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Arlington Street Church  
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## No More Loneliness

Last Saturday, I drove to the Cape to be with my friends whose 24-year-old, Gracie, had died in the middle of the night in a car wreck. When I arrived, I had to park up the street; so many people were there before me.

As I let myself in and squeezed between a table and counters laden with food and drink, what I felt in the room was not only disembodied shock and deepest sadness, but great love. A forcefield of love was holding the family, and holding all of us together.

I thought of the circle of people just outside that room, starting with Kem, who had stayed behind to cover our dorm full of teenagers so I could go. Gracie's sister, Nicole, had just flown in from Chicago; a friend had arranged for the plane tickets and the rental car, packed their bags, gotten them to the airport, and commandeered Nicole's phone, answering the myriad calls and texts. Behind almost everyone in the room was someone who had made it possible for them to drop everything and come.

And there were the people whom we'd never met before that day, who helped more than they'll ever know. The police who brought the terrible news to Gracie's parents' doors and waited with them until friends and family arrived. The old family friends who immediately stepped in to pay for the reception following yesterday's memorial service, feeding the hundreds of people who came to uphold them in their terrible grief.

Once again, I was reminded of the healing power of beloved community. Today, as we gather in thanksgiving, I want to reflect on our power to be there for each other, to companion each other through "the valley of the shadow," and to end loneliness.

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"It's been [18] years since Robert Putnam's best-selling book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* sounded the alarm about societal ...

isolation and alienation.”<sup>1</sup> Scientists agree that we are in the midst of an epidemic of loneliness. It can be literally deadly.

Researchers found that the biggest contributor to suicides among veterans is not war-related trauma but loneliness — the loss of the “tight bonds formed through shared mission and sacrifice, and [their] stark contrast with our independent, isolated, civilian society.”<sup>2</sup> “Insufficient social connection” is a bigger risk factor and a bigger predictor of premature death than obesity, and is the equivalent of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>3</sup>

But unlike obesity or smoking, loneliness hides in plain sight.<sup>4</sup> And it’s not just affecting people who are isolated. Some people who are married and those with relatively large networks of friends and families also feel empty and disconnected.

Loneliness actually acts on the same part of the brain as physical pain. It makes sense: The same pain receptors that evolved to keep us from putting a hand into the fire once signaled us to rejoin the pack to keep us safe from predators. “Collaboration has insured our survival.”

But the adaptive advantage that drove us to hunt and gather in tribes and that kept us from being lion food isn’t as obvious to us any more. Technically, we can survive solo, as long as we have a microwave and a big enough supply of Top Ramen. So we have to understand that the pain of loneliness is real. It still has the power to kill us — just more slowly than predation or starvation.<sup>5</sup>

What to do about loneliness? Just for openers, I have five suggestions.

One. We’re already doing one of the very first things the doctors ordered: attend services at your house of worship. I am not making this up. A Duke University psychiatrist<sup>6</sup> says, “There have been literally thousands of studies

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Latson, “A Cure for Disconnection,” *Psychology Today*, 3/7/18

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Junger, *Drive: On Homecoming and Belonging*, quoted in Jennifer Latson, *op cit*

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Brigham Young University

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jeremy Nobel, Harvard University

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Latson, *op cit*

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Dan German Blazer II

looking at whether religion is good for your health.... The findings have been mixed about whether aspects of religious devotion such as prayer [or] reading the Bible ... improve longevity. The one [aspect] that is significantly more predictive of good health is ... religious service attendance.”<sup>7</sup>

Two. Talk with strangers. Bus drivers, cashiers, people waiting in line with us, people waiting on us.... Say hello. Be that person.

Three. One of the most important suggestions is to put down our phones and engage with those around us. The studies linking the use of technology to communicate and loneliness are devastating. “Social media isn’t inherently alienating,” but there’s a real risk of missing the opportunity to connect authentically. Researchers say FaceTime is great, but face-to-face time is the greatest.

Four. Be a good neighbor. Shovel the snow off someone’s walk, offer to feed their cats when they head out of town, drop off some cookies from that batch you just baked, talk to the kids playing outside. Social cohesion in a neighborhood actually lowers your risk of heart attack.<sup>8</sup>

Five. Find ways to engage with others; find a common interest and run with it. Baking, board games, bowling, cooking, hiking, making art, singing — any activity you love. The trick is to create a space in which to engage meaningfully. And there has to be reciprocity. Everyone has to contribute.

The loneliness fix isn’t so elusive. Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together: Why We Ask More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, says that it wasn’t so long ago that we connected with each other more or less by default. We can figure it out again, now that we know what’s at stake. “It’s time to trace the human story of how we got here,” she says. “It’s not so complicated. We can retrace our way and rediscover one another’s company.”

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Michael Massimino’s friends call him Mass. When he was a senior at Columbia University, he saw the movie *The Right Stuff*, and he was utterly captivated by two things: First, the view of the earth out the window of John

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Dan German Blazer II in *JAMA*, as quoted in Carina Stores, “Going to church could help you live longer, study says,” 5/16/16, at [cnn.com/2016/05/16/health/religion-lifespan-health/index.html](http://cnn.com/2016/05/16/health/religion-lifespan-health/index.html)

<sup>8</sup> Please see [psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201803/cure-disconnection](http://psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201803/cure-disconnection)

Glenn's spaceship. And second, the friendship and loyalty among the seven astronauts. And so he applied to MIT for graduate school, and once he was at MIT, he applied to NASA. He applied to NASA four times, actually, and on the fourth time they said yes. Thirteen years later, he found himself on the space shuttle Atlantis, heading out to do a spacewalk on the Hubble Space Telescope.

Mass's job was to repair the power supply to an instrument that had failed. The problem was that the power supply was covered up with a panel affixed with 117 small screws. And just to be sure that panel would never come off in a launch, there was glue on the screw threads. It had taken Mass and his team five years to figure out how to get it off; they had designed over one hundred new tools to be used in the procedure.

And so he began. He leaves the airlock and makes his way along the edge of the shuttle. Looking over the edge is like looking over a cliff, with 350 miles to fall before you get to earth. He gets to the panel. His first job is to remove a handrail. A screw is stripped; it won't budge. He hasn't even gotten to the part of the repair he and his team have been designing and rehearsing for five years and he's already defeated. He looks at the crew inside the cabin. No one there can help him. He looks at the Earth. No one there can help him. He despairs.

"I felt this deep loneliness," he writes. "And it wasn't just a 'Saturday afternoon with a book' alone. I felt detached from the Earth. I felt that I was by myself, and everything that I knew and loved and that made me feel comfortable was far away. And then it started getting dark...."

"[In space,] when you enter the darkness, it is not just darkness. It's the darkest [dark] I have ever experienced. It's the complete absence of light. It gets cold, and I could feel that coldness, and I could sense the darkness coming. And it just added to my loneliness."

Over the next hour, Mass is trouble-shooting. He feels so terrible, he can't even stand to look at his friends inside the cabin. But then, through the side of his helmet, he sees that his best friend, Drew Feustel, is trying to get his attention. Mass looks up at him, and Drew is smiling and giving him the okay sign. Despairing, Mass thinks, "Is there another spacewalk going on out here?"

He can't talk to Drew, because everything they say the control center in Houston will hear, but he's miming to him, "Are you nuts?" And Drew mimes back,

“We are in this together and we’re going to make it through. You’re doing great. Just hang in there.”

“And if there was ever a time in my life that I needed a friend,” says Mass, “it was at that moment.... I didn’t believe him at all, ... but I thought, ‘At least if I’m going down, I’m going down with my best pal.’”

And then Houston has an idea, and tells Mass to just yank the handrail off the shuttle. Drew’s voice comes through: It’s going to take sixty pounds of force to get it to come loose. You got that in you, man. Go!

With a mighty yank, the handrail breaks free. With his special tools, Mass starts in on the 117 glued-in screws. Out they come, and off comes the panel, and the power supply gets switched out, the power comes back on, and everything is exactly as it should be.

When he finally finishes, he’s been out there for eight hours. But his commander says, “Hey Mass, before you come in, why don’t you take a few minutes to enjoy the view?”

Mass tethers himself to the ship and lets go. He looks at the Earth. “[I] can see the roundness of our home...,” he says, “and it’s the most magnificent thing I’ve ever seen. It’s like looking into heaven.” He turns his head and sees the moon and the stars and the Milky Way. He sees the universe. And then he turns back and sees our beautiful planet: paradise.

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A few days later, he’s back on Earth, and he’s driving home from the airfield with his wife, Carol, and their kids. And Carol tells him that, watching his spacewalk on the NASA channel, she could tell how sad he was — that she could hear a sadness in his voice she’d never heard, and it had worried her.

Mass says, “I wish I would’ve know that when I was up there, ’cause this loneliness that I felt — really, Carol was thinking about me the whole time. And we turned the corner to come down our block, and I could see our neighbors ... outside. They had decorated my house, and there were American flags everywhere.... and I got out of the car, and they were all hugging me.” They were so happy to have me back, so happy about how great everything had turned out, and I realized my neighbors were also thinking about me the whole time.

The next day, we got together with the engineers who had worked all those years with us, our trainers, the people who work in the control center, and they all started telling me how, while I was up there in my little nightmare, all alone, they were down here, running around like crazy. And “I realized that at the time when I felt so lonely, when I felt detached from everyone else — literally, like I was away from the planet — that really I was never alone, that my family and my friends and the people I [work] with, the people ... I love and the people that [care] about me.... They were with me every step of the way.”<sup>9</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

We are in the midst of a  
deadly epidemic of loneliness.  
But we are possessed of the healing power  
to be there for each other,  
and to end loneliness.  
Let’s get to church,  
talk to strangers,  
put down our phones,  
be good neighbors,  
and find ways to engage with each other.  
Let us rediscover one another’s company.

On this beautiful, round planet,  
the people we love, the people who love us,  
are with us every step of the way.

*Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Michael Massimino, “A View of the Earth,” as told on *The Moth*.