
This remarkable book confronts loneliness as a very important, but much neglected aspect of everyone’s life, and views it from a multitude of perspectives, including psychoanalytic, psychological, sociological, artistic, biological and social. As Harold Blum, in his Preface points out “There have been scattered valuable papers on loneliness in the past, but never before brought together in a kaleidoscopic collection allowing a survey of different definitions, approaches, perspectives and conclusions.” Two of the editors, Richards and Spira, (Full disclosure: both of whom are personal friends) have been holding seminars on loneliness for years at the annual meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association. The intellectual stimulation stirred up by these workshops finally bore fruit in a Symposium on Loneliness in New York City in March, 2012. Some of the Papers that were delivered at that event are included in the book.

I have commented on as many of the 18 papers as space allows. The first four papers are dedicated to loneliness and the artist. Lois Oppenheimer, examines Samuel Beckett’s life long conflict over loneliness and shyness, and his hunger for social contact, which he never satisfied. She understands Beckett in terms of depressive loneliness, which was basic for his artistic work. She interprets that Beckett’s writing provided him with a substitute social world in that he knew he had an audience listening to him and appreciating him.

Danielle Knafo’s chapter Artist’s Solitude and the Creative Process continues the theme of loneliness and the artist. She argues that solitude is a core feature of the human condition and that it is inseparable from relatedness. She refers to Winnicott’s view that solitude can be regarded as a developmental milestone on the way to emotional maturity, but sometimes artists also engage with “bad objects” from their childhood in their creative activities.

The third chapter, by Arlene Kramer Richards is titled The Skin I Live In and is based on a movie of that name by Almodovar. She uses the story of the movie’s mad surgeon’s attempt to replace his lost wife with a transgendered boy in an artificial skin, which is a futile attempt at revenge and substitution. She shows how one’s own “skin” is a guarantee of one’s gender, and hence of the self, but the self is burdened with profound conflicts. This paper is difficult, but is a most creative approach to expanding our understanding of female psychology.

The next group of papers are primarily clinically oriented, and leads with a paper by Lucille Spira, and is titled Shades of Loneliness: Psychological Perspectives. Spira presents two case studies of women suffering from chronic loneliness. She is concerned with how psychoanalytic theory might illuminate how psychological and social elements intertwine in persistent painful loneliness. She notes that “Brenner’s idea of loneliness shows how it differs from depression and how his view of loneliness implies the hope of return, while depression results from loss of hope.”

Jerome Blackman is concerned with “loneliness accompanied by a sense of ‘giving up’ characterizing a type if psychopathology.” He carries on the clinical theme of loneliness with three cases of heterosexual men each deeply damaged by loneliness problems of different
natures, but all had in common loss, neglect and symbiotic attachment during childhood. Blackman explains his technical approach to each by using “object clarification” to confront the patient with reality as a balance to their fantasy distorted perceptions of other people. Anita Weinreb Katz continues the emphasis on clinical validation of loneliness as a diagnostic category with case presentations of two male patients. She approaches these patients with their problems of loneliness from the view of separation/individuation and self psychology. The patient’s ability to both empathize with and separate from their parents is seen as a developmental achievement in the therapeutic processes.

The main theme of Arthur Lynch’s paper is the complex nature of loneliness. He focuses on just one 39-year old patient with homosexual problems to demonstrate this complexity in clinical terms. Lynch seems to see his patient’s castration fears and oedipal conflicts as defensive elements of compromise formations such as Brenner might recognize. However, he falls back on “self object” theory as part of the complexity of this case of loneliness. The end point of much analytic uncovering was to discover an unconscious fantasy of the “poor lonely boy” and its many variations.

The paper Witnessing: Its Essentialness in Psychoanalytic Treatment by Jenny Kahn Kaufmann and Peter Kaufmann raised many questions in me. I am still not clear what “witnessing” is. They quote Warren Polland “that the analyst must be a separate person, with his/her separate center of subjectivity, a person who is in the room with the analysand as an observing, interested, empathic, comprehending person, but a person who is an ‘other’ just the same.” I did not see how this differed from normal requirements for psychoanalytic treatments. They present a long case history demonstrating the value of witnessing in treatment, and warn against “fix-it therapy” which they never define. There are two authors of this paper, and they do not indicate which one was the treating therapist, or if the other one was a supervisor or just a consultant.

Section III —Loneliness/Solitude in the Psychoanalytic Training Process. The first of four chapters in this section is titled The Loneliness of The Candidate: Solitude and Solicited Identifications by Jamieson Webster, a candidate at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. She experienced psychoanalytic training as a profoundly painful experience of loneliness and found solace in the writings of Lacan and Klein. I felt little identification with her since my own experience has been that training in psychoanalysis has been experienced as an optimistic experience in leaning, usually shared enthusiastically with fellow students, faculty and supervisors.

Douglas Ingram’s paper discusses the role of the Supervising Analyst in the training program. Although he writes about loneliness in the therapeutic situation, he adds that “I am not disposed to feel lonely from patients or therapists whom I see in consultation—Nor have I found that those whom I supervise feel lonely in sessions with patients.”

Eric Mendelssohn follows with a contribution The Loneliness of the Training Analyst. He states “I believe that analysts regularly struggle with loneliness in the course of enacting their roles, and that those of us who serve as training analysts face unique and rather formidable inducements to loneliness.” But, I, personally, don’t know why this should be so, and I don’t feel that he explains why it should be.
Sandra Buechler’s There is No Place Like Home starts out with Dorothy in the story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and her yearning for home. The analyst also yearns for home in many forms, including an internal haven peopled with other objects. Many analysts yearn for an “analytic home” as a refuge from loneliness she asserts.

Section IV - In Life Events

In Brent Willock’s essay Loneliness and the Life Cycle, the author uses an extension of Erikson’s developmental scheme to understand loneliness. He uses relational psychoanalysis as a frame to understanding, and like so many others, quotes Winnicott.

Alma Halbert Bond’s piece Marilyn Monroe, the Loneliest Person on Earth, is not really a psychoanalytic study, but is a deeply moving picture of an enormously disturbed woman.

The next chapter is by Patsy Turrini The Death of the Loved Spouse, The Inner World of Grief; A Psychoanalytic Developmental Perspective. The author recounts her search through the psychoanalytic literature for some understanding of her overwhelming grief for her husband. The last paper in this section is A Soldier’s Loneliness by Amit Goldenberg and Nathan Szajnberg. They describe the loneliness of Israeli garrison soldiers waiting for something to happen. This is not really a psychoanalytic paper, but is a really good picture of the loneliness of soldiers in garrison service.

Finally, the book ends with a Conclusion: Death is the God of Loneliness by Richard Gottlieb. Gottlieb does the impossible. He summarizes every one of the 18 chapters in this book extremely well. In fact, before you read the book read Gottlieb’s chapter to orient you to the contents of this extraordinarily interesting book. As far as I am aware, there is no other treatment of the very important issue of painful loneliness in the psychoanalytic literature. It is well worth your reading.

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