

12-22-25

How Spirituality Combats Loneliness

Good morning. In today's meditation, we are again talking about the loneliness, cosmic loneliness, the modern era bequeathed us.

And the psychologist and theologian Sam Keen has written about loneliness and boredom, and he says, "Boredom is lonely"... Boredom is lonely. "The chronically bored are unreachable. The door of the prison must be unlocked from the inside."...The door of the prison must be unlocked from the inside.

Now the big category for boredom in the tradition is the capital sin of acedia, sometimes translated as sloth. Aquinas calls it "the lack of energy to begin new things."

But of course, acedia is lonely because it's about being cut off from all our relations. And when you cut off from all your relations, well, you're boring. You're bored and you're boring, because there's nothing triggering your insides, calling it forward, which of course, true friendship does.

Then friendship is another antidote, another medicine for loneliness, obviously, but the art of friendship — is this taught in schools? Is this even taught at all?

I'll tell you a story. Many years ago, when I was 28 years old or so, I was living on a farm in the southern part of France, a Basque farm, small Basque farm, with a couple who ran it, who raised turkeys. And it was the time when America landed a man on the Moon, and I was having my dinners at an inn run by a Basque family every night.

So I was there having a dinner, and they came to me; someone came in and said, "There's someone who wants to see you." And I saw the landing on the moon that night in black and white television, a small television at the inn; I did not have anything like that in the room I was renting in the farm I was staying in.

And so everyone was excited that Americans had landed a man on the moon. And a Basque priest, an old Basque priest, I think he was 90, he had a cane, he came shuffling in, and this was the person who wanted to see me. And he held his hand out to me, and he said to me, "Congratulations, congratulations. Only Americans could land a man on the moon. Great accomplishment."

And then he said, “Of course, when it comes to friendship, you Americans are morons.” With that, he left the room and I never saw him again. I'd never seen him previously either. He just kind of appeared and disappeared. He appeared to congratulate me, and he disappeared with these words about how Americans are morons when it comes to friendship.

So I think that statement deserves our attention. Are we morons when it comes to friendship? Do we care? Is it last on our agendas and our shopping lists to develop the art of friendship?

It's interesting, in my book on Thomas Merton, I point out what an artist he was in so many ways, in writing and making poetry, and in music and jazz, and also in drawing and even encouraging novices to learn weaving so forth — an artist in so many ways. But also I talk about his art of friendship, that he had so many friends, so many different kinds of friends.

But of course, he was raised in France. His parents came from America and New Zealand, but the milieu of his growing up was France, where there was a value put on friendship, as there is on other arts.

So we need to ask that question about how Americans also become lonely. Because the loneliness that accompanies the loss of cosmology for our place in the universe — how we are touched by the universe, how the universe touches us and we it — well, that has a lot to do with ritual, too, because authentic ritual, as Otto Rank says, is always, always the psyche connecting to the cosmos, the small self being yanked into the bigger self, the self that connects to all things.

And of course, that is what mysticism of the sort Julian of Norwich talks about: oneing, the experience of oneing as being mysticism.

Now I'd like to share with you a passage from my book, *One River, Many Wells*, where there's a chapter on art and imagination and ritual. And there, I draw from many traditions, but especially from the African American traditions of ritual and dance, and a beautiful book written by Donna Marimba Richards. She writes,

“Few have understood what music is to us [to black people]. Black music is sacred music. It is the expression of divine within us,” she writes. And she stresses how the music connects the African soul to cosmic powers and the divine spirit within those powers. So music, ritual, Cosmos, divinity, all come together. And she writes:

Ontologically, we gain meaning, force and being through relationship with the universal life force, by feeling ourselves to be part of the whole....Our music manifests that relationship as it puts us in tune with the universe. It explains to us mysterious workings of the universe and ourselves as cosmic beings, as in ritual, in music, the human and the divine meet.

And of course, with music comes dance. This is on pages 240 and following in my book, *One River, Many Wells*.

"Through dance, we experience reality as immediate to us," she writes. "That is, we are identified with the universe. We have experienced cosmic interrelationship."

And of course, I stress this in the daily meditation today, that dance triggers the first chakra, and that's why indigenous people around the world, whether we're talking Africa, or whether we're talking Native Americans too, or if we're talking aborigines in Australia, dance is a primary form of prayer. It's the first chakra being triggered because you're touching the earth with your feet and the base chakra relates to the earth.

"Dance, for us," she says, "is a religious expression. When we dance through rhythm, we express ourselves as cosmic beings."

Notice that word, rhythm. Rhythm is integral, of course, to hip hop, isn't it, and to so many forms of poetry.

"Music, transcends us to ultimate realities. Dance and song, rhythm and music, then are particles of the African universe."

These are all the words from Donna Marimba Richards. And she goes into other dimensions too, of course, of the darkness or the via negativa, if you will, the brutality of the history of slavery. And she says this:

Here lies a miracle of Black existence in New Europe: out of nothingness, we built a world. In an environment that denied Black being, we insisted on being. They took from us everything they could, but there was something left inside that slavery could not touch. We created a vision of the sacred in a spiritually barren environment. We reached beyond European Christianity in the depths of this religiosity, this spirituality, and discovered the divine within us. The expressions that emerged were our language, our music, our dance, our thought patterns, our laughter, our walk, our spirituality. These were the vehicles to which the African ethos expressed itself in America.

I think this is a beautiful and candid statement of how important ritual is, how important dance is, how important music is, to salvation itself, to rediscovering the value of ourselves, even in the circumstances of profound pressure.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.