

From loneliness to solitude

Quotes are from *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen



To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

The contemporary society in which we find ourselves makes us acutely aware of our loneliness. We become increasingly aware that we are living in a world where even the most intimate relationships have become part of competition and rivalry

When our loneliness drives us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are, in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring friendships and suffocating embraces. To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dreamworld. No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness.

...the solitude that really counts is the solitude of heart; it is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation...It seems more important than ever to stress that solitude is one of the human capacities that can exist, be maintained and developed in the center of a big city, in the middle of a large crowd and in the context of a very active and productive life. A man or woman who has developed this solitude of heart is no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center.

Individual solitude means that the togetherness of friends and lovers can become moments in which we can enter into a common solitude which is not restricted by time and place. We are always in search of a community that can offer us a sense of belonging, but it is important to realize that being together in one place, one house, one city or one country is only secondary to the fulfillment of our legitimate desire.

Friendship and community are, first of all, inner qualities allowing human togetherness to be the playful expression of a much larger reality. They can never be claimed, planned or organized, but in our innermost self the place can be formed where they can be received as gifts.



Father Washington as young priest



Ordaining bishops bring up rear of procession at Philadelphia ordinations at the Archdiocese. In foreground are Paul Washington and Pat Merchant Park.



Allan Crite art by high altar

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The movement between poles

The spiritual life is that constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer. The more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostility and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life.

Loneliness ↔ Solitude

Hostility ↔ Hospitality

Illusion ↔ Prayer

The movement toward growth

There is a relationship among the elements. As the person, or parish, increases its capacity for solitude that provides a base for growth in hospitality. And as our hospitality increases that provides a base for deeper prayer (and connection with more reality).

Illusion ↔ Prayer

Hostility ↔ Hospitality

Loneliness ↔ Solitude

