

*Together We Thrive*  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill  
Sunday, July 14, 2024  
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During December 2023, I participated in my annual tradition called "Holiday Council," a program run by a woman named Molly Mahar where over three weeks, we reflect on the past year and clarify our goals and priorities for the upcoming year. We are guided to come up with a theme, goals, and "ways of being" which are essentially our core values. For 2024, I chose "connection" as one of my ways of being. Some participants in the program decided to start an online book discussion group for Dr. Vivek Murthy's book "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World" as a way to foster community and work towards a value of connection both in our own lives and with each other. Embarking on this journey in 2024 has made a significant impact on my quality of life.

Ever since the pandemic, I still feel like I'm standing on shifting sands and haven't quite found my grounding. When the pandemic started in March 2020, my daughter Samantha was just turning four, and I was beginning to emerge from the haze of parenting a young child—only to be thrust into lockdown. As the past few years have progressed, it seems like the social landscape has changed on me, and I have had trouble reintegrating into it as a person in their forties, with a child, a partner who works long hours, and a job that often leaves me feeling drained at the end of the day managing teenagers' social and emotional well-being.

Many people my age seem to be so invested in their children's activities or living the same life from their twenties, just in an awesomely upgraded way, that I felt left out and left behind. I've tried to "make friends online" the way the kids do nowadays, but I just can't seem to connect with people online whom I've never met in person the same way others can. It feels inauthentic to me and like I'm still keeping part of myself hidden.

I was struggling with a lot of loneliness when I started reading this book, and much of the information really hit home. Dr. Murthy divided the book into two sections: making sense of loneliness and building a more connected life. In the first part of the book, he attempts to explain loneliness and the ways it can impact someone's life, and in the second, he talks about how we can combat loneliness. Murthy's work in various medical practices and ultimately as the Surgeon General of the United States gave him a front-row seat not only to the problems that loneliness causes, but also ways to cure it.

When Dr. Murthy began his first tenure as Surgeon General in 2014 under former President Obama, he set out on a mission to understand the medical needs of the country. However, he did not expect his "listening tour" to uncover the epidemic of loneliness. As he and his team moved around the United States, listening to people from all different walks of life, he realized that the undercurrent to many medical problems ranging from mental health difficulties and addiction to the often-discussed diabetes and heart disease was loneliness and isolation. Many people were suffering from profound disconnection to their communities in emotional and physical ways that led them to very real medical problems. One patient, James, even blamed winning the lottery for taking away his social connections and contributing to his diabetes and high blood pressure. He had the life he thought he wanted, that many Americans strive for with status, wealth, and achievement, but it didn't guarantee his happiness or his health.

As Murthy dug into the research about loneliness and connection in humans, he began to understand the evolutionary role community has played in human development and how in many modern societies we have diminished the role of community in favor of privacy, independence, and self-sufficiency. However, Murthy discovered that we are literally wired for connection. When compared with other animals on the planet, we are not stronger, faster, or better hunters. One of the characteristics that sets us apart from much of the animal kingdom is the ability to connect and communicate with each other. As he says, "Loneliness is a built-in reminder that we are stronger together, not just as clans and tribes or family and friends, but also as caring communities that form the foundation of a healthy culture." Through his investigation, Dr. Murthy discovered that loneliness is actually a signal indicating that something is amiss in our lives and needs to be addressed. Throughout our evolutionary history, being isolated from our people was tantamount to a death sentence, so feelings of loneliness can serve as guides to steer us back into our groups.

Dr. Murthy defines loneliness as "the subjective feeling that you're lacking the social connections that you need." Loneliness can fall into one of three categories: intimate, relational, and collective. Intimate loneliness is the lack of connection with a close partner or friend where you share deep affection and trust. Relational loneliness is the lack of quality relationships with friends and family. Finally, collective loneliness is missing the bond you share with people who identify with your sense of purpose and interests. If we are starved in any of these categories, we will feel lonely. Luckily, the antidote to loneliness is found in the connections we have in each of these circles as well.

As I read through Dr. Murthy's book at the beginning of 2024, I realized that all three areas of connection were suffering. My intimate circle was probably the healthiest, with a caring partner and some very close friends, but I was relying on them to fulfill the needs that were lacking from the other two circles. I needed to invest in widening my circle of friends and acquaintances, which had unfortunately shrunk during the years when I was beholden to a toddler's schedule that didn't always match up with childless friends, a partner who worked odd hours, and then compounded by the pandemic. As an extrovert who often feels energized by being around people, I had to rebuild my connections. After feeling lonely for so long, it seemed like a daunting task. What had happened to the person who was always ready to go out, do new things, and meet new people?

Loneliness lied to me. The neurons that feel physical pain overlap with those that feel emotional pain and they can feed us the lie that when we're lonely, we need to continue to withdraw and isolate out of fear and protection. Modern day loneliness seems to trigger a feedback loop that causes us to feel more lonely and more isolated, which then turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy of not wanting to get out there and see others again -- and I was suffering from it. After reading the evolutionary backstory in Dr. Murthy's book, I realized that I needed to get back out there. I needed to put my extroverted self back into the sea of people and see what happens. Before the pandemic, my husband Dave would know when I'd been home too long alone because I would start pacing around the house, and he would just tell me to go out, go to the mall, or Target—anywhere to feel the energy of other people. Somewhere since 2020, I had lost that drive and was starting to feel like a shell of myself. So, at the beginning of 2024, I decided it was time to work on rebuilding those connections. When scheduling permits, I've been attending a girls' night hosted by an acquaintance and the UUCCH Mom's Dinner because I knew that I needed to work on building my relationships in the middle circle of companions and combating my relational loneliness. I also needed to work on connecting with people face to face, which involves having conversations and sharing stories. On these nights, it's just a bunch of people from all different walks of life, with all different stories, sitting around a table and discussing issues big and small.

These groups have a way of making everyone feel seen and heard with whatever each is going through, and whether it's your first time there or your twentieth, you are welcome.

The other way I wanted to work on my loneliness was by joining a new Dungeons and Dragons group. The groups of people I had played with since I was a teenager had become defunct due to scheduling conflicts, but I realized that I deeply missed that creative outlet and needed it as a way to feel connected, both to myself and to others. Playing D&D is a way to feel camaraderie, working side by side with a team to solve problems, investigate mysteries, and have adventure in a way that doesn't exist in real life. While the adventure may be made up, the laughs, connections, and friendships that build are very real. It is one of the reasons that we now bolt out of here most Sundays so I can get to my game with a wonderful group of people at the game store just a few miles north on King's Highway. All the fears I had about not being a good enough player who knows the new edition's rules well enough have evaporated as I've become part of this team on our journey into the Netherdeep.

At the beginning of the year, I wanted to bring both of these things back into my life because I was lacking in connections, but I was scared. I had the perpetual fear that people weren't going to like me, I would say something wrong, or that we wouldn't really have anything in common. That fear almost kept me from stepping outside my self-induced bubble and shushing the voice that said I wasn't good enough. Becoming a parent and the pandemic had whittled away the security and confidence I had in myself before 2016, but I decided that in 2024, I would reclaim it.

Reading Dr. Murthy's book in conjunction with my own journey out of the darkness of loneliness and into the light of connection helped me realize that I wasn't actually alone, ever. Many people before me, many right now, and many people after me will all deal with these struggles. Connection starts with the one we have with ourselves and then we can build bridges to each other. Reaching in to know ourselves and reaching out to others with love and acceptance, we can combat loneliness and fulfill our evolutionary role as connected beings on this journey of life ..... together.

### Sources

Dr. Vivek Murthy (2020). *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*