

# Lonely together

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**Two new books on the loneliness of modern life leave *Caleb Crain* feeling unconvinced and unconsoled.**

**Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection** John T. Cacioppo & William Patrick Norton Dh96

"The human being is by nature a social animal," Aristotle wrote in his treatise on politics. The proof, he believed, lay in the fact that "the human being alone among the animals has speech." Bees buzz; sheep bleat; if humans speak, they must be even more gregarious. So integral are groups to human nature, Aristotle believed, that a person who tries to go it alone must be something other than human - "either a beast or a god."

Alas, by Aristotle's definition, more and more people are abandoning their humanity every year. Industrialization brings material comforts, and representative democracy brings political power, and as soon as people have these goods they seem to use them to procure privacy and independence - and, inadvertently, social isolation. Instead of exchanging gossip while walking a footpath, we honk at one another from inside the bubbles of our automobiles. Instead of amicably trading opinions over a leisurely cup of tea, we leave anonymous vitriol in the comments sections of blogs. In *Loneliness*, the psychologist John T Cacioppo and the science writer William Patrick report on the situation in the United States: Between 1985 and 2004, the number of Americans who said they had no close confidants tripled. Single-parent households are on the rise, and the US Census estimates that 30 percent more Americans will live alone in 2010 than did so in 1980. As the American way of life spreads around the world, no doubt loneliness is being exported with it.

People do like to be alone sometimes. But no one likes to feel lonely - to feel that they are alone against their will, or that the social contacts they do have are without deeper meaning. According to Cacioppo and Patrick the feeling of loneliness is the least of it. They present scientific evidence suggesting that loneliness seriously burdens human health. By middle age, the lonely are less

likely to exercise and more likely to eat a high-fat diet, and they report experiencing a greater number of stressful events. Loneliness correlates with an increased risk of Alzheimer's. During a four-year study, lonely senior citizens were more likely to end up in nursing homes; during a nine-year study, people with fewer social ties were two to three times more likely to die.

To explain why loneliness hurts so bad, Cacioppo and Patrick turn to evolutionary psychology. Like Aristotle, they believe that humans were designed to live together. They posit that a willingness to cooperate helped propel humans to the top of the food chain, and they agree with the emerging consensus among evolutionary psychologists that human brains grew powerful in order to interpret the signals humans exchanged as they cooperated. (Where did you put the eland shank? In the cave? Really? But I thought you said a man-eating ocelot lived there.) The earliest human societies were made up of hunter-gatherers who shared everything. On the prehistoric savannahs where humans evolved, to be alone was dangerous, and so loneliness, for humans, is a distress signal akin to pain, thirst, cold, or hunger. It burdens the human body and mind so as to force us into company, where we will be safer.

It is through the mind that loneliness damages the body, and Cacioppo and Patrick explain a number of psychological experiments, conducted by themselves and others, that offer clues about the mechanism. Loneliness erodes will power, for one thing. If subjects are told for the purposes of experiment that they will face a lonely future, they score lower on intelligence tests and abandon tasks sooner. If cookies are set before subjects who have been told that no one else in the experiment wants to work with them, they eat twice as many as those who have been told that everyone else in the experiment wants to work with them.

The mind's perception of social information seems particularly distorted. In experiments, lonely people recall social information more accurately but are worse at interpreting the emotional meaning of briefly displayed faces. They are more likely than non-lonely people to attribute failure to themselves and success to the situation they find themselves in. In a game where two players split \$10 (Dh37) if they agree on how much each one gets, lonely players accept unfair divisions more often. When Cacioppo's team watched the brains of lonely and non-lonely people under a functional magnetic resonance imaging scanner, they noticed that the lonely respond more strongly to pleasant-looking objects than to pleasant-looking people. When shown unpleasant images, however, the lonely pay more attention to people. Cacioppo and Patrick suggest that these distortions of perception might trap a chronically lonely person in "a defensive crouch" that

keeps others at bay. "Fear of attack fosters a greater tendency to preemptively blame others," they write. "Sometimes this fear makes us lash out. Sometimes it makes us desperate to please, and sometimes it causes us to play the victim."

With this plausible hypothesis, we approach the chief flaw of Cacioppo and Patrick's book. In addition to a summary of the damage caused by loneliness and a reasonable-sounding (if somewhat rambling) explanation of it grounded in evolutionary psychology, Cacioppo and Patrick offer a way out. "With a little encouragement, most anyone can emerge from the prison of distorted social cognition and learn to modify self-defeating interactions," they promise. You, too, can learn "the secret to gaining access to social connection and social contentment." In their closing chapters, Cacioppo and Patrick begin to sound like a late-night television infomercial. Cacioppo even reveals that he's a "scientific consultant" for an online dating service.

You already know the advice that Cacioppo and Patrick are recommending, so let me save you the price of the book: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you're lonely and want people to pay attention to you, Cacioppo and Patrick recommend that you pay attention to them. It's great advice, of course. Time-tested. Easy to remember. And I don't doubt that it works, for those able to follow through with it. But it will be useless to those too trapped by circumstances, habits, or brain chemicals to change their ways by mere will power - which, as Cacioppo and Patrick show, is often undermined by loneliness. There's also very little science behind it. Cacioppo and Patrick cite evidence that mortality drops 25 percent among those who regularly attend religious services. Strength of religious feeling has nothing to do with the health benefit - mere attendance is all that's required - and Cacioppo and Patrick infer that "seeing others committed to compassionate helping ... reinforces various positives, including a healthier lifestyle." That's not quite proof that the Golden Rule cures loneliness, though. It suggests, rather, that joining a church, mosque or synagogue cures loneliness. (Indeed, joining any organization at all might help; Cacioppo and Patrick report that mortality is lower in American states whose citizens belong to more groups of whatever kind.) And it should perhaps be noted that none of the major religions promise that the Golden Rule will win you friends and lovers. They merely say it's the right thing to do. For the sake of clarity, let me repeat that I think so, too. But you don't need Cacioppo and Patrick to tell you so, and there's no reason to believe that being told to practise the Golden Rule will make you less lonely - or even to believe that being told to practise it will cause you to practise it. Cacioppo and Patrick have not tested their proposed remedy with the same scientific rigour that they have tested their claims about loneliness's physiological effects and psychological mechanisms.

Of course science doesn't have a monopoly on the interpretation of a human phenomenon like loneliness. Literature and political philosophy have much to say as well, and in another recent book, *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, Thomas Dumm turns to such thinkers and artists as William Shakespeare, Hannah Arendt, Herman Melville, Arthur Miller, Sigmund Freud and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Dumm writes that his "core insight" is that loneliness explains much of modern political life, and he weaves into his analysis a partial account of what he felt as he lost his wife, who died in 2003 after struggling for four and a half years with cancer. The story of his widowerhood appeals to the reader's sympathy. It is therefore somewhat painful to be disappointed by his analysis, which is vague and breaks no new ground.

Dumm defines loneliness as "the experience of the pathos of disappearance." The definition fails to distinguish loneliness from grief, and it doesn't help Dumm reach any new insights. It isn't clear, however, that Dumm intends to reach any. For the most part, he presents the insights of others, retelling, with the occasional critical remark, Arendt's theory that totalitarian governments prefer their citizens lonely, Freud's distinction between successful mourning and stalled brooding, the plot of the movie *Paris, Texas* and Judith Butler's idea that the Bush administration shunted into violence the emotional energy that ought to have gone into grieving over America's losses of September 11.

Such dependence on the thinking of others is hardly a fault. Writers like Alain de Botton have had great success in making the ideas of the Western tradition accessible and intriguing to new readers. But when Dumm does stray from his primary texts, he fails to convince the reader to follow. Though Dumm is a professor of political philosophy, *Loneliness as a Way of Life* is in method a work of literary criticism, and as a reader, Dumm is sloppy. For example, consider his discussion of a famous passage in Emerson's essay *Experience*. Emerson expected the death of his young son to scar him but it didn't. "It was caducous," Emerson wrote. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *caducous* is "applied to organs or parts that fall off naturally when they have served their purpose", such as autumn leaves after they have turned. Dumm misses the beautiful metaphor implicit in the word. He defines it simply as "the falling off of a limb", which sounds reptilian, and then wanders irrelevantly into a discussion of words near it in the dictionary, including *cad*, *cadet* and *cadre*. Elsewhere Dumm writes of his late wife that in her absence "she becomes, as Emerson says, a part of my estate," but in fact Emerson wrote that "in the death of my son ... I seem to have lost a beautiful estate," so Dumm has reversed Emerson's meaning.

Such errors may seem picayune, but in literary criticism, interpretations are built out of observations. Dumm's lapses in noticing eventually lead him to claim, improbably, that in Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, "Ishmael is Pip."

Dumm also is hindered by a high-academic style whose hallmarks are rhetorical questions ("Why is Cordelia so unhappy?"), wildly general assertions ("Capitalism may be thought of as a symptom of the lonely self"), the po-faced delivery of puns ("Our very reality is fundamentally shaped by reality") and the heavy-handed use of the literary figure of chiasmus ("Love is all we need to overcome absence - and loneliness is the absence we cannot overcome"). The style is unfortunate. You might even liken it to a defensive crouch. The professor alone among the animals has tenure. He should use it to communicate - not to set himself apart.

If industrial capitalism is fostering loneliness, then neither science nor political philosophy is likely to save us from it. I happen to fare poorly at the cookie-eating experiment described above and suspect myself, for this and other reasons, of not having the most thoroughly socialized personality, so I don't dare offer any advice of my own. But I will mention a use of literature overlooked by Dumm: solidarity in loneliness. It's strangely pleasant to read about the runaway boy in Denton Welch's novel *Maiden Voyage*, or about the disillusioned widow in Angus Wilson's *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, even if the reader has no expectation of learning from the characters' predicaments. One isn't any less alone for reading them, but then loneliness has nothing to do with the number of actual people one is in touch with, even in Cacioppo and Patrick's experiments. Some books make solitude bearable.

*Caleb Crain's novella Sweet Grafton appears in the winter 2008 issue of n+1. He writes about history and literature for The New Yorker, the London Review of Books and other publications.*

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