

# ON SOLITUDE AND LONELINESS IN TODAY'S WORLD

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## SUMMARY

*The phenomena of solitude and loneliness the author of this essay describes as two etiologically different states of mind. They are approached by the neuroscientific, psychodynamic, artistic expressive, philosophical and psychotherapeutic points of view. With some clinical examples and artistic illustrations the author tries to clarify his approach to the topic.*

**Key words:** *solitude – loneliness - interpersonal relationships - psychodynamic approach*

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## INTRODUCTION

The experience of the uniqueness of each human being is always a surprising realization, since we all have in common the fact that we are human beings. Hannah Arendt (1991) points out that solitude is one of the fundamental experiences in every human life, but that at the same time it conflicts with our basic needs. She believes that the difference between solitude and loneliness lies mostly in a person's relationship with his/her self in that state, provided that the person is relatively self-sufficient.

And yet, everyone lives in his/her own unique world, which is largely determined by the data that are being researched and described, from genetics to environmental factors in the broad sense of the term. In this way, the old question of the characteristics of which this uniqueness of each human being consists is opened: how it arises, how it develops, how character and behaviour, beliefs and value systems, ethical principles, and the possibility of personality maturation during different life phases and under the influence of constantly changing circumstances is formed. These considerations were first undertaken by philosophers, especially those dedicated to religious spirituality, writers, poets, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century also by psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and in the last four decades also by scientists dedicated to the study of neuroanatomy and neurophysiology. In this essay, I will first look at psychological concepts and approaches.

A brief overview of the research results is provided by Perlman and Peplau (1982) as an overview of the answers to three basic questions:

- about the nature of loneliness;
- about the causes of loneliness, current or historical developmental influences or behaviour;
- on what evidence or intellectual traditions is the theory formulated?

With these considerations, they list six approaches to the phenomenon of loneliness:

- psychodynamic model;
- Rogers' phenomenological perspective;

- existential approach;
- sociological explanations;
- theoretical approaches to loneliness;
- general systems theory.

Conceptualizations of loneliness are mostly related to clinical experiences or to the aforementioned theories. Most often, the phenomenon is viewed as a repulsive, unpleasant experience, but very rarely is loneliness understood as a pathological response. However, the psychodynamic understanding emphasizes stressful and traumatic experiences from childhood, while etiological factors are most often linked to current life factors.

## ABOUT LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

My thoughts, feelings and experiences of 'being alone in a certain situation' often remind me of these poignant verses of the Sicilian Salvatore Quasimodo (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959: ("And soon it is evening", S. Quasimodo, 1940)

*"And suddenly it is evening.*

*Everyone stands alone at the heart of the world  
pierced by a ray of sunlight:  
and suddenly it is evening".*

*(Translated from the Italian by Mike Towler)*

Indeed, everyone is alone in his/her own world, in their deeply inner sphere of existence. This experience is familiar to every human being and in different periods and life situations it has different meanings and manifests itself differently. In a way, everyone is alone deep in their own world, and also in the world viewed broadly, in the universe. That poet's ray of sunshine is a symbol of the omnipresent hope that illuminates and warms us, but also wounds us with its piercing. And in an instant, evening descends, the curtain falls and that journey is over. We can ask ourselves whether this is a component of solitude in the spectrum of experiencing life almost from the very beginning, or whether it is necessary to distinguish it from the experience of loneliness built into the very core of the human way of

being. What the poet has hermetically depicted as a symbolic representation of human existence in its essence also indicates the accuracy of the Latin statement that "*ars longa, vita brevis*", i.e. that the development of art (the art of living, loving, working, socializing...) requires time, and that life is short. Or, as Borges says, to time should be given time to distinguish loneliness from solitude.

During historical development, we see that people lived in groups, families and other types of organizations, because they were intensely dependent on each other for everyday needs. Loneliness and solitude were not particularly distinguished, although they perceived and valued it differently as if there was something mysterious, mystical in it. Hermits were often understood as holy persons, dedicated to the transcendental cognition of God through their own intense experience. Saint Jerome (Belamarić, 2023) is a prominent figure among the church fathers. He is depicted in a cave, accompanied by a lion, translating the Bible into Latin in order to bring the Holy Scripture closer to people in the simple spoken language of everyday life. In silence and isolation hermits studied the paths to a distant God, whose presence was brought closer by the appearance of Jesus on Earth, as described by Jon Fosse (Nobel Prize for Literature, 2023). In the Middle Ages, melancholic troubadour singing of lonely and (often) unheard sighs of unattainable love flourished. Melancholia and depression received their specific description only from E. Bleuler, and a significant elaboration of melancholia and mourning was described by S. Freud (1917).

Contemporary philosopher Svendsen (2017), writing about the feeling of loneliness, states that loneliness is a feeling of social pain that is transmitted through the same nerve pathways as physical pain. Social and physical pain are extremely closely related. In this context, it is important to note that a feeling of loneliness appears in early childhood. Since then, it has accompanied us to a greater or lesser extent throughout our lives. In order to better understand it, we need to get closer to the characteristics of early psychological development, which especially refers to the establishment and quality of the experience of attachment and the empathic capacity of the environment, and the atmosphere of guilt or shame cultures. The traditions of these cultures significantly direct the experience of the self and self-in-the-world, as well as the world in relation to the human being in the emergence and during the formation of character and behaviour, and the maturation of value assessments. If this development leads to the formation of a 'lonely' character and behaviour the need to improve social connections will become apparent.

On the other hand, choosing solitude is a conscious process, the realization of the need to talk to oneself. Such conversations, an inner dialogue with different

parts of one's own experience, are a necessary ingredient of concentration on certain contents, and especially of creativity, whether it is scientific, artistic, transcendental contemplative or some other sphere that requires dedication to reflection in silence. The Croatian poet Luka Botić wrote: "Oh, solitude, you are blessed and blessing is you alone", revealing the intimate need for undisturbed contact with inner spiritual worlds.

## **THE BEGINNINGS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR EVOLUTION THROUGHOUT LIFE**

As I have already stated, the psychodynamic understanding of loneliness, not only episodic but also as a permanent tendency towards 'introversion', is linked to early adverse stressful and traumatic, intergenerational and transgenerational experiences, but also to genetic and other traumatogenic situations that can be experienced once, repeatedly, or can represent permanent adverse psychological and somatic states and frustrating relationships throughout a certain period of life. I will list some important concepts of the early development of the experience of the self, the object world and some characteristics of relational dynamics that I consider to be basic knowledge about the developmental stages of personality development and maturation, as well as the elements of experience that lead to feelings of loneliness or a desire for solitude.

Winnicott states (1976) that "there is nothing new in the idea of a journey from dependence to independence. Every human being must embark on this journey, and many come very close to that goal and achieve independence with an embedded sense of the social". In this way, the newborn child paves the way for him/herself from complete dependence through relative dependence to independence that is never complete. He believes that a healthy individual will not become isolated but connected to the environment in such a way that the individual and the environment become interdependent. That is, he/she will develop the capacity to be alone, even in the presence of others. In other words, he/she will be able to preserve the boundaries of his/her existential sphere and from that perspective connect with his/her environment, with 'objects' both symbolic and real (Lacan 2021, cit. Urlić). Winnicott considers this ability to be one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development.

Many scientists consider the vulnerability of the human being from the perspective of the fact that the human being comes into this world prematurely as the most immature being in the living world (Laplanche and Pontalis 2007). Careful observers of the way how life begins, such as Melanie Klain, describe the foundations

of human life in the first six months of life after birth, dividing this period into two “positions”: paranoid-schizoid and depressive. Followers of this idea have extended the alternation of these positions to the entire course of life. Associatively, we can imagine the alternation of tides, day and night, etc., constant changes that require constant adaptability.

Studying symbiotic patterns and differentiation processes from the phenomenological side, M. Mahler (1975) described three developmental phases that take place during the first three years of life: the phase of normal autism (the first month of life), the phase of normal symbiosis (further 4-5 months), and the third phase of separation - individuation (which ends in the third year of life). The third phase is divided into subphases of differentiating, practising, re-approaching (marked by the fear of losing the object of love, castration anxiety, crisis of approaching, which represents the prototype of the constant struggle between fusion and/or isolation), and the subphase towards the constancy of the object. This dynamic of the maturation of the basic mental functions indicates that the biological and psychological birth of a person does not coincide in time. Biological birth is a well-defined event, while psychological birth represents an intrapsychic process that slowly unfolds and develops until a certain level of maturity is reached.

Romanian-French philosopher E. Cioran, writing about the misfortune of being born, states that we have lost as much with birth as we will lose when we die – everything. By indulging in alcohol, drug abuse, gambling or promiscuous behaviour, one can temporarily or permanently try to avoid basic questions about the meaning of life and goals. Such questions touch on the very essence of human existence. Not finding one's own answers often leads to a feeling of emptiness and/or failure in making sense of one's own existence.

Thinking about the extreme vulnerability and experiences of insecurity and fear, and following the concepts of very careful scientists – observers of the first steps in life – it is obvious that during the developmental phases there are countless possibilities of damaging, stopping or distorting the development of further maturation processes. Artistic sensibility can present these very delicate feelings that are so important, often decisive in the formation of a certain personality and life choices, in a way that both brass and stone 'speak' in the secret language of the unconscious. For this presentation, I have chosen the works of the two prominent Croatian sculptors, Ivan Meštrović and Lovro Jakšić (Figure 1, 2).

These two representations, two visions of the experience of motherhood, are separated by a century. The first representation is the work of the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, who depicts the moment in which the mother-child unity is realized, materialized

(in Winnicott's sense). With his creation, he presented this unity, the symbiotic need of both the mother and her child, who complement each other. The young contemporary Croatian sculptor Lovro Jakšić has a different feeling and vision of the mother-child unity relationship. It seems as if the child immediately after birth represents the imprint of the mother's stream of feelings, desires and hopes that do not still have their own forms. Like an idealization of pure love and enchantment, or expressing 'primary maternal care'.



Figure 1. Ivan Meštrović: Motherhood (20<sup>th</sup> century)



Figure 2. Lovro Jakšić: Motherhood (21<sup>st</sup> century)

The early developmental path of personality formation is shown and numerous possibilities of adverse influences are described by the Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo in a twofold way, as a sunlight with the quality of heating and illuminating, but also piercing. The course of life is shown as a voyage between Scylla and Charybdis, as an alternative to protective factors in life – libidinal objects and their containing and stimulating properties. A significant part of these processes takes place in the inner world and is preserved in the unconscious and preconscious. Since there are countless possibilities of traumatogenic action and activation of mental mechanisms and defense mechanisms in the sense of excessive repression, detachment, intellectual processing in the form of intellectualization, rationalization, transformation into the opposite, projection, projective identification, etc., in this ambivalent way, the encounter with these damaging and burdensome experiences and their processing in a more mature way is both enabled and disabled.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE NEED FOR SOLITUDE AND FEAR OF LONELINESS: EXAMPLES FROM INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY**

### **Clinical example from individual psychotherapy**

Suffering is the most common motivating factor for seeking psychological help. I will give an example of a young man (I will call him Emil) who, in his thirties, found himself in a situation that he perceived as hopeless. As the only child in a family where the cult of an extraordinary father, of a wealthy and noble lineage, prevailed, Emil developed a fascination with such a figure. In the dilemma, as conceptualized by the aforementioned psychoanalysts, of separating and individualizing or remaining subject to the family myth, avoiding the depressive processing of immature attachments and not processing his own needs for the affirmation of his personality, he was increasingly filled with a feeling of general dissatisfaction and deep confusion. At the same time as he found himself on the threshold of choosing the path of his own affirmation and choosing life partnerships in his intimate and professional life, the serious illness of his previously brilliant father figure and the crisis of trust with the discovery of a family secret about his financial hardship led to the myth of his own uniqueness as a family trait that was losing its foundation, prompting Emil's withdrawal into his own world of megalomaniac fantasies in order to defend his narcissistically perceived world and his role in it. Lonely, he wandered between rich fantasies and an increasingly impoverished realistic world, and he decided to 'escape' from his environment. Years of disappointing experience showed that he was unable to 'escape' from his inner

narcissistically structured world, and the outcome was at one point a psychological crisis of psychotic intensity with paranoid-hallucinatory features. He also struggled with a deep crisis of trust in the family values that had been inviolable in his understanding until then. In this way, confronted with elements that had a lifelong and significant influence on the formation of his personality, he was able to change in terms of further individuation. This was first felt in the evolution of the transference relationship, as well as in the countertransference experience that the earlier comprehensive pressure of the family myth fades and opens the possibility of a more realistic view of oneself, the family, the wider environment and the world. Loneliness was associated with a malignant narcissistic structure that for a long time stopped the development of the patient's personality, both in terms of self-concept and self-confidence. The process of grieving for what was missed in terms of development could begin in a productive way.

### **Clinical example from the experience of a large group**

Another example that exposes the experience of loneliness to a social setting took place in a large group of over 450 participants, professionals in the fields of psychiatry, psychology and social work. During the 2023 congress in Egypt, each working day ended with a large group led by my colleague Caterina Mela from Greece and myself. The organizer warned us that a group of Russians and a slightly smaller group of Ukrainians were present. Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine had already lasted for months and we were all familiar with the terrible images of human suffering, death and destruction, the organizers wanted to warn us, the co-leaders, that there could be a conflict during the large group. However, this was a fact that was globally known and had a worldwide impact, and we were prepared to face the possible conflict between these two subgroups.

The first day of the large group began with mourning for the doyen of Egyptian psychiatry who passed away shortly before the congress began. Many expressed their regret for the loss of a beloved professor who, obviously, aroused feelings of sympathy and appreciation. Many shared their memories and an atmosphere of farewell to a dear and respected person prevailed in the large group.

The brief silence was broken by a member of the Russian group who, on the verge of tears, said that, respecting the grief of his Egyptian colleagues for the loss of their dear professor, he expressed his pain at the loss of his homeland, because his country had become an aggressor who was destroying a fraternal Slavic land. He and his friends and colleagues did not have such an idea of their homeland and deeply regretted

the aggression against Ukraine. Many of them were left without the homeland they had and wanted until now.

Other members of the Russian subgroup remained silent, shaken. None of the Ukrainians said anything.

An atmosphere of sadness of the kind one usually feels at a memorial service took over the group.

After the large group ended, I saw the Ukrainians approach the Russians, shake hands, and leave the room together. For the next two days, current social issues and a global sense of threat dominated the discussion. The co-facilitators helped the large group elaborate on feelings of sadness, abandonment, loss, and in a sociopolitical sense, the loss of certain hopes, desires, and illusions.

## **TRANSFERENCE AND COUNTERTRANSFERENCE: SOLITUDE AND LONELINESS IN THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP**

The aforementioned review of individual psychoanalytic psychotherapy with a person suffering from a narcissistic personality disorder with grandiose ideas, negations and projections, which led to a psychotic crisis as a significant part, is a depiction of loneliness that was the result of limitations in the development of a transference relationship beyond idealization and indicated the loneliness of a person with a profound narcissistic personality disorder. Within this framework, the psychotherapist also feels limited in his ability to initiate developmental maturation processes for the patient's personality and to raise the transference-countertransference relationship to a higher level. This happened only after 3-4 years of psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

In leading group therapy processes, whether it concerns small or medium-sized groups, or as in the above example a large group, the feeling of loneliness of the therapist or co-therapist is often connected in my experience with the difficulty of enduring the "minus-K" situation. Foulkes' maxim "trust the group" with years of experience facilitates this situation in a countertransference sense, expanding the containing function of the leader himself, the co-leader couple and the group—as-a whole.

In clinical work, as well as in other life situations, intimate, family or more broadly social, withdrawal into thinking, assessing and deciding on the way to participate in interactions can be a factor in withdrawal into a kind of solitude, from short-term to long-term, even lifelong. Some secrets "lie" better if they remain "buried". They are often difficult to access even in a psychotherapy framework, although maximum discretion is unquestionable. On the other hand, the feeling of loneliness in therapeutic and social relationships,

and even in certain spheres of intimate relationships, remains an enigma that is difficult to fathom. It becomes clearer why Frieda Fromm Reichmann studied these "silent" parts in relationships with patients who suffered from psychosis for decades, trying to understand their loneliness, or spheres of experience that do not find verbal expression. She wrote her studies and notes for years, and these observations and reflections were only published posthumously. This, I believe, is emblematic of psychotherapy relationships of a psychodynamic character and is part of the time of professionalism when intimate or very delicate spheres of human experiences and relationships are at stake. As much as this represents a burden on professional activity in understanding the emotional sphere, and often leads to depressed attitudes and thinking, professional experience shows that loneliness is often related to the (impossibility) of developing relationships and trust, and loneliness is often a refuge from the pressures caused by unresolved or intractable situations.

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