

# isolation to community

## Journey 4

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People who travel for a living are often envied by people who don't. Those who don't travel don't realize the hidden cost of a life on the road: stranded hours in airports, sleepless nights in hotels, surrounded by hoards of people yet not connected to any. There is nothing attractive about eating waiting for a flight with hundreds of strangers. It may look like a group, sound like a group, even smell like a group, but if all they share is the hope of arriving on time at a common destination, then that is a poor excuse for connectedness. It is in fact a crowded isolation, and often leads to intensified feelings of loneliness.

This picture is an apt description of modern life. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam identifies a curious phenomenon: more Americans are bowling than ever before; but there are fewer and fewer leagues. We are bowling alone. He concludes, "we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, and neighbors."

*Is Robert Putnam on to something or is he overreacting?*

In 1975 author John Powell wrote a book entitled *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* Despite being out of print, it is still in the top ninety self help books sold on Amazon. It has sold an amazing 15 million copies and been translated into 22 languages.

*What does that say about us as humans?*

A few years ago, a friend gave me an old Mazda truck whose fuel indicator was not a representation of reality! On the way to our favorite Friday evening hangout, we ran out of gas. Imagine this was you...

*What would you do? Rank the options below from 1 to 5 (1= first choice, 5= last choice). Feel free to add another option.*

- Call your Auto Club
- Call a friend
- Call a neighbor
- Call a co-worker
- Walk to the nearest gas station

"I know of no more potent killer than isolation. There is no more destructive influence on physical and mental health than the isolation of you from me and us from them.....The devil's strategy for our times is to trivialize human existence by isolating us from one another while creating the delusion that the reasons are time pressures, work demands and economic uncertainties." *Psychologist Philip Zimbardo*

*Explain your rankings above.*

A common assumption is that “singles” are lonelier because they don't have a companion to share life with. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In his book *The Friendless American Male*, David Smith describes three types of friendships:

- Acquaintance
- Companion
- Intimate

He declares that most American males have NO intimate friends. Compare that with Psychologist and best-selling author Dan Kiley who coined the term "living-together loneliness," or LTL, to describe the phenomenon experienced by almost 50% of married women. An LTL woman would agree with the following propositions:

- I can't turn to him when I feel bad
- I feel left out of his life
- I feel isolated from him, even when he's in the same room
- I am unhappy being shut off from him
- No one really knows me well

*As you reflect on your closest relationships, what would the forecast look like?*

- Sunny with clear skies
- Partly cloudy
- Possibility of storms
- Rain and wind

*Give some details concerning what you chose above.*

*If you are married, how did your spouse affect your choice?*

*If you are single, what is your reaction?*

God designed us to relate with others, to move from isolation to community. Darrell Johnson explains how this comes from our being created in God's image.

To be is to be related. Because it is true of God; it has to be true of us. We need to be in relationship in order to be fully human. In the famous words of the poet John Donne "No man is an island." It is because we are created in the image of the Trinity that loneliness is so crushing, that broken relationships are so debilitating, that death is so painful. Lack or loss of relationship violates our essential nature, created to reflect the relational essence of God. (*Experiencing the Trinity*, page 52)

Understanding the truth that God exists as a Trinity (a Tri-Unity of three persons in one being) often seems like a riddle wrapped up in a puzzle and buried in an enigma. However, this triune relationship is fundamental to who we are and how *we* relate. Listen to Johnson again.

Here is the good news: The living God is not a solitary God. The living God is not a lonely God. The living God is a Trinitarian God. From all eternity the living God has existed in community as Relationship. From all eternity the living God has existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From all eternity the living God has been able to speak of himself as "we," "us," and "our." (*Experiencing the Trinity*, page 73)

If our ultimate destination is to live eternally with this Trinitarian God, it stands to reason that we are called to live in community with one another in this life, rather than isolation.

Larry Crabb describes community with others as:

- Being discovered—giving someone access to my life
- Being explored—having a few people warmly and thoughtfully curious about who I am
- Being known—being fully transparent and living with no secrets before one or two people
- Being touched—when what is most alive in one person touches what is most alive in another

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Here is another way to look at this.

- **Being discovered** is like handing someone a closed photo album of your life.
- **Being explored** is like allowing someone to open the photo album and see the pictures of your life.
- **Being known** is like telling someone the stories behind the pictures in the photo album of your life.
- **Being touched** is like letting someone see the pictures that you never put in the photo album and telling them about those pictures without shame.

*Which one of these is easiest for you? Most difficult? Why?*

Let's consider a metaphor that might help explain. When you buy land you get access to the surface but you don't necessarily get the rights to the minerals below the surface. You must negotiate for the mineral rights. Relationships are the same. You might get what's on the surface, but not everybody gives access to their "mineral rights" below the surface.

*Do you want others to have mineral rights to your life?*

*What factors come to play in answering the previous question honestly?*

"In the long run, digging for truth has always proved not only more interesting but more profitable than digging for gold." *George R. Harrison*

*What resistance do you have to giving someone mineral rights to your life?*

"The experience of being understood versus being interpreted is so compelling you can charge admission." *Joseph Pine*

*Who has mineral rights to your life? Did you grant them or did they request them?*

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There is an incident in Jesus' life where some friends display an out-of-the-ordinary commitment to one another. It is found in Mark 2:1-12.

**After a few days, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and word got around that he was back home. A crowd gathered, jamming the entrance so no one could get in or out. He was teaching the Word. They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren't able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, "Son, I forgive your sins."**

**Some religion scholars sitting there started whispering among themselves, "He can't talk that way! That's blasphemy! God and only God can forgive sins."**

**Jesus knew right away what they were thinking, and said, "Why are you so skeptical? Which is simpler: to say to the paraplegic, 'I forgive your sins,' or say, 'Get up, take your stretcher, and start walking'? Well, just so it's clear that I'm the Son of Man and authorized to do either, or both . . ." (he looked now at the paraplegic), "Get up. Pick up your stretcher and go home." And the man did it—got up, grabbed his stretcher, and walked out, with everyone there watching him. They rubbed their eyes, incredulous—and then praised God, saying, "We've never seen anything like this!" (The Message)**

*What kind of relationship (history) do you think existed between the man on the mat and the four men that carried the mat?*

Those four men destroyed private property, suffered public embarrassment and risked being rejected by Jesus just to get their friend in a position to find help.

*When you feel the commitment these men had for one another, does it make you...*

- *Long for friends like that?*
- *Cynical about the "realness" of the situation?*
- *Wonder if you have people who would do this for you?*

*Which would be harder for you, to be the man on the mat or the men on the corners of the mat?*

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*Tell about your choice? Where is the difficulty for you?*

*Going back to Larry Crabb's description of what relationships should look like, rate yourself on each of these components where 1 is very comfortable and 6 is extremely uncomfortable.*

- being discovered—giving someone access to my life.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
- being explored—having a few people warmly and thoughtfully curious about who I am.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
- being known—being fully transparent and live with no secrets before one or two people.  
1 2 3 4 5 6
- being touched—when what is most alive in one person touches what is most alive in another.  
1 2 3 4 5 6

*Do you find it easier to **give** this type of relationship or to **receive** it? Why do you think that is?*

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, after God created Adam, He makes a bold and telling statement about humankind.

**The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."** (Genesis 2:15-18a NIV, *emphasis added*)

*Is it fair to take this out of the male/female context and think of it as referring to us as humans?*

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Maybe verses 24 and 25 from Chapter 10 in the Book of Hebrews will help answer this.

**And let us consider and give attentive, continuous care to watching over one another, studying how we may stir up (stimulate and incite) to love and helpful deeds and noble activities,**

**Not forsaking or neglecting to assemble together [as believers], as is the habit of some people, but admonishing (warning, urging, and encouraging) one another, and all the more faithfully as you see the day approaching. (Amplified Bible)**

God's vision for his followers is best summed up by Dallas Willard: "God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant." For you and me to fully participate in the life God has designed for us, we need other people in our lives. So let's get personal!

*It takes \_\_\_\_\_ kind of person or \_\_\_\_\_ situation for me to open myself up.*

There are two skills that can help us to connect deeply with others in life-giving relationships, thereby making the journey from isolation to community easier and more rewarding: 1) learning to be vulnerable and 2) learning to be authentic.

*What pictures or images come to mind when you think of Vulnerability?*

C. S. Lewis, Christian apologist and author of many books including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

*Do you agree or disagree with C.S. Lewis? Why? Why not?*

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Let's consider how Jesus demonstrated this value. Read Philippians 2:3-8 below. As you read this passage underline the words that relate to Vulnerability.

**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.**

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:**

**Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross! (NIV)**

*What gave Jesus the confidence to be vulnerable?*

Let's take a look at some Bible references that might apply to you. *Read the verses below and underline words or phrases that raise a question, illicit an emotion or bring a sense of comfort.*

**The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;  
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.  
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2, NIV)**

**At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:16-18, NIV)**

**I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you will not slumber;  
indeed, he who watches over Israel**

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will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;  
the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121, NIV)

*Do any of these Biblical references encourage you to be more vulnerable? Why? Why not?*

*What part does God's promise of protection play in your decision to be vulnerable?*

Larry Crabb defines vulnerability as a *willingness to discuss* whatever problems are getting in the way of deepening our relationship with God; it is not necessarily *removing* the problems.

*How would those who know you describe you?*

- Unwilling to talk
- Hard to open up
- Hesitant to talk
- Willing to talk
- Eager to talk

*Why would they say this?*

*How would you like them to describe you?*

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*When you consider "Vulnerability" as a skill—an ability God desires to develop in you, what is the next step you need to take to continue to develop this skill?*

*When you think of the word "Authenticity", who comes to mind? What pictures or images help you understand and explain this word?*

In his book, *Real Church: Can I find it? Does it exist?*, Larry Crabb writes,

The church I want to go to will provide opportunity for me to better see the mess within me that developed while I've lived as a terrified, self-centered person in a shameless, self-promoting world run by a hateful, self-destroying tyrant who keeps telling me I can find myself without giving myself up to God and who disguises his hatred of God by encouraging me to reshape my understanding of who my God is to suit my self-centered tastes. *Real Church*, Crabb, p. 61

I think that this is God's plan--to meet me where I am, in all my ugliness, not where I pretend to be or wish I were; to meet me in my weakness and shame and fear and to give me hope that God loves me, that he can change me, and that he can use me. I need help to dare believe that though I deserve to be hated, God delights in me; that though I keep living in my mess, He is changing me and will one day find [finish?] the job; and that he can use me to change the world, to make an eternal difference in this sorry but God-loved world. (Kindle Edition Locations 795-800)

*Do you share Larry's feeling? Why? Why not?*

*What is it that Larry wrote that creates the most emotional energy in you?*

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*On a scale of 1 being totally authentic and 6 being totally inauthentic how would those who know you best rate you?*

*What fears do you have in learning to be more authentic?*

The fact that Jesus valued authenticity is no secret. Nathanael, one of Jesus' early followers, was *recognized* by Jesus even as he approached him for the first time.

**When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." (John 1:47, NIV)**

Later on in his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares,

**Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:37, NIV)**

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, says,

**On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:4, NIV)**

*As you reflect on your level of authenticity what "next steps" can you take to become more authentic?*

*Do you need to acknowledge your tendency to image manage?*

*Do you need to express the fear of people using what you say to hurt you?*

*Do you need to talk about your hesitancy to open up areas of your life you've kept hidden?*

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Personal trainers say their gyms are filled the first two weeks in January. Everyone is eager to work off the pounds they added over the holidays. But by the end of the month it is back to normal with only the regulars pumping iron and pounding the treadmill.

When we start new things we often fail to adhere to the important principles of moderation and progression. It works for exercise and for developing relationships. It takes time and energy to locate a few people with whom you can be vulnerable and authentic. But once you do you will discover the power of moving from isolation to community.

God designed us to live in a connection with others who are on a journey to the heart of God. These connections have obvious benefits, like time spent with others who are on the same journey, people who encourage and challenge us (and vice versa). But other benefits are not so clear and may take time to appreciate. The "Community" for which we were created is a place where we learn to serve others, to hear from God through others, and to live out the other-centered life God intended for us to enjoy.

Several times during this study you have read the words "Next Step." It is time for another Next Step.

*What is it going to be for you?*

*Find a group to meet with regularly?*

*Join a team to serve with regularly?*

*Challenge a friend to take your relationship deeper?*

*Find someone to help you address your image management issue?*