

Our problem isn't just loneliness—it's species loneliness

How human isolation from the rest of the world keeps us from thriving.

by [Tricia Gates Brown](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



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Until the age of ten, I lived like many American kids of the 1970s in a primly geometric neighborhood, crosshatched with pavement, with matchbook yards and immature plantings. More than any tree, the television towered over my childhood. Sweltering hot summer afternoons were often spent indoors watching game shows and re-runs of shows like *The Brady Bunch*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Happy Days*. Though I loved these shows and the family I watched them with, and though our yard did have an aboveground pool and a tree house in an old oak tree, for me something was missing. It itched and ached like an amputated limb. It was nature.

Occasionally I hear a phrase that opens a door to understanding like a key, helping me decipher a social dynamic, a knot of emotions, or a foggy personal interaction. In an interview with *BookPage*, novelist Richard Powers said something that hit me in this way. He spoke of “species loneliness.” Such powerful, true words to describe the

blight of human disconnection and sickness we see around us: species loneliness.

The phrase struck me as a diagnosis of the first half of my life. Exploring uncultivated nature was rare for me as a child; the times I did wander into it, along the margins of my neighborhood, were a reprieve from otherwise incessant loneliness. I still see the arching branches I crouched through on the backsides of bushes, like knobby arms raised over my head in a wild square dance—sun-sparkled dust baptizing me like confetti. I see the rivulet streams with their split-screen reflections looking back at me.

For Powers, species loneliness denotes the way human beings have cut ourselves off from the nonhuman species inhabiting our world. In our desire for dominance and self-gratification we have put ourselves in solitary confinement, and in the worst cases become the tormenter of all things nonhuman. We have deprived ourselves of love relationships with nonhumans.

It is making us sick. We were never meant to operate as an autonomous and independent species. We desperately need the full cooperation of other species to survive, from large mammals that maintain a crucial balance within ecosystems to microbial communities in our own guts. As a result of our non-cooperation, interspecies disconnection is breaking down the systems humans depend on. This disconnection is deeper than the interdependence of biological systems; it is also theological. That's why, to my ears, the word *loneliness* gets at the issue with such scalpel-precision. Loneliness has been defined as being "destitute of sympathetic companionship." It is a sickness of the heart and soul, the parts of ourselves we cannot see yet know to be our very essence.

Loneliness has apparently reached epidemic proportions, with consequences not only sociopolitical but also physical. In 2016, the American Osteopathic Association initiated a survey that found that 72 percent of Americans experience loneliness, with 31 percent experiencing it at least once a week. Such statistics are helpful for shining a bright light on a problem shrouded in secrecy. Yet the AOA's recommendations for addressing loneliness seem largely to miss the puzzle piece to which Powers draws attention. While it briefly mentions enjoying nature, it focuses largely on human connection, as if our disconnection from other humans was by and large the problem.

Human-to-human intimacy isn't the only thing that's missing. Researchers like Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan, authors of *Your Brain on Nature*, have demonstrated that nature nourishes our bodies and souls, making us feel less lonely. For example, oxytocin is the "connection hormone," the love hormone critical for health—nature's antidote to loneliness. It is released when we experience closeness with other beings—including animals.

Scientific research into this phenomenon is young; so far it has focused on humans' relationships with dogs. But it suggests that certain interactions with dogs raise people's level of oxytocin, with all its blissful, healing benefits. Research also indicates that the experience is two-way, with oxytocin level rising in dogs as they connect with humans.

I know in my bones that to thrive I need connection with the trees and plants and wilderness, and most importantly with animals. Given the current limits of the research, I won't try to make definitive claims about what other people need. I expect science will prove it soon enough. Not all of us need to surround ourselves with friends, or find one satisfying lifelong intimate partner, to counter loneliness. Yet I think we do need to alter the ways we view nature and non-human species. We need to widen the family circle of love.

Due to a mix of privilege, good fortune, and some significant sacrifices, my life affords interrelationship with non-human species in spades. Until recently, I lived for years among wild woods, and the 100-year-old cedar and spruce trees just outside my windows were beloved, like family. Now I live on a farm. Of my several intimate friendships, three are with Sybil, Lupe, and Harper (cat, cat, and dog, respectively). These three keep the oxytocin flowing throughout each day—receiving and giving love, inspiring me to smile and laugh and emote spontaneously, and weaving into the warp and weft of my heart.

Life intertwined with animals and wild nature can be the antidote to being "destitute of sympathetic companionship." Of course, the love language of the cosmos, like any language, requires some practice and intention, and there were many times in my younger-adult years when I was lonely even in nature. I had not come to feel and understand how it pulsates with compassionate, loving, divine energy. But we only really learn a language by immersion. And we only learn to love something by really looking at it and having our eyes opened.

“Split a piece of wood; I’m there,” says Jesus in the gospel of Thomas. “Lift up the stone, and you’ll find me there.” God as immanent companion encountered in nature—under a stone or in the eyes of a hummingbird or a dog—is wonderfully good news for people sick with loneliness. Love is abundant and waiting for us, right there in nature.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Our species loneliness.”