

# United Jewish Layman's Committee, inc.

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## PRESCRIPTION FOR LONELINESS

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Twentieth century man is a lonely creature. This startling realization seems, on the surface, to be contradicted by a multitude of facts. Let us look at some of these facts.

For one thing, statistics seem to refute the notion of loneliness. Numerically, the human family is larger than ever before in history. There are in the world today some two and one-half billion people. How can man be lonely among so many of his kind? How? Because in the language of Bacon "a crowd is not company and faces are but a gallery of pictures."

For another, the vast increase in urban life would seem to eliminate a sense of loneliness. Does it? Do our huge cities with their teeming millions make neighbours of us? Are the jostling multitudes that are belched forth from the industrial neighbourhoods companions on their way home? Does a packed subway train consist of fellow travelers or merely of fare payers? Oh, how desperately alone man can feel even in a populous city!

Someone must be thinking now of how strange to regard our generation as lonely. Has not the world of men been contracted. Have we not gotten closer to each other? Is not one continent as near the other as once upon a time one avenue was to the next? Do we not sit side by side in the family of nations? Lonely in such a world? How preposterous!

Think, my friends, on the other hand of the iron curtains that separate us; of the suspicion and fear that are all about us: of the ominous detonations of atomic weapons that deafen our ears and scare our hearts. Oh, "how lonely we are in the world;" said Thackeray, "you and I are but a pair of infinite isolations with some fellow islands a little more or less near to us."

Has Scripture nothing to say on this matter. It most certainly has. Almost at the very beginning of the Bible — in the second chapter of Genesis—when God contemplates his supreme handiwork, Man, Scripture records the divine judgment: "It is not good that man should be alone." Long before the psychiatrist foresaw the mental hazards of loneliness and ere the sociologist conceived of the advantages of social nearness, the word of God enunciated the truth, confirmed by science and endorsed by human experience, that it is not good for man to be alone.

Moreover, this judgment was expressed not concerning primordial man lying in a sequestered forest or in a forsaken marsh. It was said of an Adam who was at that moment disporting himself in the luxurious Garden of Eden. However scholars may interpret that Garden of Eden as real or allegorical does not matter. There was Adam surrounded by trees that were good to eat and beautiful to behold, by cushioned meadows and bubbling brooks, by trees of knowledge and trees of life. And here is God saying of this Adam in the midst of all that splendour, "It is not good that man should be alone."

"In solitude

What happiness, who can enjoy alone,  
Or all enjoying, what contentment find?"



These lines are from Milton's Paradise Lost. The sentiment they express must of need be associated with a paradise lost. Aye, more, a lonely paradise can be a depressing hell. "It is not good that man should be alone."

What then are the means of overcoming a sense of loneliness. Let us look again to Scriptures. "And I shall make for him a helpmate suited unto him." The Biblical solution to the problem of loneliness was the introduction of love into the world. When love enters solitude departs.

See what love meant to the biblical first man. The Adam who but a while ago went about the Garden of Eden aimlessly, lonesomely, forlornly, fearing the shadows, terrified by the setting sun, horrified lest the approach of night signalize the destruction of his world suddenly was transformed into the confident courageous adventurous being that he was meant to be. He was no more alone. There was love at his side.

The serpentine wiles of the Tempter when transmitted by his loved one were but a stimulation to his natural curiosity. The tree of knowledge began to beckon. The quest for wisdom became a desirable enterprise. The tree of life became a challenge and the mysteries of existence held no more terrors. For he was not alone. There was a loved one at his side.

To be sure, there was God's punishment to bear. Hard labor with an unyielding soil was the price of his transgression. By the sweat of his brow would he have to wrest food from the stubborn earth. But it did not matter. The labour was not in his own behalf. The sweat of the brow would be wiped by a caressing hand. The prospect of leaving Eden was of little consequence. For Paradise without love is a wilderness, and a wilderness with love can be Paradise. With the companionship of a loved one, expulsion from Eden became an opportunity for travel -- two lovers on a sight-seeing tour of their destiny.

The old Adam and Even story that we read as children can have new meaning and fresh insight as mature men and women. "It is not good that man should be alone" and love can dispel loneliness. The lonely heart of a wife that can be cured by the tender attention of love; the sullen and forlorn husband emotionally wounded because of unrequited love, the sad and introverted child whose parched soul can be revived by a few dew-drops of love; the dyspeptic hate-monger who needs but to practice, "Love thy neighbour as thyself;" yes, all of them, and all of us together must realize with the poet that:

"Through the wide world he only is alone  
Who lives not for another. Come what will  
The generous man has his companions still."

Our prescription for loneliness has a second ingredient. Let us name it a sense of continuity. Man is not a truncated individual unconnected with an almost endless past that preceded him. He is the sum total of generations. In his veins courses the blood of countless ancestors. He is not alone the product of biology but of history too. His soul is the repository of inherited traits. His conduct is the result of accumulated traditions. His personality is, in a sense, a suspension bridge, one terminus of which is in ages gone by and the other extends into the infinite future. Over him march the legions of artists, and poets, singers, and philosophers and prophets to set the pattern and give the direction for expanding cultures and for civilizations yet unborn. How can he be lonely when such invisible company is his to enjoy.

May I invite your attention to the Jewish tradition for an illustration of this truth. Recall the story of Jacob, fleeing from Laban, a not over-kind-kindeman, and preparing to meet Esau, a brother who bore him an ancient grudge. At one point of



this episode the Bible tells us, "And Jacob was left alone." Never was a man lonelier than he in the darkness of that night. Danger was behind him; uncertainty ahead of him, and an unknown adversary about to assail him; a solitary, forlorn, desperate figure upon the bleak plains of Mesopotamia.

The sages of the Talmud apparently sensed the plight of this lonely pilgrim. To the verse, "And Jacob was left alone," they add, "alone in a cave with his ancestors." What a commentary on the nature of loneliness. No, they tried to say, Jacob was not alone. He may not have had his dear ones close to him. He may not have had the propinquity of others along side of him. But he had his ancestors as company. There was his father, Isaac and his grandfather, Abraham. No man is alone when he has ancestors to spur him on; a past of which he is a continuing strand; a chain of tradition in which he is the contemporary link.

Let us put it more simply. If you are only you -- self-centered, self-contained smug, insulated, hermetically sealed up from all that transpired -- then, indeed, you are alone. The great Hillel put it well: "When I am by myself, what, indeed, am I?" The outermost twig, thin and frail is attached to the branch and the branch to the stem, and the stem to the roots. Is the twig alone when he has such support, such anchorage, such rootage?

There is a third ingredient in our prescription for loneliness, and that is a sense of the presence of God. That seems so vague. Yet it is so real! It was real to Moses who in the stillness of the desert heard the Lord. It was real to David who in the silence of the night looked up upon the starry skies and proclaimed that the heavens declared the glory of God. It was real to the Psalmist who, though walking in the valley of the shadow of death, feared no evil for God was with him. It was real to Thoreau who said, "Why should I feel lonely. Is not our planet in the Milky Way?" And it was real to the ancient Greek philosopher who assured us that when we have closed our door and darkened our room, we must remember never to say that we are alone. For God is within. It was real to the poet who confidently declared that "solitude is the audience chamber of God." It was real to Elijah who in his solitariness heard the still small voice of the Lord. It was real to Enoch of biblical days who walked with God. It is real to any sensitive person who has the slogan of the pietist ever in his heart: "I have set the Lord before me always."

Lonely is he who, impressed by the mechanistic philosophy of our day, conceives of man as an accident; of the world as a fortuitous occurrence; of life as a purposeless whirling within a cavernous space. Lonely is he who when seeking direction and guidance stops short at the dead end of an existentialist God. Lonely is he who like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner finds himself:

"Alone, alone, all all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea.  
So lonely 'twas that God himself  
Scarce seemed there to be."

But he who senses the presence of God is never at a loss for companionship. In the hushed chamber of illness he hearts, "For I the Lord am thy healer." In the loneliness of orphanhood he knows that "When my father and my mother leave me, the Lord gathers me in." In sorrow he has someone to lay him down in green pastures; in distress, an ever present hand leadeth him besides still waters. How can man be alone when he is conscious of the ever presence of God?

No, "it is not good that man should be alone." Realizing that man seeks the cure for that loneliness. The prescription is at his disposal -- a portion of love, a sense of continuity with ages past, a substantial measure of God consciousness. The dose -- a heaping life-full for all his days.