

Don't despair, loneliness is part of life

December 7, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I do not know if other cultures are as obsessed with surveys as ours seems to be, but I do know most surveys I read of affect me very little. For a survey to touch me, it's got to practically hit me in the forehead. This is why results this week on a recent local survey with some 1,068 participants aged 20 to "above 65" is on my mind. The Mental Health Foundation sponsored the study in late September, and reports about it are attracting attention.

One headline in the English press threw in a special word. Well, I thought, that's an eye-grabber. "Nearly one-third of Taiwanese lonely: mental health poll" (TT 12-3-14 p. 2) I am feeling these days that, yes, loneliness is worth some contemplation. Does loneliness have to be such a big problem, however? Isn't it a natural part of life?

The report to which I refer doesn't go into detail, but hints that feelings of loneliness as picked up in the survey may relate to staying indoors too much and indulging for long periods of time in You Know What. One sentence opens with "prevalence of Internet use" and ends with "nearly one in three people have experienced loneliness in the past year." Mixed feelings came over me as I read of this phenomenon, this public and personal alert, if you'll permit me to call it that.

A quick sidebar: As an English teacher and columnist, I continue to rally for the proper use of "depression," which we ought to reserve for its clinical connotation. Depression as a prolonged period of deep sadness or an intensely painful struggle to find meaning in life (and so on) is in most cases a treatable illness. Let's not throw "depression" around like a Frisbee. It is a serious word, and is not the same as "sad" or "unhappy."

We should also use "loneliness" with care. There is of course loneliness that is truly debilitating, something akin to depression, indeed, and it is a show-stopper and it may well require counseling. There is also a form of loneliness that is a normal reality we all experience.

Normal, non-destructive loneliness comes with the realization that we are sometimes different than others, and so suffer over the inevitable bumps and holes on life's highway in our own unique

ways. Loneliness surely comes as we see (as the existentialists saw) that we essentially live our lives alone. Although we are not cut off from others, we all face fundamental turning points such as failure, grief, illness, and aging, and face them by ourselves.

I sometimes have to remind myself that there are some intersections in life that no one can meet for me. Friends and loved ones may accompany me in my hardest moments but, whether I like it or not, there are a few tough things I've got to do for myself. And that means that yes, sometimes I feel lonely. The older the participants were in the survey, the greater the chance they felt pessimistic in life. Oh, now there is a word.

I wonder if the study asked people about spiritual traditions or religious beliefs. Spiritual values may help us deal with a range of troubling emotions. Terms such as "feeling un-appreciated," "not having companions," and "feeling isolated" also appeared in the news report. Spiritual values help millions of people every day with precisely those same feelings.

I may be down about my students or church in certain circumstances, or feel a flash of hopelessness in my life's work. I may be deeply aware of my flaws as a person and as a "shen-fu." My mistakes often cause me pain. But these realities and fluctuations in life need not cast a pall over me. Loneliness and pessimism and all the rest come and go, and we do not have to let them control us.

Our collective experiences with the Internet should warn us to beware. Indulgence in any good thing can isolate and damage us. So, let's run our computers, and not let our computers run us. That's not easy, but we can do it.

I do not mean to downplay the suffering of those less fortunate than myself. Many of us do find, however, that gifts such as loved ones, a sense of humor (not victimization) and, perhaps more than anything else, deep spiritual beliefs, help us to live with occasional loneliness and still be happy. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. A new survey in Taiwan says about 1 of every 3 persons in the country are "lonely." What does this word "lonely" mean to you, and are you 1 of the 3 people?
2. The column argues that there are (at least) two different types of loneliness. Have you ever thought about this idea before? How many kinds of loneliness can you picture in your mind?
3. This column fairly strongly argues that spiritual values or religious beliefs of some kind help people to live with feelings of happiness or pessimism. What is your opinion about this?

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