International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpsp20

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15551024.2013.766956

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Review of “Loneliness and Longing: Conscious and Unconscious Aspects,”
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Keywords: attachment; dissociation; home; intersubjective; loneliness; longing; nostalgia; schizoid; trauma

While I was in the next room, I heard a child who was afraid of the dark call out: “Do speak to me, Auntie! I’m frightened!” “Why, what good would that do? You can’t see me.” To this the child replied: “If someone speaks, it gets lighter.”
—Freud, 1917, as cited in Tedeschi, 2012, p. 103

This lovely parable, quoted by two authors in this remarkable collection of essays (Willock et al., 2012), perfectly captures the existential terror of knowing one’s separateness and the hope that interacting with others can give the lie to that knowledge. Can a voice...
light up a room? Is such a light a true light or a necessary illusion? Are we essentially alone, joined to others only in desperate fantasy, or are we at our very core in union with others, beset by mere fantasies of separateness and the inevitable annihilation that would follow such an impossibility? These questions emerge from the two extremes of psychoanalytic theory: the classical drive/conflict model versus the intersubjective systems model. Despite the fact that the notion of “loneliness” floats between these poles like a restless spirit, in the nearly 100 years following the publication of Freud’s parable, little has been written on the subject of loneliness in the literature. The classical and early object relations thinkers focus more on intrapsychic phenomena than on the interpersonal longing implicit in the idea of loneliness, whereas the more recent relational psychoanalysts and intersubjective systems theorists are more interested in dyadic enactments or emergent phenomena in the intersubjective field than in the skull-bound meanderings of the lonely soul. As Roger Frie (2012, p. 36) eloquently put it,

The challenge is that when selfhood is conceptualized as relational or social in nature, it becomes difficult to account for our basic sense of aloneness and states of loneliness. Similarly, when selfhood is viewed as separate and isolated, it becomes hard to account for the relational nature of human experience.

Loneliness might be considered a kind of transitional phenomenon, a hypnagogic state between disconnection and relatedness. As such, it has found itself an orphan in the clinical literature, much like its sufferers in the world, with one paper by Melanie Klein (1963) and another by Fromm-Reichmann (1959) to attest to its importance.

Loneliness and Longing (Willock et al., 2012) is a broad mapping of this in-between dimension of human existence; more a natural history of the subject than a comparison of psychoanalytic theories. The reader will find articles by classical analysts, analysts from the interpersonal school, relational analysts, neo-Kleinians, and mixed-modists, as well as personal essays on growing old alone, dealing with the death of a spouse, the Irish famine, the holocaust, and living in the shadow of a mother’s suicide. I was in a lonely state myself as I read this book, having recently separated from my wife of 10 years. I found myself nostalgizing, fantasizing, reorganizing the story of my life, and experiencing loss and regret more poignantly than before, as each tale touched on a hitherto unconsidered facet of my
loneliness. I had company, but it did not help much. Loneliness, I discovered, does not glue us together. It makes us restless, but does not motivate us. It is particular and diffuse at the same time, as much mood as emotion, a pervasive worldview with an urge behind it, a futile reaching out that connects to nothing and touches everything.

The pairing of the word _loneliness_ with the word _longing_ seems just right, and compelled me to look closely at the latter word for the first time. Longing seems to derive from the temporal sense of the word _long_, signifying “an excessive duration of time,” which itself is a metaphor derived from the original spatial sense of the word signifying “of great length” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1988). The jump from adjective to verb (from “this day is long” to “I long for love”) gives us clues to the strange contemporary meaning of longing. When we long, we experience time and space as extending away from something we desire. However, a literal sense of the active verb comes into play, too. By longing, we futilely try to make ourselves _longer_, to stretch hopelessly backward in time, as in Proust’s (2003) _In Search of Lost Time_, or across great reaches, as in Homer’s _The Odyssey_. Loneliness has heroic frustration built into it. Its sufferers tilt at the windmill of absence. The stories in _Loneliness and Longing_ (Willock et al., 2012) are mostly about futile quests for human connection or quests to fill forever-lost gaps in understanding.

I felt my own frustration reading these various authors (Willock et al., 2012), each locked in their own view of the topic, unaware, I imagined, of how their experiences overlapped—or did not—with those of the other writers whose pages they shared. I wanted the authors to move around the book, mix a little, and share the similarities and differences in their experiences. In this imagined get-together, I began to discern two loosely opposed cliques, perhaps bounding the full dimension of loneliness. There were those authors who saw loneliness as a pathology born out of relational trauma, the injured psyche left behind by the connected pack; and there were those authors who viewed loneliness as an essential aspect of existence, even as a positive, necessary state in some of its manifestations.

**Loneliness as Pathology**

Many in this group argue that the valance of our aloneness, whether it tilts toward a feeling of tolerable solitude or desperate loneliness, depends on “who we are with when we are alone”—in short, on the “quality of our internal objects” (Willock, 2012, p. 298). At the extreme end of the
spectrum of loneliness lie those schizoid patients who, in their struggle with dangerous, critical internal presences, give up “a large chunk of ego . . . and abandon all object relationships, external or internal” (p. 298). Willock quotes Guntrip (1969) describing “the lost heart of the self” buried snugly, or chillingly, in some internal womb or tomb, which contains “the lost capacity to love” (Willock, 2012, p. 298).

In discussing the phenomenology of loneliness, Roger Frie (2012) made a distinction similar to Guntrip’s (as cited in Willock, 2012) between the loss of a sense of relatedness, associated with depression and anxiety, and the loss of relatedness itself, which ultimately leads to psychotic states. Frie quotes Fromm-Reichman (1959): “I think that Bunswanger has come nearest to a philosophical and psychiatric definition of loneliness when he speaks of it as ‘naked existence’ and ‘naked horror’ and when he characterizes lonely people as being devoid of any interest in any goal” (Frie, 2012, p. 34, as cited in Fromm-Reichman, 1959, p. 13). In short, loneliness in its extreme schizoid form has no longing in it.

Karen Lombardi (2012), in her fascinating study of adolescent longing, considers how schizoid loneliness can masquerade as connectedness in the contemporary culture of adolescence. She describes “hooking up” as an “appetitive term . . . absent the relational ingredient” (p. 63). The old metaphor of two hearts “beating each to each” has been replaced by the concrete half-truth of body parts fitting together, independent of the solitary selves hovering above them. Even more alarming to her are the ways the Internet enables lonely teenagers to introduce their private fantasies into a digital cloud of blogs and Facebook® walls—formats that blur the boundaries of public and private in which the schizoid self can stay in pseudo-connection with a vast, unknowable audience. Hook-ups and Internet encounters involve anonymous interactions that mimic the safety of private fantasizing without provoking the internal crisis of disconnection that may lead to change. “When disembodied forms of connection replace the internal space of solitude,” she explains, “we stand in danger of creating a culture of schizoid detachment that goes unrecognized, masked by a screen of 650 buddies” (p. 66).

Other authors in the loneliness-as-pathology camp consider the phenomenon of loneliness as emerging from dissociative experiences. Anna Simha-Alpern (2012) suggests after Bromberg (2006) that lonely patients render longing unconscious not only as a defense, but also because their needs have been “ignored, ridiculed or burdensome to others” (Simha-Alpern, 2012, p. 73) and have to be dissociated. She describes her lonely
patient, Sara, whose attachment feelings had been neglected by her parents, as now experiencing longing as a dissociated self-state tucked away from consciousness most of the time, leaving behind a vague, numb loneliness without a source. She refers to Bromberg (2006), who describes how a similar patient experiences longing as a “‘not me’ ghost that haunts her . . . because her own desire to communicate it . . . becomes a source of shame in itself” (pp. 19–20).

Loneliness, then, can be conceptualized as a gap in emotional knowledge, an aching sense of incompleteness one brings into all one’s relational transactions. Jenny Kaufman’s (2012) gorgeous and moving essay about living in the shadow of her mother’s suicide describes how the unknowability of her mother and the taboo in her family against talking about her left her to live in a fantasy of what should have been a “life in the suburbs with a mother who loved and understood me” (p. 179)—in other words, left her in a state of longing toward an object that could only be considered in effigy. The fantasy here is less a schizoid defense than an attempt to fill in what simply did not exist. Without these imaginative colorings, Kaufman would have been left in a barren, static “now”—what Fromm-Reichmann (p. 13, as cited in Frie, 2012) refers to as the loneliness of “naked existence.” “I think perhaps this is the very definition of loneliness,” Kaufman explains, “living in a post-apocalyptic world, but one that impacted only me. . . . Time stood still” (p. 179).

We are used to thinking of such stark, lonely states as emerging from personal loss or childhood neglect. However, Caspary (2012), in his analysis of No Country for Old Men (McCarthy, 2005), detects a corporate imperative to dissociate relational self-states. He draws from Joel Bakan to note that the corporation “is structured both internally and in law to subordinate all means to an end: increasing profits for shareholders” (Caspary, 2012, p. 217). Individuals under the auspices of this system are pressed toward the same aim, all the while knowing themselves to be disposable participants, rather than secure members, of the corporate community that controls this agenda, producing “a fundamental estrangement from our selves and between ourselves. . . . Need becomes weakness, altruism pejoratively liberal. . . . I have to deploy my attention externally and engage in frantic activity to keep my mind off my loneliness, anxiety and guilt” (Caspary, 2012, p. 217). The structures that keep the corporate soldier in fear of the intimacy he longs for, Caspary suggests, are as much external political structures as internal psychic ones.
Similarly, Michael O’Loughlin (2012) considers how historical atrocities can pass down a feeling of loneliness, longing, and disconnection distinct from personal experience. O’Loughlin argues that the failure to memorialize the horrors of the great hunger in Ireland, neither officially by historians nor interpersonally by its survivors, represents “a collective act of dissociation,” a lacuna handed down to successive generations, that leaves unconscious “how this historically located suffering structures our way of being in the world” (p. 237). Loneliness and longing become vague unconscious states for successive generations, without source or object. He quotes Abraham and Torok (1994, p. 140):

Should a child have parents “with secrets,” parents whose speech is not exactly complementary to their unstated repressions, the child will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge—a nescience—subjected to a form of “repression” before the fact.

“What if time is not linear,” O’Loughlin wonders, “and experience is neither sequential nor cumulative? What if unformulated yearnings are merely endpoints of trauma trails that reach back into our familial and collective histories?” (p. 244).

An important first step in reclaiming the lost memory of a people is to acknowledge the silencing that occurred. O’Loughlin (2012) further asks the analyst to remain vigilant to how unconscious longings might reach back past lapses in childhood development to a collective, historical wrong for which no words have been given. He urges us to be sensitive to “spectral aspects of experience, uncanny events, silences, and intrusions . . . . Then we can begin listening to the hungry ghosts who have so much to tell us” (p. 246). In short, voice brings light.

**Existential Loneliness**

Those authors in this book (Willock et al., 2012) who see loneliness not solely as emerging from personal trauma or as an accident of culture, but who see it as an inevitable aspect of existence, roughly fall into two camps: a pessimistic camp that regards human beings as incomplete and motivated by hopeless yearnings of wholeness and an optimistic camp that views loneliness as an integrated, creative state of being.
Review of “Loneliness and Longing” 237

The Pessimistic Existentialists

Evelyn Hartman (2012) gets to the initial principles of the pessimistic view when she refers to Aristophanes’s famous origins myth as recounted in Plato’s (1989) Symposium. Aristophanes describes human beings as at one time comprising two-bodied forms, with two sets of sexual organs. Eventually, they got split into two and, in agony, sought their other halves. Aristophanes conceptualizes love as a temporary, uncertain restoration of our original oneness. However, despite the antidotal remedy of love, we are ultimately left insufficient and fated forever to impossible longings.

Freud located longing not in our ancestral past, but in the oedipal drama of individual development. Evelyn Hartman (2012) and other authors in this book (see Willock et al., 2012) wonder if the denial of the infantile wish to possess the mother as a sexual object represents a paradise lost—a “prelude to loneliness. Is the infant getting a glimpse of this pain? Is it this pain that compels him to try to refind [italics added] his early happiness?” (Hartman, 2012, p. 95) Richards and Spira (2012) utilize Brenner’s (1974) definition of loneliness as “a longing for a specific unattainable object” (Richards and Spira, 2012, p. 82). These authors also connect longing to the oedipal drama. According to classical theory, we either renounce our true incestuous desires and attach ourselves to more realistic objects, or we settle for fiery replicas. But, whether we consciously surrender or repress our primal yearnings, we remain exiles from the Garden of Eden, wandering lonely through a world that has lost some of its luster.

The notion of loneliness as longing for an unattainable object has a long history in Western culture. The ancient Greeks and Romans had a tradition of writing paraklousthryons (literally, “laments before closed doors”) in which lovers complain in verse before the locked doors of loved ones. The medieval troubadours revived the tradition of the lost or inaccessible lover, and it continues to this day in blues, pop, and country music. As Hank Williams (see http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/williams-hank-jr/im-so-lonesome-i-could-cry-976.html) put it, “The silence of a falling star, wakes up a purple sky, and as I wonder where you are, I’m so lonesome I could cry.”

Whether we find meaning in Aristophanes’s ancestral metaphor or in Freud’s developmental one, the vagaries and losses of love, not to mention the impossibility of finding a perfect match, seem to leave all of us along a continuum of loneliness. We all sing a variation of the blues. Love before
a locked door allows us to believe in the possibility that we could be fully restored to wholeness if only that door would open. Richards and Spira (2012), in their consideration of Proust’s (2003) *In Search of Lost Time*, understand Proust’s fantasy of love lost as a defense against recognizing his fundamental incompleteness. Here, the lover laments before the closed door of time itself, allowing a perfect, pristine fantasy of a world that cannot be because it already was.

But, are our losses and longings confined only to people, as the recent psychoanalytic literature would leave us to believe? Henry Seiden (2012), in his beautiful rumination in “On the Longing for Home,” suggests that our ever-present yearning for home is not only an inevitable aspect of loneliness, but lies at its core. Seiden argues that *The Odyssey* and Odysseus’s seeking of nostos (his endless journey home) is a better touchstone of the human condition than the Oedipus myth as filtered through Freud. He cites the case of a newlywed couple who refuse to buy a couch in resistance to “replacing” their homes of origin. In another case, a boy rebels against going to a barber shop after moving in with an aunt, following the death of his mother, as his mother had always cut his hair at the kitchen table. Seiden notes that nostalgia, that last refuge of the lonely, derives from a combination of the Greek word nostos (home) and algos (pain). Bowlby (1988) conceptualized his “secure base” as comprising a child’s internal working models of attachment, but one wonders if his secure base might have as much to do with nostos, a place imbued with the idea of those working models, as well as a host of other memories having to do with play and reflection and dreaming and the mundane certainties of home that provide security for the child and leave a residue of yearning in the adult who leaves it all behind.

**The Optimistic Existentialists**

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills, When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils . . . (Wordsworth, 1888, as cited in Weisser, 2012, p. 114)

Weisser quotes Wordsworth’s famous poem as she faces the possibility of living the rest of her life alone. Although still confronting bouts of loneliness, she also describes her movement from a feeling of aloneness as
abandonment to aloneness as a privilege, the pleasure of having a “room of her own”—a new kind of solitary nostos, perhaps. “When I come home,” she writes, “it is to peace, to a place that is in perfect harmony with my wishes and moods, where I control the little world I’ve made just as I did in childhood play but without the magic” (p. 117). Wordsworth’s solace in contemplating “a host of golden daffodils” and, even more so, in setting his discovery into words, she sees as an act of connection that takes the sting of exile out of loneliness. “The aesthetic imagination is not an escape from the world,” she writes, “but a certain kind of engagement with it” (p. 118).

The idea that acts of the imagination at once require loneliness and mitigate its pain is echoed by several authors in this book (Willock et al., 2012). In our loneliness, we all long to be lifted up and comforted like children, explains Classen (2012). However, do “uplifting” experiences always involve other humans? He cites Jones (2002), discussing Kohut’s consideration of non-human, uplifting experiences such as those offered by art and religion. Buechler (2012) quotes Storr (1988), noting how through solitary inner communion with thoughts, feelings, and ideas, “the creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his identity” (Buechler, 2012, p. 16, as cited in Storr, 1988, p. xiv).

Allured (2012) takes the possibilities of non-human connection to another dimension in his consideration of nature as a “relational fourth.” Solitude, he argues, can mean a union “with the non-human world of land, flora and fauna, and open space” (p. 253). She notes how “in many cultures solitude has been a primary learning methodology,” whether it be in the form of a vision-quest, a saint’s venture into the desert, or Thoreau’s voluntary exile to Walden Pond. She considers Macy’s (1991) description of Bateson’s notion of self as “the epistemological error of Occidental civilization.” She adds, “We know that the skin is not the boundary of self, since minds mutually interpenetrate. How separate are we from the oxygen in our blood vessels? When does oxygen cease to be separate from surrounding air and begin to be part of the blood/self? In the bronchiole? In the lung sack? In the windpipe? In the nostril? The self is not able to exist without its environment: it is embedded in a way that makes actual separateness impossible” (p. 260).

These authors (see Willock et al., 2012) challenge the distinction between self, other, and world as a Cartesian fallacy, one sustained by the anthropocentric prejudices of Western culture. By taking a more holistic view of self and the world, and a view of the world that includes weather, atoms,
and the elaborations of the imagination, these authors remove longing from the loneliness equation. What is there to long for if we are all one interrelating system?

The religious authors in *Loneliness and Longing* (Willock et al., 2012) take this idea one step further, seeing transcendence in loneliness. Abraham made his covenant with God on behalf of the Jewish people in “the waste, howling wilderness.” Siddhartha found enlightenment in solitude beneath the sacred fig. Jesus wandered 40 days in the desert to fend off temptation. Loneliness and spirituality seem to go hand in hand. It is possible to consider psychoanalysis as a way toward solitude, rather than away from it; a way to make aloneness compatible with at-oneness by constituting an intermediate step toward God. John Sloane (2012) describes his own analyst, “who simply by being who he was made it possible for me to reformatulate my God-representation into a receptive, respectful, responsive presence. . . . Instead of a terrible absence, there was a loving omnipresence who not only seemed to listen as my analyst had, but responded with surprising relevance to whatever I was thinking” (p. 200) God, then, becomes the answer to loneliness in all its dimensions, experienced as an external object that trumps our internal representations, or as the other, spiritual half of a self yearning for completion.

Who are we when we are alone? Are we our internal objects? Do we cease to exist except as an intersubjective epiphenomenon? Do we gain substance through an alliance with nature; through the play of the mind, “the inward eye,” as Wordsworth put it, “which is the bliss of solitude” (as cited in Weisser, 2012, p. 113); or do we regain wholeness through communion with God? It is hard to pin down loneliness. Loneliness is a little like negative space in art, an emptiness that takes form from the objects of which it is not. By considering the many ways and dimensions of this essential human phenomenon, *Loneliness and Longing* (Willock et al., 2012) begins to fill a great gap in the clinical literature.

**References**


Review of “Loneliness and Longing” 241


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