

A Weapon Against Loneliness

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Every once and a while, I hear an interview that is so electrifying that everything else in the world vanishes. That's exactly what happened to me just three days ago. The program was Late Night Live on ABC Radio National, and Philip Adams' guest was economist and researcher Noreena Hertz. She spoke about her new book *The Lonely Century*, and as soon as the interview ended I bought the book and downloaded it. You will be amazed to hear that I haven't yet managed to plow through the whole of the 300 pages, but I will definitely finish it in the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, there is so much food for thought just packed into the early chapters.

Through Hertz's eyes, I got an eye-opening introduction to the service industry that has sprung up to assist those who are lonely. I learned that there's a website called Rent-a-friend. I checked and discovered that the site has eleven pages of people available to rent in one-hour increments just in the metropolitan Adelaide area. I heard the story of a very successful businessman in Los Angeles who hires a woman to come and cuddle with him weekly. He credits her with a much improved sense of well-being in his life, even though he's paying for the service. I learned that in Japan, elderly women often commit petty crimes such as shoplifting so that they'll get to go to jail. Prison, it turns out, is an accidental but very lovely community for these women. As soon as they're released, they re-offend so that they can go back to jail.

I also learned much about the very very high costs of loneliness both to individuals and to society: We can easily imagine that lonely people are miserable. Loneliness can easily turn to depression and often even to suicidal ideation. But I learned that loneliness has well-documented and dramatic impacts on physical health as well. Simply put, social isolation is more hazardous than smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Study after study has shown that people who are connected, whether through a spouse, a friend, or a community, live much longer and healthier lives.

Hertz also speaks about the dangers of loneliness to our society. Researchers have demonstrated that lonely people are more paranoid and more prone to attacks of rage than people who are not. It's important to appreciate that up until relatively recently in human history, if you were alone, you were quite likely to be eaten by a saber-toothed tiger. Physiologically, lonely people often find themselves stuck in fight-or-flight mode without being aware of it, poised to do battle with that tiger. This makes them more suspicious of authority figures in their lives including local and national governments, and it makes them more susceptible to those who can prey upon their anger and isolation. Just think about how frequently those who commit mass shootings are described as loners and isolated. Hertz suspects that the recent rise of populism and anti-government sentiments in can in part be blamed on the epidemic of loneliness.

One of Hertz's central points is that loneliness truly is an epidemic. Data in nearly every country in the world shows that a substantial percentage of the

population feels lonely. Some examples: 1 in 8 people in the UK say they do not have a single close friend. In the US, 1 out of 5 millennials say they have no friends at all. Across the OECD, the percentage of 15 year-olds who say they feel lonely at school rose significantly between 2003 and 2015. Noreena Hertz, writing during the Covid-19 lockdowns that have swept the globe, appreciates that this current crisis is greatly exacerbating the pre-existing epidemic of loneliness. She notes that there have been plenty of good news stories of neighbours finally meeting one another, but lots of other stories of people feeling utterly alone. Certainly in recent weeks I've worried for my friends in Melbourne locked away from friends and family.

One reason I haven't already abandoned this book out of sheer despair is that in every chapter, Hertz provides solutions and policy strategies to reverse the trend towards loneliness. There is a great deal that can be done to help people feel less isolated. So, for example, research shows that people who help others—who reach out to those who are lonely and underserved—themselves enjoy both mental and physical benefits. A double win! On a policy level, governments can work to do more to provide services and outreach to marginalised populations such as the elderly and at-risk youth. Hertz has not written this book simply to show how dire the situation is, but to call us all to fight back and make things better.

One of the most effective ways we can rescue people from loneliness is to welcome them into community. Communities are increasingly few and far between: our current society seems to discourage meaningful interactions between neighbours. I live in a group of 18 homes and, more than two years after moving here, I still know fewer than half my neighbours. I'm guessing many of you have had an even harder time meeting those in the houses near you. Social groups like the CWA, Rotary, and the Masons are seeing their numbers fall and their members age. We know that young people often stay home and connect with each other on line. Noreena Hertz learned that some very prestigious universities in the US now routinely offer courses to new students on how to read facial and body language in in-person encounters. These bright young people arrive at university without the skills to know how to navigate basic face-to-face conversations. They need patience and a helping hand to figure out how to build friendships.

By now you've probably figured out where I'm going with this: we Jews are a community. We have our small community here at Beit Shalom, our slightly larger community which includes the other Jews of Adelaide, and then there are the millions of Jews around the world who we consider part of our family as well. Over the years, I have loved meeting people from many parts of the world who made it a priority to visit our synagogue no matter how short their stay in Adelaide. I hear from many of you about how on holidays abroad—may they return soon!--you make a special point of connecting with other Jews. Some have shared stories of friendships that began on tours or cruise ships and have been maintained for years or even decades.

This time of year reminds us of the centrality of community in our lives. Noreena Hertz points to studies that show that in pop songs over the last forty years, the term “we” is increasingly being replaced by “I.” But our High Holy Day prayers are in the plural. We have sinned, we have transgressed. God is “our God and the

God of our ancestors.” There is no forgetting that the emphasis is on us rather than on me.

This year finds nearly all Jews around the world are painfully separated from each other and from physical community. In Israel, the start of Rosh Hashanah will correspond with the beginning of a three-week lockdown of the entire country, with residents forbidden from going further than 500 metres outside their homes. In Sydney and especially in Melbourne, Progressive synagogues will meet in the holy space of the Internet, whether on Zoom or through pre-recorded services. We here in Adelaide are among the very few synagogues anywhere in the world where people are gathering, and of course we are forced to gather in different circumstances and in fewer numbers than usual. For once, I believe I can say with a fair degree of certainty that congregations tonight are offering exactly the same prayer for the new year: that we soon see a time when we can gather in the same space confidently and without fear. I’ll add an extra prayer, and that is for those who are living their lives without those meaningful connections that are so crucial. May they find friendships and love, support and affirmation. May 5781 be the year that sees the end of Covid-19 and the beginning of building a world which is closer, more interdependent, and more kind. Shana tova!