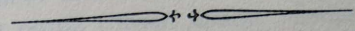


Chapter 1

A SUFFOCATING LONELINESS



Between Competition and Togetherness

It is far from easy to enter into the painful experience of loneliness. You like to stay away from it. Still it is an experience that enters into everyone's life at some point. You might have felt it as a little child when your classmates laughed at you because you were cross-eyed or as a teen-ager when you were the last one chosen on the baseball team. You might have felt it when you were homesick in a boarding school or angry about non-sense rules which you could not change. You might have felt it as a young adult in a university where everyone talked about grades but where a good friend was hard to find, or in an action group where nobody paid any attention to your suggestions. You might have felt it as a teacher when students did not respond to your carefully prepared lectures or as a preacher when people were dozing during your well-intentioned sermons. And you still might feel it day after day during staff meetings, conferences, counseling sessions, during long office hours or monotonous manual labor, or just when you are by yourself staring away from a book that cannot keep your attention. Practically every human being can recall simi-

lar or much more dramatic situations in which he or she has experienced that strange inner gnawing, that mental hunger, that unsettling unrest that makes us say, "I feel lonely."

Loneliness is one of the most universal human experiences, but our contemporary Western society has heightened the awareness of our loneliness to an unusual degree.

During a recent visit to New York City, I wrote the following note to myself:

Sitting in the subway, I am surrounded by silent people hidden behind their newspapers or staring away in the world of their own fantasies. Nobody speaks with a stranger, and a patrolling policeman keeps reminding me that people are not out to help each other. But when my eyes wander over the walls of the train covered with invitations to buy more or new products, I see young, beautiful people enjoying each other in a gentle embrace, playful men and women smiling at each other in fast sailboats, proud explorers on horseback encouraging each other to take brave risks, fearless children dancing on a sunny beach, and charming girls always ready to serve me in airplanes and ocean liners. While the subway train runs from one dark tunnel into the other and I am nervously aware where I keep my money, the words and images decorating my fearful world speak about love, gentleness, tenderness and about a joyful togetherness of spontaneous people.

The contemporary society in which we find ourselves makes us acutely aware of our loneliness. We become increasingly aware that we are living in a world where even the most intimate relationships have become part of competition and rivalry.

Pornography seems one of the logical results. It is intimacy for sale. In the many "porno shops" hundreds of lonely young and old men, full of fear that anyone will recognize them, gaze silently at the pictures of nude girls drawing their minds into intimate close rooms where some stranger will melt away their loneliness. The streets meanwhile shout about the cruel struggle for survival and even the porno corners cannot silence that noise, certainly not when the shop owners keep reminding their customers that they should buy instead of "just looking."

Loneliness is one of the most universal sources of human suffering today. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists speak about it as the most frequently expressed complaint and the root not only of an increasing number of suicides but also of alcoholism, drug use, different psychosomatic symptoms—such as, headaches, stomach and low-back pains—and of a large number of traffic accidents. Children, adolescents, adults and old people are in growing degree exposed to the contagious disease of loneliness in a world in which a competitive individualism tries to reconcile itself with a culture that speaks about togetherness, unity and community as the ideals to strive for.

Why is it, that many parties and friendly get-togethers leave us so empty and sad? Maybe even there the deep-seated and often unconscious competition between people prevents them from revealing themselves to each other and from establishing relationships that last longer than the party itself. Where we are always welcome, our absence won't matter that much either and when everyone can come, nobody will be particularly missed. Usually there is food enough and people enough willing to eat it, but often it seems that the food has lost the power

to create community and not seldom do we leave the party more aware of our loneliness than when we came.

The language we use suggests anything but loneliness. "Please come in, it is so good to see you . . . Let me introduce you to this very special friend of mine, who will love to meet you . . . I have heard so much about you and I can't say how pleased I am to see you now in person . . . What you are saying is most interesting, I wish more people could hear that . . . It was so great to talk to you and to have a chance to visit with you . . . I dearly hope we will meet again. Know that you are always welcome and don't hesitate to bring a friend . . . Come back soon." It is a language that reveals the desire to be close and receptive but that in our society sadly fails to heal the pains of our loneliness, because the real pain is felt where we can hardly allow anyone to enter.

The roots of loneliness are very deep and cannot be touched by optimistic advertisement, substitute love images or social togetherness. They find their food in the suspicion that there is no one who cares and offers love without conditions, and no place where we can be vulnerable without being used. The many small rejections of everyday—a sarcastic smile, a flippant remark, a brisk denial or a bitter silence—may all be quite innocent and hardly worth our attention if they did not constantly arouse our basic human fear of being left totally alone with "darkness . . . [as our] one companion left" (Psalm 88).

The Avoidance of the Painful Void

It is this most basic human loneliness that threatens us and is so hard to face. Too often we will do everything possible to avoid the confrontation with the experience of being alone, and sometimes we are able to create the

most ingenious devices to prevent ourselves from being reminded of this condition. Our culture has become most sophisticated in the avoidance of pain, not only our physical pain but our emotional and mental pain as well. We not only bury our dead as if they were still alive, but we also bury our pains as if they were not really there. We have become so used to this state of anesthesia, that we panic when there is nothing or nobody left to distract us. When we have no project to finish, no friend to visit, no book to read, no television to watch or no record to play, and when we are left all alone by ourselves we are brought so close to the revelation of our basic human aloneness and are so afraid of experiencing an all-pervasive sense of loneliness that we will do anything to get busy again and continue the game which makes us believe that everything is fine after all. John Lennon says: "Feel your own pain," but how hard that is!

In 1973 the Educational Television Network showed a series of life portraits of a family in Santa Barbara, California. This series, which was produced under the name "An American Family," offered an honest and candid portrayal of the day-to-day life of Mr. and Mrs. Loud and their five children. Although the revelations about this "average family," which included the divorce of the parents and the homosexual life of the oldest son, shocked many viewers, a detailed film analysis of any family probably would have been as shocking as this one. The film, which was made with the full permission and knowledge of all the members of the family, not only unmasked the illusion that this family could be presented as an example to the American people, but also showed in painful details our tendency to avoid the experience of pain at all costs. Painful issues remained unmentioned and embarrassing situations were simply denied. Pat, the wife and mother in the family, expressed

this attitude best when she said, "I don't like things that make me feel uncomfortable." The consequences of this pain-avoidance, however, were well expressed by her eighteen-year-old son when he said, "You see seven lonely people trying desperately to love each other—and not succeeding."¹

It is not very difficult to see that the Loud family is indeed no exception and in many respects "average" in a society growingly populated with lonely people desperately trying to love each other without succeeding. Is this not in large part due to our inability to face the pain of our loneliness? By running away from our loneliness and by trying to distract ourselves with people and special experiences, we do not realistically deal with our human predicament. We are in danger of becoming unhappy people suffering from many unsatisfied cravings and tortured by desires and expectations that never can be fulfilled. Does not all creativity ask for a certain encounter with our loneliness, and does not the fear of this encounter severely limit our possible self expression?

When I have to write an article and face a white empty sheet of paper I nearly have to tie myself to the chair to keep from consulting one more book before putting my own words on paper. When, after a busy day, I am alone and free I have to fight the urge to make one more phone call, one more trip to the mailbox or one more visit to friends who will entertain me for the last few hours of the day. And when I think about the busy day I sometimes wonder if the educational enterprise so filled with lectures, seminars, conferences, requirements to make up and to fulfill, papers to write and to read, examinations to undergo and to go to, has, in fact, not become one big distraction—once in a while entertaining—but mostly preventing me from

facing my lonely self which should be my first source of search and research.

The superficial life to which this leads is vividly portrayed by Henry David Thoreau when he writes:

When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters proud of his extensive correspondence has not heard from himself this long while.²

The first task of any school should be to protect its privilege of offering free time—the Latin word *schola* means free time—to understand ourselves and our world a little better. It really is a hard struggle to keep free time truly free and to prevent education from degenerating into just another form of competition and rivalry.

The problem, however, is that we not only want our freedom but also fear it. It is this fear that makes us so intolerant toward our own loneliness and makes us grab prematurely for what seem to be "final solutions."

The Danger of the Final Solution

There is much mental suffering in our world. But some of it is suffering for the wrong reason because it is born out of the false expectation that we are called to take each other's loneliness away. When our loneliness drives

us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are, in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring friendships and suffocating embraces. To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dream-world. No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. And by burdening others with these divine expectations, of which we ourselves are often only partially aware, we might inhibit the expression of free friendship and love and evoke instead feelings of inadequacy and weakness. Friendship and love cannot develop in the form of an anxious clinging to each other. They ask for gentle fearless space in which we can move to and from each other. As long as our loneliness brings us together with the hope that together we no longer will be alone, we castigate each other with our unfulfilled and unrealistic desires for oneness, inner tranquility and the uninterrupted experience of communion.

It is sad to see how sometimes people suffering from loneliness, often deepened by the lack of affection in their intimate family circle, search for a final solution for their pains and look at a new friend, a new lover or a new community with Messianic expectations. Although their mind knows about their self-deceit, their hearts keep saying, "Maybe this time I have found what I have knowingly or unknowingly been searching for." It is indeed amazing at first sight that men and women who have had such distressing relationships with their parents, brothers or sisters can throw themselves blindly into relationships with far-reaching consequences in the hope that from now on things will be totally different.

But we might wonder if the many conflicts and quar-

rels, the many accusations and recriminations, the many moments of expressed and repressed anger and of confessed or unconfessed jealousies, which are so often part of these rushed-into relationships, do not find their roots in the false claim that the one has to take the other's loneliness away. Indeed, it seems that the desire for "final solutions" often forms the basis for the destructive violence that enters into the intimacy of human encounters. Mostly this violence is a violence of thoughts, violating the mind with suspicion, inner gossip or revengeful fantasies. Sometimes it is a violence of words disturbing the peace with reproaches and complaints, and once in a while it takes the dangerous form of harmful actions. Violence in human relationship is so utterly destructive because it not only harms the other but also drives the self into a vicious circle asking for more and more when less and less is received.

In a time with strong emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity, in which we are encouraged to explore our communicative capacities and experiment with many forms of physical, mental and emotional contact, we are sometimes tempted to believe that our feelings of loneliness and sadness are only a sign of lack of mutual openness. Sometimes this is true and many sensitivity centers make invaluable contributions to the broadening of the range of human interactions. But real openness to each other also means a real closedness, because only he who can hold a secret can safely share his knowledge. When we do not protect with great care our own inner mystery, we will never be able to form community. It is this inner mystery that attracts us to each other and allows us to establish friendship and develop lasting relationships of love. An intimate relationship between people not only asks for mutual openness but also for mutual respectful protection of each other's uniqueness.

Together, Yet Not Too Near

There is a false form of honesty that suggests that nothing should remain hidden and that everything should be said, expressed and communicated. This honesty can be very harmful, and if it does not harm, it at least makes the relationship flat, superficial, empty and often very boring. When we try to shake off our loneliness by creating a milieu without limiting boundaries, we may become entangled in a stagnating closeness. It is our vocation to prevent the harmful exposure of our inner sanctuary, not only for our own protection but also as a service to our fellow human beings with whom we want to enter in a creative communion. Just as words lose their power when they are not born out of silence, so openness loses its meaning when there is no ability to be closed. Our world is full of empty chatter, easy confessions, hollow talk, senseless compliments, poor praise, and boring confidentialities. Not a few magazines become wealthy by suggesting that they are able to furnish us with the most secret and intimate details of the lives of people we always wanted to know more about. In fact, they present us with the most boring trivialities and the most supercilious idiosyncrasies of people whose lives are already flattened out by morbid exhibitionism. The American way of life tends to be suspicious toward closedness.

When I came to this country for the first time, I was struck by the open-door life style. In schools, institutes and office buildings everyone worked with open doors. I could see the secretaries typing behind their machines, the teachers teaching behind their lecterns, the administrators administering behind their desks

and the occasional readers reading behind their books. It seemed as if everyone was saying to me, "Do not hesitate to walk in and interrupt at any time," and most conversations had the same open quality—giving me the impression that people had no secrets and were ready for any question ranging from their financial status to their sex life.

It is clear that most of these are first impressions and that second and third impressions reveal quickly that there is less openness than suggested. But still, closed doors are not popular, and it needs special effort to establish boundaries that protect the mystery of our lives. Certainly in a period of history in which we have become so acutely aware of our alienation in its different manifestations, it has become difficult to unmask the illusion that the final solution for our experience of loneliness is to be found in human togetherness. It is easy to see how many marriages are suffering from this illusion. Often they are started with the hope of a union that can dispel all painful feelings of "not belonging" and continue with the desperate struggle to reach a perfect physical and psychological harmony. Many people find it very hard to appreciate a certain closedness in a marriage and do not know how to create the boundaries that allow intimacy to become an always new and surprising discovery of each other. Still, the desire for protective boundaries by which man and woman do not have to cling to each other, but can move graciously in and out of each other's life circle, is clear from the many times that Kahlil Gibran's words are quoted at a wedding ceremony:

Sing and dance together and be joyous,
but let each one of you be alone.
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.

Reaching Out to Our Innermost Self

Stand together yet not too near together
 For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
 and the oak tree and the cypress
 grow not in each other's shadow.³

From Desert to Garden

But what then can we do with our essential aloneness which so often breaks into our consciousness as the experience of a desperate sense of loneliness? What does it mean to say that neither friendship nor love, neither marriage nor community can take that loneliness away? Sometimes illusions are more livable than realities, and why not follow our desire to cry out in loneliness and search for someone whom we can embrace and in whose arms our tense body and mind can find a moment of deep rest and enjoy the momentary experience of being understood and accepted? These are hard questions because they come forth out of our wounded hearts, but they have to be listened to even when they lead to a difficult road. This difficult road is the road of conversion, the conversion from loneliness into solitude. Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude. To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. This requires not only courage but also a strong faith. As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the

A Suffocating Loneliness

inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

A young student reflecting on his own experience wrote recently:

When loneliness is haunting me with its possibility of being a threshold instead of a dead end, a new creation instead of a grave, a meeting place instead of an abyss, then time loses its desperate clutch on me. Then I no longer have to live in a frenzy of activity, overwhelmed and afraid for the missed opportunity.

It is far from easy to believe that this is true. Often we go to good men and women with our problems in the secret hope that they will take our burden away from us and free us from our loneliness. Frequently the temporary relief they offer only leads to a stronger recurrence of the same pains when we are again by ourselves. But sometimes we meet and hear that exceptional person who says: "Do not run, but be quiet and silent. Listen attentively to your own struggle. The answer to your question is hidden in your own heart."

In the beautiful book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* we find the story of such an encounter.

Daiju visited the master Baso in China. Baso asked: "What do you seek?"

"Enlightenment," replied Daiju.

"You have your own treasure house. Why do you search outside?" Baso asked.

Daiju inquired: "Where is my treasure house?"

Baso answered: "What you are asking is your treasure house."

Daiju was enlightened! Ever after he urged his friends: "Open your own treasure house and use those treasures."⁴

The real spiritual guide is the one who, instead of advising us what to do or to whom to go, offers us a chance to stay alone and take the risk of entering into our own experience. He makes us see that pouring little bits of water on our dry land does not help, but that we will find a living well if we reach deep enough under the surface of our complaints.

A friend once wrote: "Learning to weep, learning to keep vigil, learning to wait for the dawn. Perhaps this is what it means to be human." It is hard to really believe this because we constantly find ourselves clinging to people, books, events, experiences, projects and plans, secretly hoping that this time it will be different. We keep experimenting with many types of anesthetics, we keep finding "psychic numbing" often more agreeable than the sharpening of our inner sensitivities. But . . . we can at least remind ourselves of our self-deceit and confess at times our morbid predilection for dead-end streets.

The few times, however, that we do obey our severe masters and listen carefully to our restless hearts, we may start to sense that in the midst of our sadness there is joy, that in the midst of our fears there is peace, that in the midst of our greediness there is the possibility of compassion and that indeed in the midst of our irking loneliness we can find the beginnings of a quiet solitude.

Chapter 2

A RECEPTIVE SOLITUDE

Solitude of Heart

The word solitude can be misleading. It suggests being alone by yourself in an isolated place. When we think about solitaries, our mind easily evokes images of monks or hermits who live in remote places secluded from the noise of the busy world. In fact, the words solitude and solitary are derived from the Latin word *solus*, which means alone, and during the ages many men and women who wanted to live a spiritual life withdrew to remote places—deserts, mountains or deep forests—to live the life of a recluse.

It is probably difficult, if not impossible, to move from loneliness to solitude without any form of withdrawal from a distracting world, and therefore it is understandable that those who seriously try to develop their spiritual life are attracted to places and situations where they can be alone, sometimes for a limited period of time, sometimes more or less permanently. But the solitude that really counts is the solitude of heart; it is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation. On occasion this isolation is necessary to develop this solitude of heart, but it would be sad if we consid-

ered this essential aspect of the spiritual life as a privilege of monks and hermits. It seems more important than ever to stress that solitude is one of the human capacities that can exist, be maintained and developed in the center of a big city, in the middle of a large crowd and in the context of a very active and productive life. A man or woman who has developed this solitude of heart is no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center.

By attentive living we can learn the difference between being present in loneliness and being present in solitude. When you are alone in an office, a house or an empty waiting room, you can suffer from restless loneliness but also enjoy a quiet solitude. When you are teaching in a classroom, listening to a lecture, watching a movie or chatting at a "happy hour," you can have the unhappy feeling of loneliness but also the deep contentment of someone who speaks, listens and watches from the tranquil center of his solitude. It is not too difficult to distinguish between the restless and the restful, between the driven and the free, between the lonely and the solitary in our surroundings. When we live with a solitude of heart, we can listen with attention to the words and the worlds of others, but when we are driven by loneliness, we tend to select just those remarks and events that bring immediate satisfaction to our own craving needs.

Our world, however, is not divided between lonely people and solitaries. We constantly fluctuate between these poles and differ from hour to hour, day to day, week to week and year to year. We must confess that we have only a very limited influence on this fluctuation. Too many known and unknown factors play roles in the balance of our inner life. But when we are able to recognize the poles between which we move and develop a

sensitivity for this inner field of tension, then we no longer have to feel lost and can begin to discern the direction in which we want to move.

The Beginning of the Spiritual Life

The development of this inner sensitivity is the beginning of a spiritual life. It seems that the emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity has at times made us forget to develop the sensitivity that helps us to listen to our own inner voices. Sometimes one wonders if the fact that so many people ask support, advice and counsel from so many other people is not, in large part, due to their having lost contact with their innermost self. They ask: Should I go to school or look for a job, should I become a doctor or a lawyer, should I marry or remain single, should I leave my position or stay where I am, should I go into the military or refuse to go to war, should I obey my superior or follow my own inclination, should I live a poor life or gain more money for the costly education of my children? There are not enough counselors in the world to help with all these hard questions, and sometimes one feels as if one half of the world is asking advice of the other half while both sides are sitting in the same darkness.

On the other hand, when our insecurity does not lead us to others for help, how often does it lead us against others in self-defense? Sometimes it seems that gossip, condemnation of other people's behavior and outright attacks against their life choices are more a sign of our own self-doubt than of our solidly grounded convictions.

Maybe the most important advice to all searching people is the advice that Rainer Maria Rilke gave to the

young man who asked him if he should become a poet. Rilke says:

You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now . . . I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: *must* I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "*I must*," then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.¹

To Live the Question

By slowly converting our loneliness into a deep solitude, we create that precious space where we can discover the voice telling us about our inner necessity—that is, our vocation. Unless our questions, problems and concerns are tested and matured in solitude, it is not realistic to expect answers that are really our own. How many people can claim their ideas, opinions and viewpoints as their own? Sometimes intellectual conversations boil down to the capacity to quote the right authority at the right time. Even the most intimate concerns, such as the

concerns about the meaning and value of life and death, can become victims of the fashion of the time. Frequently, we are restlessly looking for answers, going from door to door, from book to book, or from school to school, without having really listened carefully and attentively to the questions. Rilke says to the young poet:

I want to beg you as much as I can . . . to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves. . . . Do not now seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer . . . take whatever comes with great trust, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your innermost being, take it upon yourself and hate nothing.²

This is a very difficult task, because in our world we are constantly pulled away from our innermost self and encouraged to look for answers instead of listening to the questions. A lonely person has no inner time nor inner rest to wait and listen. He wants answers and wants them here and now. But in solitude we can pay attention to our inner self. This has nothing to do with egocentrism or unhealthy introspection because, in the words of Rilke, "what is going on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love."³ In solitude we can become present to ourselves. There we can live, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh says, "like a child or a saint in the immediacy of here and now."⁴ There "every day, every act is an island, washed by time and space and has an island's completion."⁵ There we also can become present to others by reaching out to them, not greedy for attention and affection but offering our own selves to help build a

community of love. Solitude does not pull us away from our fellow human beings but instead makes real fellowship possible. Few people have expressed this better than the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who spent the last years of his life living as a hermit but whose contemplative solitude brought him into very intimate contact with others. On January 12, 1950, he wrote in his diary:

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others.⁶

As his life grew in spiritual maturity, Merton came to see with a penetrating clarity that solitude did not separate him from his contemporaries but instead brought him into a deep communion with them. How powerful this insight was for Merton himself is evident from the moving passage he wrote after a short visit to Louisville where he had watched the people in a busy shopping district. He writes:

. . . though "out of the world" we [monks] are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in these words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others." . . . It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is

a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a highly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them—and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone, they are not "they" but my own self. There are not strangers!⁷

His own personal experience taught Merton that solitude not only deepens our affection for others but also is the place where real community becomes possible. Although Merton himself lived as a monk first in a monastic community and later in a hermitage, it is clear from this and other writings that what really counts for him is not the physical solitude but the solitude of the heart.

Without the solitude of heart, the intimacy of friendship, marriage and community life cannot be creative.

Without the solitude of heart, our relationships with others easily become needy and greedy, sticky and clinging, dependent and sentimental, exploitative and parasitic, because without the solitude of heart we cannot experience the others as different from ourselves but only as people who can be used for the fulfillment of our own, often hidden, needs.

The mystery of love is that it protects and respects the aloneness of the other and creates the free space where he can convert his loneliness into a solitude that can be shared. In this solitude we can strengthen each other by mutual respect, by careful consideration of each other's individuality, by an obedient distance from each other's privacy and by a reverent understanding of the sacredness of the human heart. In this solitude we encourage each other to enter into the silence of our innermost being and discover there the voice that calls us beyond the limits of human togetherness to a new communion. In this solitude we can slowly become aware of a presence of him who embraces friends and lovers and offers us the freedom to love each other, because he loved us first (see 1 John 4:19).

Holy Ground

All this might sound like a new sort of romanticism, but our own very concrete experiences and observations will help us to recognize this as realism. Often we must confess that the experience of our loneliness is stronger than that of our solitude and that our words about solitude are spoken out of the painful silence of loneliness. But there are happy moments of direct knowing, affirming our hopes and encouraging us in our search for that deep solitude where we can sense an inner unity and live in union with our fellow human beings and our God.

I vividly remember the day on which a man who had been a student in one of my courses came back to the school and entered my room with the disarming remark: "I have no problems this time, no questions to ask you. I do not need counsel or advice, but I simply want to celebrate some time with you." We sat on the ground facing each other and talked a little about what life had been for us in the last year, about our work, our common friends, and about the restlessness of our hearts. Then slowly as the minutes passed by we became silent. Not an embarrassing silence but a silence that could bring us closer together than the many small and big events of the last year. We would hear a few cars pass and the noise of someone who was emptying a trash can somewhere. But that did not hurt. The silence which grew between us was warm, gentle and vibrant. Once in a while we looked at each other with the beginning of a smile pushing away the last remnants of fear and suspicion. It seemed that while the silence grew deeper around us we became more and more aware of a presence embracing both of us. Then he said, "It is good to be here" and I said, "Yes, it is good to be together again," and after that we were silent again for a long period. And as a deep peace filled the empty space between us he said hesitantly, "When I look at you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ." I did not feel startled, surprised or in need of protesting, but I could only say, "It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me." "Yes," he said, "He indeed is in our midst," and then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years, "From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground." And when he left I

knew that he had revealed to me what community really means.

Community as an Inner Quality

This experience explains what Rainer Maria Rilke meant when he said, "Love . . . consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other"⁸ and what Anne Morrow Lindbergh had in mind when she wrote, "I feel we are all islands in a common sea."⁹ It made me see that the togetherness of friends and lovers can become moments in which we can enter into a common solitude which is not restricted by time and place. How often don't we dream about being together with friends without realizing that our dreams are searching for much more than any factual reunion will ever be able to realize? But slowly we can become aware of the possibility of making our human encounters into moments by which our solitude grows and expands itself to embrace more and more people into the community of our life. It indeed is possible for all those with whom we stayed for a long time or for only a moment to become members of that community since, by their encounter in love, all the ground between them and us has indeed become holy ground, and those who leave can stay in the hospitable solitude of our heart. Friendship is one of the most precious gifts of life, but physical proximity can be the way as well as in the way of its full realization.

A few times in my life I had the seemingly strange sensation that I felt closer to my friends in their absence than in their presence. When they were gone, I had a strong desire to meet them again but I could not avoid a certain emotion of disappointment when the meeting was realized. Our physical presence to each

other prevented us from a full encounter. As if we sensed that we were more for each other than we could express. As if our individual concrete characters started functioning as a wall behind which we kept our deepest personal selves hidden. The distance created by a temporary absence helped me to see beyond their characters and revealed to me their greatness and beauty as persons which formed the basis of our love.

Kahlil Gibran wrote:

When you part from your friend, you grieve not: For that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.¹⁰

Living together with friends is an exceptional joy, but our lives will be sad if that becomes the aim of our strivings. Having a harmonious team working in unity of heart and mind is a gift from heaven, but if our own sense of worth depends on that situation we are sad people. Letters of friends are good to receive, but we should be able to live happily without them. Visits are gifts to be valued, but without them we should not fall into the temptation of a brooding mood. Phone calls, "just to say hello," can fill us with gratitude, but when we expect them as a necessary way to sedate our fear of being left alone, we are becoming the easy victims of our self-complaints. We are always in search of a community that can offer us a sense of belonging, but it is important to realize that being together in one place, one house, one city or one country is only secondary to the fulfillment of our legitimate desire.

Friendship and community are, first of all, inner qualities allowing human togetherness to be the playful expression of a much larger reality. They can never be

claimed, planned or organized, but in our innermost self the place can be formed where they can be received as gifts.

This inner sense of friendship and community sets us free to live a "worldly" life even in the seclusion of a room, since no one should be excluded from our solitude. But it also allows us to travel light vast distances because for those who share their solitude without fear, all the ground between people has become holy ground.

So our loneliness can grow into solitude. There are days, weeks and maybe months and years during which we are so overwhelmed by our sense of loneliness that we can hardly believe that the solitude of heart is within our horizon. But when we have once sensed what this solitude can mean, we will never stop searching for it. Once we have tasted this solitude a new life becomes possible, in which we can become detached from false ties and attached to God and each other in a surprisingly new way.

Chapter 3

A CREATIVE RESPONSE

Reactionary Life Style

The movement from loneliness to solitude is not a movement of a growing withdrawal but is instead a movement toward a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time. The movement from loneliness to solitude can make it possible to convert slowly our fearful reactions into a loving response.

As long as we are trying to run away from our loneliness we are constantly looking for distractions with the inexhaustible need to be entertained and kept busy. We become the passive victims of a world asking for our idolizing attention. We become dependent on the shifting chain of events leading us into quick changes of mood, capricious behavior and, at times, revengeful violence. Then our life becomes a spastic and often destructive sequence of actions and reactions pulling us away from our inner selves.

It is not so difficult to see how "reactionary" we tend to be: that is, how often our lives become a series of nervous and often anxious reactions to the stimuli of our surroundings. We often are very, very busy, and usually very tired as a result, but we should ask ourselves how

much of our reading and talking, visiting and lobbying, lecturing and writing, is more part of an impulsive reaction to the changing demands of our surroundings than an action that was born out of our own center. We probably shall never reach the moment of a "pure action," and it even can be questioned how realistic or healthy it is to make that our goal. But it seems of great importance to know with an experiential knowledge the difference between an action that is triggered by a change in the surrounding scene and an action that has ripened in our hearts through careful listening to the world in which we live. The movement from loneliness to solitude should lead to a gradual conversion from an anxious reaction to a loving response. Loneliness leads to quick, often spastic, reactions which make us prisoners of our constantly changing world. But in solitude of heart we can listen to the events of the hour, the day and the year and slowly "formulate," give form to, a response that is really our own. In solitude we can pay careful attention to the world and search for an honest response.

Alertness in Solitude

Not too long ago a priest told me that he cancelled his subscription to the *New York Times* because he felt that the endless stories about war, crime, power games and political manipulation only disturbed his mind and heart and prevented him from meditation and prayer.

That is a sad story because it suggests that only by denying the world can you live in it, that only by surrounding yourself by an artificial, self-induced quietude can you live a spiritual life. A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes

part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response.

It is this alertness in solitude that can change our life indeed. It makes all the difference in the world how we look at and relate to our own history through which the world speaks to us.

When I look back at the last twenty years, I see that I find myself in a place and situation I had not even dreamt of when I, together with 28 classmates, prostrated myself on the floor of a Dutch Cathedral on the day of my ordination. I had hardly heard about Martin Luther King and racial problems, nor did I know the names of John F. Kennedy and Dag Hammarskjöld. I had seen the old fat Cardinal Roncalli on a pilgrimage to Padua and thought of him as an example of clerical decadency. I had read wild books about political intrigues in the Kremlin and felt happy that such things were impossible in the free world. I had heard more than I could bear about the Jewish concentration camps but realized that they belonged to a world of the older generation and were incompatible with my own. And now, only a few years later, my mind and heart are full of memories and facts that have molded me into a quite different person than I ever expected to be. Now, while able to see the end of my life cycle as well as its beginning, I realize that I have only one life to live and that it will be a life covering a period of history of which I not only am a part but which I also helped to shape. Now I see that I cannot just point to Dallas, Viet Nam, My Lai and Watergate as the explanation of why my life was different than I had foreseen, but have to search for the roots of these names in the center of my own solitude.

In our solitude, our history no longer can remain a random collection of disconnected incidents and accidents but has to become a constant call for the change of heart and mind. There we can break through the fatalistic chain of cause and effect and listen with our inner senses to the deeper meaning of the actualities of everyday life. There the world no longer is diabolic, dividing us into "fors" and "againsts" but becomes symbolic, asking us to unite and reunite the outer with the inner events. There the killing of a president, the success of a moonshot, the destruction of cities by cruel bombing and the disintegration of a government by the lust for power, as well as the many personal disappointments and pains, no longer can be seen as unavoidable concomitants of our life, but all become urgent invitations to a response; that is, a personal engagement.

Molding Interruptions

While visiting the University of Notre Dame, where I had been a teacher for a few years, I met an older experienced professor who had spent most of his life there. And while we strolled over the beautiful campus, he said with a certain melancholy in his voice, "You know, . . . my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."

Don't we often look at the many events of our lives as big or small interruptions, interrupting many of our plans, projects and life schemes? Don't we feel an inner protest when a student interrupts our reading, bad weather our summer, illness our well-scheduled plans, the death of a dear friend our peaceful state of mind, a cruel war our ideas about the goodness of man, and the

many harsh realities of life our good dreams about it? And doesn't this unending row of interruptions build in our hearts feelings of anger, frustration and even revenge, so much so that at times we see the real possibility that growing old can become synonymous with growing bitter?

But what if our interruptions are in fact our opportunities, if they are challenges to an inner response by which growth takes place and through which we come to the fullness of being? What if the events of our history are molding us as a sculptor molds his clay, and if it is only in a careful obedience to these molding hands that we can discover our real vocation and become mature people? What if all the unexpected interruptions are in fact the invitations to give up old-fashioned and outmoded styles of living and are opening up new unexplored areas of experience? And finally: What if our history does not prove to be a blind impersonal sequence of events over which we have no control, but rather reveals to us a guiding hand pointing to a personal encounter in which all our hopes and aspirations will reach their fulfillment?

Then our life would indeed be a different life because then fate becomes opportunity, wounds a warning and paralysis an invitation to search for deeper sources of vitality. Then we can look for hope in the middle of crying cities, burning hospitals and desperate parents and children. Then we can cast off the temptation of despair and speak about the fertile tree while witnessing the dying of the seed. Then indeed we can break out of the prison of an anonymous series of events and listen to the God of history who speaks to us in the center of our solitude and respond to his ever new call for conversion.

A Contrite Heart

It is tragic to see how the religious sentiment of the West has become so individualized that concepts such as "a contrite heart," have come to refer only to personal experiences of guilt and the willingness to do penance for it. The awareness of our impurity in thoughts, words and deeds can indeed put us in a remorseful mood and create in us the hope for a forgiving gesture. But if the catastrophic events of our days, the wars, mass murders, unbridled violence, crowded prisons, torture chambers, the hunger and illness of millions of people and the unnamable misery of a major part of the human race is safely kept outside the solitude of our hearts, our contrition remains no more than a pious emotion.

The newspaper of the day on which this is written shows a picture of three Portuguese soldiers, two of whom are pulling out the arms of a naked prisoner while the third cuts off his head. That same paper reports that a Dallas policeman killed a twelve-year-old handcuffed boy while interrogating him in a patrol car, and that a Japanese 747 Jumbo Jet with 122 passengers was hijacked and flown to an unknown destination. It also reveals that the U. S. Air Force dropped 145 million dollars worth of bombs on Cambodia during a period in which the President declared publicly that the neutrality of that country was fully respected. It gives a gruesome description of the electrical torture techniques used in Greece and Turkey. All of that "news" is simply mentioned as secondary items whereas the headlines speak about break-ins, lies and the use of huge sums of money by the highest officials in the government, an event described as the greatest tragedy in the history of this country. And

today's newspaper is not different from yesterday's and is not likely to differ much from tomorrow's.

Shouldn't that crush our hearts and make us bow our heads in an endless sorrow? Shouldn't that bring all human beings who believe that life is worth living together in a common contrition and a public penance? Shouldn't that bring us finally to a confession that we as a people have sinned and need forgiveness and healing? Shouldn't this be enough to force us to break out of our individual pious shells and stretch out our arms with the words:

From the depths I call to you, Yahweh,
Lord, listen to my cry for help!
Listen compassionately
to my pleading!

If you never overlooked our sins, Yahweh,
Lord, could anyone survive?
But you do forgive us:
and for that we revere you.

I wait for Yahweh, my soul waits for him,
I rely on his promise,
my soul relies on the Lord
more than a watchman on the coming of dawn.

Let Israel rely on Yahweh
as much as the watchman on the dawn!
For it is with Yahweh that mercy is to be found,
and a generous redemption;
it is he who redeems Israel
from all their sins.
(Psalm 130)

The Burden of Reality

Can we carry the burden of reality? How can we remain open to all human tragedies and aware of the vast

ocean of human suffering without becoming mentally paralyzed and depressed? How can we live a healthy and creative life when we are constantly reminded of the fate of the millions who are poor, sick, hungry and persecuted? How can we even smile when we keep being confronted by pictures of tortures and executions?

I do not know the answer to these questions. There are people in our midst who have allowed the pain of the world to enter so deeply into their hearts that it has become their vocation to remind us constantly, mostly against our will, of the sins of this world. There are even a few saints who have become so much a part of the human condition and have identified themselves to such a degree with the misery of their fellow human beings that they refuse happiness for themselves as long as there are suffering people in this world. Although they irritate us and although we would like to dispose of them by labeling them masochists or doomsday prophets, they are indispensable reminders that no lasting healing will ever take place without a solidarity of heart. These few "extremists" or "fanatics" force us to ask ourselves how many games we play with ourselves and how many walls we keep erecting to prevent ourselves from knowing and feeling the burden of human solidarity.

Maybe, for the time being, we have to accept the many fluctuations between knowing and not knowing, seeing and not seeing, feeling and not feeling, between days in which the whole world seems like a rose garden and days in which our hearts seem tied to a millstone, between moments of ecstatic joy and moments of gloomy depression, between the humble confession that the newspaper holds more than our souls can bear and the realization that it is only through facing up to the reality of our world that we can grow into our own responsibility. Maybe we have to be tolerant toward our own avoid-

ances and denials in the conviction that we cannot force ourselves to face what we are not ready to respond to and in the hope that in one future day we will have the courage and strength to open our eyes fully and see without being destroyed. All this might be the case as long as we remember that there is no hope in denial or avoidance, neither for ourselves nor for anyone else, and that new life can only be born out of the seed planted in crushed soil. Indeed God, our Lord, "will not scorn this crushed and broken heart" (Psalm 51:17).

What keeps us from opening ourselves to the reality of the world? Could it be that we cannot accept our powerlessness and are only willing to see those wounds that we can heal? Could it be that we do not want to give up our illusion that we are masters over our world and, therefore, create our own Disneyland where we can make ourselves believe that all events of life are safely under control? Could it be that our blindness and deafness are signs of our own resistance to acknowledging that we are not the Lord of the Universe? It is hard to allow these questions to go beyond the level of rhetoric and to really sense in our innermost self how much we resent our powerlessness.

Protest Out of Solitude

But life can teach us that although the events of the day are out of our hands, they should never be out of our hearts, that instead of becoming bitter our lives can yield to the wisdom that only from the heart a creative response can come forth. When the answer to our world remains hanging between our minds and our hands, it remains weak and superficial. When our protests against war, segregation and social injustice do not reach beyond the level of a reaction, then our indignation becomes

self-righteous, our hope for a better world degenerates into a desire for quick results, and our generosity is soon exhausted by disappointments. Only when our mind has descended into our heart can we expect a lasting response to well up from our innermost self.

Many of those who worked hard for civil rights and were very active in the peace movement of the sixties have grown tired and often cynical. When they discovered that the situation was out of their hands, that little could be done, that no visible changes took place, they lost their vitality and fell back on their wounded selves, escaped into a world of dreams and fantasies, or joined spitefully the crowd they had been protesting against. It is, therefore, not surprising to find many of the old activists struggling with their frustrations in psychotherapy, denying them by drugs or trying to alleviate them in the context of new cults. If any criticism can be made of the sixties, it is not that protest was meaningless but that it was not deep enough, in the sense that it was not rooted in the solitude of the heart. When only our minds and hands work together we quickly become dependent on the results of our actions and tend to give up when they do not materialize. In the solitude of the heart we can truly listen to the pains of the world because there we can recognize them not as strange and unfamiliar pains, but as pains that are indeed our own. There we can see that what is most universal is most personal and that indeed nothing human is strange to us. There we can feel that the cruel reality of history is indeed the reality of the human heart, our own included, and that to protest asks, first of all, for a confession of our own participation in the human condition. There we can indeed respond.

It would be paralyzing to proclaim that we, as individuals, are responsible for all human suffering, but it is a liberating message to say that we are called to respond to

it. Because out of an inner solidarity with our fellow humans the first attempts to alleviate these pains can come forth.

Compassion

It is this inner solidarity which prevents self-righteousness and makes compassion possible. Thomas Merton, the monk, expresses this well when he writes:

Once God has called you to solitude, everything you touch leads you further into solitude. Everything that affects you builds you into a hermit, as long as you do not insist on doing the work yourself and building your own kind of hermitage. What is my new desert? The name of it is compassion. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool, it shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things.¹

The paradox of Merton's life indeed is that his withdrawal from the world brought him into closer contact with it. The more he was able to convert his restless loneliness into a solitude of heart, the more he could discover the pains of his world in his own inner center and respond to them. His compassionate solidarity with the human struggle made him a spokesman for many who, although lacking his talent for writing, shared his solitude. How much Merton became aware of his responsibilities in solitude becomes clear when he writes:

That I should have been born in 1915, that I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Viet Nam and the Watts riots are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved.²

And not without a touch of sarcasm he adds:

... it has become transparently obvious that mere automatic "rejection of the world" and "contempt for the world" is in fact not a choice but the evasion of a choice. The man who pretends that he can turn his back on Auschwitz, or Viet Nam and act as if they were not there is simply bluffing. I think that this is getting to be generally admitted, even by monks.³

Compassion born in solitude makes us very much aware of our own historicity. We are not called to respond to generalities but to the concrete facts with which we are confronted day after day. A compassionate man can no longer look at these manifestations of evil and death as disturbing interruptions of his life plan but rather has to confront them as an opportunity for the conversion of himself and his fellow human beings. Every time in history that men and women have been able to respond to the events of their world as an occasion to change their hearts, an inexhaustible source of generosity and new life has been opened, offering hope far beyond the limits of human prediction.

Solidarity in Pain

When we think about the people who have given us hope and have increased the strength of our soul, we might discover that they were not the advice givers,

warners or moralists, but the few who were able to articulate in words and actions the human condition in which we participate and who encouraged us to face the realities of life. Preachers who reduce mysteries to problems and offer Band-Aid-type solutions are depressing because they avoid the compassionate solidarity out of which healing comes forth. But Tolstoy's description of the complex emotions of Anna Karenina, driving her to suicide, and Graham Greene's presentation of the burned out case of the Belgian architect Querry, whose search for meaning leads him to his death in the African jungle, can give us a new sense of hope. Not because of any solution they offered but because of the courage to enter so deeply into human suffering and speak from there. Neither Kierkegaard nor Sartre nor Camus nor Hammar-skjöld nor Solzhenitsyn has offered solutions, but many who read their words find new strength to pursue their own personal search. Those who do not run away from our pains but touch them with compassion bring healing and new strength. The paradox indeed is that the beginning of healing is in the solidarity with the pain. In our solution-oriented society it is more important than ever to realize that wanting to alleviate pain without sharing it is like wanting to save a child from a burning house without the risk of being hurt. It is in solitude that this compassionate solidarity takes its shape.

The movement from loneliness to solitude, therefore, is not a movement of a growing withdrawal from, but rather a movement toward, a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time. The movement from loneliness to solitude is a movement that allows us to perceive interruptions as occasions for a conversion of heart, which makes our responsibilities a vocation instead of a burden, and which creates the inner space where a compassionate solidarity with our fellow human beings be-

comes possible. The movement from loneliness to solitude is a movement by which we reach out to our innermost being to find there our great healing powers, not as a unique property to be defended but as a gift to be shared with all human beings. And so, the movement from loneliness to solitude leads us spontaneously to the movement from hostility to hospitality. It is this second movement that can encourage us to reach out creatively to the many whom we meet on our way.

REACHING OUT TO OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

*The Second Movement:
From Hostility to Hospitality*

