LONELINESS and LONGING
Psychoanalytic Reflections

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Sometimes I think I was born lonely. I first remember loneliness when I was very young, as an emptiness that could be filled up from outside me, a scared shivery awareness of something missing. As psychologist Eric Ostrov and Daniel Offer have written, “Loneliness is a feeling of deprivation that painfully, but hopefully, turns outward for fulfillment” (Ostrov & Offer, 1980, p.184).

The earliest I remember, my mother was like a pilot light whose warmth felt necessary for anything to happen at all. I knew I was alive most when I was physically connected to her, her arms around me or my head in her lap, but my dominant memories are of the absence of this sensation, being cut off from it and helpless. When I was growing up, she was always in the kitchen slogging away at the meat, potatoes, and vegetables that had to be served every evening and cleaned up afterward, when she wasn’t away working at her succession of menial jobs. Most often, I recall her exhausted from both. When she was at work, I came home from school to a dog that didn’t like me because I’d pulled his tail when I was a toddler and a big brother who babysat for me by ignoring me, unless he could entertain my second brother by making me cry for my mother. Then I felt the loneliness of the human condition in the way that an 8-year-old feels it.

Yet paradoxically, I also enjoyed being alone more than almost anything else. The need for affection was a sharp hunger, but fraught with the anxiety of loss; playing alone was pure peace. Loneliness cuts; solitude soothes and cradles. You might say I protected myself from the miseries of childhood by what Wordsworth called “the inward eye/which is the bliss of solitude.” That inward eye was the imagination, and I remember sinking into my world of play with relief and deep, unspeakable pleasure, the kind that needs no justification and for which one pays no price. This was literally a world, constructed by me, in which I experienced a wonderfully stimulating community of feeling and connection. My favorite (and pretty much only) toys were a blackboard on which I drew maps of imaginary countries, naming the rivers, mountains, and cities as my made-up colonists explored the new land and settled there, and some marbles, tiny plastic
soldiers, and chess pieces, all of which I pretended were communities of assorted people also exploring and settling into new homes in some dangerous and unknown landscape. Is there a theme there? It was a dream of a life both risky and yet controlled by me, daringly free yet secure, an adventure requiring individual courage, strength, and stamina, undertaken with a group of others who were there for mutual comfort and aid. I have never found anything quite like it in adult life, and I wish I could.

I was also a great reader as soon as I could manage it on my own, not surprising in someone who became an English professor. The imaginary landscapes of the books I read were extensions of and sources for my own play: they never failed me, the happy groups of friends having adventures together, the families with parents who never argued as mine did and who guided their children with wisdom and warmth, the neighborhoods where everyone knew and helped each other, the schools where groups of children laughed, played, and learned under the eyes of strict but caring teachers. In children’s fiction, no one is ever lonely for long. Loneliness isn’t a condition of life; it’s a temporary problem to be solved, the path to a secret garden one learns to share, or the trial of a Little Princess who gets her reward of parental love in the end.

It was about this time that I began to read poetry because my mother, though like my father not educated past the eighth grade, loved and recited it often. The first poem I memorized was Wordsworth’s “Daffodils,” my mother’s favorite, and therefore a connection to her. It begins, “I wandered lonely as a cloud/That floats on high o’er vales and hills/When all at once I saw a crowd,/A host, of golden daffodils.” I had no idea what vales or hosts were, but then I listened to the music of it rather than tried to make sense of it. It seemed a simple nature poem with a happy ending: after a worrisome moment in which the poet lies on a couch in “vacant and pensive mood,” he remembers the daffodils, and then his heart dances and fills with pleasure.

My idea of literature in general, and especially poetry, was that it was unrelated to actual experience, certainly any like mine. The whole point of it was that you escaped into another world where beauty lifted you into a different realm with rules of its own.

A pivotal point came when I read Little Women at barely age ten, my first real introduction to romantic love, such as it was in the novel. I blame Louisa May Alcott for much of my life since then.

The idea of romantic love in Little Women is recognition; one’s virtues and attractions are recognized and valued by a worthy observer, and the reward is what the Sixties’ song “Going to the Chapel” calls “And I’ll never be lonely anymo-o-re” (“Chapel of Love” by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Phil Spector, 1964). You, the lonely half-formed individual, metamorphose into part of a well-formed couple, who fit perfectly, like two Legos or jigsaw puzzle pieces interlocking. Where Jo is rebellious, Prof.
Baer is serious and wise; where Jo’s sister Amy is flighty and a little greedy, her future husband Laurie represents benevolent indulgence; where the oldest sister, Meg, is sweetly and ditzily domestic, i.e., feminine, her husband John is upright, sturdy, and protective, the very definition of Victorian masculinity. In finding this complementary half of your lost self, I saw you also become securely bound to the social world.

In junior high a new front against loneliness opened up: friendship. I had almost no friends before this, oddly enough, something I can’t quite explain. Actually, I don’t remember missing being with other children; in fact, I remember resisting parental urging to go outside and play. The neighborhood kids seemed brutish and unnecessary. I preferred Jo March, Emily of New Moon Farm, and Black Beauty. These were superior beings. I felt that if they were to magically materialize, I would have instant friends, plus a horse I would be really nice to.

In seventh grade I became one of a trio of girlfriends; my mother was relieved, and I saw with wonder that while Sue Dworkin and Rona Halperin were no Jo or Emily, there were pleasures in friendship with real human beings that had advantages over the imaginary. For one thing, they could laugh with me, as the literary friends could not. This was followed by another bare period when Sue moved away and I went to a high school where I knew no one. What I remember most from this period is the feeling that, as Heidi Klum says as host of Bravo TV’s Project Runway, “You’re in or you’re out.” I was lonely and depressed, slinking like a ghost through the halls of the huge drab building. By this time I was terribly aware that other girls were dating, and though I had loved one boy passionately since age eleven, he had never so much as lifted an eyebrow at me. My virtues were distinctly not being recognized and appreciated, as Elizabeth Bennet’s were in Pride and Prejudice. It left me feeling that my own high estimation of myself as possibly superior, or at least normal, was probably a complete mistake.

Then one of those turnarounds happens that takes you to a different place from where you thought you were going. One day a nondescript girl whom I knew vaguely and inattentively as Alice Gilbert came up to me and asked me to join the high school literary magazine that she helped edit. Since I wrote poems on occasion, I don’t know why that thought had never occurred to me. My loneliness had formed a protective coating, sealing me in so I had avoided considering what might be possible. When I submitted and went with her to a meeting of this group, I saw that the girls and one or two boys were all friends already, joking and easy with one another, and I hesitated. I felt awkward and different. But Alice wanted me to be there, and everyone loved brilliant, shy, laughing Alice, for the same reasons that I would grow to love, admire, and bitterly envy her. Soon I found myself for the first and only time in my life in a tightly-knit circle of companions. Though I never quite felt a full-fledged member of this group, never as
valued as Alice, the exhilaration of having those multiple connections, the joyful, stimulating play of different personalities, ideas, and activities, lasted for a long time . . . past Alice’s death at age seventeen.

It was around this time that I first read the novels of the Brontë sisters. Literature both models life for us and is interpreted through the lens of selfhood. Looking back I see how my reading of *Jane Eyre* in particular exemplifies how literature can inform one’s perception and experience of loneliness. The novel opens with Jane as a 10-year-old who doesn’t fit in the family she lives with. Jane’s account of her emotional isolation is the story of an unhappy child who is gifted but unappreciated, given harsh limits, held back from what she needs, and abused in some ways. When Jane is grown, she feels what Charlotte Brontë called in her real-life adolescent journal a “craving vacancy.” Hearing the wind, the young Brontë wrote: “Glorious! That blast . . . has awakened a feeling I cannot satisfy . . . now I should be agonized if I had not the dream to repose on . . . its scenes to fill a little of the craving vacancy” (Gerin, 1967, p.103). In Brontë’s journal, the “dream” refers to her early fictional writing, but in the novel, Jane Eyre satisfied the “craving vacancy” with romance, the dream of love with Rochester. As an adolescent I began to read love stories and look to the same dream. The problem of loneliness seemed a question, as it had been in the novel, of finding the right person, the one who merged with you into joyful wholeness.

Having a group of friends gave me confidence to try to attract men, and my amorphous yearnings focused with a vengeance. From there it was shockingly quick and only too easy to go down the path of one or two unsatisfying romances, and then early marriage. My mother once again seemed relieved. My new husband had the ambition to be a professor—maybe I was thinking of Professor Baer. I clung to him as I had clung to my mother in childhood, yearning and expecting to inhabit him and for him to live in me, just as I had longed for this with her. Though dedicated to the idea of having a wife and family, he was just as elusive as my mother, probably not coincidentally. Nevertheless I did not think of loneliness as an issue any longer; it was taken care of. My husband liked to spend time with me and keep in touch frequently by phone when he wasn’t there. That attention made me happier than I had been, or at least more secure. It was double-edged, though: it kept me from noticing that when he was physically there, he wasn’t always really there, and when he was calling me seven times a day, I did not necessarily know what he was thinking and feeling.

I am now at the stage of life people refer to as “older” rather than “old,” as in “the older woman,” which to me implies that I am somehow older than I should be, older than the normal woman, who is in her 20s or 30s. I arrived here by an unforeseen and circuitous path, through love and dating, then marriage, children, and divorce, more dating and love, and then—once more but more than ever—being alone. That is, I am single; of course I am
not alone in one sense, as I purposely live in a crowded city, near two of my
grown children, and very importantly, near my three grandchildren, who
provide a lot of connection and stimulation, emotional and physical. I have
good friends as well, though not quite the circle I had in my last year or so
of high school and college.

Though I am surrounded by more people than I ever was in my child-
hood, I spend a great deal of time by myself, certainly compared to when I
had a husband or children at home. I almost always come home to an
empty apartment, go to bed by myself, wake up, eat breakfast and dinner
alone. I have cats, two of them, which surely marks me off as the stereo-
typical lonely, failed creature who was not able to bag a lasting relationship
and who will wither from older woman to Old Woman. People say, “You’re
living alone with cats.” It doesn’t help when I explain that I got them twelve
years ago as kittens for my young son who’d always wanted a pet, not as a
substitute for love and maternity, or a bulwark against isolation in my old
age. “Anything but an older woman with cats,” insisted a man on an online
dating site.

That brings me to how I feel about loneliness and solitude now. I used to
think of being alone as a kind of enemy that had to be guarded against and
fought with any weapon I could find. Being alone meant being abandoned;
my worst nightmare, literally, was a dream I had, in which I visited the
house I grew up in and found my aged mother dead on the floor, having
died of starvation and neglect, forgotten and unable to reach me or anyone.
I didn’t need my shrink to tell me the dream was partly about my fears
for myself.

I now think of loneliness as a kind of challenge, and of being alone as a
great privilege and pleasure. When I come home, it is to peace, to a place
that is in perfect harmony with my wishes and moods, where I control the
little world I’ve made just as I did in childhood play, but without the magic.
It’s only too easy for me to adapt myself to what someone else wants me to
do and be; I’ve done it all my life, as a price paid for affection and
companionship. I may need the physical space apart from others to be able
to make the choices, especially the small daily choices of taste and pleasure,
that define who I am. As someone dependent by nature, who yearns to lean
on someone, it also brings me special pleasure to take care of myself, to
show the world I can do this. Elizabeth Cady Stanton once said, “No
matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported,
they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency,
they must know something of the laws of navigation . . . The solitude which
each and every one of us has always carried with him . . . [is] . . . the
solitude of self. Our inner being . . . no eye nor touch of man or angel has
ever pierced . . . Such is individual life” (quoted in Gornick, 2005, pp.7–8).

I feel like a being neither as superior as I hoped nor as normal as I
appear, but someone I am quite comfortable with, at least most of the time.
After years of responding to the needs of others, it gratifies me to serve myself, not to ask for “More, please,” like Oliver Twist, from someone else. I am brave, as when I led an imaginary colony into the uncharted lands I drew on my childhood blackboard. To be brave yet at ease, I need what Virginia Woolf called “a room of one’s own,” which is exactly what I have, since I live in a studio apartment.

Nevertheless, I am lonely a lot, and I suspect that won’t ever go away entirely. It’s true that proximity is not intimacy (and conversely, there is no necessary relationship between being physically alone and loneliness . . . but it can feel that way.

What I’m left with is that “inward eye” of Wordsworth’s with which I started. When I studied the Romantic poets in graduate school, I saw finally what “Daffodils” is about. The loneliness with which the poem begins, Wordsworth’s metaphor of self as the wandering lonely cloud that “floats on high o’er vales and hills,” is a kind of alienation from humanity and the world, an inability to enter into it fully. The experience of the sublime beauty of the daffodils he comes upon allows the poet to recall his connection to a kind of community, the community of nature. This apprehension is what I could not appreciate when I memorized the poem at age ten; the aesthetic imagination is not an escape from the world, but a certain kind of engagement with it.

As the poet May Sarton (1973) says in her Journal of a Solitude, “I have time to think. That is the great, the greatest, luxury. I have time to be. Therefore my responsibility is huge. To use time well and to be all that I can in whatever years are left to me. This does not dismay. The dismay comes when I lose the sense of my life as connected . . . to many, many other lives whom I do not even know and cannot ever know” (p.40).

I am now more in the world and more in tune with the rest of humanity than I ever was when I was a child. My own humanity implies to me an interest in and involvement with the rest of humanity, including those I don’t know and will never meet. I am not lonely when I am with people I love; I am not lonely when I am doing what gives me pleasure; I am not lonely when I am in the zone of work, teaching and writing. These are my equivalents to the world of imagination that Wordsworth’s poem extols, where literature, art, and beauty occupy what he calls the “vacant and pensive mood.”

The struggle with the meanings of being alone goes on, the love and hate relationship I have with it continues, and we will see how it feels to move on to the next stage, where I really am an old woman, with or without cats.

References
