

For EL Pais The ambivalence of loneliness

by Joke J. Hermesen / Amsterdam

And then, all of a sudden, we went into a long retreat. We closed the front doors behind us, we carried the shopping bags upstairs, we filled the refrigerators with food and stayed inside our homes, for many weeks in a row, separated from our friends, colleagues and family. This retreat was not chosen voluntarily by us, like a long meditation holiday in some expensive 'Zen' resort. We simply obeyed to the strong demand from our governments, who tried to get grip on the pandemic.

I remember standing on my balcony in Amsterdam, looking at a heartbreakingly blue sky above the houses; never had I experienced such a sharp contrast between this vital blossoming spring and yet another set of dramatic statistics shown on the news. There we were, in the middle of the outburst of new life, surrounded by the announcement of so many deaths. We stayed inside and waited, sometimes wondering what it was we were waiting for: the end of the lockdown, another crisis to come or, perhaps, the opportunity for change?

While we are waiting, we discover a new, ambivalent kind of loneliness. On the one hand this loneliness is close to forced isolation, imposed upon us by an invisible power, the virus, which frightens us and makes us feel insecure about our lives, because we do not know how long it will last nor how to overcome its dangers. It scares us, makes us worry, prevents us from sleeping, and worst of all, could turn our melancholic nature into a chronic depressive state.

For we are melancholic beings, who at some point in our childhood become aware of the passing of time and therefore of loss and transience. This consciousness rests heavily upon our shoulders and deepens our melancholy with the years. If we are haunted by too many fears and anxieties, our melancholy has the tendency to become as black as the greek 'gall' it is named after: *melan-chole*: low and depressed. But luckily we also learn how to bear and 'enlighten' our melancholy with, for instance, music, or with stories, or an expression of love. We have to make it 'creative' in other words, in order to render it into 'sadness with a smile', as Calvino wrote, and not a depression .

The past few months, however, we have been confronted with huge losses and dreadful scenarios. It has been extremely difficult to find any hope at all. The danger therefore exists that a large part of the population will become depressed, which is a very serious health issue, especially if it is combined with loneliness, as well known researchers like Trudy Dehue (The Netherlands) and Stephen Houghton (USA) have demonstrated. Therefore we have no other choice then to keep looking for new sources of hope and inspiration.

The good news is there is some hope in loneliness itself, or in what we traditionally call: solitude. Solitude is a state in which you can focus on the interior dialogue with yourself, as Hannah Arendt explained in 'The Life of the Mind' (1973). Even when we are 'alone with ourselves' we still are dialogical beings, because we can talk with ourselves, we can think and reflect upon our own actions: we are 'two in one'. Or as Arendt puts it: *All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself*. If we are able to concentrate on this interior dialogue, we not only will discover the possibilities of this fruitful aspect of solitude for our own, but we will find also new connections with others: *This dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought*.

Where loneliness expresses the pain and fear of being (forced to be) alone, solitude expresses the 'glory of being alone', because it precisely unfolds new possibilities to connect with ourselves and with others. The challenge therefore for all of us is to turn our isolated loneliness into a participated solitude. How? While thinking, dreaming, reading, writing and presenting our thoughts to others, like I am presenting mine to you. Only this exchange will give enough counterweight to our melancholy and will prevent us from falling into depression. We share the same fears and threads all around the world, but we also share the same hope: to be able to begin again after Corona, and behave and act in a much more responsible and solidar way.