

Make This Heartfelt Mission a Meaningful 2021 New Year's Resolution

If you enjoyed *It's a Wonderful Life* over the holidays, do you recall the opening when two angels discuss someone who is alone and discouraged contemplating ending his life? This situation is not as rare as many might think.

Do you also remember a Beatles' classic, "Eleanor Rigby," still played 50 years after its debut, which strikes a chord with multitudes because many identify with its theme of lonely people?

"All the lonely people. Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people/ Where do they all belong?"

"Eleanor dies. "Nobody came."/ A pastor officiates then meanders away.

"All the lonely people/ Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people/ Where do they all belong?"

Friendship Promotes Longevity and Health

In his book, *Healthy at 100*, John Robbins cites a study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* underscoring the absolute importance of relationships for stability and health. People who were disconnected from others were roughly three times more likely to die during the nine-year study than those with strong social ties.

A century before, Henry David Thoreau captured the same issue of loneliness. He stated, "The mass of humanity live lives of quiet desperation."

From a biblically informed perspective, we know there are

three basic needs of humankind:

- 1. Transcendence:** Reaching beyond physical to spiritual.
- 2. Significance:** Having purpose in life.
- 3. Relationship:** Having human connectivity/friendship.

God designed us for meaningful human interaction. He stated in creation: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18b).

Romans 14:7a tells us, "For none of us lives for himself."

In civilized societies, the ultimate punishment for serious repeat offenders is long-term solitary confinement. Turkish prisoner Pastor Andrew Brunson said that weeks in this condition brought him to a place of despair and near suicide.

The Loneliness Pandemic

Before the COVID crises, the United Kingdom instituted a new government position, "The Minister for Loneliness". Facing a serious national health problem stemming from increasing social isolation, the initiative was launched because of alarming numbers of people experiencing dementia, heart disease, high blood pressure, depression and suicide. Social scientists postulated that the long-term health effects of loneliness are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day!

Cigna health insurance company conducted a nationwide study revealing nearly half of the respondents said they feel alone or increasingly left out. 40% stated they "lack companionship" and "their relationships aren't meaningful".

Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy published in the Harvard Business Review his same concern. "During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."

We must face the brutal reality of a serious crisis, a growing epidemic of loneliness in our society today. Ironically, research shows its most prevalent among younger people who feel they're the most "connected" yet in reality lack meaningful relationships and real interpersonal support.

Primary Reason for the Problem

Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee."

The father of our faith, Abraham, came into relationship with his Creator, and Scripture said he was not merely a servant but "the friend of God" (James 2:23b).

Likewise, Jesus reassured His disciples they were not just co-workers but "friends" (John 15:15). Friendship is a basic human need designed by God, and He intends for us to first and foremost find it in Him.

What a difference this represents in Christianity from other world religions having a distant, angry "Allah" figure or multiple, mysterious "Krishna" entities that must be appeased by performance and good works.

So in our society increasingly drifting from authentic relationship with the true living God, it should not surprise us when the void is left unfulfilled. "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every human being that cannot be filled by any human thing but only by the Creator Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ," said 17th century French theologian Blaise Pascal.

Simon and Garfunkel wrote: "And in the naked night I saw 10,000 people, maybe more/ People talking without speaking. People hearing without listening/ People writing songs that voices never shared/ No one dared disturb the sounds of silence."

So we trot out reruns of favorite TV shows like *Friends* and *Cheers* and cry in our beer, singing nostalgic songs like “You’ve Got a Friend” (James Taylor) all the while wrestling with nagging loneliness within.

Friendships fizzle, so people in desperation opt for other alternatives: perpetual singleness, LGBTQ alternatives, drug and alcohol escapism, suicide or simply settling for the safe companionship of a friendly dog, which the American Heart Association confirms reduces health risks and can lengthen lifespan.

The Social Media Solution

Mobility in society, casual divorce, dissolution of the family, deception of the “gay” lifestyle, unsatisfactory promiscuity and “one-night stands” all exacerbate lonely living and the continued quest to satisfy the friendship factor.

“What about social media and the advantage of incredible connectivity?”

Unfortunately, the reality is the opposite of what scores have come to believe. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or any of the many modern-day supposed friendship-building, connectivity-enhancing platforms give scores the illusion of multiple friendships that are often simply superficial substitutes for human contact.

This is not the same as quality interaction and intimate friendship.

Real friendships take much more than simply “friending online,” producing shallow relationships all the while deceiving us into believing we have thousands of Facebook “friends.” Authentic friendships require an investment of time, what Aristotle called “sharing salt together”—not just sitting together passing salt across the table but sitting

with another across the course of their lives, sharing its savor.

Aristotle says, "The desire for friendship comes quickly; friendship does not."

Addressing an Addiction

Admit it or not, Americans are distracted by and addicted to social media rather than socializing. Survey numerous studies that show similar findings: 33% would rather text than talk on the phone; 3 in 4 Americans bring their phones to bed; 25% say the last thing they see before retiring is their phone; 93% sleep with their phones within arm's reach; 55% acknowledge they are missing out on valuable time with family and friends but still do it; and 45% of Americans admit they have not made a new friend in five years.

Overcoming loneliness and developing substantive versus superficial friendships starts by repenting, receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then committing to obey His Word as revealed in Scripture.

Next, we use our smartphones and computers wisely and purposefully. We make a quality decision to not let them become a substitute for real friendship building. We also purpose to drop the excuses for a lack of meaningful friendships like:

- I'm introverted.
- I don't like going to new places.
- I've been betrayed/dumped.
- Texting is more convenient.
- Human interaction is risky.
- I fear being rejected.

Dealing with loneliness and developing meaningful friendships are significant for our emotional, mental and spiritual health.

Jesus in His humanity modeled for us the need to grow in four major areas: mentally, physically, spiritually and socially. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

Here's the Deal: Because of the prophetic significance of this topic and the tremendous potential it affords Christians in helping hurting and hopeless multitudes, may we pray, draw upon God's grace and be intentional with the all-important friendship factor in our life. Let's start today by intentionally repenting of independent living and resolving in this new year to invest and take interest in others to enjoy a lifestyle of meaningful friendships. {eoa}