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## **Reaching out to forgotten of society is season spirit**

Andre Picard

*"Loneliness is the most terrible poverty."* -- Mother Teresa

In this, the season to be jolly, the days for tidings of comfort and joy, for gatherings of family and friends, and the time for new beginnings and New Year's resolutions, let us ponder what it all means for our health.

Much is written, of course, about the dangers of holiday overindulgence and excess: too much food, too much liquor, and sometimes the stress of too much family and too little money.

But rarely do we stop and reflect on the value of friendship, of a sense of belonging that is highlighted by the holiday season, and on the value of community itself.

While there is much we still don't know about the relationship of brain, mind, body and society, there is some fascinating and compelling evidence from many areas of research.

One thing that is abundantly clear is that emotional health has a powerful impact on physical health.

Individuals who are lonely, sad and marginalized have far worse health outcomes than those who are engaged, happy and active (physically, socially and emotionally).

We know, for example, that churchgoers and committed volunteers are healthier, and so are people who are married.

On a societal level, we know that congregations of healthy individuals create healthy communities and that, in turn, healthy communities make individuals healthier.

But there are still far too many Canadians who live devoid of friendship and genuine relationships.

Most, if not all, of the marginalized are the so-called "labelled." The classic image is that of the downtrodden bum on the park bench or the blind guy standing on the street corner with a tin cup, but the reality is that the lonely are all around us, hidden in plain sight.

The labels we tag on the marginalized include crippled, crazy, druggie, depressed, suicidal, peculiar, homeless, eccentric, old -- in other words, the physically, mentally and developmentally disabled, along with some of the elderly.

It is no coincidence that most of the labelled are poor.

But their poverty is not merely economic. It is far more profound. It is the poverty of emotional neglect and societal exclusion.

That's why the approach in the community sector has changed radically in the past couple of decades.

Rather than try to "fix" individuals, there is an attempt to change attitudes in society; rather than focus on charity and handouts, there is a focus on inclusion and citizenship; rather than make marginalized people dependants of the social welfare system, the emphasis is on allowing them to become full members of society.

In an essay in the most recent edition of the e-zine published by Philia -- a dynamic and visionary group attempting to create a more dedicated citizenship -- Al Etmanski notes that countless organizations have been created to

assist people with disabilities, but very few have placed any importance on true inclusion in society, and fewer still have succeeded.

The co-founder of the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, which creates circles of caring for and with people with disabilities, recognized long ago that the key prerequisite to inclusion is friendship.

In his essay, Mr. Etmanski reflects on the fact that so few labelled Canadians enjoy genuine relationships -- those that are "reciprocal, heartfelt and freely given, not the occasional 'hello' on the bus, eating lunch in the food court and the odd 'friendly' visit."

At this time of year, when we are feeling particularly charitable, many people content themselves by tossing a toonie in a beggar's hat, stuffing some bills in the Salvation Army kettle, donating some of our precious time to a soup kitchen and visiting an elderly relative in a nursing home.

But how many of us will, in our resolutions, vow to make those relationships more meaningful and lasting?

How many of us will dare to try to be a true friend to an aunt with Alzheimer's, to the little boy in the wheelchair we wave to every day, to the frightened teenage son of a workmate who suffers from schizophrenia, or the lonely widow next door who will spend Christmas (and the many months that follow) painfully alone?

"The reality is that nurturing relationships takes longer and is more complex and mysterious than many of us realized," Mr. Etmanski says wistfully.

Be that as it may, it is not an excuse for not trying.

The yearning to belong is profound.

Yet loneliness and isolation are pervasive -- a reality that is most blatantly obvious at this time of year.

The ability to belong, to be a full member of society, should be and must be a fundamental characteristic of a just society.

Welcoming isolated, marginalized individuals into relationships and community needs to be an integral part of social policy and, more important, a goal that we set for ourselves as individuals, as families and as communities.

"To end loneliness and isolation, we must be intentional. Intentional and bold," Mr. Etmanski says.

We need a societal vision (and enabling infrastructure) that has as its principal feature not a safety net but a springboard to equality. Only then will we have a truly healthy nation.

This goal is bigger than any single service provider, consumer group or government.

But achieving it begins with individuals -- each of them reaching out a hand in friendship.

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