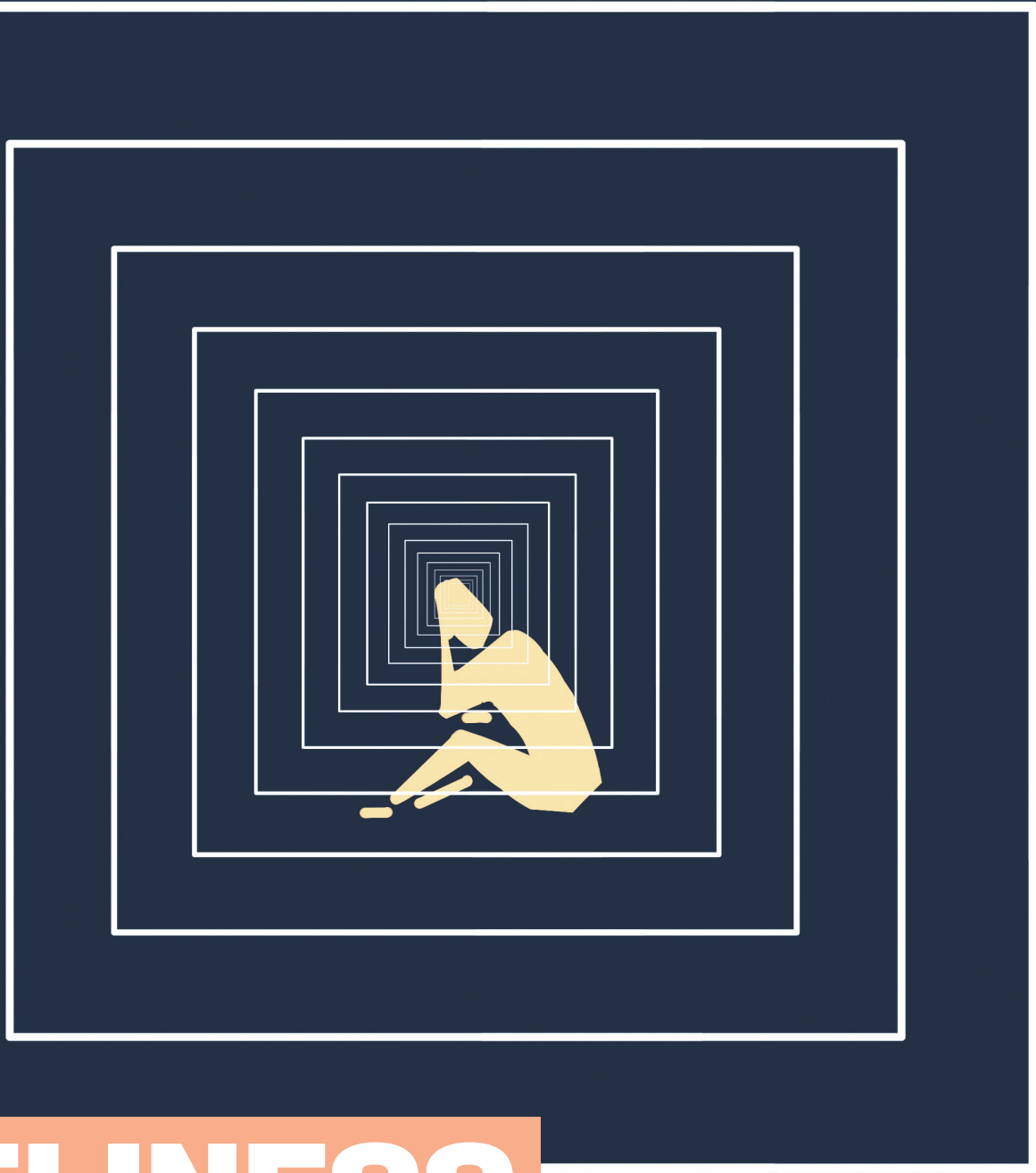


MARCH 19TH, 2019

# The University Times Magazine



## ANOTHER LONELINESS



**THE**

**LONELINESS**

**PARADOX**

**WE LIVE IN AN ULTRA-CONNECTED WORLD. WHY ARE WE SO LONELY?**

**WORDS CIANNAIT KHAN  
ILLUSTRATIONS NATHAN O'GARA**

**W**e are far from alone. Every second, there are more of us than there have ever been: we will soon hit the eight-billion mark. Our world, as we well know, is globalising. We now have access to faraway people and places, on fast planes that cost less and less. Cities today are bigger than ever before. If you live in Dublin, there are almost two million potential kindred spirits only a hop, skip and maybe a Luas away. That is, of course, if you want to meet in person. There are other ways to connect now, too. With a tap and a swipe on our phones, we can reach friends old and new: literally billions of them. Social networks have swelled, geographical walls have been razed, and we have tools at our fingertips that let us quickly find people very much like ourselves – or, indeed, very different. The world of meaningful connection is our oyster. And yet, we are lonely.

Estimates of “loneliness” range from 10 per cent of the general Irish population, to 37 per cent of people over 50. Irish figures are limited – until now, the issue has been quite overlooked – but in the UK, 46 per cent of university students are, apparently, lonely. In Canada, that number is put at 66 per cent. We can quibble over what exactly these studies are measuring, but the bottom line is that we have a problem. Many have declared it an epidemic. In response to this, the UK appointed its first minister for loneliness last year and, not long after, Ireland set up its own loneliness taskforce. “Loneliness is the public health crisis of this generation”, the group’s first report proclaimed. While

## “THE WORLD OF MEANINGFUL CONNECTION IS OUR OYSTER. AND YET, WE ARE LONELY”

it may sound slightly sensationalist, it does have basis in fact. Loneliness is, unsurprisingly, linked to a host of health issues: depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicide. Consequently, its impact on our life expectancy is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness has a financial cost too: it’s estimated to cost UK employers £2.8 billion a year.

Is our loneliness any great mystery? Most of us have sensible intuitions about why our world, despite its vast op-

portunities, often leaves people feeling alone. There is rural isolation and urban alienation. Our busy world can be overwhelming, with its enormity and endless pace. Add to that trepidation about an unsteady future, and you have a recipe for disenchantment. Still, though: when I first started thinking about loneliness, these vague explanations left me unsatisfied. Looking around me, I saw loneliness everywhere: among friends, on campus, even in myself. And it seemed surprisingly stubborn. Modern living has many challenges, but as funks go, shouldn’t loneliness be an easy one to get out of?

Yet that doesn’t seem to be the case. Feeling lonely often seemed to go hand in hand with something more, some deeper feeling of disconnect I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

**S**tarting to investigate loneliness, the elderly were my first port of call. The stereotypical image of loneliness is often an older person: bereaved, immobile, left behind by society. Reading the reports on loneliness, it is the elderly that get the bulk of attention – older people who are very lonely are nearly twice as likely to die within six years. With our population ageing by the day, this is something that policymakers are particularly concerned by.

A friend who is a home carer often tells me stories about the soul-wrench-

ing loneliness she witnesses in her elderly clients. Not so long ago, a client confided in her about his fear of death. When he started to well up, she went over to hug him. The hug lasted several minutes. He thanked her afterwards, telling her: “People forget that old people need hugs, too.” My friend often hugs her clients now: one of them told her recently that she looks forward to her bedtime hug every evening. Carers are not, strictly speaking, supposed to give out hugs – such physical affection isn’t considered professional. But the reality is that it’s often the only time some of these people get to touch another human. “People often lose that tactile contact as they get older. But I think it’s really important”, says Geraldine Halpin, who works with older people in sheltered housing around Dublin. “It’s a very basic need from the day you’re born.”

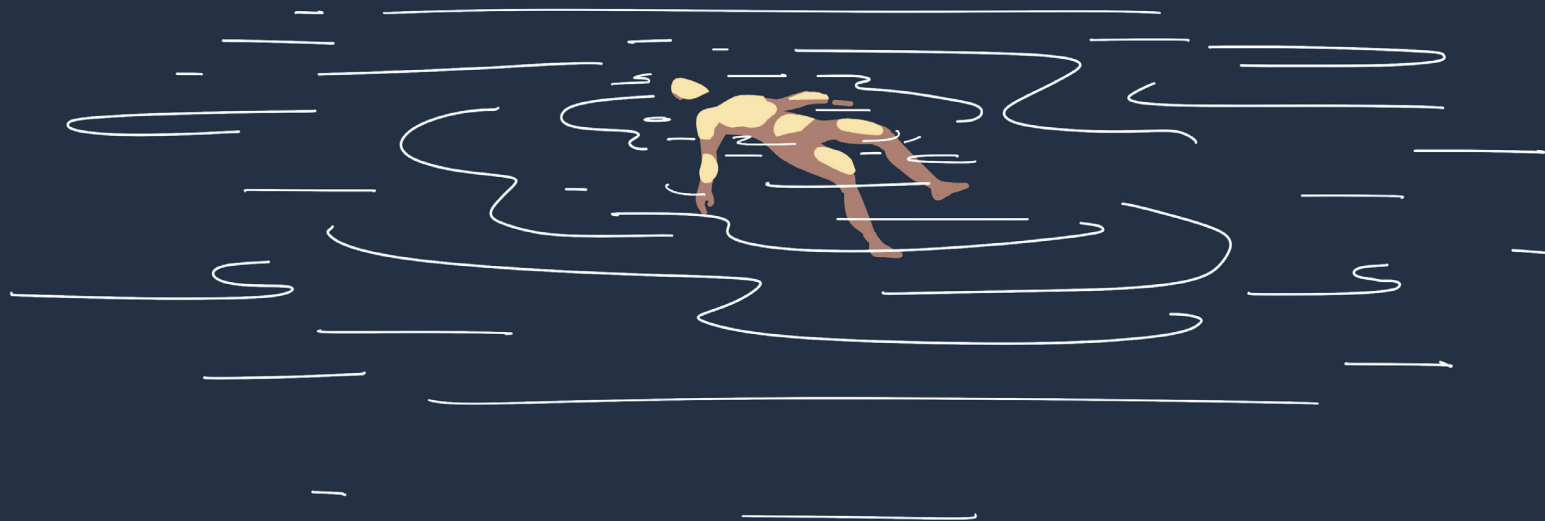
Halpin’s job is to build communities, to help older people living in these complexes connect. But she quickly learned that hosting coffee mornings was not enough to draw in crowds. Many didn’t attend. When Halpin set up a community garden, however, she noticed that people began to talk more, over potting plants or watering them. The residents began to take ownership of the project, even setting up a Facebook page for it. Friendships blossomed, and the community started to feel like a village. Older men are at particularly high risk of

loneliness, and having a role in sustaining a project seemed to engage them in a way that straight-up social gatherings didn’t.

Halpin thinks this explains why, despite the countless events and meetups taking place around the city, people often struggle to stay social. “It’s very structured, and it’s very formal, and there’s no sense of neighbourliness”, says Halpin. Indeed, there’s more to not being lonely than having company: it’s also about fitting in, playing a part. About belonging – something that can be hard to find in a crowded city. “Humans are attachment creatures, in that we need to not only attach to people; rather we need to experience connectedness and the sense of bond and belonging”, Barbara Hannigan, an assistant professor in the School of Psychology at Trinity, explains to me.

A growing formality in how we conduct ourselves socially, however, might hinder this. “I think we’re very careful now around boundaries”, Halpin says. She knows it’s a controversial point: society’s newfound interpersonal boundaries are, in so many ways, a positive development. But there are drawbacks too. Halpin indicates a point in time, maybe 30 years ago, when local community groups started to receive funding from above. This shift meant that money was pumped into local areas, but at the same time, more formalised structures were instilled. And that came





with loss – a loss of an organic quality. “There’s been a constant drive to control community groups, to direct funding and to put them in competition with each other. And that’s destroyed a lot of the fabric.”

On a Thursday afternoon in spring, I join a local community walking group. We take off from Sandymount village and stroll down by the Dodder river. It’s mostly retirees who take part: many have been doing these walks every week for 10 years. They do it for company, for exercise, to see their friends. Many reel off a list of other activities they do to fill their social calendar: Italian class, bridge, pilates. These older people are hardly poster children for an “epidemic” of loneliness, but that’s selection bias for you: the people outgoing enough to join a community walking group off their own bat are less likely to be at high risk of being lonely to begin with. I’m struck by Halpin’s point about gatherings that are so structured in nature. Organised groups offer great solace to the people who attend – but what about the people who don’t? It dawns on me that such antidotes for loneliness tackle only one part of it: the outermost layer. But with loneliness, barriers to change are often more hidden, more difficult to discern. And perhaps that’s because sometimes, the problem isn’t outside ourselves, but within.

realised that the archetype of an isolated older person didn’t really capture the more elusive breed of loneliness I was seeing around me. This was a loneliness that did not discriminate based on age. It seemed just as prevalent among those who weren’t socially isolated: people who were young, mobile, and appeared to be living rich, sociable lives.

On the streets, I asked people of all ages about loneliness. Many were apprehensive about being asked something that felt so personal: loneliness still carries with it a certain stigma. The answers

I got were varied, but several spoke not of isolation. Instead, they tapped into the all-too-familiar experience of being lonely while surrounded by people – “the feeling of being alone whether or not you actually are”, as one person put it. Another described loneliness as: “Not knowing how to explain how you truly feel, not having someone to open your heart to, a belief that you won’t be accepted.”

Speaking to loneliness “experts”, many differentiate between two kinds of loneliness. Prof Brian Lawlor, a member of the Irish loneliness taskforce and a psychiatrist at St James’s Hospital, calls one social, and the other emotional. The first is more practical: it’s about isolation. It’s situational, so once your circumstances change, so does the loneliness. But the second runs much deeper within the individual.

There are many theories as to the roots of this, as Lawlor calls it, more pernicious, loneliness. Lawlor explains that there’s a genetic element: just like some people are more introverted or extroverted, people can be prone to being lonely. Learned experience plays a part, too: people’s backgrounds and childhoods. This is a loneliness that likely always existed: Lawlor directs me to the writer Kurt Vonnegut, who many years ago urged young people to cure “the terrible disease of loneliness”. “I think the way we experience it may be emotionally and physiologically the same as before”, says Hannigan. “However, our environments have changed massively.” Loneliness may be an omnipresent feature of human existence, but how we live now is full of new trials that challenge old understandings of what it is, and, indeed, of how we can rise above it.

When I speak with Maureen Gaffney, a psychologist and the author of the best-selling book *Flourishing*, she suspects that individualism takes a heavy toll on loneliness. “I think the whole tenor of the time is to do with personal rights and personal freedoms in a way that is

## “THERE IS ALSO A CULTURAL CONFUSION BETWEEN PERSON AND IMAGE”

sort of unprecedented in comparison to other generations”, says Gaffney. “None of us want to let that go, but as with everything, there’s the shadow side.” In the past, people could blame bad luck, destiny, or God for their problems. But, as Gaffney points out, “that doesn’t cut any ice now. Your success is all your own – but so are your failures”.

Then there’s social media: the epitome of our uber-connected world. Every psychologist I spoke with treated social media with a degree of suspicion. “I think the overall effect is probably more negative than positive for people who have an issue”, says Gaffney. But social media is a tool made by people, for people, and inspired by a deep need for kinship with others – and it’s been remarkably successful, at least in terms of usage. It’s tempting to think of people’s reservations about it as age-old scaremongering about anything new. If social media was created to connect people, how could it do precisely the opposite?

Lawlor, for one, believes the connections we make on social media simply don’t compare with face-to-face interaction: “They’re momentary, they’re transient.” For him, the cornerstones of human bonding – empathy, care, and compassion – just can’t be conveyed ef-

fectively through screens. Similarly for Hannigan, the world of social media is too fast paced for bonds to have real traction. “It is much easier these days to encounter belonging and rejection cycles through interpersonal interaction on social media”, she says. The ebb and flow is such that you’re popular one day, and entirely ignored the next. Consequently, people struggle to foster genuine, deep-seated connection with one another: the kind of intimacy that human beings need to feel accepted.

Of course, nobody is suggesting that social media should be any substitute for close friendship. But there’s uncertainty around whether it’s doing a good job at even complementing that. Many seem to think that this illusion of being connected mostly serves to feed loneliness. “I think there is something about an ultra-connected age that leaves us feeling disconnected”, says John O’Connor, a clinical psychologist and Trinity academic. “Everyone is almost in instant contact with everyone in the world. And yet at the same time, everyone feels disconnected from that same thing”, he says. It’s the same, he explains, as the phenomenon whereby we think that by providing people with so much information, they’ll learn more. In reality, though, the wealth of knowledge available to people today mostly serves to overwhelm them.

“There is also a cultural confusion between person and image. You know, the kind of Tinder world of faces and images that are kind of accepted and rejected”, says O’Connor. It’s an idea that has now found its way into everyday parlance, this dichotomy of appearances versus reality. So much of what we see on social media is more a shiny facade than an accurate representation of what’s going on in people’s lives. And as that facade becomes more entrenched in our everyday lives, we get further and further away from what lies beneath.

“There’s something about the superficial that will always be impor-

tant for us”, says O’Connor, “but if we only cater ultimately in our world for the superficial, then we lose out on all of this depth of potential”.

**M**any years ago, at the outset of the industrial age, when cities burgeoned, the prospect of alienation began to trouble thinkers. Yet despite this historical awareness, the problem of alienation has, if anything, gotten worse, not better. O’Connor thinks that this alienation is wrapped up with in a larger sense of disconnect: “Suddenly, you’re so tiny in this big world.” Indeed, in societies as big as the ones we live in now, our individual existence can feel inconsequential. “It’s hard to find your own shape in that”, says O’Connor. “It’s probably frightening for us as human beings. We’re not really ready for it.”

For O’Connor, our proclivity today for prioritising the future over the past is also cause for concern. There’s an idea that the past is the past, that it doesn’t matter. But, he says, “the past isn’t just the past, because the past lives in the present”.

“The past is kind of the person”, says O’Connor. “Memory, experience, relationships, traumas, encouraging moments, distractions, joys, thrills. They all kind of add up to some sense of self.”

Having a role is important: to feel part of something. But our self-streamlining has a flipside too. “We’ve created a world now where we have so many roles and hierarchies”, says O’Connor. Society is so fast-paced, and its production of a new generation of “functionaries” is, in many ways, a well-oiled machine. Universities, for example, are training people to have one purpose, sending them down a specialised path that has more emphasis on the end goal, rather than any sense of self developed along the way. “Many people don’t become persons. They remain almost carried along by an image or an ideal”, says O’Connor. “Someone else’s, or a wider force’s idea

of what being is.” And, he says, “that leaves us emptied out in some ways”.

Loneliness, it seems, isn’t just about being disconnected from others: it’s about being disconnected from ourselves. In today’s busy world, there

## “IF WE ONLY CATER TO THE SUPERFICIAL, WE LOSE OUT ON ALL OF THIS DEPTH OF POTENTIAL”

is often a lack of space for people to truly grow into themselves – and that comes with huge loss: the loss of self.

**E**xistentialists, writing in the 1940s and 1950s, believed that loneliness was something fundamental to human nature: something that separated humans from animals, an inevitable consequence of the gaping chasm between our longing for connection and the sheer meaninglessness of the universe. For some, like Jean-Paul Sartre, this was a gap that could never be bridged. Others, happily, were more optimistic.

In his 2018 book, *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari lambastes the use of antidepressants as a catch-all solution to anxiety and depression. Hari is not a health professional: still, his book was a *New York Times* bestseller. Whether his core thesis holds water may be con-



troversial, but his book resonated with people regardless. Hari interrogates the collective pain of a society that, essentially, seeks out quick fixes to emotional problems, rather than engaging with the slow-burning healing process. In the book, Hari identifies multiple forms of disconnection we experience today: from meaningful work, from our own traumas, from nature, from others, from ourselves. This overarching disconnect, it seems, is something we’re beginning to recognise as a problem that needs addressing.

Lawlor advocates for a mass de-stigmatisation of loneliness, as part of a process similar to what’s been happening with mental health. We need to talk and ask questions, and shed the shame that surrounds being lonely: it is, after all, a universal experience. Lawlor urges people to see it “not necessarily as something that’s stigmatising or negative”. The pain, he says, is like a biological imperative: “A driving force that actually is trying to get you to connect.”

Similarly, O’Connor says that “not pathologising it [loneliness] is very important. I suppose recognising it as a fundamental human experience”. He thinks it’s important to draw people together in natural ways, rather than just manufacturing things like groups for lonely people. But, he stresses, we might also need to face the reality that loneliness involves a deeper alienation: one that may require careful introspection. And that, at times, can be painful.

In a time when technology is often positioned as our final saviour, it can be hard to acknowledge that it’s limited. But when it comes to loneliness, as with most things, there’s no silver bullet: “rent-a-friend” apps or robot companions, for example, may be one-dimensional solutions to a many-sided problem. “If our lives become connected solely to robots, I think we’d miss out on something”, says O’Connor. It’s a prospect that many of us are instinc-

tively averse to, but that doesn’t mean it won’t happen – or indeed, that it isn’t already happening. But O’Connor believes firmly that connections with things like robots – while they may give comfort to some – will never replace the genuine, human connection we find in other people. That connection, he says, comes from agency: it’s not about education or possessing knowledge, but “having come through experience, and having gained kind of emotionally from experience”. The journey of being born and all that follows is something, O’Connor is convinced, that robots will never be able to fully replicate. “It’s the form of animal, you know, that we are.”

**I**n the 1800s, poet Emily Dickinson wrote: “There is another loneliness.” In this poem, Dickinson describes a rare state of being: something that many never experience in their lifetime, but that is rich beyond words. Knowing Dickinson’s background as we do – she lived a solitary life; one that, dare I say it, we might call lonely – it seems that she’s referring to a sense of joy born from being by one’s self.

“The key differences here for me between solitude and isolation is choice. Chosen solitude is bliss and forced isolation is wretched”, says Hannigan. In his 2017 book, Michael Harris makes the case for solitude: for the possibilities it offers to bring clarity and peace of mind. In an attempt to reconnect, he spent a week alone in a cabin in the woods, entirely divorced from our hyper-connected world.

“I think people often find connection when they can get away from all of that”, says O’Connor. This idea of escaping from it all is a common motif today: in self-help books, in therapy, in the now-everyday language of self-care. And therein may lie, somehow paradoxically, one answer to the loneliness question.

