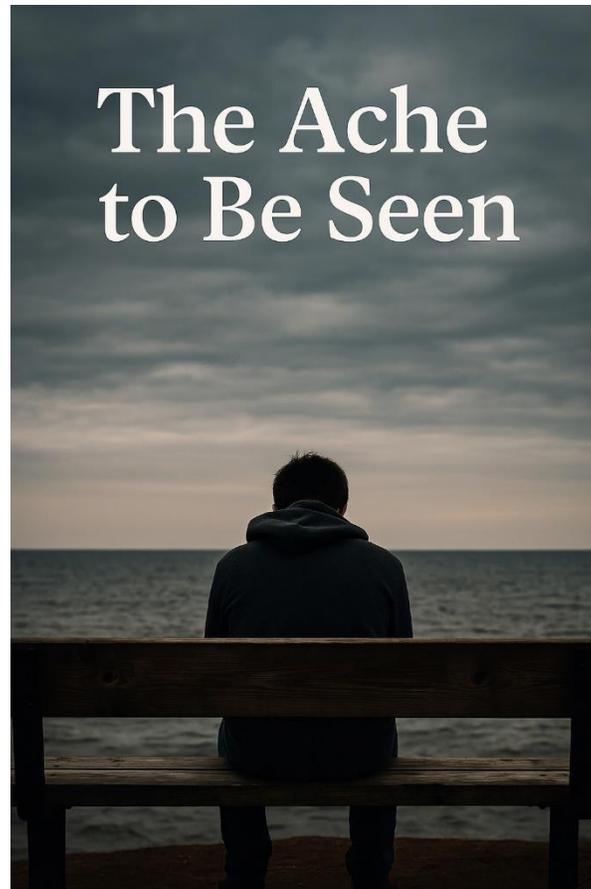


The Ache to Be Seen: A Call Back to One Another



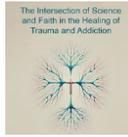
Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

We live in the most digitally connected age in history, yet many of us feel more alone than ever.

We scroll. We text. We reply to emails. But behind all the chatter is often a deeper ache, the ache to be seen. And as Johann Hari has observed, we are “the most connected society in human history, yet many of us feel profoundly alone.”

That truth has landed more personally for me in the last year and a half than I ever expected. When my twin brother passed away, the grief left a hole in me that connection alone couldn't fill. His absence was a piercing reminder of how deeply we are wired for relationship, how much we long not just to be around people, but to be known by them.

And it reminded me that advocacy, no matter how necessary, can be a lonely path. Speaking out. Carrying burdens. Standing firm. It costs something. But one thing that's helped me hold fast in that space is the memory of those small moments of care that leave a lifelong imprint.



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One of them happened in graduate school. I was exhausted, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Anyone who's been through grad school, med school, or any long academic slog knows that kind of fatigue. I sat alone in the hallway conference room, weary from the long haul of education and self-doubt. And then my major professor, Dr. John Schuldt, a soft-spoken, deeply kind man, walked by. He saw me. Paused. Gently placed his hand on my knee. And quietly asked, "Hey Jeff, how you doing?"



He didn't say much more than that. He didn't need to. That one moment of kindness, of presence, said everything. I've never forgotten it.

It's these moments, small, sacred, often unnoticed, that can restore us. And the need for them is greater than most of us realize.



Even Jesus understood this kind of ache. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before His crucifixion, He was overwhelmed with sorrow and turned to His closest friends, asking them to stay awake and pray with Him. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matthew 26:38, NIV). But when He returned, He found them asleep. Three times.

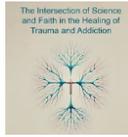
Even the Son of God longed for connection in His pain and didn't receive it.

And loneliness isn't just a feeling. It's a threat to our very health.

The late social neuroscientist Dr. John Cacioppo, one of the foremost researchers on loneliness, found that loneliness increases the risk of early death by 45 percent, making it more dangerous than alcoholism (30 percent), obesity (20 percent), or even air pollution (5 percent). In another longitudinal study, his team discovered that individuals whose loneliness levels increased over time were eight times more likely to develop clinical depression. Loneliness, it turns out, is not only emotionally painful, it's biologically dangerous.

We don't always realize it, but it physically changes us. Loneliness activates the brain's threat system. From a polyvagal perspective, we enter defensive states, either hypervigilance or emotional withdrawal. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis fires up, flooding our body with cortisol. That's fine in short bursts. But when it goes on too long, as it does for the chronically lonely, it begins to erode every organ system, impair cognitive functioning, and suppress emotional regulation. In short, loneliness puts the entire body in a state of slow, silent wear.

And what makes it worse? When we're lonely, it becomes harder to connect. The very neurobiological mechanisms we need to reach out, to trust, to open up, shut down.



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As I've gotten older and walked through more seasons of life, I've realized that chronic loneliness can't always be healed from within the same environment that created it. Whether it's a job, a community, or a relationship, if there's no real hope of connection or repair, I've learned to give myself permission to let go. That doesn't come from resentment, it comes from the deep recognition that our souls weren't made to live in emotional isolation. And I don't think God ever intended for us to remain in places where we are perpetually unseen. Instead, I've learned to reinvest my heart elsewhere, into places and people where mutual care, warmth, and vulnerability are possible.

But here's the good news. The antidote doesn't require a program. It starts with one moment. One pause. One act of seeing.

Maybe it's stopping what you're doing when someone walks into the room. Taking your hands off the keyboard. Looking up. Smiling. Saying, "It's good to see you." Maybe it's checking in with someone you haven't heard from. Not a rushed text or a polite formality, but a real question: How are you, really?

We all carry unspoken griefs. We all have parts of us that feel invisible. I sometimes avoid the word trauma because it's become overused, but most of us carry wounds from times we weren't noticed, weren't comforted, weren't loved the way we needed.

Jesus came to heal that. To show us that we matter. To remind us we are loved. And as Christians, we are called to reflect that truth to others, through presence, not just preaching.

So, here's a small challenge. Before the day ends, reach out. Not for productivity. Not for obligation. But to let someone know they're seen.

And maybe we can go a step further. Maybe we can all help each other out of loneliness.

That begins with paying attention, to the silent signals. To the distant look. To the heaviness on someone's face that says, I'm hurting, but I don't know how to say it. And yes, it requires something of us. It means loosening our grip on our own schedule, our own agenda, and choosing instead to say, This person in front of me is more important right now.

Whether it's a colleague, a client, a friend, a father, a son, someone in your life needs your presence more than they need your efficiency.

And this isn't about becoming everyone's therapist. It's about choosing intention. As I've written before, intention is the heartbeat of connection. And it's what Jesus demonstrated throughout His life. He didn't connect with people because it was convenient. He connected because it was necessary. He stopped. He looked. He noticed. He healed. And He calls us to carry that same spirit.



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It doesn't take much. A question asked with care. A look that says, You matter. A gesture that may seem small to you but leaves an indelible blessing in someone's heart that might last a lifetime. Maybe even eternity.

We're not alone in this. And we don't have to let others be. Let's be the ones who show up.

Scriptures to Reflect On:

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."
(Matthew 26:38, NIV)

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18)