

Maylie Scott Meets Loneliness

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from "The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women" by
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Crying in despair, an earnest student asked her teacher, Seisho Maylie Scott, "I've worked so hard to transform this crippling loneliness. I can neither shake it nor live with it. Can you help me?"

Holding the student in a steady gaze and offering her confident smile, Maylie ended the conversation with, "Please don't ever think anything is out of place."

DIANE MUSHO HAMILTON'S REFLECTION:

"Don't ever think anything is out of place." Hmmm ... What is the teacher saying here? Is she empathizing with the student's feeling, her bodily ache, her lament? Does the teacher fully feel the serious plight of a heart filled with longing? Why doesn't she comfort her student, promising that everything will be OK?

Instead she says, "Don't ever think that anything is out of place." Her words seem strangely impersonal for such a question. They invoke an image not of a person but of a dinner table before the meal is served. The way white plates are evenly spaced, folded napkins to one side, wine glasses above. Forks line up, then spoons; one knife for cutting, another for spreading. Flowers bend out from the center, candlelight glints off silver and glass. Everything in its place.

"How can loneliness have an appropriate place? Loneliness is the essential human cry that something is wrong. The word loneliness evokes to me an image of the dinner table after the meal is over and the guests have all gone home. The table is cluttered with dirty plates and a smattering of silverware; wine and candle wax stain the table-cloth. Suddenly, you find yourself all alone in a silent house, with no one to help you clean up.

Loneliness, by its very nature, is out of place. It is not orderly or aligned. It has the messy dimensions all bad feelings do. It hurts. It is the baby crying for its mother, the lover reaching out in the night for the one who has left. Loneliness yearns for someone to come; it pines for something to change. Yet the teacher tells us, "Don't ever think anything is out of place." What happens when we just allow loneliness to be as it is?

I have spent a great deal of my life working with loneliness. I am one of those people whose main strategy to secure myself in life is through connecting with others—making friends and creating a sense of belonging. I went one step further in my work and became a mediator, a professional in bringing people together. I worked to help people understand one another, to exchange points of view, and to solve problems together.

One night, after a long day of communication training in New York City, I was sitting in the bathtub when a profound loneliness overcame me. I had just spent the day with

many open-hearted, communicative people, and yet, just a few hours later, I was feeling alone in a way I had never felt before. For a moment, I panicked. There is no place like New York City to really feel existential loneliness when it comes knocking. Such a strong feeling won't go away by recalling a comforting memory or by reaching for the phone. It demands to be felt—felt beyond the boundaries of self-concept, beyond the limits of belonging, beyond any other source of security. It's scary. Primordial loneliness puts us on notice that in many ways, including dying, we are completely on our own.

With nowhere else to go, I allowed this loneliness in. As I sank deeper into the feeling and into the tub, something surprising happened. I felt the warmth of the water surround my skin and saw the steam rising and fading. The tub showed up vivid and white, and the walls stood out in their dingy hotel yellow. Soon the pipes, the faucets, the toilet, and the sink were all there. Nothing was out of place, and I couldn't have felt more at home.

Seishi Maylie Scott was right. When we make room for loneliness, we allow for everything. We experience directly the pain of the separate self, and we can see beyond its limits to everything as it is. Nothing can ever be out of place. The one true heart that embraces all things reveals itself to us. As the great Sufi poet Rumi wrote: "A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all." The cry of our loneliness has a place at the table, and so does our tenderness. Our troubling questions are good company. And the teacher's response is a smiling welcome to all of our life: "Don't ever think that anything is out of place."

Include all of the unexpected visitors, and entertain them all. How do you accept the unacceptable? If nothing is out of place, is there anything we need to change? How does the lonely body feel?"