

I'm so lonesome I could cry.

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When Hank Williams turned those few words into his first really big hit in 1949 he was making capital of a sad truth - that loneliness can reduce grown people to tears. Seventy years later with the world population rapidly closing in on the 8 billion mark to the point where you might think it impossible to be lonely in such a crowd, the word cry has given way to die. People do now die from loneliness, and psychologists of every feather and stripe are homing in to help understand and then perhaps cure this most confusing of all conditions. One of the weapons now gaining traction is food - meat and drink no less. It appears you may be able to ameliorate matters by getting the lonely to break bread with strangers.

For Hank and the long list of minstrels who have covered the topic since he did, it is all about the loneliness of the broken hearted. Social activists on the other hand are usually more concerned about the solitude that afflicts older citizens. But between those two extremes lies a huge band of lonely souls, young, middling, and mature, whose condition is harder to explain unless they suffer from some physical impediment to communion. In all cases other than the broken hearted it is reasonable to attribute the plight to the definite cause - an inability, reluctance, or downright unwillingness to reach out and make friends.

Being the communal animals that we are, the intimate society of other people is high on the list of our real needs. Maslow rated it in the third tier, but still fundamental since it so closely follows the vitals of food, shelter and security. Which is why in extreme cases lonely people can be driven to suicide. Normal life is very much all about being part of the crowd. In some way or another we all need to belong.

The solution therefore appears to lie in doing something that will encourage interaction, something to reverse individual reluctance to reach out and be part of the crowd. But how do you do that?

There are of course many ways of fostering interaction - promoting membership of clubs of people with like-minded interests, going to sporting events and making conversation with whoever happens to be nearest, becoming a regular at a local tavern, and so on. The trick is to somehow get into personal contact with other people in a situation where conversing becomes easy, natural and pleasing.

At this very moment there is a serious movement trying to make all of this happen, and those involved think the way to go is to do the job over a cup of tea or better still, a meal. Momentarily on hold because of society's greater immediate focus on the virus, this movement would encourage volunteers to set up friendship and conversation stalls at local markets, on streets corners and at the entrance to shopping malls and arcades. Appropri-ate signage would remind people that loneliness kills and make it open and quite clear that the table and the volunteers manning it are working on a serious social problem. They are in fact reaching out to the lonely to come over make some friends. It could be as simple as 'Take a Seat, Have a Bite, Have a Chat, Make a Friend.'

The idea has impeccable cultural significance and meaning. In both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible there are references to the importance of people 'breaking bread' together. Other religions demonstrate the same reverence for the simple act of sharing food.

Down the ages philosophers and politicians have commented on the fact that it is hard to be enemies with those you break bread with. How much more true is it now to say that it is hard to be lonely when you're eating a meal with other people. Sharing a meal is a fast track to friendship.

The organisers putting this idea together say in their opening gambit 'We sincerely believe that food has the power to bring people closer, to overcome the malady of chronic loneliness, and to make the world a better and more friendly place'. It is an ambitious outline, but few would argue with its essential beauty and goodness.

Over time they mean to build a world-wide following with thousands of volunteers.

They want to make sure that the project never seems foreign or remote, and so they foresee a highly personal element of the broad doctrine in every location that they and their volunteers can man. The hope is that the scheme will grow and grow and grow. At the table people will gather to talk about all sorts of things but probably steering away from the immediately controversies of politics and religion. Then, to keep enthusiasm blooming they plan the promotion of special days and special events. This might translate as the use of different national dishes to emphasise the universality of friendship and food. A Greek day could be followed next week with a South African or Algerian day. Once people are seated next to you and chatting away it becomes easier to rope them in to the organisation of such events and persuade them to at least come again next week.

As they see it, the scheme can bring relief to thousands of people suffering the horror of loneliness, and give them a renewed sense of pleasure, 'fun' if you like; meeting and getting to know people over food, and ultimately becoming involved. In this way the loneliest of people of all ages can find an antidote and encourage a growing interest in their own lives, while developing the desire and confidence to reach out and become part of the crowd.

If you should chance upon one of their tables sometime soon, spare a thought for its aim, have a chat, take a cup of tea and a biscuit, reach out, make a new friend, and remember the essential sadness of the lonely condition.

*Did you ever see a robin weep
When leaves begin to die?
Like me, he's lost the will to live
I'm so lonesome I could cry.*