Levels of Loneliness

Dear Gang,

Over the last years in my work with clients, and in my own life, I have been encountering, and dealing with, the experience of loneliness, and I thought that, in this fourth Occasional Note, I might reflect a bit on this experience and share how I have come to understand, and work with, it. There is much said these days about the loneliness, alienation, and isolation in Western culture, and the violence that can spring from it, either inwardly, or outwardly, and also about the ways in which people try to avoid being alone through staying busy with work, or social life. Addictive behavior is sometimes seen as a way to buffer loneliness, and it seems, generally, that the predominant forms of our present culture militate against the experience of sustained connection and community with other people and tend to generate this experience of isolation and anonymity. This state of suffering is sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden behind a veneer of psycho-social personae, but I think it is safe to say that many people today struggle with, and suffer from, what they would call "being lonely", and wish that this condition would change while not being sure quite how to make it change.

Three levels of loneliness

My sense, from working with loneliness over the years, is that often in people's naming of this experience there is a confusion between different kinds of loneliness, and so I have found it useful to differentiate between three levels of loneliness – sychological, existential, and spiritual. I have further found that it helps to define the characteristics and causes of each, and then to treat them accordingly, both within oneself and in one's clients, as they come up in the process of psycho-spiritual development. The three levels may initially feel the same--thus, the confusion – but they lead in different directions and are treated in quite different ways. Of course, it is not always so simple as this, for the three levels are often mixed in the actual experience of loneliness, but, even when this is the case, this differentiation helps to sort out which aspect of one's experience is which, and then treat each according to its own nature and need.

I have come to describe the three levels as follows:

Psychological loneliness – this is the experience of a subpersonality, most often a child, who has been neglected in any of a number of ways. The loneliness is a symptom of trauma sustained in the past which results in the experience of fear and disconnection, both from one's own being and from those around us. The fear can take several forms, but the essence of it is that "I am not able to connect, and be connected, to others and so receive the love I need and give the love I need to give". This loneliness can also be rooted transgenerationally, and be passed on

through the unconscious from a family system in which there is a great deal of unacknowledged isolation and disconnection. In this case there is no obvious trauma, but rather a system-wide experience of isolation which is absorbed by the child. In both cases the child often has turned to animals and Nature for comfort and companionship, and in some cases gives up on the human world. In others the person develops a subpersonality that is a reaction formation to the loneliness – for example, an extroverted "life-of-the-party" – , or buffers the loneliness with various addictive habits. But the deep need to connect to other humans safely and intimately is always still there, and needs to be met through psychological healing..

Existential loneliness – this is the experience of the personality as a whole in its difference and separateness from others and the world. The Existentialists would call this the "authenticity" of personhood; Ken Wilber would call it the "existential band", or "centaur level", of development. It is the experience of the differentiated and integrated personality apart from, and without, a spiritual context. Assagioli mentions this existential loneliness as a transitional state to a connection with the Higher Self, and acknowledges it as an important, though transitional, step on the path of Self-realization.

In the last twenty years the importance of this experience of existential loneliness has become more obvious, for, in the absence of this experience of distinct and unique personal selfhood and will, an honest confrontation with death and one's personal responsibility for one's choices, and the ability to bear the angst and dread of this state of being, we have seen again and again the phenomenon of premature transcendence into the superconscious and identification with these transpersonal energies as "spiritual". This generates massive confusion, both in individuals and groups, for what is taken as spiritual is, in fact, simply a reaction formation to, and defense against, the existential loneliness and despair that arises from realizing that we are, at the existential level of our experience, separate and alien beings. Spiritual cults are the social outcome of this dynamic, but it also plays a role, exemplified in much New Age thinking, in keeping individual spirituality immature and overdependent on a Greater Being and polarized toward so-called "positive" spiritual experience. This identification with the superconscious can also split the psyche and prevent the soul from reaching the person directly and the person from connecting directly with his/her soul. Existential loneliness is a necessary step in psycho-spiritual development and, as it is accepted and its intensity borne, it accords dignity and integrity to the personality and its unique experience.

Spiritual loneliness – this is an experience of the soul in relation to the world, and it both contains elements of the other levels and goes beyond them. This loneliness can arise from the soul wound and the experience of not being fully received and welcomed on earth as the being you are. It can also arise from a deep knowing of who you are and what you are here on earth to be and do, which is yours alone and no one else's. It is the loneliness of accepting your calling and destiny as distinct from all others and your responsibility to carry it out to the best

of your ability. The difference from the existential level is that at this level you experience this calling and responsibility also as part of the universal creation. Thus, in embracing it as yours alone, you join with all those who have had such an experience and struggled to express as souls on earth. Often this connection to these souls is stronger and more intimate than the one to those immediately surrounding you in your life, but, ultimately, as you accept this soul loneliness, you begin to experience a connection with all souls, near and far, living and dead.

This spiritual loneliness is paradoxical in the sense that you discover you are both completely alone in your life, your birth and death, your calling and expression, and you are not alone at all, but in the company of all sentient beings. This loneliness, therefore, is the doorway to a deep connection, both to one's own soul and to the world, and, as you live it, a yearning and intention arises for deeper connection and fuller expression of who you are, and the desire to give and receive even more of oneself, to love more deeply, to be more truthful, to respond more fully to the joys and sorrows that surround us. So, strangely enough, embracing this loneliness becomes a prerequisite for the experience of full human aliveness, participation, and expression in the world. Thomas Merton once said that "the person who has not fully embraced his/her utter aloneness in God has not begun to live". Clearly here he is pointing to this level of loneliness and affirming this condition as a foundation from which to live a mature spiritual life.

Differentiated Treatment and Terminology
You can see from the above that each level of loneliness is distinct, though they have enough in common, at least initially, that they could be confused in a person's mind and experience. Sorting out these differences more exactly is a great help, so that a person is clearer about what he/she is dealing with. This sorting also gives a person the sense for where they are developmentally. And the treatment of each is different.

With the psychological level I have found it useful to address directly the needs for love and companionship that the child subpersonality feels, and to engage the "I" in meeting these needs. This can include all sorts of personality work, – for example, keeping the critic from attacking the child for this vulnerability, or spending time with the child every day in imagination and listening to what his/her experience is – but the basic mode is, over time, to meet the child's specific needs that were unmet in early life and thus gradually to heal and integrate his/her energies and qualities into the personality system.

With the existential level I have found it useful not to do anything other than affirm the truth and intensity of this state of being and its importance on the path of development and then simply to bear it, in yourself, or with the client. In essence, this means simply to be with the person in this experience without trying to change it in any way. There is nothing to be done about this level of loneliness other than to accept and bear it, and, as we do this, we become fully grounded in our personality and begin to find the doorway to the spiritual dimension. You become a witness to its reality and its value, but you do not try to change it in any way. It exists because we exist.

With the spiritual level I have found it useful to do two things. One is to explore the issue of faith and the unknown and to help a person expand their capacity to live in relation to the unknown through faith in God, or the Universe, or Life, however they conceive it. This does not change the experience of loneliness, but it evokes the context and company I spoke of above and, again, paradoxically, we become joined through our spiritual loneliness and the Mystery to fellow souls. Usually you can find moments in a person's experience where they have touched this paradox of aloneness and connection, and through this remembering and reliving you can strengthen their awareness of this within themselves.

The other thing is to explore with them how they can express more fully and deeply who they are spiritually in the world, and help them plan the actions they can take. This again does not change the experience of loneliness, but makes it creative, activates the spiritual will, and leads to fuller connection/expression and the joy that comes with that. Nothing can eradicate this soul aloneness. And it is the source of creativity, love, and joy, that leads to an experience of deep connection with all creation and the Universe.

In thinking about all this, something I have played with is terminology to make this distinction between the levels of loneliness clearer. The first level I term "loneliness", the second, "aloneness", and the third "souloneliness", or "alloneness", playing on the double entendre of "all","lone" and "one". This can help make the distinction in people's minds, but most important, obviously, is the distinction in experience and treatment as I have outlined above.

The Truth of Loneliness

In sum, the point, with all three levels, is to accept the experience of loneliness as real and not to avoid it, no matter at what level it exists. This choice, in fact, brings immediate connection to yourself, for this is an affirmation of the truth of your experience, and from there the differences can be sorted out. All three levels are aspects of our human experience, and as we embrace them for what they are, learn to bear them, and become wiser in how we work with them, they all, each in their own way, bring a deeper connection and meaning to Life, to other human beings, and to the earth and world.

I am interested to hear your experience with loneliness and how these ideas resonate with that experience. I would also encourage you to send your response, if you would like to, not just to me but to the whole network. You have the email addresses of everyone, and this would be a way of increasing our dialogue and transcultural communication.

I send you every good wish as Spring approaches and close with a poem of Rilke who knew loneliness well and made good use of it in his creative work.

THE GREAT NIGHT

Often I stared at you, stood at the window begun yesterday,
stood and stared at you in wonder. As yet the new
city was as if denied me, and the unpersuaded landscape
grew dark as if I didn't exist. The nearest things
took no care to make themselves known to me. The street
thrust up to the lamppost: I saw it was alien.
Across the way – a room, inviting, clear in the lamplight–,
already I was taking part; they sensed it, pulled the shutters closed.
I stood. And then a child cried. I felt the mothers
all around in the houses, the power they had,
and at the same time all crying's inconsolable ground.
Or a voice sang and reached a little beyond
expectation, or down below an old man coughed
full of reproach, as though his body were in the right
against the gentler world. Then an hour struck–,
but I counted too late, it tumbled past me.–
The way a boy, a new one, when at last he's chosen,
drops the first ball and gets lost in those games
the others pursue together with such ease
and stands there and gazes off,– to where–?: I stood
and suddenly felt **you** befriending me, **you** playing, grownup
night, and I stared at you in wonder. Where the towers
raged, where the lost fate of a city
stood around me and not-to-be-fathomed mountains
camped against me, and Strangeness, hungering,
circled in on the random flares
of my feeling–: it was then that you, in your greatness,
no trace of shame, acknowledged me. Your breath
passed over me. Your smile, spanning vast
solemnities, entered into me.

Paris, January 1914