

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.*

Vol. 14, No. 3 • March 2007

Loneliness among Friends: A Ministry of Connection

By Rose Ketterer

Definition: Loneliness is a state of feeling cut off from and longing for others, due to lack of contact (physically, emotionally, etc.) with people (whether acquaintances, friends, or loved ones). Loneliness is not to be confused with solitude where a person may appreciate the time to think and reflect without distraction.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loneliness

I learned about loneliness from my beloved godmother, my Aunt Mary, who was deeply lonely for extended periods throughout her life. Severely disfigured and usually in pain, she was a highly intelligent and sociable person who was often alone but longed for a “simpatico” friend. Aunt Mary enjoyed colorful language, and she always pronounced the word with tender appreciation. It conveyed to me as a child the notion of harmony, intimacy, and union. Even so, I was surprised recently by a dictionary definition of simpatico: *An affinity between a certain color pearl and the skin of the potential wearer.* Yes, that would be a connection.

Can Friends foster such connection between members? People are lonely in so many ways—socially, emotionally, intellectually, sexually, and spiritually. I remember a poem about an aged woman who reflected that no one ever touched her; her skin was lonely for a grasp on the shoulder, a tap on the arm, a handclasp. But she never spoke of her longing.

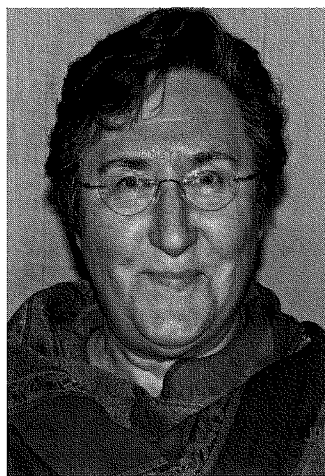
At the age of 38, I came home from my first Quaker meeting for worship bubbling with news about Yearly Meeting, Pendle Hill lectures,

committee meetings and study groups. One of my family members exclaimed, “You’ll never be lonely again!”

In fact, the meeting I joined had, in addition to the usual pastoral committees, a Fellowship Committee that planned social events and tried to draw in new attenders. Yet, in time I learned that there were those in the meeting who struggled through crushing burdens alone as well as longtime members who felt isolated and neglected and who longed for the support they saw directed to others.

A weighty Friend, confronted in a pastoral committee with concern over the uneven treatment members of the meeting received in times of trouble, remarked with exasperation that some people just sit around hoping they will be included while others put themselves right into the heart of the meeting. Naturally, those people receive more attention than the sad sacks; people just needed to have more gumption.

I imagine gasps of shock over such an insensitive attitude, but it is legitimate to consider, in a gentler way perhaps, the limits of pastoral care. If those called to pastoral care in a meeting determine to minister to the lonely, they will need to sharpen their own perceptions as well as recruit others to assist. Often, the people who need care most are least able to ask for it and least likely to accept it. Therefore, those called to pastoral work must pay careful attention to members, getting to know Friends well enough to sense when something is seriously wrong. It is helpful to



Rose Ketterer

know the connections in the meeting—who is related, who is an old friend, who is a neighbor—in hope that someone will see another's distress.

Understanding when to ask probing questions or offer assistance requires keen observation and genuine concern for others. Unfortunately, most meetings have limited energy to devote to obvious needs, let alone hidden problems.

The causes of loneliness are many and diverse, although we most often think of the lack of mobility caused by age or illness and the loss of a life partner through death or divorce. Simply moving to a new place can disrupt all one's connections and cause loneliness. Feeling that one is in a minority theologically can make a person very lonely, as can going through a time of spiritual dryness. An unhappy home life at any age or the shame and guilt of keeping secrets produces loneliness. Lack of money or transportation or limited access to cultural resources may cause loneliness.

Fatigue because of overwork or heavy responsibilities can discourage a person from interaction. Personality traits that contribute to loneliness include shyness, lack of social skills, and verbal abrasiveness. Traits like these may set a pattern for lifelong suffering. Personal habits like poor hygiene, verbosity, substance abuse, or passivity can contribute to loneliness. Some of the most intractable causes of loneliness may be depression or other mental disorders.

Members' Responsibilities

What are our responsibilities to one another as members of a religious community? We can provide social settings for interaction, such as potluck meals, human treasure hunts, small study groups or Friendly Eights, but those activities may not serve the shy or emotionally wounded among us. I suggest we should concentrate most appropriately on spiritual loneliness, a condition that afflicts some intermittently, and others for vast deserts of time.

One simple way of addressing spiritual loneliness is to remind Friends that, in open worship, our goal is not separate meditation but joined listening for divine leading. I have been frustrated by well meaning Friends school staff

who urge students to "use" meeting for worship to "work on their own problems" or "plan for the week ahead," not seeming to appreciate that the treasure of meeting for worship is its corporate nature. We need to describe the power and joy of gathered worship to children and newcomers, remind one another of it frequently, and share stories of worship that connected us to the divine and each other.

Ministry to Alleviate Loneliness

If a meeting does embark on a ministry to alleviate loneliness, members should be realistic about what the meeting can provide. Avoid raising false hopes or making promises that can't be kept. Openly offering a ministry to the lonely may call forth requests, even simple requests, that the meeting is not able to satisfy. Sometimes the best response will be referral to an agency or individual outside the meeting. (See PCN Sept. 1997, "Helping Friends Seek Professional Help.")

I think it is important to identify one's own gifts and capabilities. Someone who is not at all drawn to pastoral visitation might be happy to research local cultural events. One simple way to reach out to the lonely could be to announce and describe interesting events; the offer of your company or a ride might be especially helpful. At a time when I was quite isolated, a member of my meeting regularly spoke of attending wonderful, free events—after the fact. A ministry of announcing events could have gone a long way toward relieving my loneliness back then.

I'd like to name a *gift of friendship*. Some people make friends easily and are naturally attentive to social atmosphere. We know the friendly folk in our communities—they welcome newcomers, create a pleasant ambiance, encourage interactions, learn and share information about others and generally promote a comfortable social environment. All of these skills can help to respond to loneliness in our meetings. The pastoral committee can be attentive to those demonstrating the gift of friendship, recognize and nurture their abilities in order both to lighten the overall tone of gatherings and to discover particular cases of loneliness.

If a member of the meeting seems to have a

gift for friendship, this person could be encouraged to develop a ministry of inviting the less connected members of the meeting to participate in a variety of interactions, ranging from asking to sit together during a meal, to tutoring a younger person, to joining in pastoral visits.

Listening is an important part of ministering to the lonely. Workshops and retreats on active listening may be a place to begin a ministry of connection.

Worship sharing is a fine way to explore questions about spiritual loneliness and spiritual companionship. The reverent listening practiced in worship sharing allows uninterrupted time to each participant, and speaking from one's own experience permits Friends to know one another in a deeper way than in conversation. Speaking out of the silence to one or more prepared questions guides the interaction. Friends could share about guidance and comfort they have found from various sources, as Elizabeth Watson did in her book, *Guests of My Life*. Meetings could decide to provide worship sharing times on a regular basis.

Visitation, a traditional pastoral practice, still holds great value. One or two visitors could spend time with Friends who are ill, incapacitated or otherwise unable to attend meeting for worship. When face-to-face visiting is unwelcome or not practical, telephone, notes, or even email contact may comfort some isolated Friends.

A **confidential message box** could be placed for notes to the pastoral committee, such as "Ruth is unemployed, running through her savings and very discouraged." "Bill has to work weekends and can never get to meeting for worship. He wishes we had a midweek meeting." "I saw the little Jones boy being taunted by other boys this morning. They ran off and wouldn't play with him." Messages could be signed or anonymous.

The **nominating committee**, not normally thought of as a pastoral body, can be a major source of strength in a meeting. These are the people who can make a meeting more simpatico by moving the pearls around until they glow against ideal backgrounds.

One nominating committee I sat on proceeded in a businesslike, almost brusque way, listing slots to fill and persons available. This committee drew heavily from a small number of very active Friends, commonly placing one favored person on two or three committees while many others were not even considered for assignments.

Another nominating committee's members spent a great deal of time in worship, each member holding and occasionally referring to the membership list. Their goal was to find an appropriate service for each person. This committee was sometimes reprimanded by the pastoral folks for asking attenders if they were open to committee service. The nominators were guided by gifts, the pastorals by status.

My experience is that worshipful consideration of the history and talents of each individual can lead to unexpected discoveries of gifts that enhance the meeting while nurturing the individual. Of course, such deliberation requires knowledge of those histories and talents.

When a nominating committee seeks to discern how each person can be invited to be open to joining committees appropriate to their abilities and the meeting's needs, a welcome side effect is that lonely Friends will more often be placed "in the heart of the meeting."

Pastoral committees could name one member, a seasoned, compassionate Friend, to be the contact for anyone who desires support in relation to isolation or loneliness. This Friend could be responsible for becoming familiar with the situation and matching individuals to appropriate persons or services.

Spiritual Friendship

Spiritual friendship is the surest way I know of to increase the likelihood of two people becoming simpatico. In spiritual friendship, the partners join in a discipline of mutual concern for one another's spiritual well being.

The purpose of the relationship is to help each other to deepen their spiritual lives. Qualities essential to successful spiritual friendship include mutuality, mindfulness and accountability.

(continued on p. 4)

Mutuality means that each partner shares his or her values and goals and listens attentively as the other person does the same. It is not a relationship in which one person is the nurturer and the other is nurtured; both partners care equally for one another's spiritual development.

Mindfulness is the practice of thinking about the other when the two are not physically together and can range from remembering the other's concerns to intercessory prayer. Accountability means that each confides goals to work toward and reports progress to the other. Goals could consist of anything that fosters spiritual health, such as reaching out to an estranged family member, keeping a journal, reading inspirational material, changing a behavior, learning yoga, or doing volunteer work.

Two basic practices of spiritual friendship are holding one another in the Light every day and meeting on a regular (preferably weekly) basis to discuss hopes, leadings, concerns, and struggles. Many people prefer to enter spiritual friendship with a partner they already know well.

Questions for Reflection

1. When I have been lonely, what has helped me? How can I share those helps with others?
2. How can I be more attentive to those around me, thus perceiving more clearly who may be lonely or isolated?
3. Given my particular talents and limitations, what might I offer to assuage loneliness? What specific actions can I undertake to reach out to isolated, neglected or lonely Friends?
4. When someone maintains marginal involvement in meeting activities, how can I discern whether the reasons for their distance stem from choice, loneliness or other conditions?
5. Who in our meeting seems to have a gift for friendship, that is, the ability to approach and engage others in a non-threatening and meaningful way? How can we encourage such a gift?

My experience has been that random matching works at least as well, and partnering with spouses is not a good choice until both people are seasoned spiritual friends.

Children and the emotionally disturbed are generally not able to practice mutuality. The most important considerations are the ability to listen to another attentively, to share the time of meetings equally and the willingness to accept the duties of the relationship. In Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Traveling Teachers are available. I and another Friend have led retreats and workshops on spiritual friendship. Your yearly meeting may have similar resources available.

Conclusion:

Is a ministry to loneliness needed in your meeting? We needn't try to carry out every good idea—nor would that be possible. Perhaps your meeting could adopt one or two measures to monitor for loneliness, and otherwise just be more sensitive and alert to possible future needs. In some cases, a whole meeting may be moved to form spiritual friendships or begin a program of sustained visitation.

Others may identify and encourage persons with a gift for friendship. Still others may find it sufficient to occasionally remind Friends that a pastoral committee is available to assist anyone who would like to form deeper connections within the meeting.

The best result of a ministry to the lonely is establishing deeper connections between Friends in the process of discovering who is lonely and what type of interaction might relieve their loneliness. Thus a ministry to the lonely may bring about a stronger meeting in unexpected ways. I am reminded of the comment about an earlier religious community, "See how these Christians love one another!"

Rose Ketterer, a member of Newton Monthly Meeting in Camden, NJ, is a retired college professor and administrator. A generalist, she has taught interdisciplinary courses in sociology, women's studies, religion, communication and psychology as well as directing programs in faculty development and services for adult students. Her lifelong ministry involves nurturing various modalities of friendship. She points to having been born left-handed as early evidence of a persistent deviant streak that nearly always places her in a minority. She loves to laugh. She may sing.

Others' Experience: Four Friends Speak about Ways To Ease Loneliness

Soup Suppers Help Make Connections

Long years ago our Berea (KY) Friends Meeting recognized that several members (including me!) had needs for Friendly social activity between Sundays. So we started "Soup Suppers." On Fridays, three volunteers provided a house to eat in, soup, and bread. The signing up was done at monthly meeting and distributed with monthly minutes.

Originally we intended to follow supper with intergenerational board games, but dropped that practice. Instead we usually spend an hour eating and talking with some perhaps staying a bit longer.

In the beginning we probably averaged ten to twelve participants, mostly couples with young children. Now we have between two and twelve, with mixed ages.

We started out meeting every Friday but now it's apt to be only one or two times a month and perhaps none in summer time or when we are all very busy with other meeting projects.

It has meant, and still does mean, a great deal to me! I've been able to become better acquainted with more persons this way.

Nancy M. Lee Riffe
Berea Friends Meeting
Berea, KY

It Takes Time to Make Friends

At Atlanta Friends Meeting, Friendly Eights groups started out as groups of eight adult friends with children who met for potluck dinners in homes once a month. They have evolved into groups of almost any size and now are centered on common interests and Quaker topics. Other "newcomer" dinners are a way people can get to know each other and familiarize newcomers with Quaker traditions, beliefs and social action.

While these are helpful, they are not a substitute for one-on-one, "hang-out time" or the "social savings account" that allows one to call up a "buddy" for impromptu get-togethers. People in the "secular world" seem to do these things with

ease and frequency, but getting Friends to do the same is sometimes difficult in my experience.

When I was going through a divorce, many Friends said they had no idea I was even married, much less that I had been struggling with an untenable marriage situation. Some asked why I had not let someone know. It's hardly the sort of thing that one can just blurt out. The clearness committee from the Care and Counsel Committee, of course, carefully observed confidentiality.

It took more than ten years for me to reach a point where I was truly feeling a part of the meeting. When I had a hip replaced, I was very pleasantly surprised to discover I had made many good friends who did not wait to be corralled by Care and Counsel, but called and offered to help with food and transportation, etc. Some even stayed to visit, which I needed more than the food. Perhaps we Friends, in our own way, are just as

(continued on last page)



Quakers in Pastoral Care & Counseling

Annual Conference

Planting Seeds of Joy & Hope

Anita Paul, NYYM and Laura Melly, PYM

March 15-18, 2007

Quaker Hill, Richmond, Indiana

Not just another professional conference, but a time for refreshment and connection in a supportive and loving community, as well.

**For registration information, contact
Ted Taylor, tedtaylor@comcast.net**

Additional information available at www.qpcc.us

guilty as the general society of paying too much attention to superficial "busy-ness" and we often miss the opportunity to show genuine caring.

Julia Ewen
Atlanta Friends Meeting
Atlanta, GA

Take a Risk

Everybody is busy, everybody is reticent and protective of his or her own and others' "privacy." Nobody wants to be a burden, to speak out of turn or to appear nosy. Somebody has to take a chance. One needs to say, "I am having trouble and I need to talk to someone, to have someone listen to me, to have someone care." And one to say, "You don't come to meeting much. You seem down. Is another group taking the place of meeting or is something wrong? Can we talk about it?" Both are very risky! Both are very needed!

Sue Heath
Moorestown Friends Meeting
Moorestown, NJ

Lonely Friends Can Be Invisible

Our meeting does pretty well with calling people and asking if we can help in any way if they are sick, but are we sensitive to others being lonely? I am not sure. We also need to be sensitive when someone becomes overly assertive in seeking companionship. Others might feel uncomfortable if f/Friendship does not evolve naturally.

Seniors are often not as active on committees and may no longer get calls about events at meeting, perhaps that needs to be brought more to our attention.

How do we know people are lonely? I was very surprised by an active, long time Friend who stayed at our house recently. As she left she said, "Thank you," and then added, "this has been so nice, you know, no one ever calls me any more."

Nancy Clark
Homewood Friends Meeting
Baltimore, MD

Resources

Editor's note: Resources specific to "loneliness" are not numerous among Quaker publications. However, the topic may be addressed in general articles on ministry, aging, community building, grief and the like. Below are some examples found on the Friends General Conference web site (www.fgcquaker.org) under "Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings."

Spiritual Friendships, Yeats, Liz; Friends General Conference, February 1992, FGC Focus
Strengthening Our Meetings as Caring Communities. Kelly, Arlene; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. *Friends Journal*, October 1, 1984.

Not Only Do We Struggle With a Dependence Upon Things, We Struggle With a Dependence Upon Activity, Bishop, Bruce; Northwest Yearly Meeting's Youth Workers' Newsletter, Vol. 8, No. 3, January 1995.

Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings, Quaker Press of Friends General Conference (FGC) 2002, edited by Patricia McBee. Relevant topics: Community Building and Strengthening, pp 3, 9, 98, 109, 116, 129; Aging, pp. 157, 290, 298; Death, pp. 57, 166, 175; Depression: pp. 217, 231; Grief and Counseling, p. 166; Listening, pp. 16, 24, 258

Other web sites:

Lonely Nation: Americans Try to Connect in a Country Where Isolation Is Common, author unknown, website: healthyplace.com, August 5, 2006

Loneliness and Isolation: Modern Health Risks: <http://www.thepfizerjournal.com>; *The Pfizer Journal*; Volume IV, Number 4, 2000

Loneliness Website <http://www.webofloneliness.com/> Seepersad, Sean; provides research about loneliness.

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and distributed by subscription to meetings and individuals throughout North America and beyond. Editorial Committee: Susan Heath, clerk, Suzanne Day, Dona Garrettson, Nicole Hackel, Patricia McBee, Carolyn Terrell. Editor: Carol J. Suplee. Please do not duplicate without permission. Subscriptions and back issues information: contact Evan Draper at (215) 241-7182 or (800) 220-0796, ext. 7182 or evand@pym.org or write to PCN, 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102-1479.