

A pedagogical interpretation of loneliness for an interiority education

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is a characterizing dimension of the human being become central in our age on account of a widespread crisis and existential unease reflected in fragile identities lacking a relationship with a “you” to refer to. Following the pandemic, loneliness has increased so much that it has outlined an “epidemic of loneliness” to investigate for understanding how to educate to face and elaborate on this human dimension. From a hermeneutic pedagogical perspective, the author proposes an interpretation of the plural manifestations of loneliness as a metaphor for interiority, to help the person rework it within themselves.



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1. Introduction

The physical and social distancing experienced due to the pandemic has contributed to making us feel more alone and aware of living in what is referred to as the ‘century of loneliness’ (Hertz, 2020). If sociology and the human sciences have been recognising the progressive disintegration of human relationships for decades, let us think of the contribution made in this regard by Zygmunt Bauman to the loneliness of the global citizen (Bauman, 2008), it is also true that beyond quantitative observations and descriptions that emerge from the news reports, the investigation of loneliness as an existential experience that describes contemporary human being is still complex. Furthermore, the phase of overcoming the pandemic resulted in a set of negative consequences that call for a deeper understanding of the different meanings of loneliness. Building on the contemporary cultural framework, this contribution proposes a pedagogical interpretation of the links between loneliness and the inner sphere of the person to trace personal and interpersonal dimensions that are fundamental to help them to know themselves and overcome a meaningless existence. The question that human beings ask themselves when in a situation of crisis and difficulty refers to questions that touch upon the issue of life and their identity, and involve both those theorists and practitioners, those who educate and those who are educated because both people are involved in facing the question about their own fragile, incomplete identity and in need to access to the deepest dimension of themselves.

2. Pandemic loneliness and ‘epidemic of loneliness’

An increase in solitude accompanies the current era of disorientation in its most problematic aspects on the education of weak and uncertain identities. These are inclined to succumb to anguish, escape from relationships, and adopt forms of social confinement, as shown by the recent phenomena of social withdrawal among adolescents (Lancini, 2019) and the emerging phenomenon of hikikomori (Ferrara, Franceschini, Corsello, Mestrovic, Giardino, Sacco, Vural, Pettoello-Mantovani, Pop, 2020; Suwa, Suzuki, 2013). These phenomena, present primarily among young people, motivate a

hermeneutic analysis of loneliness concerning the condition that each person lives while being projected in an 'era of sad passions' (Benasayag, Schmit, 2004) and an existential malaise (Han, 2015). More explicitly, by reason of the prevalence of feelings linked to the paradoxical incommunicability of a society where everything revolves around communication, the prevalence of negative emotions refers to existential pain, due to a widespread socio-cultural discomfort that accompanies the perception of the future as a threat instead of as a promise, to the crisis of the principle of authority, to living in contact with unease not only in its pathological manifestations but also as an expression of an enlarged socio-cultural crisis that affects all generations. These experiences and the prevalence of the logic of utilitarianism and individualism influence education and do not facilitate the person's approach to their interiority. The scenarios of contemporary life are, indeed, populated by fragile and lonely identities, by a 'crowded' multitude of people, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, who look at each other from afar, united by a form of 'mutism', of detachment that occurs both among them but also between generations, as well as within the individual who lives as if they were internally mute.

The interpretation of solitude by human and social sciences, as a result of individualism and disintegration of social connections, however, does not satisfy the considerations that emerge from investigating the forms of loneliness in a pathological and clinical sense. The simultaneous proliferation of medical studies, together with the cultural insights (Riesman, 2009) on loneliness, have turned it into an issue to decipher, to understand as a feeling, a mental state, a mere separation from others in terms of a human fact, a disease to be treated (Ferraresi, 2020, p. 11) to recognise loneliness and thus be able to respond to this malaise and absence of meaning by recovering the search for a 'you'. Alongside these factors, we should also consider that the digital revolution's impact, with the influence of social networks, has changed human relationships, projecting them into a hyper-connection that does not bring them closer but separates them. Many forms of loneliness (Forte, Quinzio, 2003; Pinelli, 2006), such as uprooting and existential crises experienced by people, groups and families, appear even more paradoxical in an era of global communication: if on the one hand, we can get in touch with anyone in any part of the planet in just one instant, on the other hand, we live in a time where loneliness and complicated human relationships are the predominant features. We are in close contact with others, but it is as if we are afraid of the encounter; we defend our spaces for fear of being invaded by others and we place limits on the relationship. Furthermore, the negative implications of loneliness, which have grown with the recent pandemic, are not new to the human condition. As can be seen from the different forms of narration and expressiveness, from art to poetry to literature, human beings have always manifested their feeling of loneliness. Contemporary art is after all a condensed expression of an intimate feeling of anguish that accompanies feeling alone and that artists reveal from within: let us think of the malaise that transpires in the works of the painter Edvard Munch, which can represent a synthesis of the anguish and pain experienced by contemporary man (Clarke, 2009), or we can think of evocative works such as *The Cry* (1893), *Melancholy* (1891) or *Desperation* (1893) and how art, in general, has contributed to expressing the ever-growing existential unease of a communication-based society in which emotions and feelings are, in fact, incommunicable.

The images we receive from poetic and artistic productions effectively define a world inhabited by forms of aloneness and experiences that reveal the prevalence of feelings such as melancholy (Guardini, 2008) and the sense of eradication of 'temporary identities' (Augé, 1992, 1993). The loss of one's roots increases the sense of eradication and activates the need for grounding in the human soul (Weil, 1996) to fight the sense of anonymity in life, boredom, indifference, and the lack of meaning.

If aloneness is not a new state of mind, what is new is its intensification in relation to the growth of forms of distance (Musaio, 2020) that reflect a sense of existential crisis and suffering, as well as the disintegration of connections. Nevertheless, the paradox of contemporary solitude lies in living in a time full of opportunities, communication tools, and closeness, while feelings of loneliness are escalating. Against this is the increase in the frequency with which one uses narratives on social media, a demonstration of widespread loneliness that matches the need to narrate oneself (Augé, 2018; Hertz, 2020, pp. 109-146). As writers and analysts point out, people are no longer able to speak during analysis, they prefer to spend most of their lives writing (Cotroneo, 2018). Writing about oneself becomes a form of self-care that speaks of loneliness, of that deep need for knowledge of ourselves that flows uninterruptedly into the story of our lives. Reflecting on the meaning of many experiences

that accompany loneliness is central also to the reflection on education, to understand the innumerable nuances of crises and fragility experienced by a depressed human being who lives with 'a heavy head' (Ternynck, 2011, p. 28). It is a person weakened by the consequences of individualism and the intrapsychic dynamic of contradictions that work within; an evolved subject on the one hand and a variable and inconstant subject on the other, all the while free and threatened by the countless forms of addictions experienced. In all cases, our research needs to consider that when people report their feeling lonely, we must not confuse the sense of loneliness with aloneness as an objective dimension: the first is, in fact, an eminently subjective state that includes the reference to different psychic realities, among which the experience of lack, loss and inner emptiness is often predominant, recognising the surrounding environment as desolate, deserted and distant or as threatening, so much so that the subject 'more than just with himself, he is alone against all' (*Ibid*, p. 31).

In the open and fluctuating discussion between cultural and social considerations and pathological repercussions, the acknowledgment advances that to understand what appears to be an 'epidemic of loneliness', a photographic investigation or recording data and events is not enough. It seems necessary to look for the causes that go to the fundamentals of our societies, particularly when they highlight that loneliness conveys the 'one-dimensional representation of a problem that instead requires delving into [...] the bowels of the mountain of evil that afflicts us' (Ferraresi, 2020, p. 92), that lives as a 'short circuit', that is, having chosen loneliness as the result of a life project deliberately designed and implemented, for which what is sometimes identified as a full-blown disease, is the inevitable outcome of a perspective that sought liberation, prosperity and happiness, that sought and enthusiastically followed the modern path of liberation from constraints, traditions, and authority. In this regard, Mattia Ferraresi, in his investigation of loneliness as a peril of our age, affirms: 'loneliness has become an alarming mass phenomenon precisely when we have fully achieved our aspirations for independence. It did not happen despite the progress achieved in terms of individual freedom and rights, but because of these' (*Ibid*, p. 93). That modernity which produced the idea of the individual and the subject at the center of the world, projected towards the emancipation of the self, also activated the idea of the solitude of the subject who runs alone, against himself, because the idea imposed is that to fulfill oneself one must necessarily be alone, sever all ties, bonds, and moral obligations: 'In philosophical terms, we can say that modernity has introduced a solitary anthropology. And this has been largely internalised, it is adhered to in an unconscious way, it is accepted as an assumption' (*Ibid*, p. 95).

Suppose loneliness is the paradoxical outcome of a precise concept of freedom that has led man to set himself free from everything. In that case, the consequence is that he has found himself with nothing left, all alone, a 'fragile me without a you to turn to' or, even worse, obsessed with self-concern. It is the development displayed by narcissism as a fixation with one's image, a form of mental slavery that dominates Western culture and its recurring reference to 'being oneself'. The disproportionate concern with the self, as already indicated by Christopher Lasch in 1979 in *The culture of narcissism*, highlights how narcissism has become a characteristic trait that has overstepped the boundaries of simple hedonism to become a pathological state, a disorder of the personality on a collective level. Narcissism has given rise to a disturbed human being who manifests an increasing number of disorders because of an increasing loss in social skills and relational abilities beyond the boundaries of the self. As Han states: 'The narcissistic *homo psychologicus* is a prisoner in himself, in his own tangled interiority. His lack of world experience simply makes him spin around, so he falls into depression' (Han 2019, p. 36).

3. Plural solitudes

With the recent pandemic scenario, loneliness has been growing significantly in relation to the condition of the most fragile ones, such as adolescents and the elderly: boys and girls experience storms of contradictory feelings and require someone with whom to share, talk, discuss, and are at risk of consuming their thoughts in solitude and in a world where more and more adults are afraid of being such. In the case of the elderly, it is rather a loneliness that is accompanied by the growing fragility of changes and physical and cognitive decay and the difficulties and sufferings of life, even if

What really hurts them is not the pain, it is not the suffering, because suffering and pain belong to life, they are faithful companions of any lifetime. What is truly frightening is that sense of loneliness that makes one lose contact with others, with the world, with oneself... (De Rienzo, 2022).

Just like when one feels weary in front of a landscape in dull light or the things one believes in, loneliness speaks of that 'hunger' for words needed to tell life, to declare its meaning, its mystery. While the 'culture of performance' (Benasayag, 2015, p. 17) predominantly occupies and absorbs our thoughts, we follow and keep pursuing health, beauty, and moral values, and also experience the wound of feeling abandoned in relation to ourselves, almost desperate. Sometimes for some, these experiences lead to despair, irreparable gestures, or a life lived in a perennial expectation. In all cases, loneliness is a sign of what the poet Mariangela Gualtieri indicates as the shape of a distance that implies a path so that one may be able to bridge the distance experienced between what one feels and what one does, between what one awaits and investigates and the little one knows (Gualtieri, 2021, p. 22).

The forms of unease that come with loneliness are very often concealed, hidden, implicit and require to be intercepted, recognised, and interpreted to know the person's condition and activate a helping relationship. In this regard, it is essential to understand the implicit forms of loneliness, for example, concerning adolescents' communication of distress. A request for help regarding loneliness has recently emerged through forms of street writings that carry emblematic phrases such as 'I, I, I, I, I, ... I feel alone' in the context of an Italian school. Or 'There's nowhere for me to be' that appeared on the walls of a high school in a provincial town. In all cases, these are anonymous messages. These communications resemble messages in a bottle aimed at talking about a feeling of loneliness and abandonment so deep that adolescents feel they cannot find a place to stay. However, these messages also speak of distress buried within a time of non-listening and indifference. Here is an increasing need to build the conditions for the encounter with the 'you', to open up beyond oneself and be challenged by loneliness, and recognise relationship as an element peculiar to the human being.

Within the broader discourse developed by a hermeneutic pedagogy, loneliness is investigated in its many forms and manifestations, and can be defined as:

- *communicative loneliness*, as a result of the excessive use of information technology tools which lead to isolation and make one incapable of sustaining a relationship in the presence of others. This loneliness characterises all generations indifferently. It binds children to the loneliness of their parents and that society where virtual self-education is predominant, and socialisation is entrusted mainly to social networks where everyone searches for the confirmation of their needs for recognition, self-esteem, and gratification. In this regard, let us think of the loneliness of adolescents crushed by digital conformity, increasingly less in relationship with the family where the educational model based on the relationship is replaced by the rigid model of responding to parental expectations rather than the desire to discover the children's uniqueness and the need to discover always new paths;

- *developmental loneliness*, which influences children when they grow up alone as only children, immersed in a world of adults and elderly, deprived of a dialogical environment in the family and of the opportunity to share moments of leisure and play to spend in their parents' company. It affects adolescents, too. Fragile persons oriented to satisfy their need for admiration (Charmet Pietropoli, 2019), who, despite enjoying a hyper-organised life, apparently equipped with everything they need, are lacking in points of reference and of models that inspire them to build their individuality within authoritative and dialogical educational styles rather than within merely compensatory educational styles established by adults who seek to haggle over well-being and consumerism to fill gaps. In this way adolescents feel less safe and increasingly more alone to the extent that their aloneness escalates to real pathologies, seeking refuge in the various forms of addiction such as prescription drugs, smoking, drugs, food, alcohol, and the internet. Developmental loneliness affects older adults, too. They are cornered by a socio-economic system that considers them weak people because they are no longer productive and useful, thus leading them to a 'social death' through the loss of the status and educational authority that they could, instead, exercise towards the generations;

- *loneliness in the family*, reflects the profile of an increasingly mononuclear and urban, restricted and fragile family. The origins can be found in the crisis of increasingly precarious unions, the lack of space for dialogue and communication, and the difficulty of reconciling work and family life, so that

the energies that should be destined to strengthen the family nucleus from within are lost instead. This loss correlates to 'a silent crisis', permeated with boredom, loneliness, a sort of 'technological autism' that affects both young and adults and which should elicit to find other resources, creativity, restore the centrality of the experience shared by being together and living the encounter with the other rather than the intrusiveness of the virtual;

- *suffered loneliness* occurs in people's lives for different reasons and becomes intertwined with their aspiration to seek more humane living conditions for themselves and their families. It is the case of failed unions, separations, or people who live integration and inclusion experiences in a context different from their origins, forced to look for ways to survive and not fall victim to abandonment, misery, and nostalgia. Let us consider the loneliness of immigrant children, who experience the difference as the anomaly in their life. For them, loneliness becomes the price to pay for integration and inclusion that are never simple and automatic, which sometimes struggle to happen and call upon recognition and acceptance as an option for these children to seek ways of accessing their inner 'deserts' (Fabre, 2004, p. 73). A recording of the various experiences of aloneness demonstrates the importance of investigating the complex nature of an experience that is indivisible from our condition, as the expression of a shortcoming that distinguishes us and that we try to fill, reflecting it in the way of forming our identity, in educational styles and references.

4. The interpretation of a fragile and polar identity

Given the complex scenario of today's problematic issues, surveying the main forms of loneliness implies considering that they are transversal to the different ages of life and that they combine to undermine the idea of a solid and self-possessed subject, to highlight instead an increasingly more vulnerable identity (Lévinas, 1979), that needs to understand the meaning of one's subjectivity and of educating and educating oneself to recognise one's interiority instead. In this direction, pedagogical reflection remarks on the need to decipher the human being in-depth in the dimensions that intrinsically belong to them: the meaning of the self, otherness, the relationship and encounter with the other, to counteract estrangement and recover the 'infinite shades of interiority' (Borgna, 2021) that are sometimes difficult to intercept and recognize.

The progressive advancement from the outer to the inner dimensions of the person during the educational process requires us to be more and more aware of the manifestations of difficulty that the person encounters while trying to 'gravitate' around their 'center'. By avoiding reducing it to randomness and releasing it from the multiplicity of individual manifestations, the person can once again find their profundity. Recalling Romano Guardini's polar perspective of interiority, we can say that the human condition is constantly in flux; it cannot reach an immutable perfection but needs to seek a continuous balance as a synthesis between different oppositions.

Underlining the polarity that distinguishes us has the merit of making us trace the presence in us of an inner space that, although difficult to detect, intervenes in the elaboration of our identity, helps us to make ourselves transparent to ourselves, capable of disposing of ourselves independently.

The awareness of our identity as vulnerable and polar as well allows us to develop stimulating implications from an educational point of view:

- *to recall the presence of an inner center* to not live exclusively in relation to something external to us, but something reflecting within ourselves;
- *to perceive and live singly* not as a fragment versus a totality, but as a unique and unitary personality, who, starting from an inner personal nucleus project themselves through action towards the outside, knowing how to return, consequently, towards one's interior and recognising the spaces of one's own interiority;
- *to search for a harmonic order* within oneself, identifying oneself in their own center that operates as a focus from which the person grows and expands, in relation to the education of their identity, which becomes the inner symbolic place in which one conveys their capacity for self-possession, not as a mere search for self and individual well-being, but rather as a search for an *authentic identity*.

The increasingly invisible vulnerabilities and multiple forms of loneliness, the anguish of living, soul-sickness, and uprootedness experienced by many people, are not without impact on the

pedagogical reflection on identity. Pedagogy must urgently consider the problematic aspects of an identity faced with existential situations of unease and distress that require elaboration into possibilities and prospects towards life and fulfillment. These findings call for a refocusing of two fundamental dimensions of contemporary pedagogical discourse:

- *the attention to the person*, the cornerstone of contemporary pedagogy, that has progressively matched education with the demands, requirements, the need for recognition of diversity, and the expectations of human realisation, to be reinterpreted by listening to the changing needs that come from cultural changes, from the influence of today's prevailing consumer culture, rather than from what emerges from within the personal and inner dimension of people.
- *the hermeneutics of fragilities, difficulties, and forms of existential unease*, can become favorable opportunities for an inner self-understanding to enter the understanding of one's 'interiority' that blossoms from one's potential and from the re-elaboration of situations of fragility through references to the difficulty and illness in its psychological, human and existential implications.
- The two dimensions recalled are essential for tracing the skills and competencies of pedagogical and educational professionals who work in the socio-educational services environment to help people in conditions of fragility.

The helping relationship contexts recognise fragility as an experience that, while making us meet the needs, difficulties, differences, resources and potential of people, helps to develop a space of mediation between inner and outer life, between us and the other, between people and the community. The dimension of fragility is the fundamental element for a joint project that promotes the characteristics and aspirations of every human being, to strive for the construction of the common good, towards a community life based on sharing and a sense of proximity (Musaio, 2021).

The recognition of problematic aspects runs with the identification of an ethic oriented towards the formation of an ego capable of responding to oneself and constructing oneself in a free and autonomous manner but also of restoring a sense of responsibility suitable for releasing the subject from loneliness and isolation, of directing one to the formation of bonds and to take over one's educational role of care towards oneself and towards others. Here lies pedagogy's stimulating inspiring role on a reflective but practical and experimental level too, when it investigates the conditions and purposes for which to educate, the search for the sense and meaning that education has for the human being and tries to trace the 'clues' of the inexhaustible educability that people can show, despite the difficulties. This emphasis brings us more deeply into the heart of the human condition about the meaning of subjectivity and the question of the subject to be considered in relation to the acknowledgment of its irreducibility to mere 'emergency', as Morin affirms, but looking upon that mysterious component according to which the human being is like a 'secret cosmos' (Morin, 2002, p. 43).

An interpretation of loneliness can help people recognise and activate inner resources, creativity, and unimagined potential as well as can seek solutions to problematic situations by leveraging the personal potential that would otherwise remain unexpressed. Therefore, it is necessary to overcome the approach of avoiding the dangers and threats loneliness exposes to and endorse a *perspective of promoting* the possibilities that it can offer, entering into one's and others' frailties, educating the human being to assume their possibility and freedom. To arouse a profound sense of one's abilities, dispose of one's limits, go beyond the categorisations that enclose the human being, and activate a preferential channel to seize the potential that the person can obtain from difficult, painful, but also creative experiences.

Attention to loneliness becomes a motive for a hermeneutic reflection aimed at helping every person, at any age of life, to think about themselves and to be able to 'read' their living condition, to be able to recognise and cultivate their singularity and potential, in relation to oneself and others. From within the aloneness, the human being is prompted to recognise the peculiar character of some of the specific experiences lived, for example, in interpersonal relationships.

As Martin Buber points out, when the person perceives their aloneness, they are invested by the thrill of estrangement between the self and their surroundings, but also by the thought that it is necessary to do something, face the difficulties and meet the You, because, as Buber affirms: 'This

fragile life between birth and death can be truly fulfilling: if it becomes dialogue' (Buber, 2009, p. 49).

The encounter with the other finds expression, through the ability to communicate, in that feature peculiar to the human being, the *word*. This specific dimension expresses itself in the ability to think, reflect, understand each other, and enter into relationships with objects, others, the world, and culture. We name things through the word, allowing us to give a human appearance to reality. Thought and word are in an inseparable relationship and contribute to delineating the specificity of the subject as a set of *homo loquens* and *homo cogitans*. The person's need for the word is a need to exist because the word is not only a communicative and linguistic tool to express himself. It rather betokens the dialogical nature of the human being: their being intrinsically connoted by the interpersonal relationship (Gevaert, 1992, pp. 22-47) and his 'being with others'. If we hold on to these considerations, we understand how loneliness's denial of these possibilities establishes a condition of *distance from oneself* that needs to be investigated to discern in what ways it can be formative or negative.

5. Loneliness as a metaphor for interiority

If we examine the experience of loneliness, it is as if, metaphorically, the human being wanted to 'deal only with themselves' and, at the same time, free themselves from this condition (Bobin, 1999, p. 188) to try to oppose the fragmentation of the dispersed parts of the self. The problems that man faces in solitude are not located outside himself but within himself. Several references in the thought of James Hillman support this statement. He points out: 'today's historical disturbances are not simply in the 'outside', because we are not merely passive victims that have stumbled upon the clinical case of world history, without weight on the scale of events, powerless to 'change things'. Instead, we know that these disorders and these addictions reflect the polar split in the archetype that most of all pertains to history' (Hillman, 2011, p. 66).

The human being internally expresses a split from within themselves associated with two original images: the *puer*, the child with their unrelenting why's, connected to the blossoming of things, and the *senex* that refers to the icon of the harvest. The internal split resides in the alternation between flowering and harvest as images that ensue one another intermittently throughout life. The process of individuation is a ceaseless call for us to face this polarity: the prevailing issue of the inner person because of that *kairos*, that condition of formative expectation that the human being experiences, due to the need for transformation, of continuous transition that the person has to live if they want to grasp the connection between past and future within themselves, individually considered, to be able to save themselves from self-destruction.

In addressing the problem of the inner human being, we have to consider that this theme is certainly not a new pattern in the history of human thought. Interiority has a pervasive semantic field, which refers to a vast constellation of concepts and terms connected to it: the soul, the ego, the self, identity, subjectivity and subjectivism, objectivity and objectification, consciousness and self-awareness, the unconscious, the mind, cognition, emotions. This broad spectrum of references is then structured according to the axis of the subjectivity-objectivity relationship, in addition to an existential dimension that we live in the first person, also as a reality that can be approached in line with the different areas of study: philosophical-anthropological, psychological-scientific, and in recent years in the neuroscientific area too.

The plurality of factors at stake directs our attention to recognising the circularity between genetic-biological factors on the one hand and personal, cultural-relational factors on the other. Such circularity involves a set of processes that are part of our subjective experiences. Instead, an objective approach risks distorting an irrepressible need for a subjective 'consistency' that human beings feel within themselves. We recognise the contribution of psychoanalysis in revealing an entire interior dimension beyond consciousness. However, it cannot be taken as a starting point and reference point of interiority as it is itself a territory to be inversely explored from the 'bottom up', which is constituted by our biological nature and the implications with the body (Jervis, 2011), rather than from the 'top-down' which still guides psychoanalysis.

To broaden the investigation into the meaning of interiority in consideration of the current socio-cultural scenario, we must point out the presence of dynamics that do not favor individual awareness.

A cultural framework dominated by the logic of usefulness, profit, technique and efficiency, identifies education primarily with socialisation and the usefulness of learning skills helpful for orienting oneself in the knowledge-based society. These characteristics appear with the prevalence of nihilistic and nonsense drifts and educational rhetoric that leads us to believe that the causes of the problems must necessarily be detected in children, young people, new generations, or adults. On the other hand, many scholars, such as Bauman have highlighted how internal 'changeability and vulnerability' prevail in the world of adults; while Ulrich Beck affirmed that we are all 'autobiographies at risk', with the consequence of incurring the loss of the centrality of the human, leaving space to an education perfectly aligned with the learning of skills and adaptation attitudes to context conditions. Based on this framework, there seems to be no more space for the subject to learn to stay within oneself, and pay attention to one's history and personal identity, cultivating existential attitudes that feed on one's inner dimensions. Therefore, the importance of helping to discern a *component of introspection in the experience of loneliness*, keeping open the possibility of making a *narrative journey* within oneself. Recognising the significance of an interior space as a place where one can trace implicit personal components, not always easy to bring out, sometimes dispersed, fragmented, is important for many young people whose path towards identity appears marked by discomfort and at the same time by the need to be helped to rediscover their potential, not only gaps to fill, hardships, losses, shortcomings, traumas, not just judgments that others try to build around their identity, but their latent talents, the beauty of penetrating into one's nakedness and entering it and finding the reasons to oppose a false self, to accomplish a rebirth and be able to prefigure the opportunity to rediscover oneself as a person and not just a character in a story.

The return to that inner language, as psychoanalysts call it, or of that ability to 'converse with my soul', as Rousseau put it to signify a happy solitude, becomes a reason to implement an examination of oneself, to discover one's internal dispositions and arrange them in the best way possible, exercising the 'habit of returning to oneself', 'shedding light within', of knowing not with the aim to instruct and teach, but to 'learn' to shed light first of all within oneself (Rousseau, 2009, p. 31).

The meditation that solitude can offer becomes a self-examination, a set of personal tools of self-knowledge that converge in that searching within which Hillman speaks of at length in *Insearch, Psychology and Religion*, where he adopts the term *insearch, search inside, inner research*, versus research, as a provocative opposition to the objectivistic research around the soul, now lost, and that contemporary society tends to seek through psychotherapy, which has an affinity with religious activity and with the awakening of religious sentiment. In motivating the inner search, Hillman highlights how for the person, being in a human world does not only mean taking shape as a social being but instead having a life of feelings and encounters with others. The encounter implies a problem of distance and inner connection:

To be in contact with you I need to be in contact within myself. If I am not connected within me and you come and bridge the distance between us, this can cause me to rush across it by the power of attraction [...] and fall into your arms and lose my identity; or I may panic about your invasion (Hillman, 1967, 2010, p. 38).

Human connection between people certainly finds its nourishment in extroverted experiences, externalisation, through interchange and interpersonal relationships, but the intrapersonal relationship is also essential. In Hillman's words, it is 'the vertical connection downwards within each individual. If I have constituted this axis, I am present with my feeling, my listening, I am open to myself within myself, and whoever arrives, I am anchored, rooted, I am a fixed and rotating pivot that no magic lamp can move from afar' (*Ibid*, p. 39).

It is essential that each subject establishes an internal connection, as Hillman defines it, that contact that two people are able to create with each other from within themselves, in being open and connected to each other, which provides us with an interpretation of interiority as a component that is not only personal but which is outlined in an internal connection with the other: 'The ground of being in the depths is not simply my personal ground: it is everyone's universal support, to which everyone finds access through an internal connection' (*Ibidem*). However, the interiority reached by means of an internal connection through which to seek a 'common human soul' where our needs and those of others are reflected, even without an active interchange on a personal level, leads to questions about what 'the inside' in us is, i.e. the nature of the unconscious. Hillman accomplishes the exploration of inner space by re-examining the term unconscious, so widely used that it is taken for granted whereas it must be demonstrated as it is grounded on an experiential basis that draws on our ability to forget

and to remember, habit, verbal association, multiple personality experiences. Yet, as we penetrate the analysis of depth through the classic demonstrations of the unconscious, so as to give this term a correct empirical or phenomenological basis, we notice that it is ‘the door through which we pass to find the soul’, ‘through the experience of the unconscious I gain in the soul’ (*Ibid*, p. 68). Here, one encounters the soul, a third psychic reality, after the mind and the unconscious, which turns out to be the seat of a world of experiences, emotions, fantasies, moods, visions, dreams, dialogues, physical sensations; a large open space, free and spontaneous, an essential sphere of ‘significance’ (*Ibid*, p. 69).

Significance, transcendence, and depth are criteria that justify psyche’s life as a *soul*, in that the reference to the vertical direction that characterise it, downwards and inwards of ourselves are proof of the fact that, as Hillman points out, the inner search is ever more necessary today, since we are aware of how much it is over-determined by the Christian signs that indicate an upward direction, while our ethical behaviors lean downward. The importance of investing in the inner life, of increasing its relevance, even in converting fantasy into imagination, as a work that ‘is the basis of the arts, it is the basis of the new steps we take in life because the vision of our personal future comes as fantasies first’ (*Ibid*, p. 119).

It is not easy to define the nature of our inner life. Even this survey is certainly not a novelty in the history of thought which has time and again referred to an intertwining of thought, emotional and affective life, expectations of our desiring nature, but also of our ideal, ethical and spiritual tension, as an ensemble of issues that make the knowledge of ourselves complex. After all, philosophical culture too has transmitted to us a multiplicity of terms in this regard: classical culture has bequeathed the term *psyché*, Latin and medieval culture up to the modern age has handed down to us the use of the term *soul*; from the modern age onwards the term *mind* has prevailed, even though, beyond the different terminological choices, we have continued to speak of interiority to suggest different aspects that time after time recall affectivity, conscience, freedom, the personality as a whole. We must not neglect to consider also that when we talk about interiority in reference to the person, it is easy to fall into a dualistic perspective as if it were a dimension in itself, detached from the person themselves, almost as if two different and opposing persons were taking shape within us: the inner and the one visible from the outside. This way of understanding and, to a certain extent, of ‘visualising’ interiority does not help to grasp the intrinsic relationship that it has with the person in its complexity. Rather it emphasises fractures and divisions not only on a personal but also on an interpersonal level, where an authentic promotion of the self as a person takes place not through the centering on one’s self as a closed and circumscribed reality but only through opening to others and the Other from the self.

6. Conclusions: from solitude to relationship, towards an education of interiority

The condition of crisis, anxiety and fragility leads us to recognise the human being only in terms of the paradigm of our age. The sense of closure in oneself, in many cases transformed into ‘darkness of the soul’ and an unbridgeable void, are the traits of an enigmatic condition that can develop into forms of loneliness that require to be taken on with suitable preventive and educational practices.

For these reasons, faced with the many solitudes that emerge for people as conditions of inner detachment and deprivation of ties and the possibility of relating with others, pedagogical reflection is urged to refine the methods of study and interpretation of the new needs of people, and it is exhorted to refine the hermeneutic skills of educators, teachers and social operators called to carry out relationship and help tasks (Musaio, 2020).

Granted that loneliness causes the person to fall back into the fragility of a condition that requires access to the recovery of the relationship with the other that establishes us (Cacioppo, 2009), it also discloses the sphere of the helping relationship as a pedagogical device enacted by subjects and operators of socio-educational services committed to welcoming people in conditions of loneliness and fragility.

A helping relationship for situations of loneliness acts on different levels:

- *individual*, because the helping relationship intertwines loneliness with the issue of education and formation of identity and personal value, with the process of self-fulfillment and the experimentation of the potentialities that distinguish us, with ideals and life projects, with the drive to self-realisation in reference to the system of values and our ideal ego, despite the difficulty that this entails;

- *relational*, given that the interpretation of loneliness leads to investigating the sphere of fragility, needs, stories, discomforts, and traumas, as a composite ensemble of personal difficulties and richness that characterises every human being and faces them through the relationship, which becomes a means of mediation between the person's inner and outer life;
- *community*, because of the possibility that the helping relationship offers in becoming the founding element for an elaboration of loneliness not only on a personal but on a broader level, involving the different persons of the community, recognising the characteristics and aspirations of the human being in striving to build a community life based on sharing, ensuring evolutionary steps both to the individual and to the community, in terms of educational responsibilities and collaboration on a joint project. On the contrary, the prevalence of a culture of indifference towards the good of all results in indifference towards people and their central and strategic role in building a culture of commitment, running the risk of indifferent, individualistic attitudes, inspired by disengagement towards values rather than by the construction of shared values.

Nevertheless, the question raised by the different forms of aloneness appeals above all to how one can overcome negative loneliness to help the person open up to the recovery of the meaning of one's life. In this direction, pedagogy's contribution to science, theory and art is situated. While recognising a set of educable potentialities in each person, pedagogy is concerned with studying how to respond to the vast range of the person's educational needs, understanding individual processes by recognising that these reflect their uniqueness in each one and activating the need for personalised and differentiated paths suitable for the formation of identity and the construction of a life project.

If educating means promoting the growth of each person by guaranteeing their full integration into society, then it is also necessary to call into question the path to be taken to proceed from solitude to relationships and prevent transforming it into incommunicability. Aloneness is an experience we can retrieve as a possibility to enter into intimacy with ourselves, to get to know ourselves, and to learn to recognise our inner dimension and communicate it to others. Only by knowing myself, my uniqueness, and accepting myself (Guardini, 1967, 2007), can I be able to overcome the narcissism that emerges as a form of 'religion of the self' (Musaio, 2013, p. 48), to access to my interiority and be able to speak to the interiority of the other.

The proposal of an *education of interiority* and *to interiority* implies helping to implement the passage from exteriority to the knowledge of one's inner dimension, to generate within us authentic demands of interiority and reduce those that push towards loneliness and indifference, carelessness, detachment from oneself, an inauthentic life, dependence on the realms of images and addiction.

Educating to cultivate the inner space is part of a pedagogical thought and educational practices that trace multiple references in the history of thought, studies, and research identifiable as 'pedagogy of the interiority' (Musaio, 2010; Musaio, 2015). It is a perspective that starts from the basic assumption that to educate about interiority, it is necessary to consider the *existential condition of the person*, also in relation to hard experiences, limitations, suffering and loneliness, which determine a sense of fragmentation but also a supplementary question: the human being, lost in one's thoughts and solitude, withdraws into oneself, metaphorically as if lying on the floor, and in the emptiness of one's difficulty and pain, one can come to endure a condition of the malaise of the soul that invades one and reduces one to an enigmatic figure. If one is unable to seize that call to life that spurs one to recover from the nagging pain, the risk is that one becomes a victim of loneliness. Here arises the need for an investigation that helps to recover the person to an exercise of self-knowledge and of one's intimacy with themselves, because only by knowing myself do I know my interiority and can I speak to the interior of the other. It is with this view that we can find numerous references still relevant today in the Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius when he states: 'Collect yourself: the guiding principle is by nature such as to be sufficient in itself, when it operates the right and finds, by doing so, the quiet' (Marco Aurelio, 1989, p. 149). The man who acts guided by the inner principle is in a state of harmony with nature, faces the events in such a way that he can easily adapt to what is possible, tends to realise his purposes and does not take random actions. Above all, he is the man who means to look into things: 'Look inside things: do not let the intrinsic quality or value escape you' (*Ibid*, Book VI, 3, p. 113).

To come back to oneself and know how to carry out the inner exercise corresponds to the search for an 'inner order' that must be traced by withdrawing into oneself to the 'most peaceful and calm place in one's soul'. Considering that external things do not touch us and can never touch the soul, but always remain outside it, it follows that the attitude of the interior person does not reach out towards an external object or fold in on oneself, nor does one become dispersed or get depressed, but one recognises that the answers to one's questions reside within the self: 'Remember that it is hidden within you, that which moves the threads of your existence, and it is activity, it is life, it is the man, if we can say so' (Thoughts, Book X, 38, p. 243).

Coming back to oneself is essential not as a mere self-reflexive exercise as an end in itself, but as the way to seek and develop an inner order that is at the basis of the same ethics of the upright man, who acts according to justice and with benevolence: 'Dig into yourself; within him is the source of good, and he can gush inexhaustibly, if you continue to dig' (Thoughts, Book VII, 59, p. 159.).

Recognising oneself, and finding oneself in one's foundation as a human being, becomes the task of taking care of oneself and of one's educability that helps to move away from the sense of extraneousness towards oneself. Moreover, it is only thanks to this exercise of self-discovery that the person finds the sense of the guiding principle which contains at least three criteria: 1) *being social and being for others*; 2) *setting limits* and not letting oneself be overcome by the movements of the senses or only by instincts; 3) *avoiding making hasty judgments* so as not to fall into deception and be able to trace the plot of our life as the most appropriate thing we can possess.

Ultimately, the workaround one's interiority corresponds to that art of living and knowing how to exercise the skills of living, and also the capacity to be amazed at what happens around us, at all unexpected things, recognising that we are beings dependent on something and the others (Thoughts, Book XII, 1, p. 273). The exercise of interiority reformulates the meaning of being alone because it activates a questioning approach to one's condition of aloneness, which helps to recover, alongside, the meaning of the relationship.

Faced with loneliness, *inner exercise and openness to relationships* emerge as ways to help the person re-establish the connections with the problematic aspects of their life, with their needs, desires, and potential, as activation of empowerment, emotions and of that magmatic set of dimensions that imply the person's willingness to deal with the difficult, uncertain part, with open fronts, fears, inner conflicts. Consequently, the helping relationship towards loneliness acts on different levels: the emotions and deep dynamics, and the processes of communication, learning and interaction with the other. At the basis of a helping dynamics to process loneliness, there is in any case, the rediscovery of a meaningful closeness that the person is called to activate with themselves and their potential, to know and implement themselves as an ensemble of possibilities, - but also as a set of 'uncomfortable' emotions, detached and 'cold' dimensions within us, the outcome of traumas and unspoken wounds- which the relationship helps to recognise and activate in view of a process of awareness that grants the person a 'questioning' approach towards themselves and in view of the flowering of the relationship with the other.

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