

## Case Study: Br. Jim

Br. Jim is an accomplished and gifted teacher who is often praised by his students and admired by other faculty members. He is known to be a hard worker and also a contributing member of his community. Several months ago Br. Jim experienced the death of a dear friend, colleague and community member. Two months later, at the end of the last school year, his community withdrew from an inner-city school where he had ministered for the past 10 years. Since the end of the school year, Br. Jim has spent a lot of time alone and has declined most invitations to join with others for relaxation. Gradually he began to take meals by himself, either eating at odd times or taking food to his room. Television became his close and constant companion. Br. Jim did not experience the summer as enjoyable and relaxing as he had in past years.

As the new school year began, Br. Jim found himself teaching in a new school and living in a new local community. He felt lost and de-energized and for the first time doubted his ability to teach. Br. Jim decided to seek help to understand and cope with what was happening so that he could get back to normal and feel fulfilled again.

### Loneliness

As Br. Jim began to work in therapy, he became aware of the many and profound changes that he had experienced over the past year. He was able to see that the death of a good friend and the ending of a satisfying teaching assignment were significant losses that led him to experience loneliness. As he described his experience, his therapist reassured him that loneliness is a normal response to the inevitable separations that occur in life. Br. Jim also explored the existential reality that one does not find total happiness in an other, be it a person, job or place.

What Br. Jim did not realize is that loneliness caused by separation can lead a person to cope in healthy or unhealthy ways. Loneliness can lead a person into solitude where one can learn new ways to listen and understand self and others, often leading to a desire to reach out to others, to be more intimate. Loneliness can, however, also lead to isolation, an unhelpful way to cope with separation. Br. Jim's therapist helped him to see

and understand better how his loneliness was leading him to isolation and unhealthy coping.

### Isolation

Isolation is a continued separation from other persons that renders healthy connections and intimacy impossible. Clearly, Br. Jim's increasing time alone and his choice to eat alone and avoid others are isolating behaviors. Br. Jim began to realize that his compulsive watching of television, like any other compulsive or addictive behavior, was another way to isolate.

Surprised by these behaviors, Br. Jim became curious as to why he was opting for such unfamiliar and unhealthy choices. As he worked in therapy, he became more self-aware and discovered several underlying causes of his isolating choices. First, Br. Jim realized that an old enemy, low self-esteem, had returned during this past year. Earlier in his life, he had questioned and doubted himself. In the last several months he had returned to a conditional identity, i.e., he felt that his goodness or acceptability relied on whether or not he met some external standard. He was able to name "feeling less than manly" because he was seeking help and was not able to get his life back on track by himself. Lack of self-awareness and his inability to name and express his feelings, especially to grieve in a healthy way, also contributed to his intense loneliness and isolation. His fear that others would reject him or not understand his feelings was a hidden motivator for keeping his experience to himself. Finally, Br. Jim's spirituality became an impediment to healthy coping because he had learned to rely on God alone and to ask God to take care of things, to take away his struggles, as a parent does with a child.

### Solitude—A Healthier Alternative

As Br. Jim continued to work in therapy and also with his spiritual director, he began to see that solitude—a state in which one is calm, restful, relaxed and feeling one with self and with others—is a better alternative than isolation when coping with loneliness. Br. Jim learned that solitude offers the capacity to attend to God's presence in one's self, in others and the world at large. Br. Jim was encouraged by Thomas Merton's insight that solitude is an opportunity to get in touch with your

true self (feelings, desires and dreams) and to relate and listen to this self. Br. Jim also realized that when you are comfortable, enjoy your own company and are confident that you have and can use your inner resources, you can enter into and profit from solitude.

As he began to reconnect with others, Br. Jim became clearer that self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-encouragement are necessary requirements for embracing solitude, and for healthy connections with others. Coming to believe that God dwells in us and is revealed to us through our experience, thoughts and feelings also helped Br. Jim to be less fearful and see his relationship with God in new ways. Rather than fear or avoid loneliness, he saw that it can lead to solitude and subsequently to intimacy with self, others and God. Finally, Br. Jim described a gradual shift in consciousness from "what I am not and what is not happening to who I am and what is happening in my life."

### Benefits of Solitude

In a world where we cannot live without experiences of separation—some more expected than others—solitude is necessary because it affords several benefits for individuals on the journey of life. Solitude provides an opportunity to cease being attentive to the needs, demands or simply to the presence of others. In addition, it gives individuals a chance to rest from seeing themselves through other people's eyes. Solitude provides a place to discover how you are on the inside, what you think, feel, want and need, as well as a place for healing from the inevitable separations of life. It is a place to discover your center of gravity and to listen deeply to yourself and God's Spirit within so that you are able to name and understand your life work, your *opus*, what underlies who you are and all that you do.

Perhaps Amelia E. Barr says it best—*"Solitude is such a potential thing. We hear voices in solitude that we never hear in the hurry and turmoil of life; we receive counsels and comforts that we get under no other condition."*

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