

Aloneness Beyond Loneliness

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The Moon was just coming out of the sea into a valley of clouds. The waters were still blue, and Orion was faintly visible in the pale silver sky. The white waves were all along the shore, and the fishermen's huts, square, neat and dark against the white sands, were close to the water. The walls of these huts were made of bamboo, and the roofs were thatched with palm leaves laid one on top of another, sloping downward so that the heavy rains couldn't come inside. Completely round and full, the moon was making a path of light on the moving waters, and it was huge - you couldn't have held it in your arms. Rising above the valley of clouds, it had the heavens to itself. The sound of the sea was unceasing, and yet there was great silence.

You never remain with any feeling, pure and simple, but always surround it with the paraphernalia of words. The word distorts it; thought, whirling around it, throws it into shadow, overpowers it with mountainous fears and longings. You never remain with a feeling, and with nothing else: with hate, or with that strange feeling of beauty. When the feeling of hate arises, you say how bad it is; there is the compulsion, the struggle to overcome it, the turmoil of thought about it. You want to remain with love; but you break it up, calling it personal or impersonal; you cover it with words, giving it the ordinary meaning, or by saying that it is universal; you think of someone whom you love, or who loves you. There is every kind of verbal movement.

Try remaining with the feeling of hate, with the feeling of envy, jealousy, with the venom of ambition; for after all, that's what you have in daily life, though you may want to live with love, or with the WORD 'love'. Since you have the feeling of hate, of wanting to hurt somebody with a gesture or a burning word, see if you can stay with that feeling. Can you? Have you ever tried? Try to remain with a feeling and see what happens. You will find it amazingly difficult. Your mind will not leave the feeling alone; it comes rushing in with its remembrances, its associations, its do's and don'ts, its everlasting chatter. Pick up a piece of shell. Can you look at it, wonder at its delicate beauty, without saying how pretty it is, or what animal made it? Can you look without the movement of the mind? Can you live with the feeling without the word, without the feeling that the word brings up? If you can, then you will discover an extraordinary thing, a movement beyond the measure of time, a spring that knows no summer.

She was a small, elderly lady, with white hair and a face that was heavily lined, for she had borne many children; but there was nothing weak or feeble about her, and her smile conveyed the depth of her feeling. Her hands were wrinkled but strong, and they had evidently prepared many vegetables, for the right thumb and forefinger were covered with tiny cuts, which had become darkened. But they were fine hands - hands that had worked hard and wiped away many tears. She spoke quietly and hesitantly, with the voice of one who had suffered much; and she was very orthodox; for she belonged to an ancient caste that held

itself high, and whose tradition it was to have no dealings with other groups, either through marriage or through commerce. They were people who were supposed to cultivate the intellect as a means to something other than the mere acquisition of things.

For a while neither of us spoke; she was gathering herself, and was not sure how to begin.

She looked around the room, and seemed to approve of its bareness. There wasn't even a chair, or a flower, except for the one that could be seen just outside the window.

"I am now seventy-five," she began, "and you could be my son. How proud I would be of such a son! It would be a blessing. But most of us have no such happiness. We produce children who grow up and become men of the world, trying to be great in their little work. Though they may occupy high positions, they have no greatness in them. One of my sons is in the capitol, and he has a great deal of power, but I know his heart as only a mother can. Speaking for myself, I don't want anything from anybody; I don't want more money, or a bigger house. I mean to live a simple life to the very end. My children laugh at my orthodoxy, but I mean to continue in it. They smoke, drink and often eat meat, thinking nothing of it. Though I love them, I will not eat with them, for they have become unclean; and why should I, in my old age, pander to all their nonsense? They want to marry outside of caste, and they don't perform the religious rites or practice meditation, as their father did. He was a religious man, but . . ." She stopped talking, and considered what she was going to say.

"I didn't come here to talk about my family," she continued, "but I am glad to have said what I did. My sons will go their way, and I cannot hold them, though it saddens me to see what they are coming to. They are losing and not gaining, even though they have money and position. When their names appear in the papers, as often happens, they show me the papers proudly; but they will be like the common run of men, and the quality of our forefathers is fast disappearing. They are all becoming merchants, selling their talents, and I can't do anything to stem the tide. But that's enough about my children."

Again she stopped talking, and this time it was going to be more difficult to speak of what was within her heart. With lowered head she was thinking how to put the words together, but they wouldn't come. She refused to be helped, and was not embarrassed to remain silent for a time. Presently she began.

"It's difficult to speak of things that are very deep isn't it? One can talk of matters that do not lie too deeply, but it requires a certain confidence in oneself and the listener to broach a problem, the very existence of which one has hardly admitted even to oneself for fear of awakening the echo of darker things that have been asleep for so long. In this case it isn't that I don't trust the listener," she added quickly. "I have more than confidence in you. But to put certain feelings into words is not easy, especially when one has never before expressed them in words. The feelings are familiar, but the words to describe them are not. Words are terrible things, aren't they? But I know you are not impatient, and I shall go at my own pace."

"You know how young people marry in the country, not by their own choice. My husband and I were married in that way many years ago. He was not a kindly man; he had a quick temper and was given to sharp words. Once he beat me; but I became used to many things in the course of my married life. Though as a child I used to play with my brothers and sisters, I spent a great deal of time by myself, and I have always felt apart, alone. In living with my husband, that feeling was pushed into the background; there were so many things to do. I was kept very busy with housekeeping, and with the joy and the pain of bearing and raising children. Nevertheless, the feeling of being alone would still creep over me, and I would want

to think about it, but there wasn't time; so it would pass over me like a wave, and I would go on with what I had to do."

"When the children had grown up, educated, and were out on their own - my husband and I lived quietly until he died five years ago. Since his death, this feeling of being alone has come over me more often; it has gradually increased until now, and I am fully immersed in it. I have tried to get away from it by doing puja, by talking to some friend, but it's always there; and it's an agony, a fearsome thing. My son has a radio, but I can't escape from this feeling through such means, and I don't like all that noise. I go to the temple; but this sense of being utterly alone is with me on the way, while I am there, and coming back. I am not exaggerating, but only describing this thing as it is." She paused for a moment, and then continued.

"The other day my son brought me along to your talk. I couldn't follow all that you were saying, but you mentioned something about aloneness, and the purity of it; so perhaps you will understand." There were tears in her eyes.

To find out if there is something deeper, something beyond the feeling that comes upon you, and in which you are caught, you must first understand this feeling, must you not?

"Will this agonizing feeling of being alone lead me to God?" she inquired anxiously.

What do you mean by being alone?

"It is difficult to put that feeling into words, but I will try. It is a fear that comes when one feels to be completely alone, entirely by oneself, utterly cut off from everything. Though my husband and children were there, this wave would come upon me, and I would feel as if I were a dead tree in a wasted land: lonely, unloved and unloving. The agony of it was much more intense than that of bearing a child. It was fearful and breathtaking; I didn't belong to anyone; there was a sense of complete isolation. You understand, don't you?"

Most people have this feeling of loneliness, this sense of isolation, with its fear, only they smother it, run away from it, get themselves lost in some form of activity, religious or otherwise. The activity in which they indulge is their escape, they can get lost in it, and that's why they defend it so aggressively.

"But I have tried my best to run away from this feeling of isolation, with its fear, and I have never been able to. Going to the temple doesn't help; and even if it did, one can't be there all the time, any more than one can spend one's life performing rituals."

Not to have found an escape may be your salvation. In their fear of being lonely, of feeling cut off, some take to drink, others take drugs, while many turn to politics, or find some other way of escape. So you see, you are fortunate in not having found a means of avoiding this thing. Those who avoid it do a great deal of mischief in the world; they are really harmful people, for they give importance to things that are not of the highest significance. Often, being very clever and capable, such people mislead others by their devotion to the activity which is their escape; if it isn't religion, it's politics, or social reform - anything to get away from themselves. They may seem to be selfless, but they are actually concerned with themselves, only in a different way. They become leaders, or the followers of some teacher; they always belong to something, or practice some method, or pursue an ideal. They are never just themselves; they are not human beings, but labels. So you see how fortunate you are to not have found an escape?

"You mean its dangerous to escape?" she asked, somewhat bewildered.

Isn't it? A deep wound must be examined, treated, healed; it's no good covering it up, or refusing to look at it.

"That's true. And this feeling of isolation is such a wound?"

It's something you don't understand, and in that sense it's like a disease that will keep on recurring; so it's meaningless to run away from it. You have tried running away, but it keeps overtaking you, doesn't it?

"It does. Then you are glad that I haven't found an escape?"

Aren't you? Which is more important?

"I think I understand what you have explained, and I am relieved that there's some hope."

Now let's both examine the wound. To examine something, you mustn't be afraid of the thing you're going to see, must you? If you are afraid, you won't look; you will turn your head away. When you had babies, you looked at them as soon as possible after they were born. You weren't concerned with whether they were ugly or beautiful; you looked at them with love, didn't you?

"That's exactly what I did. I looked at each new baby with love, with care, and pressed it to my heart."

In the same way, with affection, we must examine this feeling of being cut off, this sense of isolation, of loneliness, mustn't we? If we are fearful, anxious, we shall be incapable of examining it at all.

"Yes, I see the difficulty. I haven't really looked at it before, because I was fearful of what I might see. But now I think I can look."

Surely, this ache of loneliness is only the final exaggeration of what we all feel in a minor way every day, isn't it? Every day you are isolating yourself, cutting yourself off, aren't you?

"How?" she asked, rather horrified.

In so many ways. You belong to a certain family, to a special caste; they are your children, your grandchildren; it is your belief, your God, your property; you are more virtuous than somebody else; you know, and the other does not. All this is a way of cutting yourself off, a way of isolation, isn't it?

"But we are brought up that way, and one has to live. We can't cut ourselves off from society, can we?"

Is this not what you are already doing? In this relationship called society, every human being is cutting himself off from another by his position, by his ambition, by his desires for fame, power, and so on; but he has to live in this brutal relationship with others like himself, so the whole thing is glossed over and made respectable by pleasant sounding words. In everyday life, each one is devoted to his own interests, though it may be in the name of country, in the name of peace, or God, and so this isolating process goes on. One becomes aware of this whole process in the form of intense loneliness, a feeling of complete isolation. Thought, which has been giving all importance to itself, isolating itself as the 'me', the ego, has finally come to the point of realizing that it's held in the prison of its own making.

"I'm afraid all this is a bit difficult to follow at my age, and I'm not too well educated either."

This has nothing to do with being educated. It needs thinking through, that's all. You feel lonely, isolated, and if you could, you would run away from that feeling; but fortunately for yourself, you have been unable to find a means of doing so. Since you have found no way out, you are now in a position to look at that from which you have been trying to escape; but you can't look at it if you are afraid of it, can you?

"I see that."

Doesn't your difficulty lie in the fact that the word itself makes trouble?

"I don't understand what you mean."

You have associated certain words with this feeling that comes over you, words like 'loneliness', 'isolation', 'fear', 'being cut off'. Isn't that so?

"Yes."

Now, just as your son's name doesn't prevent you from perceiving and understanding his real qualities and make-up, so you must not let such words as 'isolation', 'loneliness', 'fear', 'being cut off', interfere with your examination of the feeling they have come to represent.

"I see what you mean. I have always looked at my children in that direct way."

And when you look at this feeling in this same direct way, what happens? Don't you find that the feeling itself isn't frightening, but only what you think about the feeling? It is the mind, thought that brings fear to the feeling, isn't it?

"Yes, that's right; at this moment I understand that very well. But will I be capable of understanding it when I leave here, and you are not there to explain?"

Of course. It is like seeing a cobra. Having once seen it you can never mistake it; you don't have to depend on anybody to tell you what a cobra is. Similarly, when once you have understood this feeling, that understanding is always with you; when once you have learned to look, you have the capacity to see. But one must go through and beyond this feeling, for there is much more to be discovered. There is an aloneness which is not this loneliness, this sense of isolation. That state of aloneness is not a remembrance or a recognition; it is untouched by the mind, by the word, by the society, by tradition. It is a benediction.

"In this one hour I have learned more than in all my seventy-five years. May this benediction be with you and me."