



Holiday Connections

Years ago when I was considering social work training, I volunteered for a suicide hotline. Although we were trained to take suicidal calls, callers in our four hour shifts were not always at immediate risk of suicide. Many called simply in distress, some were chronically ill and called just to "check in," others called because they felt lonely or isolated.

On Thanksgiving and Christmas, I volunteered for the morning shifts. Because the holidays are oriented around gathering with family and friends, I assumed loneliness would be a more common theme than during non-holiday shifts. Surprisingly, in my years of taking holiday calls I never received a single complaint of loneliness on Thanksgiving or Christmas. Not one! What I did receive were calls that went something like this, "I have to visit my family and they are jerks! I'll have to spend the day with them and I just can't stand it." I listened and, as the calls ended, sometimes I was praised as a great communicator although I had said almost nothing.

Where were the lonely and isolated callers? After reflecting, I came to think that perhaps these were the lonely callers. Perhaps the anger I was feeling and hearing was on the surface, while the underlying feelings were of loneliness and rejection. Perhaps the lack of a "good" internalized family connection left these callers feeling lonely as they anticipated being with their families. In retrospect, I saw myself providing a modicum of what they sought from their families. I listened and accepted them for who they were. We could have a "good" connection and they could end the call feeling less lonely and isolated.

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