

**15th May 2022 – ‘Finding connection in lonely times’**

**Led by Rev Kate Whyman**

**GATHERING MUSIC** ‘Ultra moderne solitude’, Alain Souchon

<https://youtu.be/NcGxdQzNL7c>

And words from ‘Ultra Modern Solitude’ by Alain Souchon, chosen by Edgar

It happens on Haussman Boulevard at 5 o'clock

She feels a tear come from her heart

and wipes it away with the back of her hand.

Sometimes we don't know what's going on,

why rivers suddenly flow down our cheeks

in the middle of a crowded place.

It's a very modern solitude.

## **WELCOME**

Welcome to you all, here in person and here online. Today is the final day of Mental Health Awareness Week, which has this year had the theme of Loneliness. Our so service is called ‘Finding connection in lonely times’. I often begin by saying you are all welcome however you are feeling, and that is especially true today.

Let's begin by lighting our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith. And if you're at home, you might like to light a candle with me.

This light is for each of us who has ever felt lonely or isolated, apart or disconnected. It's for you if you have ever felt you don't fit in, or belong.

**1st HYMN** 173 (P) – Though gathered here to celebrate

Though gathered here to celebrate,

my spirit's burning low;

instead of serving, now I wait,

the breath of worship's not too late,

breathe, let the embers glow.

There have been losses on the way;  
a parent, partner, friend.  
At times I need to grieve and say,  
'I'll live my life from day to day,  
be near and help me mend.'

The stillness strips the mask away,  
exposes lonely hearts;  
self-pity must not have its way;  
I'll live my life from day to day,  
and now the healing starts.

*Music © W. Frederick Wooden, words © Christine Doreian Michaels*

'The stillness strips the mask away, exposes lonely hearts'.  
Let us now come into a time of stillness.

**PRAYER** by Gretchen Haley

For this one moment  
Know only that you are loved  
That you are safe, and whole and loved  
Know that you belong here  
Here among us, here upon this earth  
In your body  
However tired, or broken  
Your heart may be  
Whatever fear, disappointment, anger  
you carry  
For this hour know you are not alone  
Feel the presence of others  
Surrounding you,  
Breathing beside you, and with you,  
Discovering together the way our voices rise, and fall together

In harmony, in hope  
Claim here a resilient freedom  
The choice for love, for light, to live with joy  
and gratitude and praise  
as a form of resistance.

I invite you to pause for a moment in the quiet and the stillness, and to bring in to your mind's eye anyone known to you who is unwell, grieving, anxious, or suffering in any way at this time.

And now you may like to widen your circle of concern to those unknown to you, those caught up in conflict or oppression, those imprisoned or homeless, those struggling to survive in whatever way.

As we centre ourselves in stillness, here in this moment, may we allow the warmth of our hearts and the light of our spirits to travel outwards like ripples in a pond, gently reaching out to a beautiful, broken, joyous and hurting world.

Amen

**STORY:** 'Alone', by Arnold Lobel

Toad went to Frog's house. He found a note on the door.

The note said, "Dear Toad, I am not at home. I went out. I want to be alone."

"Alone?" said Toad to himself. "Frog has me for a friend. Why does he want to be alone?"

Toad looked through the windows. He looked in the garden. He did not see Frog.

Toad went to the woods. Frog was not there.

He went to the meadow. Frog was not there.

Toad went down to the river. There was Frog! He was sitting on an island by himself.

"Poor Frog," said Toad. "He must be very sad. I will cheer him up."

Toad ran home. He made sandwiches. He made a jug of iced tea.

He put everything in a basket.

Toad hurried back to the river.

“Frog,” he shouted, “it’s me. It’s your best friend, Toad!”

Frog was too far away to hear.

Toad took off his jacket and waved it like a flag.

Frog was too far away to see.

Toad shouted and waved, but it was no use.

Frog sat on the island. He did not see or hear Toad.

A turtle swam by. Toad climbed on the turtle’s back.

“Turtle,” said Toad, “Carry me to the island. Frog is there. He wants to be alone.”

“If Frog wants to be alone,” said the turtle, “why don’t you leave him alone?”

“Maybe you’re right,” said Toad. “Maybe Frog doesn’t want to see me. Maybe he doesn’t want me to be his friend any more.”

“Yes, maybe,” said the turtle as he swam to the island.

“Frog,” cried Toad. “I am sorry for all the foolish things I do. I’m sorry for all the silly things I say. Please be my friend again!”

Toad slipped off the turtle. With a splash he fell in the river.

Frog pulled Toad up onto the island.

Toad looked in the basket. The sandwiches were wet. The jug of iced tea was empty.

“Our lunch is spoiled,” said Toad. “I made it for you, Frog, so that you would be happy.”

“But Toad,” said Frog. “I am happy. I’m very happy.

This morning when I woke up I felt good because the sun was shining.

I felt good because I was a frog.

And I felt good because I have you for a friend.

I wanted to be alone. I wanted to think about how wonderful everything is.”

“Oh,” said Toad. “I suppose that’s a very good reason for wanting to be alone.”

“But now,” said Frog, “I will be glad not to be alone. Let’s each lunch.”

**READING:** Kabir, 15th century Indian mystic, translated by Robert Bly

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.

My shoulder is against yours.

You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,

nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:

not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around your own neck,

nor in eating nothing but vegetables.

When you really look for me you will find me instantly –

you will find me in the tiniest house of time.

Kabir says: Student, tell me what is God?

He is the breath inside the breath.

**2nd HYMN** 148 (P) Spirit of life (sung twice)

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;

move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

**SILENCE**

**INTERLUDE** 'A little prayer', Evelyn Glennie (a link to Ann's service last week)

[https://youtu.be/42b0\\_YbMOIE](https://youtu.be/42b0_YbMOIE)

**ADDRESS**

Frog wanted to be alone. He was perfectly happy sitting on the island, by himself, thinking his own thoughts. As Wendell Berry wrote: 'True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One's inner voices become audible... In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives.' I think Frog would have agreed with that, though he might have put it more simply.

Of course Frog might have become lonely eventually, if he hadn't had his friend Toad, who he knew would come looking for him.

And loneliness is a completely different kind of feeling.

Olivia Laing wrote a book called 'The Lonely City', about being lonely in New York. In it she tries to describe the feeling of loneliness. She writes: 'It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast. It feels shameful and alarming, and over time these feelings radiate outwards, making the lonely person increasingly isolated, increasingly estranged. It hurts, in the way that feelings do, and it also has physical consequences that take place invisibly, inside the closed compartments of the body. It advances [she says] cold as ice and clear as glass, enclosing and engulfing.'

Does that sound familiar to you at all? I think it's a good description. I wonder if or when you might have felt that way? And whether it helps to hear that others have felt it too? How comfortable do you feel admitting when you're lonely?

Because anyone can feel lonely. At its simplest, loneliness is the feeling we get when there's a gap – a mismatch – between social connections we *have* and those that we *yearn* for. That means it can be different for all of us. It's not about the number of friends we have, or the time we spend on our own, or something that happens when we reach a certain age, though all these factors can contribute. And loneliness is very common.

Olivia Laing says: 'Though [loneliness] feels entirely isolating, a private burden no one else could possibly experience or share, it is in reality a communal state, inhabited by many people. In fact, studies suggest that more than a quarter of American adults suffer from loneliness, independent of race, education and ethnicity, while 45 per cent of British adults report feeling lonely either often or sometimes. Marriage and high income serve as mild deterrents, but the truth is that few of us are absolutely immune to feeling a greater longing for connection than we find ourselves able to satisfy.' So wrote Laing in 2016.

I think the situation has got worse, especially since the pandemic, for young and old alike. You can see it in people's faces. According to Age UK, more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone, and more than a million older people say they go for over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member. However much we

may enjoy our own company, I think most of us begin to feel lonely if we are isolated for long periods of time like that.

I live on my own and in general I am quite happy spending time alone, like Frog sitting on his island. But by the end of last winter's lockdown, I realized I had begun to feel lonely. The pleasure of having peace and quiet and time to myself had begun to wear off. I craved company, and conversation, and connection. Being alone turned insidiously from being a feeling of liberation to one of emptiness and sadness. It crept up on me. I wonder if it did on you, too?

And yet it's also very possible to feel lonely when surrounded by others, like the young woman in the song we began with, who found she was crying in a crowded street without even knowing why. And perhaps this is a particularly 'ultra modern' phenomenon. We live in a time in which we can appear to have friends, and maybe have busy lives, and perhaps know lots of people, and live in a bustling city, and yet relationships can feel quite superficial. It can feel as though no one really knows us, or cares much about us, and maybe we feel we don't really know anyone properly either. And unfortunately rather than encouraging us to reach out more, loneliness can make us more withdrawn.

So this year Mental Health Awareness Week wanted to bring loneliness out from the shadows of secrecy and shame and into the light of understanding. It wanted to take the stigma out of loneliness. And encourage us to tackle loneliness together, both for its own sake but also because loneliness can easily lead to other health problems like depression and anxiety. And the [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) website offers lots of sensible advice. You can probably imagine the kinds of things it says. Like getting more exercise, and seeking out green spaces, and taking an interest in something new, and finding someone to talk to, volunteering to help others – and so on. It's very practical and sound advice. All these things definitely help because essentially they are all about making – or remaking – those vital and nourishing connections (not distractions but connections) that bring us back to ourselves and back into relation with the world: so, connection with our creativity, connection with our bodies, connection with other people, connection with nature, and so on. So, yes, do go for a walk in the woods, and dance in the kitchen, chat to the bus driver and smile at a stranger, write a poem or paint a picture, call on a neighbour or ring a friend. Come to church.

This week I have been waking up early and going out for a walk before breakfast. It's lovely. The sun has been shining, the horse chestnut trees are in flower and dropping beautiful carpets of deep pink petals over the paths. The rhododendrons are in full bloom. There aren't many people around at that time, but those who are there smile and say hello. The birds are singing their little hearts out. What do *you* do to reconnect?

It takes effort to do these things, and when we feel lonely or depressed it's harder still, but reaching out and making connections, even in simple ways, is the way back to belonging. And, we here would surely add, making time to connect with the divine, which is everywhere and in everyone and everything. Even in our own breath. And yet...we have to make space and time to connect.

Kabir the mystic said: 'Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours... When you really look for me you will find me instantly. God is the breath inside the breath.'

In other words this extraordinarily intimate and all-encompassing relationship some of us call God is always right there, and right here in fact. How do *you* rediscover your connection with the god of your understanding, particularly when the cold ice of loneliness creeps in?

Finally, just because loneliness is an unpleasant feeling that doesn't mean it's all bad, something to distract ourselves out of as soon as possible. Just like any other feeling, loneliness brings its own gifts, even if they're not immediately obvious or welcome. So experiencing periods of loneliness has helped me see more clearly how much I need other people, and how important it is for me to connect with the things I love doing. It has woken me up to my vulnerability – I am not as independent as I like to think I am – and made me more understanding of others' loneliness too.

And it has confirmed for me, once again, how much I really do need to regularly reconnect with that Divine presence in which we each live and move and have our being. That place where there can be no loneliness at all.

May it be so.



**3rd HYMN: 204 (P) When I am frightened**

When I am frightened, will you reassure me?  
When I'm uncertain, will you hold my hand?  
Will you be strong for me, sing to me quietly?  
Will you share some of your stories with me?

If you will show me compassion,  
then I may learn to care as you do,  
then I may learn to care.

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?  
When I am thoughtless, will you understand?  
Will you believe in me, stand by me willingly?  
Will you share some of your questions with me?

If you will show me acceptance,  
then I may learn to give as you do,  
then I may learn to give.

When I am troubled, will you listen to me?  
When I am lonely, will you be my friend?  
Will you be there for me, comfort me tenderly?  
Will you share some of your feelings with me?

If you will show me commitment,  
then I may learn to love as you do,  
then I may learn to love.

*Words and music © Shelley Jackson Denham (arranged by Jeannie Gagné)*

**CLOSING WORDS:** 'Wild geese', Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

**CLOSING MUSIC** 'If you got a problem', Joy Oladokun

<https://youtu.be/05FuiIsKJzk>