houses and be their little boy—to eat at their table, to sleep in their clean bed, to sit on some mother's lap and have her arms around me. But always I had to go back to my house, where there was not enough food, where the beds were dirty, and where chronic angers were never far from anyone's consciousness.

Years later, I experienced what, upon reflection, might be the single loneliest day of my life. It was the day after I graduated from the University of Wisconsin with my doctorate in literature. By this time, Mom and Dad had each been married four times, and she was soon to marry again. Mom flew into Madison first, and the next day she and I went to the airport to pick up my father. They hadn't seen each other in nearly fifteen years, and I was a little anxious about their meeting.

When Dad saw Mom, he seemed surprised, even though I had told him she would be there. Although they hadn't been married for nearly thirty years, he greeted her in his usual charming way by saying, “Hello, Mrs. Rees,” a name that must have sounded strange to her. I helped Mom into the back seat of the car and then got in the front seat, expecting Dad to get in opposite me. Instead, he sat next to her in the back seat. For the next two days, they got along like old friends.

Dad went home first, and after Mom and I saw him off at the airport and were driving back home, she was very quiet. Turning to me, finally, she said, “Bobby, I have never stopped loving your Dad.” Even as I write this, more than sixty-five years after I was born to them, tears come to my eyes, tears of loneliness for what might have been, for the mother and father I never knew as parents together, for what they missed by being too young and immature and too broken themselves to make their marriage work. Later that night, a great sadness washed over me, a sadness that sometimes still touches me in the dark hours of the night.

YEARS AFTER MY mother died of heart failure at age fifty-one, and at a point when I was trying to understand her and her inability to love and nurture my siblings and me, I found the key that unlocked the mystery she had always been to me. On a trip to Colorado, my wife and I visited my mother's sister, Jessie, who was then taking care of my ninety-six year old grandmother. Jessie, who had also had a sad and tragic life, told me something that suddenly explained so much about my mother: from early girlhood, she had been sexually molested by her father, my grandfather. Jessie said that even the year before she died, when my grandfather went to visit her, he was still coming on to her.

This disclosure stunned me, and yet I knew immediately it was true. It was a shock of recognition like I had never before experienced. It helped explain both my mother's passivity and her unquenchable thirst for male companionship. It explained why as a teenager she had been sent across the state to live with her uncle and aunt. It explained why she had run away to marry my father. It helped explain her vulnerability to men and her alcoholism. In reality, it explained everything about her. Mom could not nurture because her whole identity had been shattered before it had even been completely formed. No doubt she married my father to try to escape a shame she couldn't name and to heal some deep wound in her soul.

Just before we left Jessie's home, I had a sudden desire to visit the place where my mother had been born in Southern Colorado. Aunt Jessie directed me to my mother's cousin, Mavis Peterson, who still lived there. We drove south and then west to the little town of Rye where Mom's family had settled in the latter part of the nineteenth century. We visited old homesteads where my grandfather had lived and the home of my mother's paternal grandparents with whom she lived for a period of her early childhood. We visited the places where her family had been buried. As I saw where my mother had lived and gone to school, I kept thinking about her and the tragic loss of her innocence.

While we visited, Mavis took out some family photo albums. She and Mom were the same age, and one picture shows their eighth grade class. I studied the photograph carefully. There was my mother, a stunningly beautiful girl with dark hair and eyes, dressed in a cotton middy, standing at the back of the class. The photograph shows her slightly separate from the group, an aura of mystery about her. I searched her face, I studied her pose, and I looked into her eyes. What before would have been a hieroglyphic now shone in astonishing clarity—I saw her as if for the first time, and my heart broke for all the lonely days her heart had endured. Following are two verses from a poem I penned about this experience:

ONA

That's her, standing somewhat stiffly
with the others in Rye, Colorado,
the year of the Great Crash.
Her cousin Mavis is there too,
third girl from the left. She looks
more poised than my mother, who

stands in a corner, her passive face
lit like a cameo.

The other boys and girls in the picture
look innocent, expectant, dreaming
of girlfriends, boyfriends, basketball
and dresses for the school prom.
My mother alone casts a shadow
on the pastoral backdrop hung clumsily
by the photographer, who cannot see
what she knows and can never tell
anyone, especially her classmates
standing so full of promise before
the black, one-eyed box.

DURING THE YEARS I spent trying to sort out my childhood experiences, I would often dream about a small boy. He was usually lost and alone, and he was often in danger or searching for something. I would try to rescue him from fires, floods, or other dangers, but I always failed or awoke in terror. Gradually, I came to realize that I was that little boy.

All of us at one time or another have felt alone, like motherless children, exiles from some safe haven or heaven. In an essay entitled "Exile," William H. Gass, says,

Life is itself exile, and its inevitability does not lessen our grief or alter the fact. It is a blow—*un coup de destin*—from which only death will recover us, and when we are told, as we lie dying, that we are going home, we may even be ready to welcome the familiar darkness, the slumbering emptiness of the grand old days [in the womb] when days were nothing but nights. . . . Perhaps that [the promise of a Day of Redemption] is the last lie we shall be told, however, for the advancing darkness is a darkness we shall never even dream in.¹

Although I admire Gass's writing, I don't share his nihilistic view. Perhaps some of us will choose exile in some ultimate sense, but it will be our choice. God invites us to end our exile, not in the nothingness of death, not in some great black hole of annihilation, but in the eternal light of his love. Ultimately, we are promised that we can go home again, home with our true, healed and whole selves, home to him and to her who sent us into mortal exile in order that we might learn how ultimately to end all our exiles in them. Perhaps Robert Frost's definition of home—"Home is where when you have to go there, they have to take you in"—is as clear a definition of heaven as we have.

Our loneliness can be both general and specific. Most often, we long for *someone*. When we are estranged from someone we love, our separation increases our loneliness. The story of the Prodigal Son does not tell us that the son was lonely for the father, although I believe it is fair to assume he was. And judging from the father's behavior when the son returned, there is no question that he had missed his son enormously: "While he was a long way off his father saw him and was moved with compassion and ran to him and threw his arms around him

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and kissed him.” The father rejoices, not only that the son has come home, but, because, as he tells the older brother, “Your brother was dead, and he came back to life; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:20, 32, trans. Steven Mitchell).

In his commentary on this parable, Stephen Mitchell quotes a parallel story from the Midrash:

The son of a king was a hundred days’ journey away from his father. His friends said to him, “Return to your father.” He said, “I can’t; I’m too far away.” His father sent to him and said, “Go as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you.” Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Israel, “Return to me, and I will return to you” (Mal. 3:7).²

In addition to its thematic connection to the Prodigal Son, this parable suggests that God, too, may experience loneliness. The Hebrew Bible is full of God’s longing, his pleading entreaties to the Israelites to return to him. Christ, as well, seems to have been lonely for human companionship—“The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air [have] nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay [his] head” (Matt. 8:20)—and we might even read his anguished cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” as an expression of his loneliness for divine companionship during his last hours (Matt. 27:46).

At times, our loneliness is not tied to our separation from any particular person. We long for something we cannot name; we ache from what seems like a deep tear, a rent in our innermost self, a wounding we can’t remember; we yearn for another country which we vaguely recognize as home. As Paul says, “For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13:14). This angst is particularly characteristic of those of us who live in the postmodern world where, to cite Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach,” there is “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” Existential loneliness may be the essential state of our postmodern world.

I believe this deep, generalized loneliness comes not from our separation from and consequent loneliness for others but from our separation from God. Psychologists speak about the trauma we experience in coming out of the soft, warm world of our mothers’ wombs and of our longing to return there. Our newest grandson, born two months prematurely, keeps stretching out his miniscule hands as if searching for the walls of the womb that no longer enclose him. He is swaddled and kept in a heated, shaded crib to mimic the close warm night of his first earthly home. All of us may indeed long for that safe, warm place, but I believe it is the separation from our heavenly

parents, from the embrace of their unconditional love that causes our deepest longing.

While our remembrances of that pre-mortal experience are veiled, I believe that in the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls, we have fragments of memory from that time when we were at one with our Heavenly Father and, happiest of revelations, our Heavenly Mother. I believe that heavenly state is imprinted indelibly on our souls, and the actual impression of their embrace on the chambers of our hearts and in the channels of our minds. I believe we carry a remembrance of their words spoken to us, to us alone, our own personal assurances of their love; a remembrance of how this intimacy and knowledge enveloped us in a sort of spiritual amniotic fluid like liquid light.

Our knowledge that we must leave such a place and face the risks of setting forth into mortality, that distant, dangerous country, must have caused us deep anxiety. Such anxiety is probably akin to that felt by the earliest explorers who left their loves to go down to the seas in small uncertain ships. They knew they had to go, but they and the loved ones they left on the shore also knew that they might never see one another again. As Keats expressed it in “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be”:

When I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the fairy power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

But standing as we do on the brink of eternity, we believe that love at least does not sink to nothingness. From what modern prophets have told us, we willingly undertook the risks of mortality, even the risk of acute loneliness, for the promise of returning to that heaven of the heart where God dwells. While at times I still feel like a motherless child, still experience loneliness for what my mother might have been, I have a certain witness that she is now whole and that someday in that wholeness, she will embrace me as she was unable to in this life. In my loneliest hours, I dream of that embrace—and of the other embraces, human and divine, that await us there. ☞

NOTES

1. William H. Gass, *Finding a Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 215.

2. Steven Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (New York: Harper’s Perennial, 1991), 227.



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