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Levels of loneliness and connection: Crisis and possibility¹

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Zusammenfassung: *In diesem Artikel beschreibt Barrett-Lennard verschiedene Formen von Einsamkeit auf der individuellen Ebene, auf der Ebene enger Beziehungen sowie auf der Ebene der Zugehörigkeit zu größeren Gemeinschaften und diskutiert anschließend Aspekte und Möglichkeiten der Heilung auf allen diesen Ebenen. Zu Beginn unterscheidet er zwischen einem Mit-sich-selbst-Sein einerseits als positiver Form der Einsamkeit und einer schmerzhaften Einsamkeit andererseits. Beide Zustände sind nicht absolut durch die An- bzw. Abwesenheit eines Anderen bedingt.*

Im Folgenden stellt er drei verschiedene Arten von Einsamkeit dar:

- 1) *Selbstentfremdung, wobei der Mensch nicht mit sich selbst in Kontakt ist, sich innerlich gespalten fühlt und einen Sinnverlust sowie einen Verlust des Selbst erlebt.*
 - a) *Eingeengte (trichterähnliche) Selbst-Wahrnehmung. Die Bewertungsbedingungen haben ein Selbstkonzept entstehen lassen, das nicht immer mit dem Erleben übereinstimmt. Das führt zu Inkongruenz (Angst-, Schuldgefühle). Im positiven Fall kann es zu Wachstum führen, da es uns dazu veranlasst, etwas zu unternehmen.*
 - b) *Sinnverlust, Machtlosigkeit, Verzweiflung, wie sie durch den Verlust der Existenzbasis, oder einer wichtigen Person, durch massive körperliche Veränderungen oder durch Veränderung der Umgebung entstehen.*
 - c) *Akuter Selbstverlust in Form einer Schizophrenie oder einer ähnlichen Form des Zusammenbruchs*
 - d) *Gefühl der Leere oder eines nie gestillten Hungers nach Identität, nach einem Ich mit bestimmten Eigenschaften und einer kontinuierlichen Orientierung.*
- 2) *Zwischenmenschliche Einsamkeit*

Unsere persönliche Identität ist immer mit wichtigen Beziehungen verbunden. Unser Bedürfnis nach Liebe und Zuwendung bedingt zugleich das Potential für die Deprivation der Sehnsucht nach einer engen Verbindung. Mangel an Erfahrungen mit Beziehungen führt nicht nur dazu, dass wir Anderen als Fremden gegenüberreten, sondern auch dass wir dem Prozess des Kennenlernens und Beziehung-Aufbauens fremd gegenüberstehen (ohne uns dessen bewusst zu sein). Heutzutage entstehen oft „funktionelle Beziehungen“, die nicht um ihrer selbst willen bestehen, sondern für einen gewissen Zweck, was die Einsamkeit verstärkt.
- 3) *Einsamkeit auf der Gemeinschaftsebene, das Gefühl, nicht zu einer größeren Gemeinschaft zu gehören. Vor allem in unserer westlichen Kultur gibt es weniger Eingebundenheit in der Gemeinschaft. Dieser Mangel an Wurzeln oder Zugehörigkeitsgefühl ist abträglich für das Identitätsgefühl.*

Im Anschluss daran verweist Barrett-Lennard auf die Ressourcen von Psychotherapie für die Heilung der Beziehungsfähigkeit auf allen diesen Ebenen. Dabei muss jedoch die ganze Spannbreite von menschlichem Engagement berücksichtigt werden: es geht um die Heilung der Beziehungen (der Sub-Selbste) innerhalb des Selbst, um die Heilung der intimen und der funktionalen persönlichen Beziehungen, der Zugehörigkeit zu Organisationen und zu gesellschaftlichen sowie kulturellen oder religiösen Gemeinschaften sowie um die Heilung der Verbundenheit mit der Natur und dem Kosmos. Zum Abschluss wird die Frage aufgeworfen, ob unsere heutige Kultur zwangsläufig Entfremdung und Einsamkeit verstärken muss. Neben der übermächtigen Tendenz einer isolierenden und einseitig technologisch-ökonomischen Globalisierung sieht Barrett-Lennard auch gewisse Tendenzen einer sich positiv entwickelnden Zivilisation.

Keywords: *Loneliness, self-estrangement, community, healing of relationship*

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It is part of our nature to *need* to be alone, at times; part of our human potential to be on our own but involved, active, deeply absorbed perhaps, and not in the least empty or cut off. This can happen in a myriad of particular ways. One set of ways involves our bond with nature; with non-human beings, and with a natural world that we can feel nourished or embraced by. Many of us have at times an intense need just to be with ourselves. We seek opportunity, in solitude and in special relationships, to put ourselves together or find our way again. Perhaps we sense a self-healing process within us needing a chance to do its work. While a complicated species, each individual having a many-sided personality and diverse self, it seems we have the potential to find a balance or wholeness in which no important part is neglected.

I do not wish to confuse the positive condition of being *with oneself*, or inwardly in touch and absorbed with one's own experiencing, with the different condition of feeling all by oneself and painfully lonely. Most of all, I don't mean to suggest that being out of the physical presence of other people has any necessary relationship with loneliness, nor that being in their presence is not to be lonely. Many of us, myself for one and perhaps you too, have had the experience of feeling alone, separate and very lonely in a group or crowd, in an institution or organisation that one belongs to, at a party or other festive gathering, and even at times in a close-knit family. It would surprise me greatly if you were to really let yourself into your own present and remembered feelings and then not find any experience of loneliness, any times when you have been unable to speak of what lay heavily within you, any moments when no one was listening, or any occasion where your sense of meaning, selfhood or belonging eluded you. Underlying this variety of experience, I see three major kinds of experienced separation and loneliness, and several distinct forms within the first kind. I would like to try to bring each kind and form to life.

Levels of loneliness

One major kind of loneliness centres on estrangement from oneself, or being out of touch on the inside. It can be as though part of oneself were a lost child whose voice returns in half-heard echoes, or speaks in disguise in our dreams. Or, it may be as though part of us is a stranger, even an enemy, to the self we own. Or, we might feel that our energy or drive has failed, leaving us without direction or power, drifting along. For some of us the loss goes further still: we no longer know who we are; or perhaps we never have. Put another way, this self-estrangement may take the form of inner separation and dividedness; an acute absence of meaning and purpose; a frightening loss of a sense of self; or, the floating hollowness of having no formed self. Here are the four forms of self-estrangement in more detail:

- (i) In one way of being out of touch with ourselves, awareness is narrowed and selective. Imagine a funnel, in which the wide mouth is filled with all the reactions of our physical and emotional being, reactions that could reach clear consciousness but have not got there yet. Picture this funnel having a strainer or mesh in it and a narrow spout. Our consciousness, what we see clearly and can put into words, is what comes out through the thin end of the funnel, after all our preconscious reactions have been processed in our nervous system, and filtered or reshaped as they rise to consciousness. Some of our fears, yearnings and impulses (perhaps ones we would see as bad/immoral, arrogant, or weak) don't come into clear view. Although our 'funnel' was partly shaped by earlier experience and learning, we are not seeing how this happened and may only have a vague sense that we compress and filter at all. Given the sifting, reworking nature of experiencing and memory, qualities we do not see in ourselves might be seen or sensed by others. We can have tendencies at odds with the picture we have of ourselves, the 'me' we need to believe we are, our 'acceptable self'. What has happened may originate in having been cared for and loved in very conditional ways and, little by little, having absorbed whatever powerful prescription was involved in order to maintain a sense of worth and regard for ourselves. 'Introjected' requirements for self are not totally immune to experience which contradicts them. One may react to some situation in a way that makes the evidence of behaving and feeling out of line with an inner prescription overwhelming. When this happens, the disturbance to our sense or picture of self can be accompanied by sharp uneasiness and anxiety, or painful guilt. Such a feeling state, although distressing, can turn out to have positive consequences if it motivates us toward soul-searching inquiry and growth.
- (ii) The next kind of self-estrangement is associated with no longer finding meaning in one's life, of feeling futility or impotence and, at the worst moments, an acute despair or anomie. Such feelings can arise in nearly anyone when some foundation of life is ripped away or slides out from under: perhaps through the loss of someone very close, particularly a child, or a loved partner or parent; or, by losing a valued job or career, or facing the end of working life; or by finding oneself in a totally different and unfamiliar living environment; or through a handicapping injury and loss of capacities formerly taken for granted; or as a result of major political and social upheavals in the milieu of 'home'. It can be quite natural to feel painfully lonely, cut off and powerless, or to find that nothing makes sense or has meaning any more, under conditions that occur every day for large numbers of people old and young, striking at some stage in the lives of nearly all of us.
- (iii) The third kind of self-estrangement is less common in full-fledged form than the previous two. It is the loss or fracture of

our sense of self that may happen, for example, in an acute breakdown or psychosis, especially what is often labeled acute schizophrenia. I suspect that most of us at some time have transient experiences of the self we know seeming to disappear. Then, the world around us can become strangely altered and unfamiliar, and we are lost; strangers in a world that eludes us. Few things are more terrifying than a literal disintegration of self and loss of a sense of who one is, or perhaps even of being a person, both like others and distinct from them.²

(iv) A fourth way of being out of touch inside deserves separate mention. In some persons there is a void, a hollow emptiness or shapeless hunger that has never been filled; a hunger we might say from the outside, for identity, for selfhood, to be a 'Me' with distinct qualities and a sense of direction that carries over from one situation and time to another. In some circumstances, people appear not to develop a cohesive sense of self; and an urge to find purpose and meaning in their existence has had little chance to germinate, let alone to take root and grow. Persons without a working guidance system of their own are at the mercy of others and easily fall prey to passing influences. This directionless quality can be very puzzling, or seem like a deficiency of will, to those of us with strongly patterned or fortified selves. My sense is that "self-less" persons have feelings and no friends, not even the companionship of a developed, familiar "me" that weaves in and out of the awareness of a doing, feeling "I".

Beyond these varieties of *self*-estrangement, the next major level distinguished is that of *interpersonal loneliness*. I think this can arise without profound self-estrangement, although any of the patterns I have so far described could contribute to it. We learn who we are largely through relations with others. Our deepest needs for affiliation, caring, respect and love, for union and intimacy in its various forms, imply potential for deprivation; and the possibility of enduring long periods (even a lifetime) of hunger for close connection. One is handicapped if one has no experience, or very stilted experience, in relationships with siblings or close childhood companions; with parents and others where emotional attachment, responsibility and example are built-in; with people very different from oneself who nevertheless become known personally; and with individuals met on one's own path with whom mutual befriending occurs.³

If some of the avenues mentioned are missing in our growing-up worlds, we are not only strangers when we first meet someone, but may be strangers to the process of meeting and engagement. Not only do we start off not knowing the other, but without knowing from experience how to know them. We may not realise that this inexperience is our difficulty, and thus attribute problems to non-self causes: 'bad luck', incompatibility, or deficiencies in the other person. To always look to such external factors when relationships do not work out, suggests unawareness of an inner handicap.

Unfilled hunger for personal affiliation, whether for a friend, a mate or lover, a companion to play or work with, perhaps for a child to nurture, can result in acute or aching loneliness. The presence of others does not itself dispel such feeling, and may even sharpen it if we sense ourselves on the outside, and experience this exclusion while seeing others included. Conditions of modern life often lead to 'functionary relations.' Such associations are not engaged in for their own sake but as a means to some outside goal. Much experience of this 'ulterior' kind (prompted by something we want for which the other is a conveyance) and little experience in relationships that are their own reward, can leave us very lonely; and with a tendency to use others even in purely personal encounters, for we know no better, or no other way.

Personal identity, our very selfhood, tends to be bound up with relationships that are most central in our lives — past and present. Self-estrangement coupled with collapse of pivotal relationships can, at the extreme, bottom to an agony in which to live is unbearable: worse than to die. Suicide can seem to be the only release from such despairing loneliness and self- and other revulsion. To act on this extreme despair may be an irreversible step, but the desperate feeling state is not of its nature irreversible. If the person chooses life, the crisis potentially has propelled him or her to seek change in self and/or circumstances; change that may lead to new levels of meaning and connection with others.

Severe loneliness for close personal relationships tends to work against developing a sense of belonging in any larger group or community. For one thing, understanding the hunger for connection that others also could be feeling (but protecting themselves from expressing plainly) is likely to be deficient or out of tune. These thoughts provide an entry to the remaining broad kind of loneliness.

It appears also to be within our nature to *hunger for community* beyond close and intimate relationships, a hunger reflected and often satisfied, it seems, in tribal societies. Western mass culture clearly leaves many people lost and alienated, with little if any sense of inclusion and belonging in a communal whole. The relationship bonds between couples, within families, and in other small groupings within a community, have bearing on the quality of that community, and this ambient quality also acts back to influence the personal bonds within it. Without a felt sense of community, we feel no rootedness, no sense of inclusion or belonging in the world around us, no feeling of our presence inside a communal whole in

2 Shlien's earlier (1961) but still freshly original discussion and case-study is a powerful statement of ideas and process related to this quality of estrangement and 'loss' of a sense of self.

3 Intimate relationships are ones in which we can share immediate feelings, precious experiences and inner parts of self, and also receive the other person in kind. In such relationships some of our felt experience and action is intertwined with experience and self-expressive actions of the other person. The particular ways we share and express our connection vary widely from one type of intimate or close relationship to another. It will be quite different with our spouse or lover than with our child, or our parent, but the depth of sharing connection can be similar.

which we are known, acknowledged and looked for. Community belonging contributes to one's own sense of identity and of living in a human world; a world in which every person matters and is a giving and receiving partner.

When ideas about community first became of serious interest to me, it was as though I began to see something in focus that had been vaguely in front of and around me all the while. The transition started during a period of sabbatical university leave, away from home and in an unfamiliar setting; a setting in which I came to feel rather acutely lonely, although most members of my own immediate family were there with me.⁴ The next year (1975) I took part with 130 others in a two-week residential workshop that developed as a learning laboratory around the formation and meanings of community. It was, to me, a provocative and fruitful stimulus, and led on to a new paper wholly focused on community. During my first writing of the paper, not published until much later (Barrett-Lennard, 1994), it struck me that a community worthy of the name was like a life-form, was an emergent species of life, vital in nourishing, giving meaning to and otherwise enriching the lives of its members. The influence is two-way, for such a community is sustained by its members, and potentially in continuous creation by them. Early in the paper I ask "what quality does a human collective or group need to have, to justifiably call it 'a community'?" My answer includes as one major aspect that the members experience a *founded sense of community*; a felt union, connection, sharing, and belonging that has been forged through and discovered in their actual experience together.

In the frequent case of a sense of community being absent in people's lives, it is as though they/we are strangers in our world. We have no sense of the larger population around us being a significantly acquainted and connected group of which we are fellow-members, little feeling that we have any part in creating or sustaining our milieu. We tend to feel powerless, without agency in our lives and without importance to most other people. We see people as bunched together in towns, organisations and other groupings out of convenience or necessity, not to enrich the meaning of each other's lives. The essential isolation and alienation we feel leads easily to an exclusive concern with self or, at best, *with self plus a small life raft of immediate family or other personal allies*. Where this happens, loneliness on a community level perpetuates itself.

In each of these kinds of loneliness a primary level of connection and engagement is missing or painfully attenuated. The quality of 'painfulness' applies especially to the first two primary kinds of loneliness, involving self-estrangement and/or lack of any intimate relations. Persons who do have the resource of one or more intimate/close relationships can chronically lack a sense of community or affiliated belonging to any larger group without being fully conscious

of their deprivation. But if their closest personal relationship then collapses or is somehow lost to them, the resulting emptiness and aching sense of being cut off, disconnected and alone can be overwhelming. The loss itself of a pivotal relationship, compounded with felt inability in forming relationships, is a 'double whammy' that may goad the person into some kind of personal counselling – which leads me into an issue relating to therapy itself. I will focus this issue with a question: "How well and how far do our therapies go in facilitating healing around relationship? What is the scope of this challenge, and how can we respond to it?"

Recovering connection: The healing of relationship

I suggest that our therapy, basically person-centred or other, has more chance to be a powerful resource if the *healing of relationship* is envisioned as its pivotal axis. The spectrum this opens extends through the whole width of human life relations and engagement. It runs from the healing of relations within the self, through therapeutic discovery and development in the area of self-other relations, a growing felt awareness of community and its meaning, the exploration of struggle and bondedness with larger people systems, the possible emergence of an actual sense and concern for the whole human family and even a deepening connection with the living world of nature. How far and in what depth healing and growth issues extend through this spectrum depends on the individual client and, vitally also, on the perspective and resources that their therapist brings to the helping engagement. A therapist's perspective comes not only from professional training but from life experience in their own engagement milieu. We are all part of a culture which stresses individualism, the separateness of persons and the implicit idea of *relationship as transaction* between free-standing selves. Contrary ideas are that we are deeply interwoven bearers of a common life, that our very selves are born in relationship and evolve therefrom, we live interactively, interdependence is built into us, and being in relation is at the core of our lives. It has taken me a long time to come squarely to this latter view, and I am still in the process of drawing out its full implications.

I think that the philosophy and values of individualism have something to do with the epidemic crisis of loneliness in Western culture. A vital step toward resolution of this crisis would be the development of a widely shared public consciousness that loneliness takes many forms, that in these varied guises it is endemic in our culture often with tragic personal effects, and that it both arises from and acts to diminish the life quality of whole societies. Out of such awareness and a broader sensitivity to issues of interdependence I believe that there needs to grow a new priority of concern and provision in the culture, one that works to enable, conserve and nourish experiences of interconnection on many levels. This spectrum,

⁴ Out of this context I wrote a paper expanding my previous thought on empathy. It starts with a section headed "On human community and interconnection" (Barrett-Lennard, 1976).

already implied, would include one to one and whole-family relationships, relations within varied small groups and larger communities, and qualities of association between peoples of differing culture, belief or circumstance. Cutting through this spectrum, the capacity for and exercise of empathy would be *one* crucial strand.⁵

Overcoming the loneliness of *self*-estrangement hinges on the healing of relations within the self. So what is a healed or well-functioning self like, positively stated? To respond to this question I need to start by saying something about the nature of the self, as I now understand it. First, I think of the self—anyone's self—as a 'singular multiplicity.' The multiplicity aspect fits the notion that we have configured subself patterns that are called into action in differing main contexts of our lives. In the well-functioning person this multiplicity is also 'singular' in that the self is one as well as many; a distinctive complex whole that knows or keeps track of itself through the inwardly open connection of all of its parts. Another way of putting this is that the subselves, although somewhat distinct in their configuration and function, are dynamic entities not shut off from each other but effectively in open dialogue. There is free flow of information within the complex total self-system. Just how, it might be asked, does this information flow and all the voices of self get heard? The way I think of it is that there is a mediating self system or function that is part of our thinking-feeling consciousness, a resource that keeps track of the diversity within, that is involved in our decision-making, that above all gives expression to and, in a sense, presides over the interchange within us, and which may prompt us to seek help. A core function of personal therapy, in this perspective, is the freeing up and enabling of dialogue within the self (Barrett-Lennard, 2000).

I have said that, in the well-functioning person, the various parts and voices of the complex total self are in open working connection with one another. It is also possible that some parts or subselves have a qualitatively different origin than others. For example, the self-configuration triggered and manifest in relation to a parent or authority figure may have been born out of highly conditional attitudes intensely experienced in such a relationship in childhood. Other subselves, perhaps one triggered in relating to a close friend, or (in differing example) by the embrace of deeply enjoyed natural surroundings, may include very little involuntary scripting, leaving the person open to their primary spontaneous experience. For the well-functioning person, a contextual subself is a resource not a repertoire of involuntary, built in imperatives. Not surprisingly, such a person has a sense of agency and capacity, and an active initiating stance. S/he is curious and reaches for further discovery and refinement of knowing. The self systems are dynamic entities, and experience in this case has a naturally developmental quality.

Discussion of healing in interpersonal relationships also raises the question of goals, specifically, "What is a well-functioning relationship?" My starting point, in answer, is that the relationship involves an open connective meeting and interplay of selves. The selves feed into each other, each projected from a larger self-system but without sharp boundary in their interaction. Communication of varied kind flows freely and expressively between the linked selves, within an ambience of general unguardedness and trust. There tends to be a taken-for-granted safety in the sense that neither person feels their identity at risk. Indeed, this identity lies partly within the relationship and is enhanced by it, leaving no need for careful protection of separateness. The participants make way for each other and, most importantly, for the emergent and resource-rich 'We' of living relationship (Barrett-Lennard, 1998, pp. 182–183). They are embraced in their relationship but not submerged in it, for each has a wealth of experience, interest and meaning from other life engagements as well, all of which contributes distinctively to their consciousness. Viewed more externally, the relationship is an open, adaptive living system, self-generative and growthful in quality, aware of itself through the consciousness of participants, and in dynamic motion through feedback both from within and from other persons and systems.

One could similarly identify qualities of a well-functioning working group or team, one that has responsibilities and tasks beyond the intrinsic satisfaction of communicative interplay among its members; responsibilities best exercised when members experience satisfying engagement among themselves, have compatible visions of their joint purposes and division of labour, and feel their own and one another's presence as needed, active contributors in achieving these purposes. Implicit is the idea that the team and its activity has a texture of meaning to each participant such that their own job is not solely a means to some individual end. While there is generally a structure of formal leadership in the group, each member experiences opportunity for initiative, a valuing of their particular resources and presence, and a role in decision-making that affects them. When such a group calls on a helping consultant, the consultant's role is not as group therapist but as a facilitator in group relations. It is the group that is being healed, with growthful spin-off for individual members. Also, when a person seeks counselling assistance as an individual, one of the significant engagements in their world is likely to be with a work group or team. The relationship-sensitive therapist is alert and highly responsive to any signals that the person is suffering in such a context, and perhaps feels little knowing capacity to change the quality of the engagement. Therapy exploration of this relation may enable the client to discover and feel new capacity for discrimination, qualitative change and choice in this vital sphere of life.

I have spoken of community belonging as another primary sphere of relation. Organisational membership can also be such a sphere, but is beyond my scope to explore here except to acknowledge that

5 Presented in early form at the annual conference of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, 1977.

some organisations serve as significant communities for their members, others not. I think that most persons do experience some identification with a community. Where this connection is substantial, the community exists in the ground of the person's consciousness and meanings and can readily emerge into the foreground of awareness. Many significant friendship, family and small-group relationships would have their life within the broader context of a well-functioning community. Moreover, the community would tend to serve as a bridge to larger systems in the larger human world that also contribute to personal identity. Without this bridge, a person's identification with a nationality, or a transnational ethnic, linguistic or other cultural grouping, or perhaps a world religion, lacks the experiential anchorage that direct, local communal engagement gives rise to.

Healing on a personal level can open the potential for community reconnection. However, if the person's natural communities have no cohesion, are exhausted by conflict or weak from attrition, or are suffocating in the narrowness of their norms and conformity requirements, then the community itself is in need of healing. A group of members aware of such a crisis of need can sometimes take initiatives, even including reaching out to suitable facilitator-resource persons, to set in motion a process to heal and bring their community to life again. These comments touch on issues explored further in sections of my 1998 book as well as in my already mentioned article "Toward a person-centred theory of community" (Barrett-Lennard, 1994).

I have mentioned the level of relational engagement with larger national-political, religious, ethnic diaspora and other systems. Individuals generally have no direct contact with most other persons in the large system, although the symbolic and practical effects of this broad membership relation can be very influential in their lives and outlook, even in their ideas of self. Obviously there is great variation in people's consciousness of the working of these embracing systems, of their channels of influence and their impact. Attitudes toward a particular large-system affiliation (with one's country, say, or religion, or extended ethnic group) range all the way from those who cherish this relation, to others with strongly ambivalent feelings, and to some who are rejecting and ashamed of it. Even in personal therapy, in some instances, this level of relation is a distressing, sensitive one to search into. Issues may of course extend beyond self-inquiry, beyond the relation between an individual and the large system. The system itself may have very unhealthy features, ones that are theoretically amenable to alteration but, in practice, are a huge challenge to envision clearly and for the members collectively to change.

Further, the system itself might be in a very tense or actively conflictual relation with another large system. If there is significant desire from both sides for change in this relation, outside enabling resources may be invoked. A huge and vital challenge in our world is to develop more effective resources to mediate termination of explosive tension or conflict between large people systems but also,

beyond this, to set in train and facilitate processes of actual healing of relations. This healing would mean that felt safety and confidence replaced threat and fear or bitterness, and the conditions for potential resumption of conflict had dissolved. I believe it is not beyond the bounds of possibility, and certainly not beyond those of relevance, for some colleagues in the person-centred movement to develop and grow the expertise to contribute on this level.

The possibilities ahead

It would be possible, but beyond the bounds of this presentation, to further elaborate the spectrum of potential relational healing and new connection. I don't wish to take the polyannaish view that our culture or civilisation will necessarily overcome the epidemic of loneliness and alienation and achieve a new momentum of relational healing and connection between people. I see two broad possibilities. One is that any present trends toward increasing estrangement, more superficial association and the emotional isolation of people will continue to build in our highly competitive, technology driven, economically stratified and involuntarily 'globalizing' world. In this scenario, Internet communication, economic ties and other linkages will not actually work (or not suffice) to bring people into deeper and more trusting relation with one another, will not heal the bitterness, indifference, or estrangement in belief and circumstance, that divides so many groups and peoples. Significant communities of belonging generally will not revitalise but suffer dilution, deterioration or extinction. The conditions for stressed relations and conflict between large systems of people will be fuelled by effects of population increase and crowding, rising aspirations for the 'good life' in material terms, and diminution of natural resources and environmental quality. The mixed up and divided human family will become more divided, more people will be desperate individually and in collectives of varied kind and scale. One hardly dare imagine the consequences of such deteriorative change on a global scale.

The other broad possibility I see is more hopeful. Although there have been ferocious and tragic internecine and regional wars no huge international war has engulfed our civilisation for over half a century in this fast-moving world. Such a 'great' war seems less likely in the coming decades than in some of those behind us. There is breathing space and potential to move forward, and some steps are being taken. One can point, for example, to advances in education, improvements in health and economic security in some regions, to a pattern of nations coming to the aid of others in the face of major disasters, to faltering advances in democratisation in a good many settings, to growing consciousness and concern for the environment and our impact upon it, to the survival of the United Nations as a significant symbol and sometimes practical force, and to the explosive growth of information exchange and potential for direct communication between individuals and networks of people

across all kinds of increasingly nominal boundaries. Through media documentaries, first-hand contact and other communication, it seems that more of us see 'ordinary people' the world over, regardless of skin colour, language and local culture, as basically like ourselves—all belonging to one larger family.⁶

On another plane, attitudes toward competition may slowly be changing. Whether besting or winning out over others should continue as a mainspring of the world culture is at least being questioned now, in some contexts. Even in the conservative arena of education, the incentive of doing better than others, in order to be seen as doing well, is being de-emphasised in some quarters in favour of more intrinsic motivators: nourishment of curiosity and the desire to know, and the inherent satisfactions of extending one's reach, capacity and competence. There is an uneven trend greater opportunity and reward than earlier for literally cooperative endeavour, thus for joining and connection, within formal education. Competition is still a pivotal engine of commerce and industry and is rife in sports and athletics, and perhaps there always will be a place for some forms of competition. However, I suggest that the limited trend noted here needs to grow and spread much further so that no one is demeaned and demoralised by failure in competition in whatever context and, most of all, so that everyone retains a sense of inclusion.

I will make one further observation. We are now familiar with environmental impact assessments often being carried out before a major new industrial or resource development is undertaken. Sometimes such assessments seek to evaluate likely social consequences, and this feature could go much further. Should we not regularly study and weigh the likely impact on attitudes and *relationships between people* of proposed new economic measures, new laws, plans for urban or other 'renewal', and significant commercial and industrial developments of all kinds? In deciding whether or how to proceed with some new measure, surely its potential for undermining or enriching human relations should be carefully weighed, in fact, *should not this potential be a major, consideration?* If it is foreseen that a new move expected to profit a particular group will have the 'side-effect' of increasing the isolation and vulnerability of others, thus also accentuating loneliness and disconnection, then the move in question is unjustified under any principle of common human good.

In overall view, if we don't envision and mobilise efforts toward the multilevel healing of relations, the first of the broad possibilities I've sketched seems to me the more likely and, if likely, then an enormous risk to humankind. If enough of us in the culture focus our concern and resourcefully bend our efforts in varied ways we might just ensure that the balance tips toward the second, hopeful alternative. Many who hear or read this paper will have the values,

and the resources or aspiration, to assist people in healing, recovering and preserving personal wholeness. Some will have professional interest in the realm of personal relationships in crisis. Others will have a background of community or organisational involvement, or 'simply' a richness of life experience, on which to call. From these foundations, could we not, between us, build the understanding and resourcefulness needed in order to contribute on the urgent further levels indicated?

The domain of collaborative effort required to assist not only fellow human 'casualties' of the wider malaise of relations but, as well, to enable the group and societal levels of healing is a tall order indeed. But is it an impossible dream? I think not. Human consciousness and social purpose are not static, the present epidemic condition and pain of loneliness might be undone, and the broad-spectrum healing of relations could *become* a priority of discernment and action in the suffering human family. Such change, if achieved, would fundamentally alter the quality and conditions of human life. *One* effect is that we would be living in a far safer world.

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⁶ In a paper not long ago I focused on the (therapeutic) recovery of *client* empathy, encompassing both self-empathy and empathy toward others. It is published in A. C. Bohart & L. S. Greenberg (Eds), *Empathy reconsidered: New directions in psychotherapy* (103–121). Washington, DC: APA Books, 1997.