BEING LONELY

Making sense of Australia's epidemic of social and ecological disconnection

Richard Hil, Louise Holdsworth & Charlie Brennan

August 2020

This publication is guided by the following assumptions: we are an integral part of the complex, adaptive, interconnected web of life; humans are social creatures; being social is part of our biological, genealogical makeup; we are at our best when we cooperate, collaborate and share – without the latter we are diminished, spiritually impoverished and endangered.

Forward

The authors of this essay, Drs Richard Hil, Louise Holdsworth and Charlie Brennan, do a superb effort at reminding us not just of the ravages of loneliness, but at linking the epidemic of loneliness we are in, to larger dynamics. These include the excesses of neoliberal capitalism, the paradoxical isolation stemming from new technologies and our lived experiences of a dystopian future already falling upon us. As many have experienced, loneliness is gut-wrenchingly destroying. It affects a large proportion of Australians, in the most intimate and private way, but also our communities and societies at large, with the burdening of our health, mental health and social systems, as well as of our environment, with consumerist and other destructive behaviours compulsively trying to fill a void. The authors remind us of the complex nature and many origins of loneliness. They investigate its consequences and propose sound ways forward, all underpinned by a robust review of the literature and key actors in the field. They conclude that 'we should reflect on the need for social renewal and a greater investment in the social as the bedrock of a thriving democracy'. In other words, we need, together, to reinvent how we live together.

When my wife, sons and I dropped invitations to create a neighbourhood support group in our neighbours' letterboxes, I experienced an unexpected inner transformation. As neighbours started responding, warmly and positively, my heart burst open. Suddenly, I felt a gentle curiosity about the people we are living amongst. I saw them not only as neighbours, but as humans, beautiful and frail all at once. I sensed a deeper connection for each of them, even those who didn't reply to our invitation. I felt a genuine concern for their wellbeing. I also felt safer, not surrounded by familiar strangers anymore, but potential connections. I felt richer, and more at peace.

Our neighbourhood support group is only in its infancy in building connections. But random acts of kindness are more frequent, with contacts, online and in-person, warmer. We're more attuned to those who appear to be lonely, be them retirees, single parents and others. We are wondering how we can better care for them, but also for each other. Building on our recent experience of the floods, bushfires, COVID-19 and economic crisis, several of us wish to start a conversation about how we can, together, better prepare for the next disasters.

But the reality is, with the confluence of global and local crises that we have started to live, preparing for the next disasters won't suffice. In a society ever more fractured and anxious, we need to live differently. We need not only to build our resilience, but to live in ways that deepen our connections to one-self, each other and nature. A shift in our economic and political systems, as well as in our values underpinning these, from seeking accumulation to regeneration, is necessary to bring abundance to all. As the authors of this essay note wisely, 'given the existential threat posed by the climate emergency in particular, there has never been a more important time to consider what's ahead of us and how we might set about building more supportive and cooperative localised communities to help us withstand the worst and perhaps create a new, just and more inclusive societies'.

While I'm touched and pleased by the gradual changes I notice in my own neighbourhood, I hope we can be bold enough and reinvent the concept of neighbourhood entirely. What if we identified our respective skills and needs and

supported each other by sharing goods and skills? What if our elders and youngsters engaged meaningfully with each other? What if we brought down our fences? What if we reorganised our lots so that we have a common playground, a common shed and tools? What if we raised some farm animals together? What if we shared a car or shopped for each other? The neighbourhood is our oyster.

Resilient Byron is a not-for-profit that aims to create a resilience and regeneration movement from the local to the national. This essay is the result of a collaboration between the Ngara Institute and Resilient Byron and is the first Resilient Byron's publication. In the process, and as the Ngara Institute is winding down after several years of rich community work, the baton is passed to Resilient Byron. May the authors be thanked for their generous partaking.

In the Byron Shire, Resilient Byron brings together local citizens via a web of neighbourhood support groups organised as interconnected areas of local resilience and regeneration, themselves supported by residents organised in thematic groups (e.g. food security, housing security, health and well-being, energy security, safety and emergency, etc.) aiming to create projects that benefit the wider community. These groups are coordinated and supported by Resilient Byron, which also collaborates and partners with existing organisations, including councils, emergency agencies, businesses, community groups, etc. A climate resilience and regeneration fund provides the investments to transition to a region that ensures food and water security in anticipation of restrictions and supply chains disruptions, supports off-grid capable housing and systems, and builds redundancies in health provision and communication networks. As a model of systems-thinking approach that fosters the co-creation of dynamic responses to uncertainties, Resilient Byron acts as a facilitator, creating connections between residents and institutions, but also as a community development organiser, supporting neighbourhoods in building their resilience, as well as lobbyist, advocating for regenerative and resilient solutions in the Shire and beyond.
But at its heart, it is about connection. And this starts within each of us.

Now, may I respectfully ask that you put this document on the side for a minute, and take a few deep breaths in.

I mean it, please do so if you feel comfortable.

Thank you.

Now may the intellectual reading of this rich and profound essay reach your heart.

Dr Jean S. Renouf

Preface: Lockdown

We wrote the main body of this essay over the Australian summer of 2019/2020. Fast forward just a few short months and the world is, in many respects, unrecognisable and the Australian summer of 2019/20 was already traumatic enough. Months of record-breaking heat with little or no rainfall led to a dry spring, which ushered in severe drought and compounding heatwaves. Repeated warnings of unprecedented wildfires went largely unheeded, and then became reality.

Each night we watched TV footage of landscapes, ecosystems, towns and communities being ravaged. People withdrew indoors away from the heat and smoke, ready for the real possibility that they might need to evacuate to escape the encroaching flames. Nowhere felt safe. Occasionally, the power would fail, or people couldn't afford to cool their homes. There are accounts of some going hungry rather than heading outdoors to get food, out into the heat, smoke and imminent danger. Others moved between air-conditioned spaces – from house, to car, to shopping centre and back again. Pushed to the limit, some people became traumatised, suffering emotional breakdowns, unable to cope. The tension was palpable. The world watched, utterly aghast, as the inferno crept across Australia, eventually burning over 18 million hectares of land, destroying homes, lives and livelihoods. After the fires, police and the military were mobilised in some areas to help clean up, cordon off disaster areas, and ensure law and order in areas where infrastructure and services were no longer functioning.

> *"This abrupt shift, the sudden arrival of a dystopian future, is hard to comprehend and even harder to act upon."*

Something had shifted in our collective sense of being, and not simply in terms of trauma and suffering. A clue to the nature of this transformation can be found in Margaret Atwood's celebrated novel *The Handmaid's Tale (1985)*. In what is a complex and disturbing story, Attwood portrays how an authoritarian state intrudes into the most intimate parts of human relationships, obliterating the boundaries between the public and private. There's a scene in the 2017 TV adaptation in which a street protest is violently closed down. As conflict intensifies, the story's main character, June Osborne, takes cover under a table in a café. Petrified, she witnesses the moment when daily habitual routines, that have already been disintegrating, are replaced by the sudden, crushing arrival of a previously unimaginable dystopian future. Bullets fly, batons are wielded, blood flows. The everyday is no longer. The mundane vanquished. The unthinkable has morphed into a dark, new and menacing reality.

We know this is possible: that the everyday can morph into the unprecedented. The almost unthinkable is already here in Australia. Over the course of a protracted lockdown, people have been confined alone in their homes, isolated from friends and family; banned by law from participating in previously normal activities and gathering in public places. Lockdowns are lifted, then reimposed. Our previously routine freedoms subject to watchful regulations. In three short months the Covid-19 virus, shaken loose from the wider biosphere, spread around the globe. Governments have enacted policies to slow its contagious spread: halting travel, closing businesses, social gatherings and many aspects of normal life. These policies were aimed at stopping medical systems from becoming totally overwhelmed and to keep society functioning at a manageable level. This abrupt shift, the sudden arrival of a dystopian future, is hard to comprehend and even harder to act upon. Writing about this new reality feels surreal and certainly confronting.

But things change – often rapidly. A few weeks into the coronavirus crisis and some people seemed relatively content with the new normal of home and garden renovations, lots of walking alone or with friends, reading and endless TV viewing. For some, this was a welcome respite after the long hot summer. People found ways to connect, forging new socially distanced communities via digital platforms. Social media and Zoom, Skype and so forth enabled virtual connection to take the edge off isolation, but these have proved a poor substitute for authentic inter-being. Others celebrated the break in the crazy busyness of modern life; it was an opportunity to rethink how we live. For others it became a time of exacerbated loneliness and disconnection, with many trapped in situations of alcohol fuelled domestic violence, and of course, social distancing meant people suffering and dying away from loved ones.

In late April 2020, some restrictions were relaxed. However, bans on travel and social gatherings, and mass unemployment and unprecedented government payments to keep the economy from collapsing are underlying realities. From this vantagepoint, any person gazing into the future felt uneasy. The promises of yesterday have lost credibility and relevance. We've been told repeatedly that fundamental changes to the socio-economic order were not possible - changes that would have helped us avoid ecological collapse, alleviated poverty, and helped those suffering addiction, homelessness, isolation, disconnection and exclusion.

The fact that governments across Australia are currently funding mental health services in response to the human anguish caused by prolonged isolation, is remarkable. It took a crisis of epic proportions to recognise the ubiquitous presence and seriousness of social suffering. Private and public services have sprung into action with counsellors, social workers, psychotherapists and psychologists mobilised like never before. New fora have emerged, and on an individual level there's a greater preparedness in the face of fear, threat and isolation to express previously edited emotions, and to explore our interior worlds.

"We've been told repeatedly that fundamental changes to the socio-economic order were not possible... It took a crisis of epic proportions to recognise the ubiquitous presence and seriousness of social suffering."

Not long ago, Naomi Klein (2007) warned us about how ruling elites have fomented or taken advantage of disasters to put in place measures that advance the interests of global capital and further diminish human and environmental rights. Who would have thought that the state would, or could, so easily and rapidly mandate closing all borders, enforce social isolation and legally deny community space? How many of these rights are going to be fully restored? Who among us believes that governments will not take advantage of the COVID-19 tragedy to push their agendas? We wait, and watch.

We live in fractured, fraught times that have exposed many of our previously held assumptions. Uncertainty and a stifling sense of vulnerability have made us more guarded and anxious. Our present, let along the future, appear unknowable and yet threatening. A wary anticipation has set in.

Our reactions to all this are complex. The consuming nature of the coronavirus crisis has compounded existing anxieties. Initially, shock and fear surfaced as services closed down. Vague and sweeping laws were enacted and threatened to engulf us. Some however, foresaw a new, golden, age where civility and justice could be actualised, connections strengthened, while others predicted the rise of draconian authoritarianism, building ominously alongside many other worrisome "megatrends" (Haig 2020).

Australian authorities, previously reluctant to take action in the wildfire disasters, watched as the virus spread from China, to the Middle East and Europe, but this

time acted quickly by imposing strict lockdown measures. It seemed to work, for a while. Across the world, however, the tragedy instantised and, as we write, there is no end in sight. Economies have ground to a halt, opened up, then shut again. Millions have lost their jobs, billions are self-isolating, and new regulatory regimes installed. Some time ago, James Howard Kunstler (2005) observed that we are in a "long emergency". Indeed, we are, with the Covid-19 pandemic the latest in a series of ongoing, intersecting crises: the nuclear crisis still looms, and pollution, biodiversity collapse and the climate crisis are building. International inequality, corporate tax avoidance, capital hyper-accumulation and the arms trade continue apace. We live with the ongoing reality of mass-scale human displacement and a compounding refugee crisis. These issues, and so many more, combine and threaten planetary systems and humanity itself. Yet when we need clarity of purpose, we face an epistemic crisis that befuddles knowledge and certainty. It undermines democracy itself. Many have lost faith in democratic institutions and no longer know what to believe in a 'post-truth' world.

How does all this relate to the issue at hand – loneliness? Well, if we thought that coming to grips with loneliness, isolation, disconnection and exclusion was urgent last summer, then it's even more so now. As we ploughed through the literature on loneliness this feeling grew. Now we find ourselves in a whole new world which has shifted so suddenly and spectacularly that it's almost impossible to grasp. Suddenly, loneliness, isolation and distancing, both physical and emotional, is the stuff of casual conversations, not a source of embarrassment and concealment. Existing in confined social spaces, and limiting our exposure to the everyday, has perhaps offered us the opportunity to reflect, to think, to be different: if only for a while. Countless others, of course, do not have this luxury, existing as they do on the edges of a ruthless, market-oriented system.

The by-products of this system: loneliness and disconnection, are the subject of the remainder of this essay. The COVID-19 lockdown has merely sharpened our collective focus.

Key points

Before we proceed, we here set out the main points arising from our deliberations:

- Unwanted loneliness is a complex, historically contingent and deeply personal experience that can have devastating social, psychological, economic and political implications.

- Australia is riven with loneliness and multiple forms of felt exclusion and disconnection.

- Loneliness and disconnection have too often been viewed as health problems *per se*, whereas the origins of such are systemic and multiple.

- The financialisation of the economy, precarious employment, entrenched poverty, growing personal debt and economic inequality have all contributed to the further fragmentation of society.

- These states of social anguish weaken civil society and democracy and encourage fear and distrust.

- The dehumanising effects of neoliberalism have driven the above trends over the past half-century.

- Social capital and power in Australia have been severely eroded over recent years in the wake of emergent neo-liberal policies.

- Disconnection from nature exacerbates our sense of isolation and diminishes our capacity to live in harmony with the world around us.

- The climate/ecological crisis requires a radical rethinking of all aspects of life and an urgent strengthening of communities, neighbourhoods and civic life more generally.

- Loneliness is considered a global health epidemic, and there are frequent references to “the loneliness epidemic” and an “epidemic of anxiety”.

- Around one in four people live alone in Australia, a rising trend.

- One in five people report feeling lonely. This is particularly so for some older people, millennials, people with disability, underemployed people and those incarcerated.

- For a variety of reasons, the number of people reporting loneliness is likely to be a gross underestimate due to shame and denial.

- Social media can create the illusion of connection, and heighten feelings of isolation, and diminish social skills. Social media can offer forms of connection but equally, virtual hyper-connectivity can, paradoxically, add to a sense of disconnection.

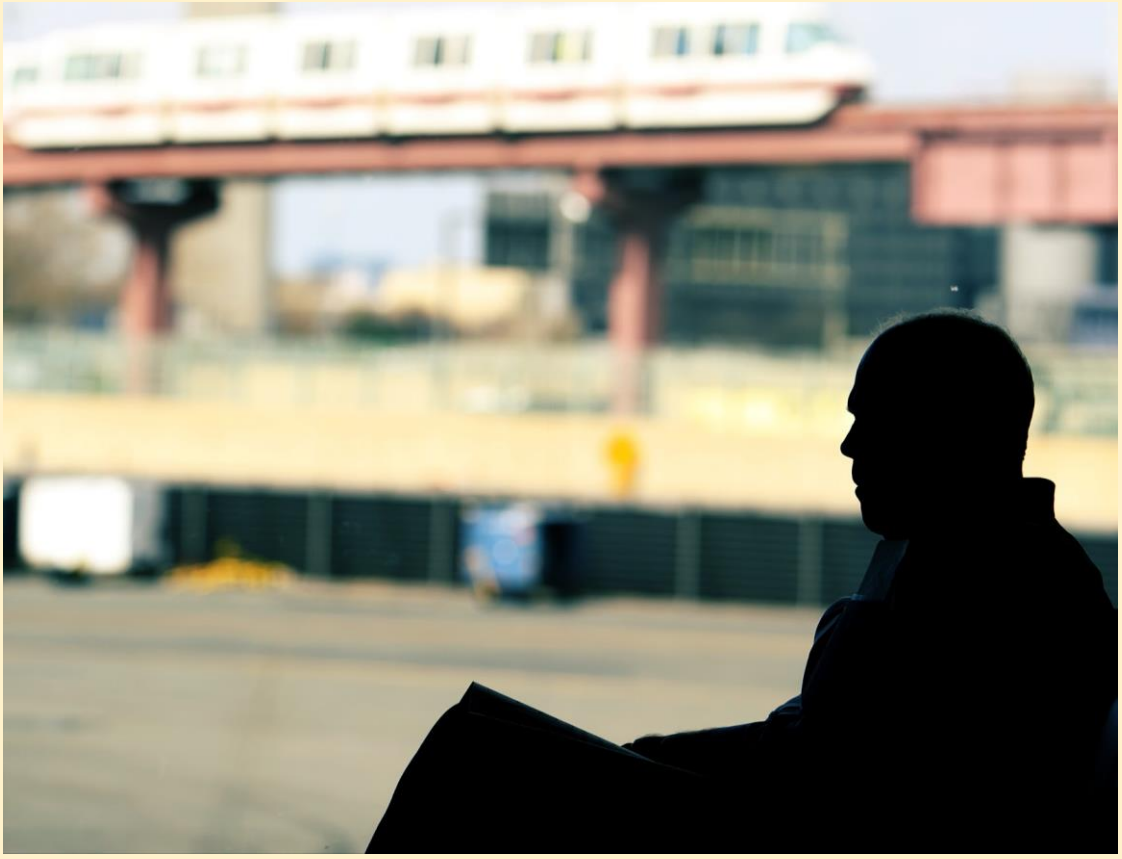
- Generally, the more meaningful regular interactions people have with others, the less likely they are to be anxious and depressed, depending on the nature and quality of relationships.

- Close, supportive, inclusive, loving, nurturing communities, or the “village effect”, can help foster improved health and wellbeing, but again, depending on the sorts of relationships and awareness of the dangers of insularity and exclusion.

- Reconnecting can be interpreted as a profoundly political practice that works against the hyper-individualism and competitiveness inherent in neoliberal values.

- The more that people identify with place as a lived experience rather than postal address the better, for their health and wellbeing.

- Indigenous wisdoms can help guide Australia to a more socially and ecologically connected and regenerative future.



Shadow voices: Jose, Ella and Stan

Although we haven't ventured into the discursive worlds of the lonely and disconnected, we here offer some fleeting insights into aspects of these lived experiences. Jose, Ella and Stan (not their real names,) speak of the desperate heartache and social suffering that occurs when people find themselves cut adrift from the deep human and ecological experiences that enrich everyday life.

> **Jose:** "*I'm thirty something – a millennial, I suppose. Loneliness is a fuck up. It's a feeling of being cut off from people and places; like being unnoticed, removed from the life I should be living. I'm surrounded by so-called friends, I see stacks of people, mostly through computer and phone screens. Funny thing is that the more I talk to people the more I feel lonely because I don't feel like there's any real connection*". (Jose lives in a small but trendy town in regional Australia).

> **Ella:** "*I hate feeling lonely. It weighs on you. It tears you up. It brings you down. Maybe it's my age, I don't know, but I can't stand the feeling. I feel as if the only people I talk to are other lonely people, just like me. The worst is when I go home. I just sit there wishing someone else was in the room. No one calls in, I just feel I don't matter*". (Eighty-two-year-old woman in a large regional centre).

> **Stan:** "*It's hard to describe what I'm feeling. It twists your guts. It's not so much the absence of people – I live in the middle of a big city – but the feeling of disconnect. You talk but you don't talk, you see but you don't see. You end up trying to connect with yourself but that only makes you feel lonelier".* (Thirty-year-old Stan lives and works in central Melbourne).

These are some of the shadow voices of our time – utterances commonly confined to the most private recesses of our being. We rarely hear them for fear of shame and humiliation. And yet they are there, like existential ghosts in the chambers of everyday life. While the world can appear vibrant, full of colour and action, the reality for many is often considerably less alluring. Epidemics of loneliness and anxiety now scar the social landscape. Fewer of us feel we belong anywhere or are part of things. We are, as Johan Hari (2019) points out, one of the loneliest generations ever, often bereft of friends, meaningful relationships and connection with place. How can we begin to explain this?

That lonely feeling

We've all felt lonely at times, sometimes desperately so. Some of us feel lonelier than others and growing numbers of us are experiencing serious and prolonged bouts of such social suffering (Bourdieu, 1999). But what are loneliness and disconnection? As English academic, Bound Alberti, notes in *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (2019), loneliness is a complex and historically contingent term that reflects an emotional language and related set of human experiences. Given the complex meanings associated with loneliness it's not surprising that most surveys fail to provide an adequate working definition, and nor are they able to explain why it occurs in the first place.

Generally speaking, we assume that if people are saying they feel lonely or disconnected (or variations thereof), this means they are experiencing some sort of unwanted form of suffering derived from a felt sense of detachment from others, even if they have access to people or lead busy, people-centered lives. What we're talking about here is a profoundly subjective experience. Minimally, such experiences reveal aspects of suffering that entail a problematic relationship to others (in the broadest terms,) borne of a variety of complex circumstances. It may be that an absence of social skills can lead to this state of being, just as the isolation caused by certain lifestyles or being cut adrift from like-minded others can bring about discontent.

When we are feeling lonely it's tempting to attribute this to our personal shortcomings, to a lack of access and opportunity, or to some distressing psychological condition. Shame, social stigma and self-denial can make it difficult to admit to loneliness. Admitting the truth, even to oneself, can be daunting. After all, loneliness carries with it negative connotations including failure, marginality, a sense of oddness or unwanted difference.

The current instruments for assessing what is meant by loneliness and disconnection remain rather crude. Perhaps the best prospect of elucidating their meaning will come through more nuanced qualitative studies. However, it doesn't take a huge leap in logic, for example, to realise the potential for modern technologies to produce the simultaneously paradoxical effects of illusory connection and compounding disconnection. Nor is it earth shattering to suggest that this paradox needs to be viewed in the context of new modalities of capitalist development, techno-fetishism and altered social-cultural relations.

That said, we have to take seriously what is increasingly being presented in the available literature, and the fact that social misery, in all its manifestations, is revealed across a broad range of indicators. Importantly, it is most alarmingly evident in escalating rates of depression and anxiety.

Indeed, when health practitioners and politicians talk about loneliness, they usually invoke individualistic explanations, or refer to this as a 'mental health problem' requiring urgent attention. And yet, much of what we describe as loneliness is in fact a symptom of deeper, underlying issues that go to the very core of our collective being.

Sadly, from what the research is telling us, Australia is a deeply fragmented and increasingly lonely society. More and more of us are feeling disconnected. And it hurts. A lot. This social condition, as we note below, matters for civil society, for democracy and in terms of the quality of everyday life. Social fragmentation (the fracturing of meaningful interpersonal engagement) weakens our capacity to resist the actions of the powerful and to deal with the intersecting crises we now face. The emergence of hyper-individualism means less community, imagined or otherwise, and a reduced capacity to share, care and collaborate. It works against collectivism and a sense of common purpose. The effects of loneliness and disconnection also translate into more stress on already overstretched health and welfare services as more people seek help to deal with 'mental health' problems.

Neoliberalism, the ideological love affair with the 'free market', has contributed greatly to Australia's current malaise, and that of many other nations. We have become more inward-looking, self-preoccupied and less concerned with the plight of others. The stereotype of the affable, easy-going Aussie bloke and 'his' family hosting adoring neighbours in the backyard of a suburban block is largely a myth.

We contend that the ubiquitous presence of loneliness reflects the world in which we live, its underlying values and relational practices, rather than an inherent failure on the part of the individual. If we are to understand the antecedents of loneliness, social and ecological disconnection, fragmentation, isolation and the rest, then we have to turn to the bigger picture: to the prevailing economic, political and socio-cultural normative order. Without this broader picture we are likely to miss the contextual nuances that contribute to what is an ever-escalating problem across many so-called advanced societies, including Australia.

Feelings of loneliness – beyond 'mental illness'

Over recent times, loneliness and social disconnection have attracted considerable attention among researchers (Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2018; Hari, 2018; Lim, 2015; Mackay, 2018; Monbiot, 2018; Penny, 2017; Pinker, 2018; Singer, 2018). The evidence indicates that when a person's social network is lacking, when there's a feeling of being cut-off from meaningful interaction and the sought-after company of others, then feelings of deep sadness and longing tend to follow (Cacioppo, Fowler & Christakis, 2009; Gregory, 2017). Loneliness and disconnection manifest in personal suffering and a realization that one's needs haven't been met. Unrewarding relationships can lead to the fragmentation of social identity and growing physical and spiritual detachment from others; a phenomenon, according to Lim (2015), that's on the rise in most 'advanced' societies. To feel connected, on the other hand, involves feelings of mutual respect and reciprocity, a shared interest and general willingness and desire to engage with other persons, the other-than-human and ecologies on a regular or even irregular basis. It's about feeling valued, noticed and respected, a sense that one matters to other people and that they are not indifferent to you (Cacioppo et al., 2009).

Feeling bereft of company, lacking someone who cares for us, or feeling a lack of access to those whom we would choose to be with, can produce considerable inner

turmoil sometimes leading to acute despair with thoughts of self-annihilation. The great French sociologist Emile Durkheim was among the first to posit the connection between suicide and "anomie", that is, a sense of "normlessness" arising from feeling adrift from the social world (Kelly et al. 2011).

A glimpse of what loneliness feels like can be found in written personal reflections that put into words feelings that are both terrifying and often experienced secretly behind screens of shame and humiliation. The account of loneliness in Olivia Laing's: *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (2016) and Rosie Medium's (2018) blog: '*This is What loneliness feels like (and what it does to us)'* describe self-fulfilling cycles of introversion, withdrawal, isolation and shame that become unbearable, driving those who experience this toxic mix into the darkest corners of being. Olivia Laing, author of: *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone,* states:

> *"This is what's so terrifying about being lonely: the instinctive sense that it is literally repulsive, inhibiting contact at just the moment contact is most required."*

This can occur in the presence of others and even in the context of intimate relationships. We all have varying tolerance levels when it comes to how much time we spend with others. Some can go for weeks without seeing a soul but still feel connected. Conversely, some of us seek out regular contacts, habitually timetabling people into our daily lives.

There's a mystery to relationships, to the 'chemistry' that makes us feel close to others, to the qualities that draw us in and make us feel part of something, and valued and respected. The very opposite to this felt sense is, as Richard Sennet (2004) points out in a brilliant discussion of respect, is indifference. Each of us is drawn to certain characteristics and qualities that we're likely to find agreeable, and perhaps the foundation for long term friendship. But as we know from reality TV shows, or from the heartache that often accompanies those who venture into the world of online dating, there's nothing predictable about any of this – that's the mystery and wonder of human experience.

For most of us, prolonged social disconnection comes at a great personal cost. Loneliness and social isolation are among the leading indicators of illness and early death (Connor, 2014). In Australia, it's estimated that one in five people feel lonely; a problem so prevalent that experts are warning of a "loneliness epidemic" (Jennings-Edquist, 2018).

Those experiencing this refer to feelings of longing, of not being part of something larger than themselves, or to a kind of spiritual hunger that leads to unbearable despair. Some of us come in and out of states of loneliness, sometimes with alarming regularity, while others experience it as a gnawing sadness, taking some inexorably to the edge of despair.

To make things worse, more and more of us are living alone than in the past, with a quarter of private dwellings in Australia having only one occupant (Jennings-Edquist, 2018). The Australian Loneliness Report (2018), co-authored by researchers at the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology, reported on a national survey of adults which found that 17 percent, or 285 of the 1,678 people surveyed, lived alone, often in less than joyous circumstances. Most felt socially isolated. Falling rates of marriage and lower levels of social participation in established institutions like churches, have further contributed to this trend. And as we note below, rapid technological developments, the erosion of social infrastructure such as the closure of public spaces and the expansion of anodyne commercialised spaces, 'independent living' and hyper-individualism have each combined to further isolate people from each other.

That said, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting this data. The fact is that precise figures on loneliness and isolation are hard to come by, chiefly because many respondents find it difficult to name their loneliness due to stigma or its attribution to other factors, such as physical illness (Lim, 2015). It's likely, therefore, that the figures quoted here and elsewhere are gross underestimates. Nonetheless, the fact that so many people are saying they feel lonely should raise serious concerns about the evolving state of our society. Most people now live in densely populated metropolitan centres that in many complex ways exacerbates the loss of familiar social bonds, traditions and rituals, but also diminishes acquired knowledge and skill, disconnecting us from nature and each other. It also renders more of us dependent on others for services and sustenance which may, in other circumstances, have been provided by more intimate others (Peplau, 1955).

"Hope springs from chance encounters, altered situations and perspectives, and the decisions that come from wanting a different life."

We need only think of people in aged 'care' facilities, the nearly three million people living in poverty, and the growing number of people in precarious employment or indeed without jobs. For these populations, participation in everyday life in a modern society is seriously impaired.

While material hardship is a major barrier to social participation, there are things that can be done to make people feel more connected. Hope springs from chance encounters, altered situations and perspectives, and the decisions that come from wanting a different life. Improvements in wellbeing may arise from minor ontological shifts. As clinical psychologist at Swinburne University of Technology, Michelle Lim (2015) observes, even when individuals have been diagnosed with serious mental illness they've reported significant improvements in wellbeing after participating in positive, life-affirming activities with others. Moreover, in the Australian Rural Mental Health Study (2008), it was found that the more socially connected people feel, the better their state of mind and overall sense of wellbeing. This may sound trite, obvious even, but social relationships are complex. Simple blueprints for guaranteed connection can prove disappointing.

Social capital, power and disconnection

The notion of social capital is far from new. It was first used by Coleman (1988) and later by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). Despite losing some traction, there is renewed interest in social capital, particularly in terms of its contribution to alleviating the worst effects of loneliness and disconnection. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2004), social capital refers to networks underpinned by shared norms and values which enable cooperation within and among social groups. It signifies community strength and wellbeing and is experienced when people interact regularly with one another both formally and informally. In surveying five communities in Sydney, social researchers Paul Bullen and Jenny Onyx (1998) from University of Technology Sydney, School of Management, concluded that social capital originates through the social

connections and networks that people form based on trust, mutual interests, inclusive participation and reciprocity. The more such interactions occur, the more likely that people will identify with a group and a place as a lived experience rather than a postal address.

In her 1995 Boyer lectures, prominent Australian academic, Eva Cox, highlights the importance of social capital to the maintenance of civil society. 'Social capital', she contends, 'should be the pre-eminent and most valued form of any capital as it provides the basis on which we build a truly civil society; without our social basis we cannot be fully human. Social capital is as vital as language and practice for human society'. (1995:3)

A growing body of research reveals that the presence of social capital in social networks, groups and communities is an important protective factor when it comes to health and wellbeing, enabling people to feel more connected and therefore emotionally and spiritually grounded (Cox, 1995; Hari, 2018; Lim, 2015; Lin, 2001; Mackay, 2018; Monbiot, 2018; Penney, 2017; Pinker, 2018). In *The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters* (2018), Canadian psychologist, Susan Pinker, suggests a number of ways in which social capital can be nurtured. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, Pinker maintains that direct contact with others is particularly important in this technological age, mainly because it helps bind people together through shared experience and attachment. Pinker points to the experiences of people living in a relatively secluded village in the central mountains of Sardinia.

Drawn together through place, intergenerational connection, family and community rituals, the villagers reported feeling emotionally grounded and content. They felt supported and generally fulfilled, and compared to their European counterparts, tended to live longer and healthier lives. While recognizing that longevity is due in large part to a healthy lifestyle and absence of excessive stress, villagers benefited enormously from regular contact and immersion in rich, supportive interactions, especially during times of need. Although not wishing to oversimplify the complexities of a fulfilled life, (no community is ever perfect, of course,) Pinker insists that intimate social networks are vital to longevity and wellbeing, and that without regular and direct social contact, loneliness arises and ill-health ensues (including a greater susceptibility to diseases).

Pinker further contends that the ways in which we interact with others have changed over recent decades. The proliferation of virtual contact via social media has impacted our current levels of loneliness. Despite all the obvious advantages of hypo-connectivity, the more we rely on technological screen-centred devices, the less we relate directly to other people and therefore, the lonelier we become. In *How Social Media is Ruining Your Life* (2018), 'influencer' and 'creative', Katherine Ormerod, argues that being over-reliant on social media platforms for social connection can result in unintentional consequences, including a reduced sense of self-worth, diminished empathetic skills and increased social isolation. The endless comparing and contrasting with others that occurs, for example, on Facebook, bullying and attempts at self-promotion can lead to considerable social suffering.

Clearly, the socio-cultural landscape is changing, and rapidly. Patterns of social engagement have altered dramatically with the onset of new technologies, rising

income iniquities, suburbanisation and the closure or declining significance of key social institutions. Moreover, leisure pursuits have also undergone a profound change, with young people in particular, spending more time in isolation or immersed in screen-based interactions.

Such developments, however, need to be set against other societal shifts and changes. Indeed, the argument that loneliness and social disconnection can be solved by simply re-building social capital is somewhat simplistic. Years ago,

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argued that social capital and, by extension, social power, is '… the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). In other words, a person's experience of the social world is contingent upon both the networks and resources that encourage a sense of being noticed, supported and cared for. This more nuanced understanding of the social acknowledges an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities that are largely inherited and/or class based. The "new feudalism" that typifies neoliberal hyper-capitalism (Botkin 2020) concentrates power, wealth and opportunity in fewer and fewer hands, meaning that for those with fewer resources the prospect of building social capital is significantly reduced (Kompf, 2008).

The withdrawal of community-building infrastructure resulting from the privatization of many areas of social life has impacted the ability of citizens to coalesce around shared experiences that are the bedrock of cohesive networks. Research into poverty has made this plain over many years. The ability, for

example, of the poor and marginalised to participate in community life is markedly diminished due to lack of resources, including time and money. So, going on holiday, frequenting cafes and restaurants, eating healthy food and even remaining cool in heat waves or warm in winter are a major challenge. The desire to study, to have good clothes, a dependable car, to live in a safe neighbourhood, a reliable, meaningful and well-paid job, access to good medical care, to be sexually safe and to travel to see family and friends are often seriously hindered by lack of resources. But there are other deprivations too: of the right to be respected and to tell one's own story, to drink clean water, to not be incarcerated and so on. These, and many other opportunities to cultivate healthy human relationships, are closely related to social power.

Loneliness and neoliberalism

Building social power can prove inordinately difficult, especially in the current era. As *Guardian* columnist and author George Monbiot points out in *Out of the Wreckage* (2018), the sense of belonging and attachment necessary for the creation of cooperative communities has, over recent years, been significantly eroded by neoliberal governance. At a macro level, economic policies vital to prosecuting a neoliberal agenda (cuts to public expenditure, privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and so on,) have transformed the social landscape through the erosion of social power among large swathes of indebted, precarious populations, thereby weakening the capacity for collective mobilisation around community concerns (Ferragina & Arrigoni, 2016; Mason 2019; Piketty, 2018). In seeking to commodify human relationships, neoliberalism has in effect privileged the economy over everything else, consequently overriding other ways of engaging with the world by eschewing the complex and adaptive nature of ecological systems (Harvey, 1999; Monbiot, 2018; Mason 2019; Piketty, 2018).

> *"... neoliberalism threatens our very existence, and it has also fundamentally diminished the vibrancy and joys of life itself."*

In *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, economist Kate Raworth (2018) argues one of the most egregious faults of neoliberal capitalism is in splitting off the economy from both society and the natural world. This chauvinistic worldview turns on Enlightenment-inspired notions of progress that view 'man' as having dominion over the Earth. In contrast, Raworth proposes an economic system that provides for the needs of all within the finite resources of the planet, rather than ceaselessly pursuing economic growth, high productivity and damaging resource extraction.

Yes, neoliberalism threatens our very existence, and it has also fundamentally diminished the vibrancy and joys of life itself. Its materialistic obsessions have sucked the soul out of place, commodified human and ecological resources, art and creativity, and reduced difference and creativity to monochrome uniformity. Cities bristle and glisten with skyscraper clusters, while parks and character disappear. It's an odd state of affairs for an ideology that claims such things as

freedom and choice, and which supposedly celebrates diversity only to build a world of materialistic constriction (Farrelly, 2020; Wheen 2005). It's little wonder, some say, that loneliness and soullessness flourish in this environment. How could it not?

For Raworth, Monbiot and others, the major concerns of our time - the climate/ecological emergency, inequality, political corruption, the erosion of democracy, economic nationalism, psychological stress, and so forth - can in large part be attributed to the rapaciousness of neoliberal capitalism. Monbiot asserts that neoliberalism works against the innate tendency of humans to achieve safety, security and personal fulfilment through cooperation with others and within environmental limits. Altruism and empathy, Monbiot contends, are evolutionary characteristics that are core to the human experience and therefore vital in terms of self-protection and survival.

Over time, neoliberalism has significantly diminished our capacity to respond to the challenges of the twenty-first century. The fracturing of civic life has generated more interpersonal rivalry, fear and distrust, much of this fostered by the rise of nativist populism. The discontent that fuelled the populist right in the US, UK and Australia stems, in part, from a distrust of a new globalist, green, educated strata that, for detractors, appears elitist and exclusionary. Those who feel left behind include the ever-expanding ranks of the underemployed and the redundant. The marginalised have time on their hands, but no stake in the system, while the aspirational lack time for meaningful relationships. Both are routes to unbalanced, lonely lives. Finger pointing among these populations is common. Hate crimes, victim-blaming and other forms of othering are the by-products of such developments which threaten to deepen already gaping social divisions.

In *Australia Reimagined* (2018), social researcher, Hugh Mackay, argues that Australians are more socially fragmented, anxious and depressed than ever before. Hyper-individualism and social isolation have been exacerbated by the growing income and wealth divisions. Trust in major institutions and political leaders, says Mackay, is at an all-time low and important societal connections are breaking down. Mackay sees contemporary politics as riven with fear and conflict, where political parties compete for dominance rather than seeking common ground.

Mackay challenges Australians to imagine a different future built on our innate decency, social inclusion, kindness and cooperation. He attributes many societal problems to the breakdown of community, arguing that social disruption has led to an 'epidemic of anxiety' which fuels discord and rivalry. Mackay advocates a more compassionate and socially cohesive Australia, along with a 'convergence' of positive social attributes vital to building a better society. This means moving towards an era of inclusion and cooperation in which our similarities are greater than our differences, a point reinforced powerfully by English commentator Paul Mason in *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* (2019).

An 'ideal Australia', says MacKay, would be tolerant, compassionate and respectful, with a political culture based on kindness towards refugees, the poor and other marginalised and oppressed groups. There would be more inclusion, equity and social trust and a high value placed on public education, as well as more work for those who need it. For Mackay, social justice is vital in terms of creating more integrated and cooperative communities and in building a truly participatory democracy involving active citizens rather than denizens.

Clearly, neoliberalism is not capable of achieving such outcomes. Data shows that Australians now work longer hours than their OECD counterparts and have one of the most casualised and insecure workforces in the world. Underemployment – already a significant problem prior to the pandemic - is a major problem too. More of us hold down two jobs or more, often in precarious, low-paid, non-unionised positions; again, a situation scheduled to worsen once COVID-19 response governmental support is removed. The net effect is that more Australians are 'time poor,' stressed and suffering psychological problems that prevent involvement in community affairs (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019). Single parent households and women have been particularly impacted by such developments (National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated, 2014).

Australia and the world: global issues in technology and social health

Australia's loneliness epidemic is part of a wider set of trends across the Western world (de Jong, 2016). Hyper-mobility, hyper-communication, tech dependency, Artificial Intelligence, changes in workplace patterns, and the staggering fallout resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic are some of the main drivers of change. It's a world too of contrasting, differentiated mobilities and connections. Many of us can keep in touch more easily and, until recently, millions could travel as never before. Both social media and enhanced geographic mobility can, for some, lead to short-term, contractual relationships, which are 'good-for-now', instrumentally based, fleeting and precarious.

"In a world of precarity and imagined community… people can expect to periodically experience loneliness, displacement and instability. It's how many of us live… in crowds, yet alone."

Some Australians are lonely because they are socially isolated, that is, disconnected from social support systems due to geographical separation, relationship break-ups, or because they feel unsupported and disregarded. Elisabeth Shaw of Relationships Australia (cited in Jennings-Edquist, 2018) points out that people of all ages and genders are increasingly feeling socially disconnected, as do those who have lost a partner, single parents, etc. Research also suggests that loneliness is increasingly prevalent among young people aged between 16-25 years. Recent studies by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2019) and the Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation (2019) point to heightened levels of social suffering among millennials, many of whom attend universities but who, for a variety of reasons (not least because they have to work while studying or live in isolated accommodation and/or study online,) feel marginalised and alone (Hil 2016). At the other end of the chronological scale, older people who experience loss of health and mobility, financial difficulties and lack of social support due to death of a spouse, or because of serious or chronic illness, are also vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation.

In a world of precarity and imagined community (Tsing, 2017), people can expect to periodically experience loneliness, displacement and instability. It's how many of us live. 'Gen Z' communities seem to suffer the most. Sucked into illusions, hyper-connectivity and high fashion, they often find themselves confronted with the emotional vacuity that derives from the material. In many of the world's densely populated western centres they find themselves in crowds, yet alone. The super trendy, much vaunted epicentre of cool, Berlin, speaks of this troubling contradiction. Known as the 'city of exiles', Berlin is, despite its image of youthful exuberance and hyper-connectivity, referred to as the 'capital of loneliness' (Schumacher, 2019). Still, there are no shortages of technical portals to supposedly connect you with others. Click and tap contacts are readily available. For instance, 'Friend apps' in the US allow you to meet someone for a coffee or a chat. No need for all that preliminary build up or those drawn out seductive rituals. Relationships are on tap, at your convenience. In Japan, millions of people shun intimacy as 'too troublesome' (Haworth, 2013). They want the convenience offered by handy apps. And like much else in the material world, relationships too are disposable. Interestingly, sexual encounters among young people have altered dramatically, partly as a result of easier access to pornography and a more functional, less quixotic view of intimacy. Paradoxically perhaps, one by-product of this commodification of social relations is, despite all the instrumental convenience, that more young people feel detached from others despite being in their company.

In 2018, the UK government's response to the loneliness epidemic was to appoint a Minister for Loneliness (Yeginsu, 2018). Former British Prime Minister, Theresa

May, announced the creation of this new ministry, stating that: ‘for far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life’, and noted that more than nine million people ‘always’ or ‘often’ feel lonely in the UK (Yeginsu, 2018:8). Avoiding the obvious irony that rising loneliness may in part be attributed to May’s own party's neoliberal agenda, the Prime Minister lauded her government’s ground-breaking initiative. The Ministry would develop an overarching strategy to address the loneliness problem across the UK, including a dedicated fund aimed at developing community-based strategies to rebuild social connections through a variety of interventions. In austerity ravaged UK, this initiative spoke of social capital without acknowledging how social power has been diminished through escalating economic inequality – a blind spot common revealed across a number of policy agendas.

Widespread loneliness, of course, is not confined to the UK. In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, the Surgeon General of the U.S., Dr Vivek Murthy, stated that: ‘Globally, loneliness is a growing health epidemic. We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilisation, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s’ (cited in Yeginsu, 2018:8). The reasons for this are complex, but include, *inter alia*, weak or transitory social networks, lack of spaces and places to meet and enjoy communal activities, altered work patterns and conditions, and infrequent participation at regularly occurring social events (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Greene, 2017; Lim, 2015; Mackay, 2018).

Alan Woodward, Executive Director of the *Lifeline Foundation for Suicide Prevention*, (cited in Jennings-Edquist, 2018) notes that risk of loneliness is especially high among socially and economically excluded people. People with existing mental health issues and those with disability can be particularly vulnerable, given their reduced capacity and fewer opportunities to engage socially.

People with substance abuse problems are another particularly vulnerable group when it comes to experiencing social disconnection. As Johan Hari points out in a withering appraisal of the 'war on drugs', in *Chasing the Cream* (2017), one of its most tragic consequences, the opioid epidemic, is in large part the result of economic upheaval, acute social disconnection, and being 'cut off from meaning'. Hari writes on the origins of addiction:

> The native peoples of North America were stripped of their land and their culture – and collapsed into mass alcoholism. The English poor were driven from the land into scary, scattered cities, in the eighteenth century – and glugged their way into the Gin Craze. The American cities were stripped of their factory jobs in the 1970s and 1980s – and a crack pipe was waiting at the end of the shut-down assembly line. The American rural heartlands saw their markets and subsidies wither in the 1980s and 1990s – and embarked on a meth binge (Hari, 2017: 175).

An addict from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside told Hari that 'addiction is a disease of loneliness', a reality that has long been known by those in the grip of economic collapse and social despair. Addiction is a symptom of these problems. Criminalisation has only made things worse.

The architecture of social isolation: loneliness, insight and embodiment

The spread of loneliness reflects the nature of our fragmented, barely existent communities, which are often more imagined than real (Tsing, 2017). In most non-gentrified places in the Western world, experiencing loneliness occurs when social power is sucked out of workplaces, relationships, communities and formerly social spaces. For many, loneliness reflects the lack of respectful, flourishing, cultivated, mutually life-affirming, interpersonal relationships. It raises questions about the quality of our encounters with others, and what we value or regard as meaningful (Zeldin, 1994). A cursory glance outside gentrified enclaves into 'shadow places' reveals social terrains that have been ravaged, leaving millions exposed to the dangers of economic hardship and spiritual malaise (Plumwood, 2008).

> *"Mastering aloneness may, in fact, be seen as part of normal life development. Our desire for the good life involves cultivating rich relationships, deep connections and conversations, but it also means not being terrified of isolation and revisiting our stories about it."*

Paul Shepard, in *Nature and Madness* (1982), argued long ago that humanity is characterised by 'neoteny' – a kind of mass immaturity. In many traditions, one of the main challenges of life is to ensure that people mature beyond small, inward looking states to outward looking, appreciative selves that engage the experiences and world views of others. This psychological transformation of self is supported by teachings, meditation, new insights and ceremony. Zeldin (1994), however, points out that the fear of loneliness has acted as a restraint, which is as much of a barrier to a fulfilling life as discrimination or poverty. It can drive us into self-destructiveness and forms of restlessness that compel constant movement and, by inference, evisceration of thoughtfulness. Cultural symbols, solipsistic tendencies and consumptive expectations of modernity encourage this way of being.

Centuries ago, philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, penned 'Pensées' (Thoughts) (1670), a book of philosophical reflections in which he observed that: 'all of humanity's problems stem from man's (sic) inability to sit quietly in a room alone'. But the particular sense of aloneness he describes was not equated with loneliness. Rather, it denoted the act of being in temporary contemplative solitude and not in a state of constant motion, as is common in today's hyperactive, sensorially overloaded world. Mastering aloneness may, in fact, be seen as part of normal life development. Our desire for the good life involves cultivating rich relationships, deep connections and conversations, but it also means not being terrified of isolation and revisiting our stories about it (de Botton 2019). We can, in short, be alone but not feel lonely.

David Malouf in *The Happy Life* (2011) suggests that we have forgotten long-established modalities of good living which eschew surface entertainments, fleeting acquaintances and short-term gratifications. Much of this is influenced by our restless desire to be different or somewhere other than we are, or to seek the illusory attributes of the fictive other.

Building meaningful relationships, however, needs some sense of enduring presence and meaningful reciprocity. Florence Williams in *Nature Fix* (2017) observes that humanity is experiencing the greatest mass migration ever: from out-of-doors to indoors. Being in cities, suburbs, malls, homes, cars, or immersed in screen-based enclaves constitutes a withdrawal from what, for many, were once places and activities of communality. Nearly all traditional, Earth-based cultures see no division or distinction between the human and other-than-human worlds. In Native American traditions everything is referred to as 'All my relations', while among Australian First Nations people 'kinship' extends to intricate relationships with the natural world in a complex, interconnected web of life, or anima mundi: "the soul of the world" (Ross, 1989). Arguably, the errant symbols of materiality

have taken us away from these contemplations of deep connection and we're the poorer for it, emotionally, spiritually and socially.

In *Lost Connections,* Johann Hari (2018) discusses the antecedents of depression and anxiety, focusing on the social psychological factors that lead to loneliness, trauma and social disconnection. Hari asserts that the threads of anxiety and depression in modern society are, in large part, due to a prevailing sense of detachment from meaningful places and people that enable connection and a sense of belonging. To offset the wisps of sadness and occasional despair that so often invade our sensibilities, Hari encourages regular face-to-face contact through social gatherings, more informal exchanges and a carefully thought out divestment from the trappings of modern life.

In some ways, this is a hackneyed message, but it's one that resonates profoundly with those increasingly disenchanted with what modernity has to offer. Being with others and rethinking our sense of the social, according to Hari, seems to offer the prospect of a more fulfilling life, beyond the seductions of materiality, competition and commercial exchange. It's a way of thinking and being that is embraced by countless numbers around the globe.

> *"Zones of mass consumption like shopping malls, designed to mimic marketplaces and urban villages, can also feel emptied of genuine human presence. Likewise, educational institutions like universities may have the appearance of village life, but the reality is often very different."*

In 2018, Mission Australia established a program in Broken Hill, New South Wales, aimed at addressing the problem of unwanted social isolation. Workers at the *Connections Program* sought to link socially isolated people, including people with mental health challenges, with others in an effort to foster friendship, improve confidence and social skills, and to enhance community participation (*The Feed*, 2019). After only a few months it was found that mental health visits to the Broken Hill Emergency Department were reduced by 80 percent and admissions to the hospital by about 65 percent (*The Feed*, 2019).

Clearly, it would be foolish to attribute such startling results simply to the program itself. However, it's clear the program had some effect in reducing the misery associated with being involuntarily alone. Many of the program's participants noted how they gained confidence and felt more supported within their communities. As participants noted: 'Connections [the Connections Program] is like my lifeline. It gets me out of the house and gives me something to do as I had cut the world off, from my being depressed'; 'Connections means I can make new friends and it also gets me out of the house. It is a safe place where I can have a laugh'; 'Before Connections, I pretty much stayed in my room. My best friend … pushed me to go to Connections and I am grateful he did. I now go every weekend …'.

Spending time at home, assuming you have one, with nowhere in particular to go, with no real aim or purpose, especially if we desire companionship, can be soul-destroying. For those seeking temporary solitude, which most of us occasionally do, and for others who celebrate the virtues of solitary idleness, a degree of physical and emotional separation is welcome. Prolonged periods of enforced solitude and a felt sense of unsought separateness is, however, another matter entirely. Programs like Connections can certainly begin to fill the void, as can voluntarily work, activities and programs in neighbourhood centres, reading groups, choirs, participating in community gardens and a swathe of other locally based initiatives. Neighbourhood programs that seek to connect residents through library and ideas groups, sports clubs and organisations like the University of the Third Age have also contributed to building social connection.

The ABC documentary '*Old People's Home for 4 Year Old's*' (2019) showed how connecting older people with children to assist in learning, befriending and play-based activities, proved extremely beneficial in terms of opening up new social horizons. Parallel initiatives that assist migrants and other newcomers can also have positive spin-offs (Aged and Community Services, Australia, 2015). Still, for many Australians, the dead weight of debt, long work hours, multiple jobs (often casual and low paid), household demands, and sheer exhaustion can detract significantly from participation in social activities. Put simply, material

circumstances mean that many people are simply too overwhelmed to engage in activities beyond what is required of them to care and make ends meet. Needless to say, such problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other problems have added to the potential for disconnection. For instance, the retreat of many into private domains, encouraged by long hours spent in front of computers or in media rooms, in houses surrounded by high walls or in secluded apartments, can alienate people from neighbours. A general sense of separation can also derive from the proliferation of technological devices within households, ensuring that less time is spent conversing or simply having fun together. There's nothing especially new about this, but Amazon's virtual assistant device, Alexa, has added a potentially sinister dimension to household relations.

Atomised living and its consequent problems of disengagement and estrangement have also been made worse by poorly designed housing developments. As urban social geographers point out, the exponential growth of inner-city apartment blocks and drab suburban subdivisions have created areas often bereft of a sense of community (Ho, Liu & Easthope, 2018). Zones of mass consumption like shopping malls, designed to mimic marketplaces and urban villages, can also feel emptied of genuine human presence. Likewise, educational institutions like universities may have the appearance of village life, but the reality is often very different. Students squeeze in studies between jobs and other commitments and often live in unappealing outer suburbs, having to commute enormous distances to attend lectures and then return home. For international students drawn in by promises of excellence and the fabled Aussie lifestyle, the sense of disappointment is particularly galling (Hil, 2015).

Rebuilding healthy relationships with each other and our world

The building of a decent, connected society is made especially difficult as a result of the hardening of social and geographic borders. Globalisation is no longer the main game in town. Instead, the powerful seek to establish inner sanctums of privilege surrounded by the wilds, which is a familiar scenario seen in various post-apocalyptic movies. Faced with the choice of making the world fairer and more sustainable for people, communities, places and species, the powerful are choosing an anti-global, economic nationalist, short-term entrenchment of radical inequality and disconnection. Aloneness in this context is more than social suffering: it serves to fragment otherwise powerful social entities, thereby concentrating even more power in the hands of the few. The erosion of collectivized power thus diminishes the capacity to achieve human connection and in many cases dissolves stories and identities that derive from common experiences.

> *"The separation from nature has made it especially difficult to see what is unfolding before our eyes, especially the environmental destruction that is reconfiguring our daily lives. In privileging the material, many of us have drifted away from spiritual and ecological well-being."*

Given current trajectories of social change, we're slowly but surely sleepwalking toward a social catastrophe - if we're not already there, that is. While rampant hyper-individualism may in some ways bolster the interests of corporate elites, it undoubtedly causes enormous harm to society and democracy. Being cut-off from others also ensures that we spend less time reflecting conjointly on our way of life or opening ourselves up to the experiences and perspectives of others. Civil life suffers too. We spend less time talking about how things are, or how things could be. Constricted by isolation, our visions and desires begin to fail us. This impacts on the vibrancy and effectiveness of sociability, civility and democratic participation, and opens-up spaces that are increasingly occupied by extraneous and sometimes nefarious entities.

Some have attributed rising suicide rates, especially among men, to the erosion of social wellbeing (Sosteric, 2017). Young Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable in this regard, having experienced on-going traumatic disconnection from land and culture and having to live in a society that has yet to come to terms with its violent past and the need for meaningful reconciliation (Prince, Jeffrey, Baird, Kingsburra, Tipiloura & Dudgeon, 2018). For the vast bulk of people now residing in metropolitan centres, the growing sense of social estrangement is compounded by a disassociation from nature and increased reliance on commercial and other services for sustenance and support. We have outsourced many aspects of our lives to commercial interests.

The separation from nature has made it especially difficult to see what is unfolding before our eyes, especially the environmental destruction that is reconfiguring our daily lives. In privileging the material, many of us have drifted away from spiritual and ecological well-being. We've uninvited ourselves from the great potentialities of life. Still, it's revealing how over recent times urban populations have increasingly come to appreciate the many wonders of nature. The rise of 'green' urban environments and the documented psychological benefits gained from immersion in forests, or being near bodies of water, testify to the need for a re-embracing of the wildness of the natural world. (Hunt, 2019).

The ‘blessed unrest’ prompted by the global environmental justice movement has invited a radical change of consciousness deemed necessary to confront what is now a crisis of unprecedented proportions. It has become blindingly obvious that in coveting economic gain, acquisition and consumption, the meaning of human presence in the web of life has been seriously eroded (McKibben, 2019). Without a recalibration of life values and an appreciation of the importance of connection with nature, ourselves and each other, we are likely to witness a further unravelling of everything that is dear to us. Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and other manifestations of the cyber age are only likely to accelerate this trend.

So, what can be done to turn back the tide of social disconnection and loneliness? Minimally, this involves a reconsideration of our values and a privileging of ecology and the social over material acquisition and personal gain. It means, as Hugh Mackay (2017) argues, bridging divides by engaging with strangers, participating in neighbourhood activities and reinvesting in social infrastructure by supporting institutions and practices that make social power possible. It also means keeping new technologies in perspective, making sure they pass the test of human connection and not the illusion of such. But above all, it means radically reducing inequality, rethinking how we govern ourselves, and placing the web of life at the forefront of our concerns and deliberations. These, among other things, are the building blocks for a much richer, connected society.

Australia: connecting a disconnected nation

Loneliness in Australia has its own genealogy. Historically scarred by unresolved trauma in the form of, *inter alia*, genocide, forced removals and banishments, modern Australia is the living embodiment of those experiences, they have shaped the contours of everyday life and whatever passes for national identity.

Many of us are inclined to forget, or fail to ask, why Australian history is so brutal. The colonial culture imposed on this country was literally out of place, exported from lands far away, aspects of which many subsequently sought to reproduce, conceal and redefine. Dislocation and loneliness run through the collective experience which has been accompanied by the imposition of a culturally specific, racist, classist and gendered value system and specific ways of knowing, being and relating. Two centuries of colonisation have disrespected Country, ancestral being and history, with sacred places often stripped of soil, water, biota, meaning and reverence.

In 2008, Warwick Baird, Director of the Native Title Unit of the now defunct Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission stated that: 'Indigenous peoples have a deep relationship with the land (and the sea). The traditional knowledge Indigenous peoples have accumulated may well provide a valuable resource in adapting to and dealing with, climate change'. Nine years later, the Uluru Statement of the Heart, emanating from the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, called for an Indigenous voice to be enshrined in the nation's constitution and, importantly, that Australia should acknowledge that sovereignty

had never been ceded following invasion and that: 'the ancestral ties between the land, or "mother nature", and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born there, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors.' (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2018)

"… the role played by Indigenous peoples in addressing climate change… has in many quarters been obscured and its meaning largely ignored in mainstream commentary."

This spiritual connection to land over which Indigenous people have, for millennia, been the custodians, fostered a genealogy of place and belonging that ensured harmony and kinship with nature and the cosmos (Svieby & Skuthorpe, 2006, Yunkaporta, 2019). Yet the role played by Indigenous peoples in addressing climate change (an existential threat originating from the earliest days of racialised industrial capitalism,) has in many quarters been obscured and its meaning largely ignored in mainstream commentary (United Nations & Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019).

However, in a Special Report on Climate Change (2019), the United Nations and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] identified Indigenous land rights as key to addressing the climate crisis. The report acknowledges that Indigenous communities have protected their traditional lands for tens of thousands of years, contributing to the maintenance of environments that made human habitation sustainable. The climate emergency and ecological crisis cannot be separated from the destructiveness of colonisation and the erosion of Indigenous rights and from those bodies of ancestral knowledge that made a fulfilled and connected life possible in this country. The IPCC argues that the right of traditional communities to manage and govern these lands needs to be strengthened and respected (UNIPCC, 2019). As we write, Indigenous peoples in various parts of the world are experiencing the ravages of environmental destruction and COVID-19, in some cases amounting to genocide. Tragically, in Australia there are cases where First Nations people are being driven off their lands by the intolerable conditions resulting from climate change. This is a form of violence, building on colonial rule, that has yet to be fully acknowledged and discussed.

Indigenous knowledge and 'the wisdom of the elders' (Suzuki & Knudtson, 1997) is not only integral to planetary survival but would also allow for alternative ways of being beyond the materialist strictures of neoliberalism. Instead, traditional bodies of intergenerational knowledge, enmeshed in the web of life, should be incorporated into environmental practices, such as the protection of forests, oceans and the sustainability of global biodiversity (Suzuki & Knudtson, 1997; UNIPCC, 2019). Ultimately, this life-affirming transformation would embrace ancient wisdoms and ways of being expressed in connective symbols, custodianship, Country, and kinship ties and obligations (Yunkaporta, 2019).

Indigenous peoples are often among the first to face the deleterious consequences of climate change due to their dependence upon and close relationship with the land and its resources (Baird, 2008). Legal and institutional barriers also hinder their ability to cope with and adapt to climate change, making this a pressing

human rights issue. The recent forest fires in Brazil, Australia and other parts of the world are a reflection of the challenges faced by First Nations peoples. The rights of Indigenous peoples, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, are crucial to the substantiality and survival of Indigenous peoples and the planet itself.

Back in 2008, Warwick Baird, asserted that Indigenous peoples must be centrally involved in deliberations on mitigation and adaptation strategies if their human rights and the environment are to be protected. Indeed, the inclusion of First Nations peoples at all levels of decision making, especially at the international level, is crucial if regenerative environmental management and economic activity are to alter course, as the current situation demands. The gravity of the biosphere crisis means that traditional ways of life have been seriously impacted, reducing the capacity of communities to maintain attachment to land and everything that flows from this in terms of social cohesion and social connection. Tragically, home of Australia's First Nations peoples have already been driven off their lands as a result of rapidly deteriorating climatic conditions; a largely unacknowledged development.

Satish Kumar, of Schumacher College, UK and author of *Elegant Simplicity* (2019), argues that if life on earth is to be protected and nurtured (a prospect that is rapidly disappearing) then an entirely different set of existential assumptions need to prevail. Current privileging of economy over ecology, individualism over collectivism and connection is, simply, the road to catastrophe. Much can be

gleaned from an appreciation of Indigenous knowledge and ways of relating and being. Indeed, such wisdom should be the starting point for an urgently needed re-evaluation of life on earth, and how we might learn to live respectfully with everything around us.

The climate crisis and community

> "I am convinced that climate change and what we do about it, will define us, our era and ultimately the global legacy we leave for future generations. Today, the time for doubt has passed." (United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 24 September 2007).

Everyone is vulnerable to the compounding effects of the climate/ecological crisis. Extreme weather events and the collapse of finely balanced natural systems can be slow or sudden and terminally destructive. More intense storm systems, floods and bushfires, along with rising sea levels, changes in the life cycles of bees, ticks and mosquitoes, reductions in crop viability and production, and the unleashing of pathogens are just some of the dangers we are now experiencing. The stress caused by such occurrences can exacerbate community health issues such as the spread of diseases, poor air quality, water shortages, drought, and in the reduced quality of life including psychological conditions such as deep depression and eco-anxiety (Compton & Shim, 2015).

The net effect of such events can be devastating to communities, particularly when they are already burdened by poverty and disadvantage (World Health Organization [WHO], 2005). For instance, in reporting on Hurricane Dorian, which in September 2019 struck the Bahamas as a Category 5 storm and caused major destruction and flooding, the United States Public Broadcasting Service [PBS] News Hour noted that if Dorian was to make landfall in Florida it would have been the eighth major hurricane to hit that state since 2000. Many communities in Florida are still recovering from havoc and trauma caused by previous storms (PBS, 2019). Some populations, of course, are more vulnerable than others: the elderly, children, young people, people with disabilities, those with addictions and mental health problems, pregnant women, the institutionalised, the poor and the homeless are at the mercy of climate disruption (Compton & Shim, 2015).

Inequities in recovery trajectories are felt more deeply by residents of neighbourhoods in economically stressed areas. For instance, when heat waves strike, low-income residents in conurbations around the globe are less likely to have air-conditioning and access to required resources. Extreme climate events, as we are discovering around the world, exacerbate existing inequities, such as inadequate employment, housing problems and lack of access to healthy food, water and clean air. All of which impacts most significantly on women and children. Socially isolated people are placed at extreme risk and their sense of disconnection from others is deepened (Walkover & Helland, 2018). Depression, anxiety and increased levels of suicide are, as the coronavirus pandemic has shown, a major consequence of acute crisis (Kantor & Manbeck, 2020).

In 2018, Lucy Jones, a veteran US seismologist, described how natural disasters impact communities. In *The Big Ones* (2018), Jones observes how community development depend on the strength of pre-existing social connections and networks. And the converse is true. Margaret Walkover and Linda Helland (2018), researchers from the University of Hawaii-Manoa and the California Department point out that programs can help build social and physical infrastructure to support traumatised populations following extreme climate-related events. When physical and economic infrastructure disappear, Jones observes, survival and recovery of Public Health respectively, note that climate events first impact mental health through loss of homes, possessions, jobs, access to food and water, electricity, and physical health. The psychological fallout can devastate entire communities and suffering can endure for years to come. For some communities, the knowledge that there is worse to come only adds to the anguish now felt by tens of millions around the globe, with the Australian bushfires being a significant case in point. The chronic stress of preparing for, coping with and recovering from destructive climate events, experienced directly or indirectly, can lead to transient distress, prolonged symptoms of mental ill health (Compton & Shim, 2015). The onset, duration, and intensity of such reactions is determined by the availability of tangible resources, such as a safe community and access to affordable housing, income, transportation, healthy food and clean water (Compton & Shim, 2015).

Several studies demonstrate how social power is essential to surviving severe climate events, including rebuilding lives and reconstructing communities

following destructive events (Brown & Westaway, 2011; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Jones, 2018; Walkover & Helland, 2018). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina that struck New Orleans in 2005, social researchers Robert Hawkins and Kathleen Maurer (2010) found that good social and relational skills, as well as storing community ties, enabled residents to obtain necessary, life-saving responses and to cope more effectively with trauma and ill health. Even as the physical infrastructure disappeared, residents said their close personal relationships with others in the community enabled them to feel connected and supported.

The best chances of survival in extreme situations, say Hawkins and Maurer, is through networks of like-minded people across geographic, social, cultural and economic boundaries to offer mutual care and support. Brokerage, bonding and bridging functions can be used by government agencies, foundations, universities and other institutions to support interventions to solve challenges in the areas of housing, transport, communications, and food and water safety. The primary goal in such cases is to reconnect communities and to rebuild social power as the essential means of creating a rejuvenated and resilient civil society.

Concluding comments

In many countries around the world, citizens are feeling increasingly disconnected from themselves, each other and nature. This has generated widespread discontent, restlessness, more self-absorption and, perhaps most worryingly, fear and loathing of others. It's no wonder that bookshops are overflowing with 'self-help' and 'personal growth' books, that addictions are rife, and that there are so many arbiters of the human soul: psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, counsellors seeking to address our personal suffering, with only partial success (Hillman, 1993; Masson, 1988).

Healing personal suffering through such means is, of course, only a partial solution to what is a complex set of problems that are to do with the way we live. The toxic mix of neoliberal values, socio-economic division and hybridized digital technologies has in many ways served to diminish the things that make life truly worthwhile: our deep, enduring relationships, connection with place and the natural world. Given that the majority of the world's population now resides in cities, problems of disconnection and loneliness are only likely to intensify. Constant motion, busyness, time constraints, stress, isolated living and lack of identification with place all work against life-affirming social ecologies.

Neoliberalism has served to exacerbate these trends. The very idea of society, like the notion of community, is often more imagined than real. Increasingly, we live in fragmented, ephemeral, illusory worlds that offer us bounty but which, in the end, impoverish us all. The sadness, restlessness, anxiety and bouts of depression that most of us feel from time to time, are symptoms of profound disconnection. That is, more often than not, sated by the gods of over-consumption and self-actualization are devastating symptoms of a larger set of problems. Our social identities, ways of being and relating are shaped and nurtured in this troubled context. The more we claim to be connected, the less we are. We are, as Johan Hari suggests, one of the wealthiest yet loneliest generations to have existed.

Faced with all this, some have called for new beginnings: a society that elevates the social over economy, a culture of unlearning and re-wilding, and a new sense of common purpose and regeneration. Ecological democracy, localised economies and sustainable practices are seen as vital to enhancing the collective social power of the commons (Hollo, 2019). Kindness, tolerance, compassion and respect towards others are considered an integral part of this project. A reinvigorated way of life can only occur through a deep commitment to social justice and human rights, especially the rights of Indigenous peoples, and the valuing and protection of the natural environment.

As we confront a range of intersecting crises – including the Covid-19 pandemic - questions are being asked about the sort of society we need to enable citizens to cope with what's coming. There is deep apprehension about where we're heading, and some are even contemplating the horrors of the sixth extinction. We're also seeing more socio-political discord and economic inequality, made worse by the pandemic, along with the rise of nativist demagogues. The pandemic has ensured that countries around the world will have to confront the climate/ecological crisis with weakened economies, divided civil societies, and likely, more repressive states.

It's in such worrying circumstances that we should reflect on the need for social renewal and a greater investment in the social as the bedrock of a thriving democracy. Given the existential threat posed by the climate emergency in particular, there has never been a more important time to consider what's ahead of us and how we might set about building more supportive and cooperative localised communities to help us withstand the worst and perhaps create a new, just and more inclusive societies.

Ultimately, this prospect is enmeshed in questions of power and who controls economic and social resources. Building change requires us to identify who benefits from existing arrangements and what needs to be done to create a more socially just society. Loneliness and disconnection have many ramifications, not least the maintenance of inequality, social division and unfairness. Socially fragmented societies are more likely to foster nativist populism and violent nationalism; problems that are increasingly besetting many parts of the world. The road to peace with justice depends on many things: greater equality, investment in social infrastructure, valuing the natural environment and the re-humanising of human relationships.

Perhaps we need, as a matter of urgency, to revisit the things that make life worthwhile and that encourage us to feel part of something bigger than ourselves. Inevitably, this takes us back to the question of human nature and what makes for a spiritually enriched, connected life. If indeed we are at our best when connected with others, to land, place and ancestry, then it follows that the current order is not conducive to this way of being.

We urge that:

- The magnitude of loneliness be recognised and that this be acknowledged as something that many people commonly experience.

- People and communities must be protected from the excesses of hyper-capitalism and practices that distract and addict them in the service of corporate profit motives.

- People and communities should be strongly encouraged and supported to explore and live 'good lives', with opportunities to deepen relationships with self, intimate others, community, and to reconnect with the other-than-human.

- The current measurement of quality of life in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been widely discredited and should be viewed as hegemonic tyranny.

- Other more intelligent indicators beyond GDP should be used to gauge the wellbeing of individuals, communities, 'the economy', species, systems, and indeed planet Earth.

- The obliteration of humanity's sense of aliveness, (consciousness, feelings, intelligence, purposes, rights etc., and the other-than-human) should be recognised as coterminous with the genocide of First Peoples.

- An anthropocentric worldview is replaced by an ecologic one, where human societies are designed to reflect the fact that humans are only one amongst many living entities.

Most forms of loneliness work against the long-term interests of people, communities, and planet Earth. They're the road to pointless destruction. A better, more deeply connected future can only emerge when the complex web of life is fully acknowledged and absorbed into our daily practices and social being. Without this urgent realisation, we are on track to sleepwalk our way into oblivion with each of us increasingly alone.

Postscript: Pointers to a more connected life

Below, we list a number of websites setting out some things each of us can do to prevent loneliness and disconnection. Some are self-help type suggestions, while others hone in on deeper ontological questions. Some are general guides for leading an emotionally and spiritually richer, more fulfilled and connected life. We also include a number of websites focused on Indigenous knowledge which we, the authors, consider indispensable to achieving the changes necessary for a life worth living.

A number of the sites take you to interesting organizations and institutions concerned with the matters we have discussed above. Our reference list is long, but you will find some really useful material buried in there. One or two references in the main list appear in the 'Further reading' section. We like them that much.

Our final point: loneliness is a symptom of disconnection. Investing in reconnection is the way out of this prison. It's a joyous journey, if you let it be.

Further reading, resources and helpful websites:

Australian Association for Environmental Education [AAEE]: *Professional body for environmental educators who advocate for environmental education*. https://www.aaee.org.au/

Aged and Community Services, Australia [ACSA]: *National service that provides support and advocacy for not-for-profit charitable and for purpose providers of retirement living, community, home and residential care.* https://www.acsa.asn.au/Publications-Submissions/Social-Isolation-and-Loneliness.aspx

Australian Council of Social Service [ACOSS]: *A national advocate service supporting people affected by poverty, disadvantage and inequality, and the peak council for community services nationally*. https://www.acoss.org.au/

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute [AHURI]: *Through a national network of university research partners, AHURI undertakes research leading to the advancement of knowledge on key policy and practice issues. Many resources and research reports are available via the website.* https://www.ahuri.edu.au/

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW]: *Australian Government website that provides information on mental health services in Australia*. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/s

Environment Institute of Australia & New Zealand [EIANZ]: *A not-for-profit association that promotes independent and interdisciplinary discussion on environmental issues. The Institute also provides environmental knowledge/information and awareness*. https://www.eianz.org/

Green Institute: *An Australian non-profit organisation that supports green politics that is grounded in the principles of ecology, social justice, democracy, non-violence, sustainability and respect for diversity, through education, action, research and debate*. https://www.greeninstitute.org.au/

Hari, J. (2018). *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*. Bloomsbury Publishing: Oxford.

Klein, N. (2020). *On fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. Allen Lane: London.

Kotkin, J. (2020). *New Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*. Encounter Books: New York.

Kumar, S. (2019). *Elegant Simplicity*: *The Art of Living Well*. New Society Publishers: London.

Mackay, H. (2018). *Australia Reimagined*. Macmillan: Sydney, New South Wales.

MI Networks: *Offers access to relevant, current information, peer support and connections to local community networks*. https://www.minetworks.org.au/

Monbiot, G. (2018). *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*. Verso: London.

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters*. Atlantic Books: London.

Raworth, K. (2018). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing: Vermont.

SANE Australia: *A national mental health charity that assists people with mental health issues and others through support, research and advocacy*. https://www.sane.org/

Sennett, R. (2004). *Respect in a World of Inequality*. Norton: New York.

Sustainable Living Foundation [SLF]: *SLF facilitates many projects and initiatives covering a wide range of areas relating to sustainability, both locally and nationally*. https://www.slfonline.org.au

Williams, F. (2017). *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*. Norton: New York.

Yunkaporta, Y. (2019). *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Text Publishing: Melbourne.

Photo credits

"The Handmaid`s Tale". Benon, France - December 30, 2018: Woman holding a TV remote and watch. "The Handmaid`s Tale is a futuristic". ID 135519606 © Pixinoo Dreamstime.com.

"Shadow". Free photo 86293070 © creativecommonsimages - Dreamstime.com.

"Wallpaper Flare". https://www.wallpaperflare.com/silhouette-art-sky-loneliness-lonely-wallpaper-cwxrx/download/360x640.

"Rain". Free photo 2154412 © Heiko Rothe - Dreamstime.com.

"3D House". Free photo 5221874 © Tyler Boyes - Dreamstime.com.

"Baby Having Fun with Laptop". Free photo 4583785 © Adam Borkowski - Dreamstime.com.

"Theresa May Visits Danish Prime Minister in Copenhagen. Briefing, meeting". ID 114091369 © Ojen | Dreamstime.com.

"Sydney - Night Skyline". Free photo 4962559 © Radim Spitzer - Dreamstime.com.

"Donald Trump". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/688084/donaldtrump-politician-america-donald.

"World Map". Free photo 7929118 © Janaka Dharmasena - Dreamstime.com.

"Statue Man". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/1001453/statue-man-sitting-chair.

"Native American Totem Poles". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/806103/nativeamerican-totem-poles-alaska.

"Together Team People Circle". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/142879/together-team-people-circle.

"Tasmanian Aborigines". https://www.goodfreephotos.com/australia/tasmania/other/four-full-blood-tasmanian-aborigines-is-tasmania-australia.jpg.php.

"Misty Forest", CSP Misty Forest V. Free photo. 4886476 © Cspcreative - Dreamstime.com.

"Florida Hurricane". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/61236/keywest-florida-hurricane-dennis .

"Black Lives Matter". https://www.freeimg.net/photo/48T6160/blacklivesmatter-africanamerican-graffiti-blackamerican.

References

Aged and Community Services, Australia [ACSA], (2015). *ACSA Issues Paper: Social Isolation and Loneliness*. October 2015. Creative Commons Attribution: ACT, Canberra.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC] (2019). ABC documentary: *'Old People's Home for 4 Year Old's'*. ABC: Brisbane, QLD.

Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2004). *Measuring Social Capital*. Cat. No. 1378.0, Australian Capital Territory: Canberra.

Australian Psychological Society [APS] (2018). *Australian Loneliness Report: A Survey Exploring the Loneliness Levels of Australians, and the Impact on Their Health and Wellbeing*. Swinburne University of Technology: Melbourne.

Baird, W. (2008). *Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples*. Speech by Warwick Baird, Director, Native Title Unit, Public Broadcasting Service, Human Rights Commission and Equal Opportunities [HREOC], Native Title Conference, 4 June 2008, Perth.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in the Contemporary Society*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (1992). *Theory of Social Capital*. Polity: London.

Brown, K. & Westaway, E. (2011). 'Agency, capacity and resilience to environmental change: Lessons from human development, well-being and disasters'. *Annual Review of Environmental Resources,* 36(*1*): 321–42.

Bullen, P. & Onyx, J. (1998). *Measuring Social Capital in Five Communities in NSW*. University of Technology [UTS]: Sydney.

Cacioppo, J., Fowler, J. & Christakis, N. (2009). 'Alone in the crowd: The structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network'. *Journal of Personal Social Psychology*. 97(*6*): 977–991.

Coleman, J. (1988). 'Social capital in the creation of human capital'. *American Journal of Sociology*. 94: 95-120.

Compton, M. & Shim, R. (2015). *The Social Determinants of Mental Health*. American Psychiatric Association: Washington, DC.

Connor, S., (2014). 'Extreme loneliness worse for health than obesity, and can lead to an early grave, scientists say'. *The Independent Newspaper*. 16 February 2014. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/extreme-loneliness-worse-for-health-than-obesity-9132031.html

Cornwell, E. & Waite, L. (2009). 'Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and health among older adults'. *Journal of Social Behaviour*, March 50(*1*): 31-48.

Cox, E. (1995). 'A truly civil society, 1995'. Boyer Lectures. *Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC]*: Sydney, New South Wales.

de Jong, T., (2016). 'Loneliness is the global epidemic of our times'. *Huffington Post*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/loneliness is the global epidemic of our times sl

Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., Wampold, B. E. & Hubble, M. A. (Eds.). (2010). *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering what Works in Therapy* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association: New York.

Ferragina, E. & Arrigoni, A. (2016). 'The rise and fall of social capital: Requiem for a theory'. *Political Studies Review,* 15(*3*): 355-367.

Farrelly, E. (2020). 'Let's revive the larrikin spirit of Mundey and Leplastrier to secure our future'. *Sydney Morning Herald,* 16 May 2020.
https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/let-s-revive-the-larrikin-spirit-of-mundey-and-leplastrier-to-secure-our-future-20200514-p54sw1.html?ref=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_source=rss_feed

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage.

Greene, M. (2017). 'The terrible price of our epidemic of male loneliness'. *Good Men Project,* 15th March 2017. https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/male-loneliness-megasahd/

Gregory, A. (2017). 'Loneliness turns people selfish'. *Science of Us*. August 23, 2017.
http://201708-new-study-says-loneliness-turns-people-selfish

Haig, A. (2020). *The Haig Report*. Highlights from Haig Report 2018: Sydney.
https://dealersedge.com/product-page/mega-trends-impacting-auto-retail-in-2018-highlights-from-the-haig-report

Hari, J. (2018). *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*. Bloomsbury Publishing: Oxford.

Harvey, D. (1999). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford University Press: New York.

Hawkins, R. & Maurer, K. (2010). 'Bonding, bridging and linking: How social capital operated in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina'. *British Journal of Social Work*. 40(*6*): 1777–93.

Haworth, A., (2018). 'Why have young people in Japan stopped having sex?' *The Guardian*. June 19, 2018.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/young-people-japan-stopped-having-sex

Hil, R. (2015). *Selling Students Short: Why You Won't Get the University Education You Deserve*. Allen & Unwin: Sydney.

Hillman, J. & Venture, M. (1993). *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy--And the World's Getting Worse*. New York: Harper Collins.

Hillman, J. (1995). 'A psyche the size of the Earth'. In Roszak, T., Gomes, M. E. & Kanner, A. D. (Eds.). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books: Washington DC: 18-38.

Ho, C., Liu, E. & Easthope, H. (2018). 'Higher density and diversity: apartments are Australia at its most multicultural'. *The Conversation*, 19 June 2018. https://theconversation.com/higher-density-and-diversity-apartments-are-australia-at-its-most-multicultural-97176

Holdsworth, L. & Hartman, Y. (2009). 'Indicators of community cohesion in an Australian country town'. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*. 2: 76-97.

Holdsworth, L. (2016). 'The impact of mutual obligation for sole parents'. *Journal of Sociology*. 3:17-27. https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jos

Holdsworth, L., Kelly, B., Stain, H., Fuller, J. & Coleman, C. (2008). 'The importance of community connectedness for mental health and well-being'. Paper presented to the *Promotion, Early Intervention and Recovery: The 13th New South Wales Rural Mental Health Conference*. Hunter Valley, NSW, 26-28 November.

Hollo, T. (2020). *Inspiration on Indigenous Democracy*. Green Institute. https://www.greeninstitute.org.au/author/timhollo/

Hunt, E. (2019). 'Blue spaces: Why time spent near water is the secret of happiness'. *The Guardian*. 3rd November 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/03/blue-space-living-near-water-good-secret-of-happiness

Jennings-Edquist, G. (2018). 'Feeling isolated? You're not alone. Here's why one in four of us is lonely'. *ABC Life*. 30th November 2018. https://www.abc.net.au/life/social-isolation-why-are-we-so-lonely/10493414

Jones, L. (2018). *The Big Ones: How Natural Disasters Have Shaped Us (and What We Can Do About Them)*. New York Doubleday Press: New York.

Kanner, A. D. (1995, Eds.). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco.

Kantor, J. & Manbeck, K. (2020). COVID-19 could lead to an epidemic of clinical depression, and the health care system isn't ready for that, either. *The Conversation,* 1 April 2020. https://theconversation.com/covid-19-could-lead-to-an-epidemic-of-clinical-depression-and-the-health-care-system-isnt-ready-for-that-either-134528

Kelly, B., Stain, H., Carr, V. et al. (2011). *The Australian Rural Mental Health Study*. National Health and Medical Research Council, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health: Orange NSW.

Klein, N. (2020). *On fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. Allen Lane: London.

Kempf, H. (2008). *How the Rich are Destroying the Earth*. Chelsea Green Publishing UK: London.

Ki-moon, Ban (2007). 'United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon convenes largest ever meeting of global leaders on climate change. *United Nations*. 24 September 2007.
https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/09/232332-ban-ki-moon-convenes-largest-ever-meeting-global-leaders-climate-change

Kotkin, J. (2020). *New Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*. Encounter Books: New York.

Kumar, S. (2019). *Elegant Simplicity: The Art of Living Well*. New Society Publishers: London.

Kunstler, J. H. (2005). *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century*. Grove-Atlantic: New York.

Laing, O. (2016). *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. Picador: London.

Lim, M. (2015). 'The deadly truth about loneliness'. *The Conversation*. 17th April 2015.
https://www.abc.net.au/life/social-isolation-why-are-we-so-lonely/10493414

Lin, N. (2001). 'Building a network theory of social capital'. In N. Lin, K. Cook & R.S. Burt, (Eds.), *Social Capital: Theory and Research,* 3-29, Aldine de Gruyter: New York.

Mackay, H. (2018). *Australia Reimagined*. Macmillan: Sydney, New South Wales.

McKibben, B. (2019). *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* Henry Holt and Co: New York.

Malouf, D. (2011). 'The happy life'. *Quarterly Essay*. 41, 2011.

Martin, George R. (1996). *A Song of Ice and Fire. (Adapted, Game of Thrones)*. Bantam Books: Canada.

Mason, P. (2019). *Clear, Bright Future*. Allen Lane: London.

Masson, G. (1988) *Against Therapy: Emotional Tyranny and the Myth of Psychological Healing*. Common Courage Press: New York.

Monbiot, G. (2016). 'Neoliberalism is creating loneliness. That's what's wrenching society apart'. *The Guardian*. October 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/12/neoliberalism-creating-loneliness-wrenching-society-apart

Monbiot, G. (2018). *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*. Verso: London.

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated [NCSMC], (2014). *Income Inequality in Australia: The Hidden Cost*. Extent of Income Inequality in Australia: Submission 15.

Oriti, T. (2017). 'Australians work very long hours compared to OECD countries'. *The World Today*. Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC]. 19 October 2017. https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/worldtoday/australians-work-very-long-hours-compared-to-oecd-countries/9066168

Ormerod, K. (2018). *How Social Media is Ruining Your Life*. Cassell: London.

Pearson, N. (2018). Uluru Statement from the Heart, Noel Pearson – Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration, 2018. Cited in '*Sovereignty is a spiritual notion: An unexplored frontier in the freedom of religion debate'*. ABC Religion and Ethics. 30 May 2019. https//www.abc.net.au/religion/sovereignty-is-a-spiritual-notion-the freedom-of-religion-debate/11163062

Penny, J. (2017). 'Social media and citizen participation in "official" and "unofficial" electoral promotion: A structural analysis of the 2016, Bernie Sanders digital campaign'. *Journal of Communication: International Communication Association*. 1: 1-22.

Pascale, B. (1670). *Pencees (Thoughts)*. A. J. Krailsheimer, (Trans.) Penguin Books: New York.

Peplau, H. (1955). 'Loneliness'. *The American Journal of Nursing*. 55: 1476-1481.

Peplau, L. & Perlman, P. (1982). 'Perspectives on loneliness'. In: Peplau L. &

Perlman D. (eds). *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*. Wiley, New York: 118-130.

Phillips, P. (1981). *Dear Abby: The Best of Dear Abby*. Andrews & McMeel: Kansas City.

Picketty, T. (2018). *World Inequality Report, 2018*. Co-edited with F. Alvaredo, L. Chancel, E. & Saez, G. Zucman. World Inequality Lab [WIL]: Berlin.

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters*. Atlantic Books: London.

Plumwood, V. (2008). 'Shadow places and the politics of dwelling'. *Ecological Humanities*. 44: 112-140.

Prince, J., Jeffrey, N., Baird, L., Kingsburra, S., Tipiloura, B. & Dudgeon, P. (2018). *Stories from Community: How Suicide Rates Fell in Two Indigenous Communities Aboriginal and Torres Strait*: *Research Report*. Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) & Gurriny Yeamlucka Health Service: Tiwi Islands (Northern Territory) & Yarrabah (Queensland).

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

Raworth, K. (2018). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing: Vermont.

Rosie, L. (2018). 'This is what loneliness feels like (and what it does to us)'. *Medium Blog*.
https://www.medium.com/swl/this is what loneliness feels like.com/e2

Ross, A. C. (1989). *Mitakuye Oyasin: We Are All Related*. Wiconi Waste: New York.

Schumacher, E. (2019). 'Berlin: Capital of loneliness'. *DW Media*.
https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-capital-of-loneliness/a-50867492

Sennett, R. (2004) *Respect in a world of Inequality,* Norton: New York.

Shaw, E. (2018). 'Feeling isolated? You're not alone. Here's why one in four of us is lonely'. In Jennings-Edquist, G. (2018). *ABC Life*. 30 November 2018.
https://www.abc.net.au/life/social-isolation-why-are-we-so-lonely/10493414

Shepard, P. (1982). *Nature and Madness*. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco.

Singer, C. (2018). 'Health effects of social isolation and loneliness'. *Journal of Ageing Health Care,* Spring Issue 2018: 18-55.

Sosteric, M. (2017). 'Suicide is on the rise and this is why'. *The Conversation*. 8 September 2017.
https://www.theconversation/2015011/The-deadly-truth-about-loneliness

Suzuki, D. & Knudtson, P. (1997). *Wisdom of the Elders*. Allen & Unwin: Sydney.

Svieby, K. & Skuthorpe. T. (2006). *Treading Lightly: The Hidden Wisdom of the World's Oldest People*. Allen & Unwin: Sydney.

The Feed (2019). 'Connections Program: Loneliness'. *The Feed. SBS*. 28 February 2019.

Tsing, A. (2017). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: New Jersey.

Uluru Statement of the Heart (2017). 'The Uluru Statement of the Heart'. *National Constitutional Convention*, 2017. Uluru.

United Nations and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [UNIPCC] (2019). *Special Report on Climate Change and Land*. 8 August 2019, Geneva.

United Nations: Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples [UNCCIP] (2019). *Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples: Climate Change*. July 2019, Geneva.

United States Public Broadcasting Service [PBS] (2019). 'Report of Hurricane Dorian'. *PBS United States News Hour*. 2 September 2019. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/september-2-2019-pbs-newshour-full-episode

Van Krieken, R., Habibis, D., Smith, P., Hutchins, B., Martin G. & Maton, K. (2017). *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. 6th Edition, Pearson Australia: Melbourne, Victoria.

Vedantam, S. (2018). 'Why some men have a harder time confiding in others'. *Hidden Brain*. 20 March 2018. https://www.npr.org/2018/03/20/595123557/men-dealing-with-social-isolation-have-a-harder-time-confiding-in-others

Walkover, M. & Helland, L. (2018). *Mental Health, Climate Change, and Community Development: Strengthening Core Capabilities to Promote Community Resilience*. Community Development Innovation Review. 4 October 2018. https://www.frbsf.org/community-development/publications/community-development-investment-review/2018/october/mental-health-climate-change-and-community-development-strengthening-core-capabilities-to-promote-community-resilience/

Wheen, F. (2005). *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions*. Harper Collins: Sydney.

Wong, M. (2018). *The Opioid Addiction: Opioid Harm in Australia and Comparisons between Australia and Canada*. Report for the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018. https://www.aihw.gov.au

Woodward, A. (2018). *Lifeline Foundation for Suicide Prevention*. Executive-Director: Cited In Jennings-Edquist, G. (2018). Feeling isolated? You're Not Alone. Here's Why One in Four of Us is Lonely. *ABC Life*. 30 November 2018. https://www.abc.net.au/life/social-isolation-why-are-we-so-lonely/10493414

World Health Organization [WHO], (2005). *Mental Health: Facing the Challenges, Building Solutions*. Report from the World Health Organization European Ministerial Conference. Copenhagen, Denmark: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2005, Denmark.

World Health Organisation [WHO], (2019). Mental Health in the Workplace. *World Health Organisation Report*. May 2019. https://www/who.int/mental health/in the workplace/en

Williams, F. (2017). *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*. Norton: New York.

Yeginsu, C. (2018). 'U.K. appoints a Minister for Loneliness'. *New York Times*, 17th January 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html

Yunkaporta, Y. (2019). *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World.,* Melbourne: Text Publishing: Melbourne.

Zeldin, T. (1994). *Intimate History of Humanity*. Sinclair-Stevenson: London.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Professor Kristen Lyons and Susan Stock for early feedback on the essay, and to Shona Anderson for editing work. Our gratitude also goes to the Ngara Institute for supporting this project financially and in spirit. Sadly, the Institute has recently closed but the document is now available on the Resilient Byron website.

THE AUTHORS

Richard Hil

Dr Richard Hil is Adjunct Professor in the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University, Gold Coast; Adjunct Professor in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University; former Convenor of the Ngara Institute, member of the Editorial Collective of *Social Alternatives* and board member of the *Justice for Fallujah Project*. Richard has written and co-written a number of books, the most recent being *The Sacking of Fallujah: A People's History, with* Ross Caputi and Donna Mulhearn. He is currently working on *A University for the Commons: Transforming Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century*. Over the past five years Richard (under his own name and as 'Joseph Gora' and 'Henry Barnes') has written extensively on Australian higher education for *The Australian*, *Campus Review*, *New Matilda, Arena Magazine, The Advocate, Social Alternatives, University World News, The Conversation, Overland, Online Opinion, Pearls and Irritations,* and *Countercurrents*. His views about higher education are best encapsulated in *Whackademia: An insider's account of the troubled University*, published in 2013 by New South, and *Selling Students Short; why you won't get the university education you deserve*, published by Allen and Unwin in 2015.

Louise Holdsworth

Dr Louise Holdsworth completed her PhD thesis in 2008 under the supervision of Dr Richard Hil. Her thesis addressed the negotiated meanings and experiences of housing tenure in a social, economic and political context. Louise is a social researcher whose key areas of interest include research concerning disadvantaged social groups, especially from a gendered perspective, social policy, homelessness and housing-related concerns and policy, unemployment related issues, qualitative research, health and mental health issues, problem gambling, and feminist research. She is currently an Adjunct Lecturer with the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University, NSW.

Charlie Brennan

Dr Charlie Brennan is a Social Ecologist, eco-psychologist and researcher and has lectured in ethics and sense of place and worked as a facilitator for a range of conservation and sustainability alliances. With 30 plus years applied experience, he is passionate about 'bringing the land alive' through project design, coordination and community education. Projects include regenerative agriculture, Permaculture, rainforest regeneration and support for Caring for Country. He travels offering design, consultation and a range of innovative workshops, and is the Director of Sacred Places PL; details of projects and workshops can be found at http://www.charliebrennan.info

---