

The Time of Loneliness by Whitney A. Bauman

We live in a world of sped-up reality. Sociologists describe the fossil-fuelled pace of our world as a “space-time” crunch. This means that the communities near to us are intersected by global flows of energy and information on a daily basis and that the fossil-fuelled speed at which our lives are lived is outstripping the pace of the planet. For those of us in the economic top one third of the world’s population, we are literally living at a pace that outstrips the planet’s carrying capacity. In other words, fossil-fuelled reality leads to more demands for faster work so that more labor (production) and more leisure (consumption) can take place. On one hand, the world is much smaller and closer together. On the other, the fossil-fuelled world comes at the expense of many earth-others both human and non.

One might think that this “smaller” world would lead to more community and more recognition of the plurality of human cultures and life-forms on the planet. Or, that recognition of a single world might lead us toward understanding ourselves as first and foremost part of a single planetary community. But instead, we are experiencing a rise in nationalism or at least “in-group-ism” on every continent. People seem to want to retreat from this space-time crunch of the globalized world, which is in fact leading not to more connection but to more division. I want to probe one possibility for why this might be the case: loneliness in the modern world.

[Scientific research](#) is beginning to suggest what many of us already may intuitively know: loneliness and social isolation is an epidemic that leads to serious health problems and early death. From school shootings to depression and suicide, to alcohol and drug abuse (rising now significantly among the elderly), loneliness and social isolation have been outed as one of the underlying causes. [Some studies](#) have even suggested that loneliness and social isolation are equal (if not greater) predictors of early death than are smoking, obesity, and alcohol use.

It seems then, that the medical industry would be throwing a lot of money into research on how we might best deal with this epidemic but until very recently, the medical industry has largely ignored it. Part of the reason is that the medical industry, like my own profession of education, is caught up in the fossil-fuelled pace world. In such a world, we rarely have the time to stop and address the more complex issues underlying psychological, physical, and social problems. Rather, in the name of efficiency (especially economic efficiency), the answer seems to be to look for a pharmaceutical fix or at least a fix that is patentable and marketable.

Treating the *symptoms* of loneliness—depression, anxiety, even heart disease and stroke—fall well within the medical industry’s current capacities. But its causes and *solutions* are beyond the medical industry and sometimes, run against the industry’s profit incentives. When the US government’s [National Guideline Clearinghouse](#) for medical information (a resource to help medical professionals correctly diagnose and treat patients, based on reliable medical research) [posted information on non-surgical interventions for back pain](#), the back surgeon lobby protested, leading to attacks on the Clearinghouse by Republicans and cuts in funding.

Money is the currency through which one is able to survive in the fossil-fuelled era. If you have it, you can live as if you do not depend on the time of community life and on the time of planetary systems. You can afford to pay for services that you outsource so you can focus on your career more effectively. You can afford to have a car that enables you to access work and leisure places that those who have no car cannot. You can afford medical insurance, buy a house, have the best education, fly around the planet, and buy the latest technologies. All of these costly things enable living well in the fossil-fuelled world. The medical and education industries, among others, have largely bought in to this fossil-fuelled efficient model and thus search for the pill or easiest route to address symptoms without ever addressing the underlying conditions.

This is not, by the way, the fault of individual medical professionals nor the industry itself, many of whom and much of which are fighting against such “efficient” models for more systemic or holistic understandings of human health. This is the result of deep-rooted habits, emotions, and desires that have become tied up with the benefits of fossil-fuel consumption.

In other words, our hopes, habits, and expectations are changed by our technologies. Our fossil-fuelled era has shifted them toward modes that may not be sustainable for human life, much less the rest of the natural world. At one time, the primary mode of communication was through letters and face-to-face communication; transportation happened on foot or with animals. This meant that the social fabric was developed among bodies that were *present*. Now, with text messaging, emails, chatting, and cell phones, our lives can be virtually spread across the face of the earth. [One study](#) suggests that this distraction from surroundings and face-to-face interaction has changed our intimacy, trust, and happiness even with those in our immediate presence. One outcome is the increase in loneliness and social isolation: as we become more virtual in our communication and more mobile in our transportation, we are more and more removed from those around us and the rest of the natural world.

But technological change doesn't have to mean this if it's embedded within the paces of embodied communities, pays attention to connectivity, and even couches itself within some sort of spirituality. Indeed, [research suggests](#) that those who take part in communities (religious and non) live longer, happier lives than those who do not. Many religious rituals help us to step out of time, or slow down time, so that we can think about what it is we are doing and about our connections with our communities and the rest of the natural world.

These solutions are not the economics of efficiency and fossil-fuelled time but of an eco-social economics and time of planetary flourishing. How might we embed fossil-fuelled technologies within norms/practices that sustain communities, networks of communities, and the rest of the planet?

Naïve answers won't cut it because in our globalized world, community can't be about only a specific locality. But it can't ignore local places, either. Re-imagining our selves as planetary creatures in a planetary community—a cultural shift of *that* size with all the work that entails—might alleviate some loneliness and social isolation.

Whatever the answers to the loneliness of our sped up and shrunken space-time, they cannot come from science and medicine alone. Religious studies, philosophy, literature, etc.—the sciences of values, meaning, and justice—must play an important role in answering what such future visions of the world might look like. And this will only be possible if all the sciences (including the humanities) take time out from the speed of fossil fuels and pivot towards the space and pace of the planet.

Whitney A. Bauman is Co-Founder and Co-Director of Counterpoint as well as Associate Professor of Religious Studies. He is the author of several books and articles including: ***Religion and Ecology: Developing A Planetary Ethic*** (Columbia University Press, 2014).
• <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/religion-and-ecology/9780231163439>
• <https://www.amazon.com/Religion-Ecology-Developing-Planetary-Ethic/dp/0231163436>