

# Reviving charity in a lonely world

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In a world where we are more connected than ever, why do so many of us feel so alone? According to the US Surgeon General, isolation and loneliness have become epidemics. Scores of studies in 2023 and 2024 confirm this. We usually picture someone who is lonely as being socially isolated. The isolation need not be physical. You can feel lonely in a busy restaurant or on a crowded street.

Loneliness is an emotional and spiritual state of being. It has little to do with proximity to others. We need a loving presence in our lives. I am married to the love of my life, and we are rarely separated for more than a few hours. But we are old, and life is uncertain. Deaths happen regularly among our contemporaries, and we are mindful of our mortality. We know that one of us will not escape being left “alone” by the other.

In the 21st century, we’ve lost many social networks that once kept loneliness at bay. Participation in service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis is down. Scouting, church affiliations, and union membership have shrunk. Volunteer rescue squads and fire departments

struggle to recruit. Women’s clubs are less popular.

These networks practiced “charity” in its archaic original meaning. Charity once meant how we relate to and care for one another as a community, not merely financial generosity to the less fortunate among us. To live in charity with one’s neighbors meant concerned mutual support—loving them.

What’s gone wrong? Today, we can easily travel great distances, and families are dispersed geographically. My two brothers live on the West Coast, my sons live in Florida and Texas, and my daughter lives in North Carolina. The phone connects us visually (Facetime), and we can be together virtually, but it isn’t the same as living in the same town.

While technology connects us across distances, it can also create invisible barriers that divide us, particularly when it comes to our local communities. My son Adam is the head of the Griffen School in Austin. This year, the school is banning student use of cell phones during the school day. Not only is the phone a distraction, but time spent texting or on social media is time not spent in personal interaction.

At a recent gathering of Bucks Coun-

ty Quakers, I found myself, like many others, reaching for my phone during breaks to check emails — missing an opportunity for face-to-face connection. This common habit chips away at the communal spirit we so desperately need. Kids in school are doing the same thing, and the school community suffers.

Our increasingly polarized politics also divide us, driving us into cultish tribal camps that erode the charity and mutual respect that once held our communities together. We aren’t living in “loving charity” with some neighbors who’s views don’t resonate with us. We may no longer speak to some.

We seem to lack insight into how we, as a human society, prosper. Airplanes, cell phones, and political beliefs are not inherently corrupting influences. We must focus on intentionally enhancing relationships and not be diverted. We must rehabilitate that spirit of old-time charity.

My retirement community, Pennswood Village, was founded by Quakers who envisioned a place where seniors could live graciously and have their health needs met. This culture of charity, where people enjoy each other, is palpable today. Visitors can sense it im-

mediately—this is a place where isolation and loneliness are rare, and people truly thrive. It was designed to be a community of caring.

Service to others is a vital part of old-time charity. America’s tradition of individualism must be tempered lest it become predatory. Our independence makes us agile and creative when blended with our commitment to serving the greater good of our community. To live in charity, we must purposefully go to some trouble to be with one another in a loving, caring way — to give ourselves to others. People of faith often express this as doing “God’s work.”

To combat the loneliness epidemic, we must *intentionally* live in charity with one another, fostering connections, building community, and supporting our neighbors. Think about the last time you *truly* connected with someone— was it through a screen or in person? This Labor Day, let’s challenge ourselves to put down our phones and engage in the kind of charity that builds real, lasting connections. Let loneliness be banished, and joy fill our hearts.

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