Alienation and the Quest for Meaning

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Abstract

The widespread estrangement felt by human beings in the present day has led to what has been called an "epidemic of loneliness." Although a plethora of studies have explored this theme in an attempt to address the problem, effective solutions have proved elusive. Some will no doubt claim that alienation has always been with us, yet what we are witnessing right now is on a scale that is arguably unprecedented. The vacuum created by the loss of connection to a transcendent reality has directly contributed to the dissolution of society, family, and personal relationships. If we broaden the scope of this phenomenon to include metaphysical and cosmological factors, we can better understand the mental health consequences of loneliness as stemming from the spiritual crisis of the modern world, and the corresponding loss of meaning in people's lives. In order to heal the trauma of secularism, which has led to the burgeoning loneliness and alienation we see today, we need to go to the root of this affliction by offering a radical response that is grounded in the sacred and its manifestations in humanity's spiritual traditions. In exploring this phenomenon, a metaphysical framework has been adopted to help illuminate this serious affliction.

Keywords: Alienation, Loneliness, Mental Health, Psychology, Metaphysics

"Modern man is ... estranged from himself"
– Mircea Eliade, "Cultural Fashions and History of Religions"

"The condition of alienation … is the condition of the normal man"
– R.D. Laing, "Persons and Experience"

"Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total"
– Erich Fromm, "Man in Capitalistic Society"

"We cannot go resolutely forward unless we first realize our alienation"
– Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture"

Introduction

Although it is often said that we are living in the most connected time in global history, our lived experience proves to be markedly different. It is as if we increasingly live in a permanent state of exile from ourselves, each other, and the cosmos, seeing as our relationship to the Absolute has been severed. If we reflect on our immediate surroundings, one may readily discern that we are utterly alone. The presence of a large number of people in a given environment does not necessarily enrich human connectedness; indeed, it can even amplify our sense of separation. It has become uncommon for people to fully engage in the "here and now." The tendency, rather, is for them to compartmentalize their solitary lives, even if they dwell in the midst of others. Many are uncomfortable with face-to-face encounters and prefer to communicate through a screen. To mask a deeply-felt existential void, many have come to depend on their external environment for stimulation and distraction, whether it is television,

podcasts, or background music. There is an inordinate fear of silence as it heightens a sense of emptiness in the face of being alone. These are widespread experiences in the collective spaces of modernity, in that they fortify our isolated individualism, instill suspicion, promote dehumanization, and fuel a corrosive nihilism, all of which are manifestations of our dystopic malaise.

What was hitherto the unimaginable reality of the future has become our current situation: "the vacuum where there is no relatedness" (May, 1969, p. 30). There is much discussion about the long-term health costs of loneliness, especially with all the mounting social and mental health problems plaguing the world today (such as anxiety, depression, and psychosis, along with the addiction and suicides, including homelessness that can follow in their wake). The phenomenon of loneliness is elusive and underlies many disorders of the psyche. Its effects contribute to a diminished satisfaction with life, which can profoundly degrade our well-being. So, what can be done to remedy this social catastrophe, if the very conditions of modernity are to blame for our collective estrangement?

The Enlightenment project, which gave rise to widespread individualism, has radically undermined our sense of self, community, and our reliance on the Spirit. These changes have fueled a sense of loneliness and alienation from the world. Indeed the Enlightenment project has called into question our common-sense experience of life and our self-identity as human beings. This has spawned a hard dualism between mind and body (along with matter) that has plagued the mindset of the West since the seventeenth century, fracturing traditional cosmology and psychology.

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of the mental health epidemic in our midst, and its root cause: the spiritual crisis of the modern world. Loneliness can be understood as a subjective reality; as an unpleasant response to perceived or actual isolation. It can also be accompanied by a sense of inner desolation, and felt even when a person is not alone. Solitude is being apart from others, though it need

not entail feeling lonely. By contrast, alienation can be understood as an objective reality. According to sociologist Robert Weiss, alienation is "the social or psychological estrangement of an individual from an activity or social form with which he is nevertheless at least nominally associated" (1973, p. 4). According to French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994), the alienated state is akin to becoming "a stranger to the human condition" (1964, p. 220). And, elsewhere, he speaks of it as a form of human control: "Alienation means being possessed externally by another and belonging to him. It also means being self-alienated, other than oneself, transformed into another" (1976, p. 24). While the phenomenon of loneliness is a common feature of the human condition, it can lead to disorder in the human psyche when compounded by the spiritual bareness afforded by modernity.

Loneliness is a characteristic psychological problem of our time, as it reflects a crisis of identity and meaning. Swiss physician Paul Tournier (1898–1986) asserts: "[L]oneliness ... result[s] [from] the spirit of our age" (1962, pp. 19–20). According to Tage Lindbom (1909–2001): "The man of today is lonely, lonely to an extent that he does not dare admit. The human loneliness is one of the great paradoxes of our time" (2025, p. 64). Furthermore, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) points out that "the world ... is hostile to human beings ... [imposing] a climate of alienation" (2002, pp. 17–18). In a world of transient families, relationships, and life circumstances, the foundations for sustaining human equilibrium start to erode, such that people become estranged and rootless. In doing so, we create self-made bubbles, each containing a private algorithm of views and preferences. The prominent American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) elaborates: "[T]he concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with its psychic survival ... executing a kind of emotional retreat from the long-term commitments that presuppose a stable, secure, and orderly world" (1984, p. 16; see also Zilboorg, 1938, pp. 45–54). Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) elaborates on our present-day alienation and its connection to today's mental health epidemic:

These millions of abnormally normal people, living without fuss in a society to which, if they were fully human beings, they ought not to be adjusted, still cherish 'the illusion of individuality', but in fact they have been to a great extent de-individualized. Their conformity is developing into something like uniformity. But uniformity and freedom are incompatible. Uniformity and mental health are incompatible too…. Man is not made to be an automaton, and if he becomes one, the basis for mental health is destroyed. (1959, p. 36)

When seen through the lens of traditional metaphysics, alienation is associated with a severance from our transcendent source. As Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) has astutely observed, many in the modern and postmodern world exist "completely alienated from the center of their being" (2003, p. 236). As influential Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written, loneliness arises from a "world from which the Spirit has been banished" (1989, p. 94). There are various ways to envisage this separation. Our physical birth marks a rupture, both from the biological womb of our mother and, more broadly, in a cosmic sense. Simply by being born, we experience a scission in our being that leads to us becoming sundered from the Absolute, which, in turn, inflicts a psychic wound in us. "The individual suffers because he perceives duality…. Find the One everywhere and in everything, and there will be an end to pain and suffering" (Ānandamayī Mā, 2007, p. 71). Human beings find themselves trapped in a realm of perishable forms that expose us to separation, suffering, and death.

The Loss of Transcendence and Our Inner Wasteland

A striking feature of the present day is the epidemic of alienation from the transcendent, ourselves, each other, and the natural world (see Bendeck Sotillos, 2022a, pp. 34–55). Indeed, modernity itself is fundamentally isolated at its core. As Rollo May (1909–1994)

pointed out, a key "characteristic of modern people is loneliness" (1973, p. 26). American psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom regards alienation as one of life's "ultimate concerns" (1980, p. 8). Carl Rogers (1902–1987) points out "individuals nowadays are probably more aware of their inner loneliness than has ever been true before in history" (1970, p. 106). What we have termed the *trauma of secularism* speaks directly to this phenomenon (see Bendeck Sotillos, 2022b, pp. 23–53). An inner emptiness makes us feel that our achievements are null and void, as there is always something lacking in our fragmented condition that keeps us solely focused on what is external. As has been astutely observed, "Loneliness is the 'new poverty'" (Blackhirst, 2007, p. 121).

It is not comfort or material goods that are lacking, but a connection to the Divine and our fellow human beings. No amount of wealth can insulate us from the transient and unsatisfactory nature of existence. Aristotle (384–322) points out that "without friends, no one would choose to live, even if he had all other goods" (1889, p. 202). This of course would also be true of someone who was largely balanced and not afflicted by trauma. Kohelet, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, portrays this kind of loneliness well: "Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth" (Ecclesiastes 4:7–8).

It is worth adding here that because so many have been traumatized by relationships, their trust in people has been eroded, leading to fear, suspicion, and avoidance of others. Understandably, this may compel them to seek solace in the company of animals as a substitute for human connection, though that may serve to further entrench their isolation from the community. In yearning for the Real, we cling to the illusory, in which our loneliness perpetually haunts us. Unless we view this problem as embedded in the spiritual crisis of the modern world, we will fail to come to terms with it.

To better understand the phenomenon of alienation, we need to consider that the modern West is perhaps the first completely secular culture in history, which has had deep repercussions on all facets of human existence. French poet Eustache Deschamps (c. 1346–c. 1406), who witnessed the signs of this dissolution as early as the late medieval period, wrote these striking lines: "Why are the times so dark? / [M]en do not know each other.... / I know no more where I belong" (as cited in Huizinga, 1922, p. 36). In the traditional pre-modern world (whether of the East or West), to know where one belonged was to know who one was. The Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) commences his classic work by observing a state of alienation in the opening lines: "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found that I was in a dusky wood; / For the right path, whence I had strayed, was lost" (1948, p. 1). The Enlightenment project culminated in the desacralized outlook embodied by the well-known motto by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), which proclaimed, "God is dead" (1974, p. 181). The rejection of transcendence has now spread widely across the globe and appears to be unchecked.

This loss of transcendence has unleashed a pernicious nihilism, leading to a spiritual abyss that can never be filled by the profane world. Metaphysics distinguishes a horizontal from a vertical dimension of both our identity and the whole of reality. 'Horizontal' loneliness can significantly affect our personal and social relationships, whereas 'vertical' alienation reflects the remoteness many feel from the Spirit, along with its serious psycho-physical consequences. No matter how optimal our social networks may be, they can never support true wholeness or allow us to properly flourish as fully integrated beings. Deprived of the vertical dimension, we live in a secularized and de-centered cosmos—the result of a flattened and disfigured self-absorption, cut off from enduring sources of emotional and spiritual sustenance.

The cause of alienation in the spiritual crisis that afflicts our time can be revealed through an engagement with traditional metaphysics, and its cosmology of humanity's four ages. *As the temporal cycle*

(Sanskrit: yuga) moves further away from the Spirit—especially during what was known in the ancient West as the Iron Age (Sanskrit: Kali-Yuga)—our way of apprehending reality becomes gradually compromised. In the Golden Age (Sanskrit: Krita-Yuga or Satya-Yuga) human beings experienced their primordial nature without any fissures. This was followed by the Silver Age (Sanskrit: Treta-Yuga), during which spiritual cognition gradually became diminished; and then the Bronze Age (Sanskrit: Dvapara-Yuga) where one begins to see the appearance of ruptures in the human psyche. We now find ourselves in the Iron Age. This is the most degraded period, in which our primordial nature becomes hardened and opaque to our discernment; in other words, we have lost access to the "eye of the heart," our innate organ of spiritual perception (see Bendeck Sotillos, 2022c, pp. 29–45*).*

Although modern Western psychology and its mental health treatments urge us to engage in healthy socialization and fulfilling human relationships, they do so on purely individualistic terms that are limited in scope. This leaves us to manage our lives sequestered from others, which runs counter to the advice we find among the spiritual traditions of the world regarding the need for community. Across the humanity's diverse cultures, we find a unanimous recognition, conveyed here by St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), that is key to grasping the present-day affliction of loneliness: "None of us can be estranged or alienated from the nature with which we are created" (as cited in Palmer et al., 1998, p. 48). Furthermore, as Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) emphasizes: "All separation, every kind of estrangement and alienation is false. All is one" (1999, p. 205). To be rooted in the sacred is to have a center that not only participates in the horizontal domain of contingencies, but is also immersed in the verticality of the Spirit.

Beyond the Void

By restoring metaphysics to our understanding of mental health, human alienation becomes intelligible beyond the horizontal contingencies of conventional psychology. By contrast, if we approach it through worldly forms of psychotherapy and the ideology of progress, we will miss the mark. This dire problem cannot adequately be addressed with individual or group therapy alone, no matter what modality is used; at its root, it represents an ontological quandary that modern psychology, due to its compromised foundations, cannot perceive. Bereft of any metaphysical foundations, this discipline remains adrift in a self-contradictory morass, precisely because it has failed to tackle the problem at its source.

In treating mental health disorders today, we are apt to forget the truth enunciated by John Donne (1572–1631) that "No man is an island" (1923, p. 98). People need each other, which is why the importance of community has long been recognized. Each person serves a particular function that contributes to the integrity and harmony of the whole. When such support networks break down, the social order falls into disarray. Furthermore, healing and integration are traditionally situated within a close community and are not the outcome of solely individual endeavors, as the focus is always the well-being of an integrated collective.

While secluded contemplatives have always been accommodated in traditional societies, there remain dangers in avoiding communal life, for those not suited to a life of solitude. For example, we are cautioned by the following words from the Book of Genesis: "It is not good that man should be alone" (2:18); similarly, Goethe (1749–1832) writes: "[W]e cannot remain in a state of isolation" (1853, p. 49). At the same time, across all spiritual paths, there are solitary vocations dedicated to enhancing our intimacy with the Divine. An early monk and ascetical writer, Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) observed: "A monk is one who is separated from all and united with all" (2006, p. 206). Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886) observed: "[I]t is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God.

To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practices meditation in solitude…. To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest" (1977, p. 81).

The human psyche is an integral part of the web of life and its underlying cosmic order. The principle of Unity, also prominent in non-theistic traditions such as Taoism, is defined in this way: "To see all things in the yet undifferentiated, primordial unity" (Lao Tzu, as cited in Cooper, 2010, p. 37). In Buddhism, it is found in the idea of emptiness (*sūnyatā*), which corresponds to the concept of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), as we see in the famous Heart Sūtra (*Prajnāpāramitā-hridaya-sūtra*): "form is emptiness … emptiness is form" (as cited in *Buddhist Scriptures*, 1959, p. 162). There is also the famous analogy of Indra's net in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. It is transcendence made immanent in human beings that seeks a return to the One: "Through all the diversities of the world, the *one* in us is ever seeking unity" (Kanamatsu, 2002, p. 33). Given the heightened levels of rupture from so many facets of our lives, it is difficult to discern any apparent wholeness. Isolated and disconnected, the human psyche remains fractured, unable to find psychological health and well-being.

Estrangement and Mental Illness

This alienated condition appears to be at the core of many mental illnesses. As Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1889–1957) observed: "Understanding … loneliness is important for the understanding of mental disorder" (1959, p. 15). Yet contemporary psychotherapy overlooks the anguish caused by living in a world devoid of spiritual nourishment. This has proved tremendously detrimental, as such sustenance has shown itself to be invaluable in supporting human resilience. To the credit of contemporary psychotherapy, it does recognize to some degree, as Fromm-Reichmann observes, that "The longing for interpersonal intimacy stays with every human being

from infancy throughout life; and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss" (p. 3).

Psychology today attempts to assess, diagnose, and treat mental illness without acknowledging the suffering caused by secularism. Without understanding the historical developments that led to the rise of modernity—the humanism of the Renaissance, along with the Scientific Revolution spawned by the Age of Enlightenment—it is difficult to understand how this profane trajectory radically undermined the collective psyche and its notions of self. Present-day mental health treatments are still based on the fragmented and scientistic foundations of the Enlightenment project which after all, was responsible for spawning psychotherapy in the first place.

Individualism and the Eclipse of the True Self

The ethos of modernism is isolating because it reduces the person (consisting of Spirit, soul, and body) to a one-dimensional psycho-physical entity. Our True Self then becomes obscured, and replaced by a disfigured individual trapped inside a bubble of relativism that cannot conceive of any reality higher than itself. Modernism undermines our well-being insofar as it upholds notions such as "each person for themselves," pitting each person against the other, which only serves to dismember us. This corrosive tendency culminated in the Enlightenment project, as Tournier explains: "[M]odern man, misled by nineteenth-century science and philosophy, can conceive of society only as a vast network of battles, tests of strength, and competition between rival powers" (1962, p. 31). Instead of resisting this individualism as a social disease, we have come to view it as natural and necessary.

French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1911–1998) frames the historical anomaly of this outlook: "[M]odern individualism, when seen against the background of the other great civilizations … is an exceptional phenomenon" (1986, p. 23). Furthermore, "The

discovery of the individual, the creation or invention of 'modern man,' was also paradoxically the source of the first portent of alienation, the first sense of peril to the integrity and dignity of the human person" (Montagu & Matson, 1983, p. xx). It is essential here to acknowledge the rise of individualism and its false notions of a separate self, which French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951) explains as the "negation of any principle higher than individuality" (2004, p. 55), which goes to the heart of our existential infirmities. Devoid of a vertical dimension, we will inevitably succumb to the "delusion of unique individuality," according to American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892–1949) (1955, p. 140). As a side note, true diversity and human uniqueness originate in the Spirit, and are not simply based on our subjective perspectives (see Bendeck Sotillos, 2018, pp. 34–76).

Mental health treatments today attempt to remedy the afflictions caused by the vacuum of modernism, without ever acknowledging the source of this emptiness. Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) points out that "The loss of religion as Center in the world has left a hole which [modern] psychology is trying to fill" (1996, p. 200). As a result, the normative state of contemporary humanity is, as R.D. Laing (1927–1989) explains, in an "appalling state of alienation called normality" (1972, p. 167). Acknowledging this ubiquitous void in society and ourselves ought to be the focus in any form of therapeutic work, given its widespread ramifications. Yet, it remains the elephant in the room that nobody dares refer to. To be clear, horizontal loneliness is the result of a vertical collapse in meaning because, in traditional cultures, proximity to the Divine afforded enduring protection from social isolation. Suffering reminds us of our need to rely on the Spirit, and to keep in mind the "one thing needful" (Luke 10:42). In this remembrance, our relationship to suffering is transformed. Rūmī (1207–1273) observes that "Since therefore you see when you suffer, suffering is made to prevail over you to the end that you may recollect God" (2004, p. 224).

The epidemic of loneliness has not arisen because of a failure to assimilate modernity; rather, it is the latter's very outcome. American social psychologist Kenneth Keniston (1930–2020) comments as follows: "Alienation, estrangement, disaffection, anomie, withdrawal, disengagement, separation, non-involvement, apathy, indifference, and neutralism—all of these terms point to a sense of loss" (1965, p. 3).

German psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1885–1962) describes alienation as "the remoteness of the neurotic from his own feelings, wishes, beliefs, and energies. It is the loss of the feeling of being an active, determining force in his own life. It is the loss of feeling himself as an organic whole" (1950, p. 157). Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor says that in a mechanical and depersonalized world, people have to endure an "indefinable sense of loss; a sense that life … has become impoverished, that men are somehow 'deracinated and disinherited', that society and human nature alike have been atomized, and hence mutilated; above all that men have been separated from whatever might give meaning to their work and their lives" (1958, p. 11).

While we do not want to pathologize loneliness, there is an important link between it and narcissism. Loneliness can stem from negative perceptions of one's social networks and can impede the formation of healthy relationships, while fostering self-obsession. Historian of psychiatry Gregory Zilboorg (1890–1959) elaborates as follows:

The term 'narcissism' does *not* mean mere selfishness, or egocentricity, as is assumed; it denotes specifically that state of mind, that spontaneous attitude of man, in which the individual himself happens to choose only himself instead of others as the object to love. Not that he does not love, or that he hates, others and wants everything for himself; but he is inwardly in love with himself and seeks everywhere for a mirror in which to admire and woo his own image. (1938, p. 46)

The profane orientation of modern psychology denies the transpersonal center of our being, and thus ignores everything that flows from this reality. Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966) offered an astute criticism of the fragmented mentality that underlies the discipline in our times: "The cancer of all [modern] psychology up to now [is] ... the cancer of the doctrine of subject-object cleavage of the world" (as cited in May et al., 1958, p. 11). The bifurcated worldview that gave birth to our current alienation is outlined by May:

[A] profound common denominator [of] alienation … is the ultimate consequence of four centuries of the outworking of the separation of man as subject from the objective world. This alienation has expressed itself for several centuries in Western man's passion to gain power *over* nature, but now shows itself in an estrangement from nature and a vague, unarticulated, and half-suppressed sense of despair of gaining any real relationship with the natural world, including one's own body. (1983, p. 120)

Fragmentation and Wholeness

This scission in our consciousness, which forms the basis of Cartesian dualism, is now firmly embedded in the philosophical assumptions of mainstream psychology, and has led to unforeseen yet deleterious consequences. The hard division of this world into *res extensa* (extended entities) and *res cogitans* (thinking entities) reduces all human experience to a realm that is merely private and subjective. This outlook rejects any notion of an objective, or even ultimate, reality.

Founder of the "talking cure" Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) observed that the "Ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else"

(1989, p. 12) and, elsewhere, he remarks on the "boundary lines between the ego and the external world" (1989, p. 13). It cannot be stressed enough that, without overcoming the bane of this dichotomy, there cannot be a psychology that is grounded in the transcendent.

The very means by which the empirical ego perceives the phenomenal world is itself problematic, as its very starting point involves a dualistic impediment to truly understanding ourselves and others. Identification with the ego is rooted in a fictional, if not distorted, sense of self that assumes an underlying split between subject and object, or self and the world. This estrangement from our True Self lies behind the proliferation of mental health issues that we see today. something acknowledged by psychiatrist Edward F. Edinger (1922–1998) who observed that "All problems of alienation … are thus ultimately alienation between ego and Self" (1974, p. 39). He goes on to add that "When the connection is broken the result is emptiness, despair, meaninglessness and, in extreme cases, psychosis or suicide" (p. 43). The ego harbors the false belief that it can function independently of what transcends it, namely the Spirit. The crisis engendered by a divided self can only be fully appreciated within a metaphysical framework, for the ego cannot experience what lies beyond its inherent limitations.

The essence of sacred psychology, as found in all spiritual traditions, could be described in the following way: "The Self became *ego* in order that the *ego* might become Self"; (Schuon, 1990, p. 71) this is to say, "In man the Spirit becomes the ego in order that the ego may become pure Spirit" (Schuon, 1998, p. 139). While the same principle can be presented in many other ways, the need for the intermediary realm of the soul to become reintegrated with its divine source remains the same. Secular psychotherapy is incapable of supporting this transformation for two reasons; firstly, it does not acknowledge a reality beyond the ego and, secondly, its foundations lack an authentic ontology.

The tripartite structure of the human being (consisting of Spirit, soul, and body) provides a metaphysical means of envisaging this wholeness without bifurcation. This gives access to the sacred center at the heart of every human being, abiding in which we may foster a potential for true healing in our temporal reality. In contrast, modern Western psychology and its materialist assumptions reinforce a rigid subject-object dualism without remedy. While alienation is as old as fallen humanity, it has undoubtedly assumed extreme forms in the modern world.

When it comes to the study of the mind, modern psychology has scant insights to offer, as it focuses on the corporeal aspect of the brain and does not realize that consciousness is the "eye" through which everything is perceived (while it itself remains unseen). The mind has no independent existence, and is reliant on a consciousness that is rooted in the "eye of the heart" (or the transpersonal Intellect). Consciousness, which is essentially undivided, remains foundational, whereas corporeality is contingent (Bendeck Sotillos, 2023, pp. 12–21). The myopic outlook of the post-Enlightenment remains ensnared within the confines of a fractured cosmos where notions of the "brain in a vat" and "simulated reality" have flourished, yet without any true grounding in the Real (see Harman, 1973). It is important to state here that no amount of technological sophistication—such as transhumanism or artificial intelligence—will ever assuage our alienation.

Inner and Outer Exile

The paradox in all of this is that our failure to see our emotional isolation leads to further loneliness. Central to all human experience is our need to discern the brute fact that we are born alone and we die alone (see Becker, 2020). According to American psychologist Clark E. Moustakas (1923–2012), avoidance of this fact leads to more suffering: "Efforts to overcome or escape the existential experience of loneliness can result only in self-alienation" (1961, p. ix). Evading

this truth paralyzes the potential for inner growth and obscures the meaning of our lives. Correspondingly, social deprivation is self-inflicted, as Austrian physician and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940), an early disciple of Freud, writes: "Man does not become lonely as a result of circumstances, he makes himself lonely" (1931, p. 18). At the same time, "The human being cannot live in a condition of emptiness" (May, 1973, p. 24) without this eventually leading to destructive tendencies. What is the origin of this emptiness facing humanity? It is precisely the loss of transcendence that distinguishes our debased condition.

According to the Abrahamic monotheisms, the fallen condition of Adam and Eve was the result of their having lost their capacity for direct spiritual knowing, leading to alienation from the Divine and discord between themselves. This is what Hindu and Buddhist traditions call spiritual ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidyā*; Pāli: *avijjā*), or the inability to perceive reality as it is. By contrast, true knowledge is liberating. The eclipse of our transpersonal faculty, which directly apprehends spiritual reality, has led to the infliction of a primordial wound—a loss of our sense of the sacred and the corruption of the Intellect or "eye of the heart."

Relationships in the modern world have become degraded and fraught with conflict. We readily dispose of them without any afterthought when we become bored or indifferent, as if they were commodities of convenience rather than something to be honored. A true friendship must be demonstrated through time, patience, and maturation. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are cautioned as follows: "If thou wouldest get a friend, prove him first and be not hasty to credit him" (Sirach 6:7). Additionally, we are reminded to "Honor thy father and mother" (Ephesians 6:1), yet not in a manner that diminishes our connection to the Spirit, for "He that loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37); and "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother ... he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). The Buddha considered "the entire holy life" to be "good friendship, good companionship, good

comradeship" (2000, p. 1524). Additionally, Confucius (551–479) stressed that the person who "associates with those that possess the Way ... thereby corrects his own faults" (1938, p. 87).

Relationships encompass various realms of consciousness and levels of reality. These comprise a sacred unity that links the created order with what lies beyond it. The Lakota proclaim: *Mitakuye oyasin*, "We are all related" (literally, "All my relatives"); similarly, the Christian tradition tells us that "We are [all] members one of another" (Ephesians 4:25). The Hindu tradition has what is known as *satsang*, or an association with truth or reality, which consists of being in the company of saints and sages; however, it also signifies our ultimate encounter with the True Self. What is properly human never confronts the earthly alone, because it is the Spirit (as immanent) that actually encounters the Spirit (as transcendent); it only appears as a mundane reality from a relative point of view. However, considered from the aspect of Ultimate Reality, there is nothing other than the Divine Itself. In summary, sacred forms of relationship unify the horizontal and vertical dimensions of existence, so as to support human wholeness.

The initial trauma of being separated from the Absolute has become the basis of all the subsequent chaos in our wounded psyches. We have lost our connection to the created order as a result of having purged the sacred from our lives. Without discerning humanity's proper place in the cosmos, we cannot know who we really are. Thus, we can better understand how the absence of this discernment fuels the experience of feeling utterly alone in a world that appears bereft of any meaning. Being made for transcendence, we will be estranged from ourselves, others, and the cosmos when cut off from the Absolute. As C.S. Lewis (1898–1963) writes: "We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it … to become part of it" (1949, p. 13).

Human beings cannot flourish in a reality that has become spiritually impoverished and subverted. When the psyche crumbles in the face

of existential estrangement, our identity becomes compromised and our relationships ruptured. This is not merely fortuitous, for it is the inevitable reaction to something conceived as unintelligible. Sundered from our True Self, we desperately seek to re-connect with reality, even if it means chasing false substitutes for what can truly fulfill us. This is done to protect ourselves from the perceived or actual threats of a world that has abandoned its sacred center, and now finds itself in a freefall of self-induced madness. We need to look for the remedy in an abiding reality that is both transcendent and immanent. We recall the words of William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966) who wrote: "Religion is often described as the healing of an alienation which has opened between man and his world" (1928, p. 238).

Conclusion

To be fully human is to discover our true identity in the Spirit. Our original nature is happiness, which is why abiding in our True Self mirrors our connection to the whole of reality. Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982) explains that "A glimpse of one's own essential nature gives bliss. The mind that aspires after bliss is really aspiring to its own Self" (1995, p. 42). This is our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), the "image of God" (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or the Self (*Ātmā*). This nature, which is inherent to our being, can never be lost or destroyed, as it contains within itself the archetype of our transpersonal humanity.

Overcoming our alienation requires identification with our True Self, as alienation itself is a disordered dualism. The Sage of Arunachala, Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), offers the following insight from a non-dual perspective: "[T]here is nothing alien to the Self" (1996, p. 48). It is intrinsic to our True Self to be connected to the whole of Reality. *The end to our existential isolation is described by the Taoist adept, Chang Po-tuan (Zhang Boduan, 983–1082), as a* "return to the origin" (2001, p. 44). By contrast, ignorance of our primordial nature

leads to a dehumanized state, whereby we are divorced from the timeless source of authentic well-being.

Loneliness comes from not knowing how to endure solitude. This distinction is key, yet the former reaffirms the *trauma of secularism*, while the latter opens itself up to a contemplative remembrance of the Real. One of humanity's greatest difficulties is being alone. We endlessly distract ourselves from reflecting on what lies beneath our moment-to-moment experiences. Influential French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) observed that "[T]he sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (1984, p. 67). This is why we tend to be so distracted by what is external to us, and seek out ways to avoid being with ourselves (see Postman, 1988). Similarly, a prominent thinker of the French Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), remarked that "The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself" (1925, p. 321).

People today find themselves immersed in radical technological advances, unparalleled economic growth, profound human misery, apocalyptic visions of mass destruction, and dreams of everlasting progress. The tools that were supposed to improve human life have become, in fact, the very same forces that control and threaten it. Our estranged condition leaves us susceptible to collective mind control and manipulation, which includes economic measures. As Lasch points out, consumption turns "alienation itself into a commodity. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure" (1978, p. 73). Humanity's alienation is spanned between the extremes of utopic fantasies and dystopic horrors.

Alienation from truth signifies a loss of contact with reality, which has tremendous consequences for mental health and psychotherapy when these are deprived of an authentic ontology. A renewal will require nothing less than returning metaphysics to the discipline of psychology, for a "true solution to the crisis of our civilization

demands a restoration of the meaning of fellowship" (Tournier, 1962, p. 50). In the final analysis, alienation stems from being estranged from our true identity. May we all learn to heed the exhortations of humanity's spiritual traditions that urge us to abide unconditionally in the Divine Presence, in which all fear, anxiety, despair, and hopelessness are forever vanquished.

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