

The Paradox Between Isolation and Loneliness

My Lived Experience of Loneliness Amidst Death and Grief

By Shruti Jain

Life as I knew it, took a one eighty degree turn on 1st April 2021. I travelled to India to be with my father who was in the hospital. I had lost my mother in January 2018 and my father had been forced (due to pandemic-related circumstances and lack of professional carers) to move into a care home in August 2020. He had to move there alone, having already lost his wife, and with none of us, his children, there to support him. He was wheelchair bound, and he was scared. It's not a surprise that in less than a year he fell into severe depression, had two clots leading to hospitalizations and completely lost the will to live. He died on 26th April 2021.

It was April 2021, it had been just over a year of the world experiencing the devastating impact of the pandemic. Covid-19 had already wreaked havoc on so many lives, old and young, rich or poor, black or white, it didn't spare any class, religion, race or age. This could have been a time for us humans to realize that we are all the same when it comes to natural disasters or pandemics, although I'm not sure if that happened!

Humanity was brought down to its knees and humans were once again reminded of their collective helplessness, vulnerability and mortality.

Singapore, the country I was living in at the time, reacted with very tight border controls, especially for India and Indians in Singapore. I was aware that if I leave to be with my dad, chances of re-entering will be next to none for an unforeseen period of time. It was for this reason I delayed my trip to be with my father, who had been suffering from November 2020. My elder daughter's IB finals and her high school graduation were in May, and I kept telling dad to 'hold on' until May 23rd. I just wanted to be there for her, for her final exams and for her graduation! I felt immensely torn between my dad and my daughter, the guilt engulfed every waking hour and I started experiencing anxiety and panic attacks. I remember telling my dad every day, "please just wait until May dad!".

I had lost my mother in January 2018 and, even after having a few pertinent and honest conversations with my parents, about life and how it will be for the one left behind, we were unsure on how to manage my father's existence after mom's passing.

I guess no matter how much you plan for life after a death, it will never be entirely how you'd hoped or plan for it to be. The repercussions of the passing of a loved one, of your mother, a wife, a grandmother can never be imaginable or predictable.

So, does it help to have the conversation then, on life after the death of your partner?

In my experience, I believe it does, for us, it allowed us to open up to the fact that when mom was ready to pass, we needed to let her go peacefully - with our support, not our hesitance.

After some thought, dad decided he wanted to stay in his own home, surrounded by precious memories of their lives together. He did not want to move in with me or my brother, maybe he also wanted to keep the tethers of his dying career alive. So, in order to help dad cope, my family and I decided that I would travel every 8 weeks to be with him. It was possible as Singapore to India was a mere 6-hour flight. I did that until the global lockdown ensued restrictions that grounded all of us.

The year of separation thereafter was really hard for both dad and me. Dad stayed positive for the first half and lost all hope of seeing anyone in the second half. Needless to say, he wasn't able to see anyone else around him in his community, everyone was locked in. It was also the time the caretaker who had lived with him for 6 months, had to be fired and we had to move dad into a care home. Unbeknown to us, these were the last 8 months of dad's life.

I am very aware I was not the only person in this situation. At the beginning of the pandemic, we all heard and read many stories of dying parents who could not have their children visit, children stuck at university, loved ones stuck in countries where borders were closed. At the time, I feared I would be one of those children, and that, sadly, became my truth. Singapore's strict travel restrictions exiled me for what we foresaw to be 6-8 months, but became forever.

A few weeks after my dad was hospitalised for the second time, I decided to go, and that was April 2021. There were vivid signs from my mom that helped me make that decision quite confidently. My husband and I had to run through a pros-con list about leaving Singapore and decide who needs me more, between my father and my children. At the time the only person that mattered was my father, he was all alone and so scared. On top of that, I had an incredible guided spiritual intervention from my mom, which affirmed my decision.

So, I left, leaving my nine and eighteen year old daughters, and husband behind.

The journey from there to now, a year later, was chaotic and lonely. I was alone in India when dad was sick, when I made the decision to move him from the hospital back to the care home, just in time before the second wave hit India. I had hoped that he would recover in a homely environment, but realising soon that his condition was only deteriorating... and realised that I needed to start preparing for his death.

I was alone in the month of taking care of him and watching him wither away (watching him endure pain, helplessness, dependency, fear, anxiety and anger), and watching him die. I was alone when I walked in the room where his dead body was kept, arranging the funeral, burning his body, watching the flames burn away pieces of him.

I was alone after the funeral, taking his ashes to immerse it in the Ganges. I was alone when I went back to his home, mom and dad's home to empty it completely and decide what to do with all their stuff. You see I hadn't touched mom's stuff since she had passed. Everything was as it was when she passed.

I was alone when I gave their stuff away, looking through every drawer, cupboard, shelf, every nook and corner of the house to decide if I should keep it or donate it or throw it away.

Is this what life is worth in the end: the three categories of *keep, donate or throw?!*

I was alone when I helped my father pass, and helped him make the decision to die. As I said above, his health was deteriorating, so for two weeks after he had moved to his care home, we talked everyday about his life and what it means for him to know that it may be over now. His energy was decreasing so he could only talk in little bouts throughout the day. In the beginning, I saw his eyes close, first for short periods of time and then most of the day. He would talk to me with his eyes closed, as if he was half in this world and the other half in the world he wanted to be. His appetite was decreasing, his voice (that was always bold and loud!) was getting softer and softer.

He was seeing people in his room, once he saw a small girl who was standing at the corner of his room. Another time, he saw two women sitting on the floor, smiling and waiting. Yet another time he saw a man in front of his bed. Many a times he asked me to pack his bags and he would say,

“make sure beta (dear daughter) my wallet, my phone, my glasses and my tissue packet is there with me”. I knew he was preparing for the next phase of his journey in this earthly existence of ours. A few days before his dying day, he saw relatives who’d come to say hi. He was ready, like me, he was in a paradox too, should I stay or should I go.

But he was ready for, what I believe, was his next step; the spiritual world.

In emptying my parent’s home alone, I suffered immensely painful moments but had to push them aside as I had only 3 days to do so.

Fifty-three years of their lives together, of creating this beautiful home, filling it with pieces of memorabilia that reflected their journey, of the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows, the moments of love and anger shared, the tears shared, the parties with friends, the visit homes by us, where our children (their children), played and ate from grandma’s kitchen, the phone calls, facetime calls taken at the dining table and sofa (mom’s favourite places), secrets shared, conversations my parents had about me and my brother and eventually our children, experiencing depression, sadness and loneliness. All endured in the four walls of this home, that I had the daunting responsibility of clearing up. I was stripping away not only the material things but I was stripping the house of all its memories that my parents made in this little house of theirs.

I had to do all of it alone.

I went through, what felt like, hundreds of sarees that my mother owned with matching petticoats and blouses, her sweaters, shawls, salwar suits. My dad’s very limited number of shirts, pants and jackets. My brother had already spring cleaned his wardrobe in 2018, that was necessary as dad had gained so much weight after mom passed. Mom’s jewellery was easy, as there was none, she had already distributed it between me and my sister-in-law and, knowing her, probably a few close friends and relatives. Did I mention, I had to do all of it alone.

I hope my description of my loneliness doesn’t come across as self-pity, as I define alone as being physically and emotionally alone. My husband, my sister-in-law, my children, my brother, a close friend in London and in Singapore called every day and several times in the day to be my anchor through this journey. Yet; and this is what I realised a few months after dad passed, the meaning of feeling alone was the paradox of wanting to be alone vs. loneliness in making the choice to be alone.

In May 2021, reluctantly, I moved to the UK. All I wanted was to go home to my children and husband, but there was no way back home! After being here for just over a month, my husband and I decided to relocate the whole family to the UK as Singapore was not going to change their travel restrictions. My family finally arrived mid-july and I hugged my girls, my husband after five very long months. My husband couldn’t relocate as he had to find another role with his organization, and so travelled into the uk when restrictions relaxed.

However, even in that he could only be here for 90 days in every tax year! This meant I got my girls into the country, with the eldest moving to first year of uni and the ten-year-old living with me at home, but it was my husband’s turn to be separated from the family. The family was still scattered and we would only be under the same roof in April 2022, a year after our lives changed forever.

I was still alone.

The term ALONE was used so often that I thought it became my identity! Even with loving friends and family that were always there, I realised I could not share my existential loneliness with anyone. The paradox of loneliness vs choosing to be alone impacted a lot of my relationships.

When I moved back to the UK, I found a small apartment near the coast so I didn't have to meet anyone from the city; I wanted to have less people around me. I also needed to be near nature and water, this allowed for moments of peace, reflection and time with myself. However, the isolation led me to feeling even more alone in my times of sadness and despair. A couple of friends visited on weekends, and I was grateful for that, but felt the distance between us was so large that sometimes I felt like pushing them out of the apartment! I felt like shouting at them 'go back', 'I don't need you!', 'leave me alone'. Yet I was grateful for those moments when I was crying and there was a shoulder to lean on.

In losing my parents, I lost the ground from under my feet. I lost my stability, my security of a space that was safe for me, I lost a place where I was loved by my mom, by my dad, unconditionally. We would fight and make up, we could talk about everything, we could laugh, I could let them down on many occasions and would still be loved and forgiven. With my mother, I felt seen, I felt heard, she could feel my heart hurt, she could call me at the exact time when I needed someone to talk to, she would call no matter how busy I was, she would give me advice regardless of whether I used/needed it or not! She would love me whether or not I was good enough.

With my dad, the prevalent academic, he was the pillar of support for my professional and academic life. Always giving me advice, listening to me and telling me off for when I was procrastinating, telling me to keep working harder on my thesis. I can still hear him say, "...so, Gudiya (my pet name), how much work have you done on your thesis today?" and "...there will always be enough excuses and justification you can give to the world my darling, but only you will know the truth of how hard you're working on your thesis..." and I would smile, he would smile and then we would talk about something else. He taught me and reminded me to keep my eye on the ball, giving me insight from his own learnings. At one point in my previous career, I decided to quit my work because I felt I was not being a good enough mother, and he was my critique and supporter at the same time.

After mom passed, every visit with him consisted of sitting for two to three hours every morning and talking about mom and our grief in losing her, sharing her stories, and repeating them always. Now, after his passing, I had no one to sit with and share stories of him and mom.

In being away from my family, I lost my support structure. In changing countries, I lost the friendship community I had created that could have been a support structure too.

But I have reflected that there has been a slow and poignant web of loneliness that has crept up around me. It started in 2018, when I lost mom, and built up over the next three years in going through dad's depression, loneliness, and move to the care home.

It grew ever so quietly in the displacement from Singapore to India to the UK and finally took form in my grieving of losing dad. Being there for and with him in his journey of passing, performing the funeral rights alone, emptying their house alone, and lastly in losing Molly, our beautiful dog. Can anyone have been with me completely in this journey, which is so unique only to me? Is this why we are and always will be alone? Viktor Frankl says that we deal with this

loneliness safely and securely when we are accompanied by nurturing relationships in our lives. But there is always going to be a phase when even these relationships seem so far away, and our true self walks through the web of grief, loneliness, alone.

Is that bad? Or does that form the self that needs to experience this existential loneliness and know how to process through it.

Unfortunately, the processing of this loneliness has been harmful and I feel it has impacted the people around me. I have forgotten how to have fun, to be happy, to see the light-ness and humor in life... and most importantly, to see the privilege of being alive.

Even in being reunited with my family in July, I still felt that loneliness and the need to be alone. After waiting for what seemed like years, and finally having them near me, I yearned to be away from them for some time every day. Sometimes I felt they couldn't understand my grief, what I went through and am going through. They were there for me but maybe not in the way I needed them. Is that being selfish? Self-centered? Absorbed in my grief? Needing to cry inconsolably was so prevalent, and felt so wrong!

Thoughts like these would make me even more lonely. And during the excruciating nights of sadness and pain, I would ask why I need to feel this alone. Yet, in this paradoxical space, I found myself leaning towards my needs to be heard, seen and felt so much more, especially by the people in my inner circle. And I learnt to ask for it, shamelessly.

The liminal space between loneliness and isolation, between having human presence and not, is so haunting, so daunting. No, I am not trying to be funny with my rhyming. There are so many moments of anxiety, panic, such sadness, despair, anger, fear, lifeless-ness, confusion, shame, guilt....should I go on? So many of these emotions that create a vicious cycle and I have known and felt that the only way out has been to reach out to a family member, a friend, my therapist, talk to my dead parents....but the fear of not being understood or felt has stopped me from doing so, hence the vicious cycle continued.

In my therapy, I realised the presence of a 'grief companion' is pertinent. I felt for a while I had one, but she was also grieving and so that companionship became a responsibility and a burden for me. I am sure she might have felt the same about me. You see, I realised, to be a companion you need to have strength and resilience to bear the grieving person's sadness and despair.

My loved ones were there, but I felt alone. I felt supported but I was alone. I wondered, if this point of existential loneliness is an accumulation of pockets of loneliness felt over my lifetime, and this, losing my parents was the tip of the iceberg, the last straw or being at the edge of the cliff, feeling the pit of that black hole that just kept getting deeper and deeper. Maybe this is what Frankl (1963) described as the concept of aloneness where we face life totally alone, devoid of meaningful experiences in other relationships that may result in fears and anxieties of nothingness, non-being and death (Combs, 1990).

But, wait, I had my primary circle of family members who loved and were there for me. Why did I still feel this loneliness?

Maybe it's not surprising that I felt, or anyone can feel, totally alone. As an existentialist, knowing that we find our purpose and meaning in life by confronting the idea that we are alone in life, this paradoxical experience of alone-ness vs loneliness has forced me to accept that I have two

choices: to remain stuck in this loneliness or move on to the existential concept of alone-ness. I also learnt that this is where my relationship with 'my-self' strengthens and the relationships I have nurtured with others will allow me to find a way to live with meaning.

Now, after what has felt like endless reflection and introspection, I know I have to:

- Piece together, once again, a relationship with 'my-self',
- Accept:
 - The loss and how it has transformed relationships in my life
 - That life as I knew it is no more,
 - Fearing the darkness of the newly developed void of loneliness
- Allow for moments of joyfulness and happiness, no matter how big or small,
- Connect to my spiritual self again,
- Connect to my spiritual guides
- Connect to nature; the ocean and its vastness, walk for as many miles as possible
- Allow for a dance that moves me one step forward and two steps back in this journey.

Over the past few years, the geopolitical landscape has changed, so many countries and populaces have been tremendously impacted in a myriad of ways. I shudder to imagine what individuals and families are going through on a daily basis, on top of the struggles that accompany normal life. After reading this in the current global atmosphere, I do hope that this does not come across as an indulgence of my experience of loneliness. Rather, I hope the message that you take away is that the phenomena of being alone even whilst surrounded by loved ones is a common one. It is something I struggle with, alongside many of my clients, and I believe that my experience in this will only help me in my work with them.

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As I have written and rewritten this essay, Russia invaded Ukraine. I shudder to imagine what individuals and families must be going through in Ukraine. Please accept my apologies for indulging in my loneliness but I hope and pray that my experience of this loneliness will only help in my work with my clients.