

# uOttawa Together Podcast

## Episode 3: Can spirituality help with loneliness?

### **SPEAKERS**

Mark, Sid

### **EPISODE TRANSCRIPT**

#### **Sid**

And I find that and I find that faith connection in being able to speak with God and being able to rest, meditate, breathe, and in breathing, even slowly finding that sense of otherness that is beyond me.

#### **Mark**

Hello and welcome to you uOttawa together. I'm your host Mark Patton. It can be challenging sometimes to feel connected, like you're a part of things. Physical distancing can make this even more challenging. In this podcast, we will be discussing issues related to human connection, interviewing guests, and offering practical ideas and suggestions for building greater feelings of belonging in our lives. Our guest today is Sid Ypma. Sid has been part of the University of Ottawa community working as a chaplain since 2012, and has a Master's of divinity. So Sid, welcome to our show.

#### **Sid**

Thank you, it's good to be here.

#### **Mark**

I guess to start, can you give us a sense of what students are telling you about their experiences with isolation and connection at the moment?

#### **Sid**

Sure, it's a bit of a mix. Depending on on the students situation, some students are, are doing well. And the students that seem to be doing well seem to be the ones that have built a strong bubble, that they're working within. And I've actually been very impressed with the resilience of some students, and recognizing that they, they need social connection. So they're, they have their roommates, and maybe one other group of students, and they're maintaining this regular approach of meeting and seeing each other, but doing so in a safe and appropriate way. But on a more individual basis, I am seeing some students who don't necessarily have those bubbles, who are expressing more frustration. The frustration is interesting to me. Sometimes it's even coming out with a certain amount of anger. Students who, who otherwise I would not have expected to be frustrated, almost beginning to question the state of things just because their lives. They feel as though their lives have been taken away from them. So that's been that's been curious to see some of that, a growing frustration, and then other

students, there's a weariness. Because there is such an open-endedness to this all, it's not like we're saying, well, you have to do this for a month, are you going to be sick for two weeks? But for some, it's it's the open-ended. When is this going to end? And I'm feeling very weary and tired of trying to maintain all of the procedures.

**Mark**

I'd like to take you back a little. And can you tell us about a time in your life when you have experienced isolation or loneliness.

**Sid**

There's probably a few different periods of my life that I could talk about that. But I think what's relevant, when I think about the student situation is certainly my own feelings of isolation as a university student, with respect to direction and opportunities. I remember being a first-year student in university and was not thriving in the academics. I was studying political science and history, which aren't exactly always known for their career prospects. But I wasn't thriving in the academic community. And it was the first time in my life that I really began to wonder what the future held for me, generally a fairly confident person. And I always done social well. But you suddenly get this feeling like everybody else's, has an understanding of what of where they're going. And you don't. And it's almost as though you don't feel like you can talk to other people about it. Because everybody else seems to have it together and you don't. And I can remember that being a very lonely feeling. And you, you, you almost live in this headspace that it just says a certain amount of negative thoughts that come with it, but you, you just begin to start questioning everything, questions of decisions made in the past and questions about other things that might even be good, because it becomes the future becomes a bit overwhelming. And that, for me was an exceedingly lonely time period. And, you know, comparatively, and this is less about being a student. But there's a similarity in that feeling of isolation later in life after I was married. And my wife and I were dealing with infertility. And you watch other couples around you and friends who are starting families. And that was a part of our dreams and hopes, and suddenly we were dealing with, with infertility. And the feeling is almost the same, because it's like your futures suddenly thrown up in the air, your plans here, the way you thought things were gonna go is, is not going the way you expected. And so now, both are very similar. The isolation sometimes comes in those unmet expectations.

**Mark**

Right. Before our conversation today, we talked a bit about you, you shared with me that you grew up in a small farming community in Alberta, I believe and can you tell me about sort of how that experience like what that was like for you landing and university growing up in that community, and that having that experience,

**Sid**

Well, the experience was certainly one of small town boy moving to the city. And that that was definitely a change. The benefits for me, were, you know, I grew up in a community that was tight. And so you had lots of people who knew each other. Now, that brings its own challenges, because there's a certain expectation of conformity that comes in that. But certainly, you go from a tight knit community, and especially from a faith community, I was part of a church that that cared for each other that looked

out for each other, and then you go to university and all of that, that sense of familiarity is gone. And so it certainly was one in which you're trying to kind of scratch your way through trying to find that same community. But you can't simply manufacture that in a short amount of time, good community, it takes time. So I was very blessed to have a strong family and friends backgrounds, that at least knowing that support was behind me. But it was definitely a change.

**Mark**

Right. So it was support, but at the same time that maybe created this greater sense of lack when you when you landed in university then.

**Sid**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Mark**

Was there a particular moment that stands out in there, where you, you really, there that was a turning point for you?

**Sid**

No, it's, it's hard for me to pinpoint one moment or one particular time. I think it was, it was more just the recognition that amongst these group of friends that I had a freedom to, to begin to explore who I was. But I would say was something that emerged over my four years of undergraduate. And, you know, there were, there were numerous moments and different friends that certainly stood out. And I can think of a couple of particular friends, for whom I can remember going on a walks with just having conversations. And sometimes those conversations on walks, which I'm a big fan of students should get out, go for a walk with a friend, it's good to do it on your own. But going for a walk with somebody often seems to open up opportunities for conversation, but I can remember some late night walks with friends. And it would sometimes be two or three people and you get into these deep conversations about life because everybody's in that university angst period of their life. And finding this joy in recognizing that we have, we have shared questions. And we have shared struggles, and that there was something about being in the muck of all of that together. That was of great value. And ..

**Mark**

Great. Trying on that and also your, your experience with infertility, what what of your experiences of isolation taught you about connection?

**Sid**

I think when you are in those, those moments where you feel isolated, you begin to realize almost how out of your hands, everything is, you know, in, in alcoholics anonymous, they often talk about, you know, the, the first step of, of admitting you've got a problem and and then admitting that you need help. I think that's true of both situations of isolation as well is you have to come to this point where you, you recognize that you need something other than yourself as an ability to get through. And that's not to diminish the quality of yourself for who you are. But it's more to recognize that as humans we're not wired to be alone, we're not wired to do things in such a way that we're completely independent of other people, we're in fact wired for relationship. Dr. Sue Johnson, who's an associate professor at University

of Ottawa, she's done a lot of work in this area of connection. That's, I think it's just a fundamental piece of who we are. And so from a faith perspective, I certainly see that as, as, as being crucial to understanding what faith is all about. In the Christian tradition, we talk about the Trinity, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. And we, we talk about that as the divine relationship. You know, it's, it's three, but one, but we talked about how it's in this relationship, it's the working out of, of everything that happens in the relationship of God, and that we are made in the image of God and that somehow that aspect of relationship then becomes an intrinsic to how we, how we do life. So if I go to my points of isolation, finding that space of vulnerability with, with friends, in which I was able to talk about some of my feelings of, of questions, or wonderings, about the future, I recognize, and other people felt the same. In that vulnerability there, there is a shared, caring for one another's burdens. And that is life giving.

**Mark**

There's a lot in there, and what you're saying just to back up a little bit like it, but one of the things that's really resonated with me as in my role, as a counselor at University of Ottawa, I see a lot of students who are really trying to struggle through these things on their own, where they're like, you know, I've got this individual problem, and I've got to kind of solve it on my own or something. And it is, do you see the same thing in the chaplaincy?

**Sid**

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. There's a, there's this fear of somehow not being able to our people finding out about maybe what we perceive to be the dark side of ourselves. And that can be anything from an addiction or challenge that we're trying to struggle through, or particular aspects of our self-worth, or our feelings of not having gifts in certain areas, whatever it may be. And the reality is, this is where we're all in the same boat with that. It's almost as though we have these pictures of ideals that are placed before us. And we're all striving for this ideal, and no one can really tell you what that ideal is, but we all think that we need to hit it. And, and yet, I would argue that there's a uniqueness and in the diversity of all of us. That is so important. But it's being it's recognizing just how those things that we struggle with are also an important part of how we work together and community that makes life better.

**Mark**

Right? Yeah, sometimes I think the part that's really disabling is when people go into that shame about loneliness, right? Like loneliness is a burden enough, but when people go into the shame about, about feeling that there's something wrong with them, because they're feeling that way, that it can really get get even more challenging, like it seems to go exponentially more challenging.,

**Sid**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You know, and, and I don't think that that's, that's how we're wired.

**Mark**

Um, yeah.

**Sid**

I think there's, again, to teach you to use the Christian imagery, we often talk about the body as, as an important image, and that, if you're a part of a body, you don't want the whole body to be fingers, you need, you need different parts of the body. And sometimes those parts of the body, which, you know, are considered unmentionable are crucially important to the functioning of that bargain.

**Mark**

Right.

**Sid**

And, and, and I think that that is a reality that all of us have to, to recognize that we have something to offer and that we are an important part of a body. And, and, uh, part of life is discovering that aspect of our importance to the body. No? yeah.

**Mark**

Yeah. Just to build on you're talking about connection in terms of faith connection to God. And I'm wondering like in the academic literature, there's often a focus on meaningful social connection as the antidote to loneliness. And I'm wondering whether you think this misses out on other forms of connection such as faith.

**Sid**

I think it's important to recognize that what they're saying about that in, in the academic literature is, is that, in, in faith, those things are all intimately connected. I do believe that we're called to be a part of something other than ourselves. And so from a religious standpoint, you know, the habits and practices and rituals of whatever faith community in, they're a part of forming you. And, you know, when I, when I think about going to church on a weekly basis, I'm not going to church just to serve my interests, I'm not going there simply because I want to receive some kind of golden nugget that I can hold on to for the week, or, I'm not even going simply because I, I want to express myself in some particular manner. I'm going because I'm a part of something larger than myself. And in going I, when it when it's done well, I'm interacting with people who are different than I am, ages that are different than I am, socioeconomic differences, and racial differences so at its best part of what that is supposed to be is getting outside of myself, so that I can intimately recognize this, this deeper part of, of who I am, and that I am, it's because we are. Bishop Desmond Tutu talks about the South African term Ubuntu. And, you know, it's I am because we are, we find that identity and being a part of the collective, but it moves beyond that, in that, not only is our connection found in the people, but it's found in, in the story of life itself. And so the, you begin to realize that, not only is our story connected in the community of people, but those people are also a part of the social structure and fabric of our society. And we're a part of nature, and that nature is a part of the universe, and that all of it is, is connected through time and space. And when we, when we find that faith connection, it becomes a relationship to that larger story. And I'm, I'm big on saying that I think one of the problems of our current culture and some of the problems of loneliness, is people have a certain lack of meta narrative, they lack almost that deeper sense of being part of this larger, larger and meaningful story. That includes that 150 year old maple that's beside my window, and the room I'm at right now. And knowing that there, there have been kids that have climbed that tree in years past and, and now my kids are playing on it, and, and that somehow or another, this, this story has been woven together, and we get to be a part of it. And I find that I find that faith connection and in,

being able to speak with God and being able to rest, meditate, breathe, and in breathing, even slowly finding that sense of otherness that is beyond me.

**Mark**

Can you go a little bit further in terms of what like connection is for you, how you experience connection in your life?

**Sid**

Sure. So for from a spiritual discipline standpoint, some of the rituals that are a part of my day are our daily morning, prayers and evening prayers. And some of that is about centering oneself and you can call it centering prayer. It's not unlike a lot of forms of meditation that are out there that I pause every morning and, and take a deep breath. And sometimes choose a word to focus on and it might be grace, or it might be forgiveness, or it might be love. And just repeat that word over and just take some deep breaths. And that's the type of prayer that you can do throughout the day, especially if there's something going on, or you've had a particularly difficult conversation that sometimes you need to do that just take a deep breath and, and breathe in that largeness. I do something called a daily examine which is a practice of almost reflecting on everything that's taking place during the day. And what would I do with that as I kind of walk through and talk my way through everything that took place and it might be as things as what did I have for lunch? What did I eat? Who was there when I walked to that building or walked over to this space? What did I see? where, you know, who else did I notice? What did I not really pay attention to? And it's a way of sometimes reflecting on the things of the day that I need to be thankful for the smallest thing like, wow, that cupcake tasted fantastic. Because it's too easy to focus on the negatives, and not feel connected to the good things of the day as well, the experiences or people or situations that were a part of that that story of the day. So that's, that's a part of it. And so I'm always asking God to show me so the morning in the morning, I, you know, I asked God to help me see what I need to see. And to participate where I need to participate at the end of the day. And I'm asking to, to reflect upon what what might have been that I, I failed to truly take notice of as I was rushing through my day,

**Mark**

Okay, so if a student was to come to you and express that they're feeling lonely, or they're feeling disconnected. Do you have any sort of common starting points that you'll suggest to students?

**Sid**

Depends on the student first in terms of my relationship with them. So if it's somebody I don't know, I think my first focus is going to be on getting to know them a little bit more so that you can meet them where they're at. And be able to find out a little bit about what their story is. And, and that's going to be the starting spot to also thinking about connections, because you want to be able to do these things in in baby steps. Far too often I see some students, when it comes to both social connection or wanting to experience something new that they know, they throw themselves into something whole hog. And that works for some, but it also can then if it doesn't work for the while that didn't work, I'll try the next thing. Most, it's like a good relationship. It emerges over time. And it takes dedication, and it takes investment. And so for myself, if I want to work with a student, it's I got to invest in them, I need to know them, and love them and hear where they're at, to know what that connection is going to be. But if it's a

student so I have more knowledge of there's a variety of different spiritual disciplines that I might begin to suggest, based on their disposition, based on their story. And I'll encourage them to try things and then I'll, I'll check in with them if they desire that. Find out what that experience has been like. But I often do think that many of these things are best done in community that speaks to the social connection as well. And those communities can be vastly different. And let's face it, you know, developing community again, it's sometimes about committing to a group of people and being willing to love them for who they are, not for who you think they should be. And then also learning more about yourself in that process.

**Mark**

If the student reaches out to the chaplaincy for the first time, what are they likely to expect?

**Sid**

Yeah, under normal circumstances, the chaplains hold office hours. And so people can just show up and they can expect a listening ear. To be a chaplain in the university setting, first and foremost is about I'm taking seriously who the person is in front of us and, and finding somebody who wants to get to know them. And I think that as we are in this virtual sense, most of the chaplains are right to the same. The difference is students have to reach out by using other means via virtual or, or telephone or text or email. But what they do so the chaplain is, is there to basically be a resource and a guide and a friend. It's not unlike going to see a counselor. But the difference is that we're also going to be asking a question about, you know, possibly ask a question about we know where, where they might see faith and all of this or ask some questions about yeah, more existential type questions. But again, that all depends on the student and where they're at. And it begins with, it begins with their story.

**Mark**

And can you tell us a little bit about your team?

**Sid**

Sure. So the team has a mixture of Christian, Muslim and then we have someone associate, Jewish and Hindu. Currently, we certainly have connections to other faith communities as well. With that also diversity of private Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic. Yeah. You have different Muslim chaplains coming from different communities as well. And so we certainly enjoy our conversations with one another one we have, right, we all work. We all work, we all work independently from our own faith traditions.

**Mark**

And I guess the last question I have for you is based on your experiences, do you have anything you'd like to say to students who are listening and who are feeling isolated, particularly in the unprecedented times that we are living in?

**Sid**

I think my, my main thing that I would want to say is, if you are feeling lonely, or you're feeling weary, don't wait to reach out to someone. There are many people who are more than ready to listen, be it appear, be it a faculty member or be at a chaplain reach out not because all of these people are going to have answers to your weariness but because you shouldn't be in this alone. And we want to be able

to share that weariness with you, even if it is just for a quick conversation or the recognition that, yeah, you're not. you're not the only one feeling this. Here we're in this together.

**Mark**

Great. Okay. Well, thank you for joining us Sid. This was really fascinating.

**Sid**

Thank you for having me.

**Mark**

Yeah, thank you for joining us on uOttawa together. If you are a University of Ottawa student and are looking for opportunities to feel more connected, you can access the Wellness Hub on the uOttawa website. If you're struggling with isolation and loneliness and would like to access online resources for counseling, please don't struggle alone. Check out the website for counseling services at [sass.uottawa.ca](http://sass.uottawa.ca). That's s-a-s-a dot uOttawa dot ca. And thank you for listening to us and we hope that you will join us next time.