

Is Modern Life Making People Lonely?

We walk the streets rarely making eye contact with those we brush up against. We zoom along our freeways, only occasionally glancing at the driver beside us. We sit on the metro and hope we don't need to make conversation. We wave at our neighbors but rarely talk to them. We are surrounded by people but we live in isolation.

It's no secret that the modern structure of life and work is oddly lonely. Through entertainment, social media, and other escapes, we attempt to overcome the sense of an atomized existence. For most of us, we were born into this environment and know nothing different. But should we ponder the effects of such a world?

That thought occurred while reading [Watch the North Wind Rise](#), a sort of Utopian novel that "imagines a world of a thousand years from now which is gloriously different ... clocks, money, and machinery have disappeared." The protagonist of the story is a poet from our age who explores that future world. Here's the section that really gets you thinking:

"See-a-Bird had apparently been considering what I had told him earlier in the evening about the population of London.

'How terrible it must be to live there,' he said, 'with some ten million people occupying territory that here would support only five or ten thousand! Whenever you leave your house to visit a friend in another part of the town, you must pass hundreds of new people.'

[The Poet:] 'What's so terrible about that?'

'Well, surely, whenever you see a new face in the street, even if no greeting is exchanged, there is always a sort of

contact, a recognition: you not only notice the face but you sum it up mentally and store it in your memory. Every personal contact is an expense of mental energy. Here we know practically everyone by sight, so our casual meetings make little demand on our energies, and on grand festival days we dull our sensibilities with drink. But we find visits to other regions exhausting; the brain dizzies after a time from the demands put upon it. That's why we travel little, and why, when we go abroad, our hosts take care to expose us to as few personal contacts as possible. When I try to imagine thousands and thousands of people, all in different clothes and with thoroughly disorganized minds, threading in and out of one another's lives without knowing or greeting, each pursuing a private, competitive path – I think it would kill me.'

[The Poet:] *'Oh, no. One can get used to almost everything. The Eskimos who were brought to London in the eighteenth century didn't die of seeing too many faces. So far as I remember, they just caught bad colds and died that way.'*

'Nobody dies of a cold,' Sally insisted. 'Seeing too many faces must have undermined their strength.'

[The Poet:] *'Have it your own way. At any rate, we treat people as if they were trees: when you're walking through a forest, you don't study every tree, but only the striking ones that will serve as landmarks to guide you back. In the same way we don't study people's faces as they go by. Old friends, relatives, even lovers may pass each other and not know it. We're conscious only if the policeman who regulates traffic, and of the ticket-collector in the bus or railway station. But unless the policeman pulls us up for breaking some traffic rule, we don't study his face; and we know nothing of the ticket-collector, unless he questions the validity of our ticket.'* Here it took me a long time to explain the policeman and the ticket-collectors.

'But if a beautiful woman goes by?'

[The Poet:] 'The impression is as transitory as a picture in the fire. Women go by with their faces set in the same sightless mask as men: no true beauty is apparent.'

'This self-protective habit of not-seeing must blunt your poetic sensibilities and impair your memory.'

[The Poet:] 'Perhaps it does. Little poetry worth the name has been written in London ever since it ceased to be a country town...'

If modern life goes against some of our natural inclinations as social animals, short of moving to a very small town, one wonders how we'll ever know what we're missing.