

1

Even though the experience happened nearly 40 years ago, due to the intensity of the event, it seems like it happened just yesterday. I was a Head Start bus driver, and I would drive around town to pick up preschool children for school, some of whom were leaving their parents for the first time. I'll always remember the young boy who didn't want to get on the bus, who was terrified of leaving his mom. I reassured mom that her son would adjust to being with us and that he would have a good day at school, and I suggested that she give him a hug, place him on the bus, and walk away without looking back. Although the child cried while getting on the bus, as soon as we drove away, he was fine. I wondered who had the greatest separation anxiety that day, whether it was the child or his mom.

Years later when I became a parent and watched my son get on the bus, I experienced those feelings of separation anxiety, watching my child leave home for the first time for kindergarten.

I imagine we all experience this feeling at one time or another—whether due to a child leaving home for school, the last child getting married and moving, the

death of a parent or best friend, a divorce, or the death of a spouse.

When we find ourselves alone, possibly for the first time, we may try to fill up the space, pushing away the feelings of loneliness by keeping busy, such as one man who faced the death of his wife. His son tells the story of what happened:

This story is of my father in the years immediately following my mother's death. My dad, alone in a small town he had never liked, had made the usual mistakes: sold the house, changed locations, projected his loneliness outward into anger with the world. And then, at seventy, he did something he had been wanting to do since he was a boy—he signed up for flying lessons.

The aircraft pushed his reflexes, his endurance, and his patience. The ground school pushed the edges of his mind. But he wanted to fly, so he stuck with it. And at last there was only a physical between him and the solo flight. He went to the doctor and passed the medical exam only to have his hopes dashed when the doctor said, "Sorry, I can't let you solo. You're seventy years old."

As it turns out, there were no regulations about maximum age, so my father pushed ahead. He went to higher and higher authorities,

submitted to more and more stringent physical examinations. Everybody agreed that he was physically fit, but still they said, “We can’t let you solo. You’re seventy years old.”

Finally, my dad found a bureaucrat of high enough rank to admit there were no laws about maximum age. “Pass one more test and you’re in.” So my father took yet another round on the treadmill, and at the end the physician handed him a piece of paper that read: “Harry Killoran, Qualified for Solo Flight.”

My dad shook the doctor’s hand, put the paper in his wallet, and started to leave the office. “Wait a minute,” said the doctor. “When are you going to fly?”

My dad looked at him, and I expect he grinned as he said, “Do you think I’m crazy? I’m not going up in any airplane alone. I’m seventy years old.”<sup>1</sup>

Facing a different point in life may not lead you to learn to fly an airplane, but at one point or another, we may each encounter feelings of being abandoned, wondering what to do next. We may even possibly wonder where God is, feeling left all alone, experiencing isolation and maybe even a bit of fear.

It’s not a new experience, for the writer of Psalm 22 expressed feelings of separation anxiety, for he felt he had been separated from God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” the writer lamented. Or as another translation expresses it: “My God! My God, why have you left me all alone?”

Have you ever felt all alone, as though everyone—even God—has abandoned you? If so, you’re in the good company of not just the writer of this psalm, but of Jesus himself, who spoke the words of this psalm while hanging on the cross: Why have you forsaken me, God, left me all alone on this cross to die? The word translated as *forsaken* in Psalm 22 can also mean left behind, deserted. It’s a word filled with strong emotions, intense feelings of abandonment and despair.

Writer Henri Nouwen recognized that we all encounter these feelings of being alone, but he distinguished the difference from being alone and being lonely. He wrote:

All human beings are alone. No other person will completely feel like we do, think like we do, act like we do. Each of us is unique, and our aloneness is the other side of our uniqueness. The question is whether we let

3

our aloneness become loneliness or whether we allow it to lead us into solitude. Loneliness is painful; solitude is peaceful. Loneliness makes us cling to others in desperation; solitude allows us to respect others in their uniqueness and create community.

Letting our aloneness grow into solitude and not into loneliness is a lifelong struggle. It requires conscious choices about whom to be with, what to study, how to pray, and when to ask for counsel. But wise choices will help us to find the solitude where our hearts can grow in love.<sup>2</sup>

Being in solitude invites us to discover that we are really never alone, for in the silence, in the aloneness, we encounter the invitation to sense the presence of God in a deeper way. Feeling lonely focuses on ourselves, our disconnection from others, but being alone in solitude helps us focus on our connection to God, on the Spirit's presence that has been there with us all along.

The writer of Psalm 22 seems to begin with a sense of loneliness: "O my God, I cry by day, but you

do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." But did you notice the shift from being lonely to celebrating the writer's aloneness in God's presence? The writer remembered how God had helped their ancestors, how they had been saved from terrible times. Later in this psalm the writer celebrated that God had been with him since his birth, since leaving his mother's womb. Even though the psalmist knew what being alone was like, the writer also knew that God had been present all along.

It's ok to be alone, to face in the silence the questions of your existence, to wonder about God, to ask the difficult questions of life. In doing so, you're not alone, for God hears every sigh, every ache, every question, and continues to embrace you in loving arms. So, when you begin to wonder, *Have I been left all alone?*—know that God has been with you the entire time, just waiting for you to wonder that very question in order to reassure you, "You're not all alone."

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for*

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*Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers.* Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #32.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (HarperCollins, 2006), 18.