

Isolation is Proximity
by MJ Townsend

I like people—I always have. From the ages of three to seven, I was the busiest socialite my neighborhood and church congregation in Laguna Niguel, California, had ever seen. My diaper, Snoopy life-jacket, and cowboy boots comprised my daily “get-up,” and get up, I did: up into the homes and lives of every sister in church and every Santa at the mall and every neighbor on the street.

I just like people.

But people are few and far between these days. After the Costco crowds calmed and the government moved toilet paper off the endangered species list, life slowed down for a lot of us and, for some, it even stopped completely. And as if to add insult to injury, many of those endings haven't been softened much by the healing balm of *people*—by the hands and hugs that help and hope us all through our tragedies. These community farewells, along with the tender gatherings housing them, have been all but outlawed in the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are we to do? In our 2020 house of horrors, what *can* we do about the people we love and the causes we care about and the communities we serve? What can we do when we're, in large part, alone?

This summer and the past few semesters, I've asked myself those questions a lot. And as I've thought about it amidst my personal COVID-related heartache, I've come to a few conclusions, not the least of which is this: isolation need not be desolation.

Desolation is empty. Desolation is a sorrowing soul yearning for something else—for *someone* else. It is a ship at sea when the lower lights have gone out; it is a barren land where the forgotten go and are then forsaken; it is the starless nights where the disheartened retreat to curl up and give up for their final defeat. Isolation, on the other hand, is not—or at least it doesn't have to be.

Isolation, I've come to learn, can actually be full of people. For me, isolation has been calling grandma three times a week to talk about the flowers blooming on her balcony and to remind her that I (still) graduate in April. Isolation has been FaceTiming Randi Allen in her hospice bed to whisper my final goodbye and deepest gratitude to her and to God that I could live on the same earth at the same time on the same street as this angel of a friend. Isolation on these and other occasions has been seeking a God that I am more fully convinced is there and to whom I have never before so fervently pleaded to help us love our neighbor.

This was my constant prayer this summer when, because of the pandemic, my summer work turned from civil to criminal and from plaintiff to defendant. To be honest, I never thought I'd work in criminal defense. I never thought I would be working with—or for—people that have done or have been accused of doing certain things. And so with this change my heavenward pleas turned towards love, asking for some degree of charity to clothe me in my work and help

me look past the words and the pictures and the videos to see a human, and one that is both in need and worthy of the best advocacy I could give them.

Thanks to that effort and what I believe was some additional measure of atoning grace, my summertime isolation turned into something worthwhile—for me and, I believe, for those defendants, too. My summertime isolation quickly sparked into a fervent desire to close the advocacy gap and offer legal services to criminal defendants desperately looking for their miracle. My summertime isolation enabled me to get close to these people by getting close to their cases and their causes, to their pasts and their futures, in an effort to let freedom, justice, and mercy ring out in their lives.

My summertime isolation built community—connections that, though I never saw a client or stepped foot into an office or even looked a supervisor in the eye, were nonetheless real and meaningful. That community, refined in my solitude, taught me that isolation in the time of COVID is proximity.

Or at least it can be.