

Our deepest pain is that of moral loneliness, the desire for a soulmate

Living In Exile
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Our deepest loneliness is not sexual, but moral. More than we yearn for someone to sleep with sexually and emotionally, we yearn for someone to sleep with morally. What we really want is a soulmate.

What does this mean?

Ancient philosophers and mystics used to say that, before being born, each soul is kissed by God and then goes through life always, in some dark way, remembering that kiss and measuring everything in relation to its original sweetness.

Inside each of us, there is a dark memory of having once been touched and caressed by hands far gentler than our own. That caress has left a permanent imprint inside us, one so tender and good that its memory becomes a prism through which we see everything else.

Thus we recognize love and truth outside of us precisely because they resonate with something that is already inside us. Things "touch our hearts" because they awaken a memory of that original kiss. Moreover, because we have a memory of once having been perfectly touched, caressed and loved, every experience we meet in life falls a little short. We have already had something deeper. When we feel frustrated, angry, betrayed, violated or enraged it is because our outside experience does not honour what we already know and cling to inside.

And that dark memory, of first love, creates a place inside us where we hold all that is precious and sacred. It is the place we most guard from others, but the

place where we would most want others to enter; the place where we are the most deeply alone and the place of intimacy; the place of innocence and the place where we are violated; the place of compassion and the place of rage.

The yearning and pain we feel here can be called moral loneliness because we are feeling lonely in that precise place where we feel most strongly about the right and wrong of things; that is, we feel alone in that place where all that is most precious to us is cherished, guarded and feels vulnerable when it is not properly honoured.

Paradoxically, it is the place where we most want someone to enter and yet where we are most guarded. On the one hand, we yearn to be touched inside this tender space because we already know the joy of being caressed there. On the other hand, we don't often, nor easily, let anyone penetrate there. Why: Because what is most precious in us is also what is most vulnerable to violation and we are, and rightly so, deeply cautious about whom we admit to that sacred place. Thus, often, we feel wrenchingly alone in our deepest centre.

A fierce loneliness results, a moral aching. More deeply than we long for a sexual partner, we long for moral affinity, for someone to visit us in that deep part where all that is most precious is cherished and guarded. Our deepest longing is for a partner to sleep with morally, a kindred spirit, a soulmate. Great friendships and great marriages, invariably, have this at their root, deep moral affinity. The persons in these relationships are "lovers" in the true sense because they sleep with each other at the deepest level, irrespective of whether they have sex or not. In terms of feeling, this kind of love is experienced as a "coming home," as finding a home, bone of my

bone. Sometimes, though not always, it is accompanied by romantic love and sexual attraction. Always, however, there is a sense that the other is a kindred spirit, one whose affinity with you is founded upon valuing preciously the same things you do.

But such a love, as we know, is not easily found. Most of us spend our lives looking for it, searching restless, dissatisfied, morally lonely.

It's this kind of loneliness that brought Jesus to his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane. The blood he sweated there is the blood of a lover, one betrayed, morally betrayed, hung out to dry in all that was precious to him.

Nikos Kazantsakis once wrote that virtue is lonely because, at the end of the day, it is jealous of vice. "Virtue," he writes, "sits on its lonely perch and weeps for all it's missed out on." Not quite, though perhaps that's what it feels like.

But the pain of virtue, while not immune to jealousy, is a whole lot deeper than Kazantsakis (and conventional wisdom) suspect. It's the pain of Gethsemane, of moral loneliness, the ache of not having anyone to sleep with morally.

One of the lessons of Gethsemane is that when we sweat our moral aloneness (without giving in to compensation or bitterness) we undergo a moral alchemy that can produce a great nobility of the soul. "What's madness," Theodore Roethke asks, "But nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?" True. And that madness intensifies loneliness, even as, more than anything else, it opens the soul to the possibility of finally finding a kindred spirit.