

When The Message Light Doesn't Blink

Considering the worldwide pandemic that we are recovering from, sometimes messages of encouragement are far reaching. Seeing one of her neighbor's children playing alone, a woman asked him where his brother was. "Oh," he said, "he's in the house playing a duet. I finished first." Too many people find themselves playing a duet alone. Too many people are lonely. They rise alone in the morning, they eat meals alone, they watch television alone and retire alone in the evening. They have too few friends and family to share their lives with. It feels as if they should be playing a duet or an ensemble and everyone else finished first. They are more than alone; they are lonely.

"I don't have an answering machine," one man said. "I live alone, and I'm sometimes told that I've missed calls when I've been out. 'You should really get an answering machine,' my friends tell me, but I won't. I don't want to come home to find the message light not blinking. I don't want to know with such certainty that no one tried to get in touch. It's worth missing a message or two to avoid that."

A folktale tells of a monarch long ago who had twin sons. There was some confusion about which one was born first. As they grew to young manhood, the king sought a fair way to designate one of them as crown prince. Calling them to his council chamber one day, he said, "My sons, the day will come when one of you must succeed me as king. The burdens of sovereignty are very heavy. To find out which of you is better able to bear them cheerfully, I am sending you together to a far corner of the kingdom. One of my advisors there will place equal burdens on your shoulders. My crown will one day go to the one who first returns bearing his burden like a king should." In a spirit of friendly competition, the brothers set out together. Soon they overtook a frail and aged woman struggling under a heavy weight. One of the boys suggested that they stop to help her. The other protested: "We have a burden of our own to worry about. Let us be on our way." So the second son hurried on while the other stayed behind to help the woman with her load. On his journey to the kingdom's edge, the same young man found others who needed help. A sightless man who needed assistance home; a lost child whom he carried back to her worried parents; a farmer whose wagon needed a strong shoulder to push it out of the mud.

Eventually he did reach his father's advisor, where he secured his own burden and started home with it safely on his shoulders. When he arrived back at the palace, his brother met him at the gate and greeted him with dismay. "I don't understand," the brother said, "I told Father the burden was too heavy to carry. How did you manage it alone?" The future king replied thoughtfully, "I suppose when I helped others carry their burdens, I found the strength to carry my own." Isn't that the secret of living with loneliness? When we find others who need help with their burdens, we also find the strength to carry our own! Get busy helping others, even if it is nothing more than making a phone call or writing an encouraging note, and you'll find that your burden of loneliness will become easier and easier to manage. And soon you'll be too happy and busy to even notice if the message light is blinking.