

Loneliness in America  
*In Perspective*  
1983

We enter and leave the world alone, but not necessarily lonely. We have all been both alone and lonely and not necessarily at the same time. One can be alone and feel connected to oneself and one's fellows. Loneliness, on the other hand, is alienation, disconnection, reaching out to touch someone who isn't really there. Americans seem to have developed a cult of aloneness.

Partly as a result of our increasing mobility and astronomical divorce rate, growing numbers of us have substituted the single's pad for community and family life. If we must be alone, then we'll learn to love the single life. We talk glibly of being our own best friend and living in solitary splendor. We admire the self-sufficient individualist, the lonesome cowboy, the self-starting corporate magnate. Many psychologists define the healthy personality as one that is independent of the need for social approval, one that maximizes its own potential.

Yet the history of the species teaches us that humans have always lived in social groups. It is the rare individual who has chosen to live completely apart, and the words we use to describe him or her tend to be derisive: hermit, recluse, social misfit. Thoreau's Walden Pond experiment was of limited duration; he did not shun the company of people forever.

And beneath the slick veneer of sophistication in which the singles' industry trades is often a desperate longing for the communal roots we have sacrificed for glamor. The personal advertisements in publications aimed at the single woman and man are filled with thinly disguised desire for meaningful and lasting relationships. To paraphrase John Donne, no man--or woman--is an island.