

**The Loss of a Brother: The Presence of a  
Community of Caring  
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I planned to write my March column the weekend of March 16. I had already selected a topic: the impact of loneliness on one's physical and emotional well-being and the importance of having a supportive community to provide a sense of belonging and connectedness as an antidote to loneliness. For me, there is not one set definition of the make-up of a community. As examples, it can include just a few friends or family, a place of worship, individuals with similar jobs or in the same workplace, or people volunteering for a particular cause or charity.

The topic of loneliness is one I have described in past writings, including my [February, 2018 article](#), and [several articles composed during the pandemic](#). I decided to address the theme of loneliness again given recent research highlighting its ongoing deleterious effect.

In my February, 2018 piece, I quoted Dr. Vivek Murthy, a former U.S. Surgeon General, who expressed that loneliness represented a major health issue, including an increased risk for cardiovascular and chronic illnesses. He posited that the effect of loneliness on our health was similar to “smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”

**The Passing of a Brother**

I had no idea when I first sat down to write the article that it would take another 10 days for me to finish. I could not have imagined that an unexpected, painful event would take a topic of great significance for me and render it even more relevant and personal—and highlight the need for a supportive community, especially during difficult times.

My brother Henry became seriously ill on the weekend of March 16 and his health rapidly deteriorated over two days. Up until this hospitalization he was healthy both physically and cognitively. On the morning of, March 18, knowing Henry had only a few more hours to live, many of the immediate family called him to say our last good-byes and tell him how much we loved him. While he could not speak, his daughter Cheryl held the phone up to his ear and told us after each of us spoke with him, he mouthed the words, “I love you.” He died that afternoon.

Henry was the firstborn in my family. Irwin was to follow three years later. As the story has often been recounted in my family, when Henry was 12 and Irwin 9, my mother “convinced”

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

my father that they should try for a girl. That “trying” resulted in the birth of twin boys, Michael, followed by me 70 minutes later.

I have described Irwin and Michael’s deaths in previous articles. I did so not only to honor their memory but to let others know about the ways in which they represented courage and resilience. In my [October, 2001 article](#), following the 9/11 attacks, I noted that Irwin was an officer in the Air Force when his plane exploded over the Pacific Ocean after taking off from Guam. A bomb had been placed on the plane and neither his nor the rest of the crew’s bodies were recovered. For months I harbored the fantasy that they were surviving on a small island—knowing this was only a fantasy that would never be realized.

In my [February, 2013 article](#), I wrote about Michael’s death from amyloidosis, a rare disease that occurs when the protein amyloid builds up in organs, eventually resulting in death. Michael not only lived longer than many others diagnosed with this disease, but what I especially focused on in my article was the resilient outlook and behavior he displayed throughout the last years of his life. He never asked, “Why me?” but instead, focused on enjoying the time he had with his family. Fortunately, his children and grandchildren lived only a few miles away from Michael and his wife, and all of them spent time together on a regular basis.

Thus, for the past 11 years Henry has been my only surviving brother. He and I had a phone call every Sunday morning, talking about our family, family history, politics, and whatever other themes arose. Since he was 13 years older than I was, he often filled in some family details from before Michael and I were born. He was a medic in the Navy and after leaving the service he became a Certified Public Accountant, first in the retail field, and then founding his own firm. He and his wife Rhoda had three loving children, Cheryl, Larry, and Ira; they gave him five wonderful grandsons. Cheryl lived only a few miles from her father.

**A Community of Caring**

Henry’s death was sudden and as a result he really did not suffer, for which I am grateful. I am also grateful for the support I and other family members received following his passing, reinforcing my belief in the importance of community. As I have often expressed, resilience is rooted in our positive relationships, both as recipients of support and love as well as providers of these qualities. The outpouring of caring I received when others learned of Henry’s passing reinforced my belief that whenever I might be in a position to offer support and love, I will strive

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

to make certain I do.

When Henry died, my wife Marilyn sent a message to our Temple (Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, MA) and as is always done, a notice was sent to all congregation families to inform them of his passing. Immediately, I received messages of condolences via emails and phone calls. Our two senior rabbis, Jay Perlman and Todd Markley, both extremely empathic and compassionate individuals, called to find out how my family and I were doing. They emphasized if they could be of assistance in any way, I should let them know.

Members of our family announced Henry's death on their Facebook pages, posting photos of him at different times in his life, including some I had not seen previously. In informing people of Henry's passing on my personal Facebook page, I included the earliest photo that I had of Henry even though it was not very clear; he was 18 months old and in a Navy uniform (the photo is included with this article).

When Marilyn and I attended Friday night services at our Temple and my brother's name was mentioned as having died within that week, many of those in attendance came over to offer condolences. We are fortunate that we have been members of this caring community for many years. Even if one does not belong to or attend services at a house of worship, I believe it is important to have a community that provides a place for comfort and solace. Over the years I have spoken with a number of adults in my clinical practice who feel very lonely. When I ask to whom they would turn for connection and caring, they are hard-pressed to name anyone. Some have family members or friends, but they are not close to them. They consider them to be acquaintances and not people from whom they can seek comfort when feeling sad, bereft, and lonely.

Having seen both children and adults in my practice, I am aware that loneliness is not confined to one age group. I have heard poignant accounts from young children who describe no one wanting to play with them and not being invited to sit at the lunch table with classmates or not being asked on playdates. One ten-year-old girl told me, "The only time kids have anything to do with me is when they tease me."

One of the most powerful statements I have heard was uttered by a man in his 50s who was divorced and basically estranged from his family. When I asked about friends, he said, "I know some people, some at work, but I don't consider them to be friends."

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

After a lengthy pause, he said tearfully, “Your questions about family and friends have led me to wonder if anyone would even come to my funeral if they even knew I had died.” Unfortunately, this man’s sadness and his loneliness are not unique and represent the plight of many. All-too-often we hear accounts of people dying in their homes or apartments without anyone knowing. I recall reading about a postal worker who became suspicious when the mail he delivered was not taken in for several days. He contacted the police who discovered a deceased man inside.

A community of caring, whether containing just a couple of members or many members, can play a notable, therapeutic role in our lives. That role is heightened when an individual or family experiences challenging and distressful events such as the loss of a beloved relative or friend. During my career as a therapist, I became much more aware of asking specific questions about one’s community. For those who could not name even one person to whom they could turn, we spent time in our sessions considering ways for them to develop meaningful connections.

I realize connecting with others can be a daunting challenge for many, but meeting this challenge can prove very rewarding. As an example, a man in his early 30s felt “extremely lonely” and expressed a pessimistic attitude that he would ever meet others, especially a woman. In response to my question, he listed reading as one of his favorite activities. This led to a discussion of his attending readings by authors held at one of his favorite bookstores. We discussed that this was a “comfortable” setting for interacting with others with similar interests and if he wasn’t certain what to say, he could always talk about the book. At one of the readings he met a woman who has now been his partner for more than 15 years.

Being a recipient of kindness and compassion by a community of caring is important as a source of strength for our emotional and physical well-being. Equally important is for each of us to find ways to become a member of such a community so that we might find an avenue through which to enrich the lives of others, especially those struggling with uncertainty, anxiety, loss, and loneliness. As I have often expressed in my writings and presentations, hope and resilience are rooted in our having what the late psychologist Julius Segal called “charismatic adults” in our lives (i.e., others from whom we “gather” strength) and also, serving as “charismatic adults” for others.

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.****“There Are Stars”**

As I noted earlier, I spoke with Henry every Sunday morning. I called him on the morning of March 17 and was directed to his voicemail. I found out a few minutes later from his daughter Cheryl how ill he had become overnight. I will miss the “tradition” of those calls. I will miss him as I miss my other two brothers. While in Temple the following Friday night I found comfort in reading a particular poem in the prayer book.

By coincidence, the following day I received a beautiful card of condolence written by a couple who are members of our Temple. They quoted the same poem. Its author was Hannah Senesh, a Hungarian Jewish poet, who was only 23 years old when she was killed in 1944. I learned that when she was 18 years old she emigrated to Palestine and in 1943 she joined the British Women’s Auxiliary Air Force that led to her recruitment in the Special Operations Executive (SOE). She was sent to Egypt for parachute training.

After this training she volunteered to parachute behind enemy lines to assist Allied troops and the Jews in occupied Europe. On March 14, 1944 she parachuted into Yugoslavia with two colleagues. They were arrested in Hungary, where she was beaten and tortured, but she refused to provide information about a British transmitter code. On November 7, 1944 she was executed by a firing squad.

I was truly moved to learn about Hannah’s brief life and the incredible courage she demonstrated. In reading about what she experienced, her poem “There Are Stars” took on even more meaning for me as I thought about the recent loss of Henry. Hannah wrote:

There are stars up above,  
So far away we only see their light  
Long, long after the star itself is gone.  
And so it is with people we have loved—  
Their memories keep shining ever brightly,  
Though their time with us is done.  
But the stars that light up the darkest night,  
These are the lights that guide us.  
As we live our lives, these are the ways we remember.

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I will think about this poem especially on Sunday mornings when I always spoke with Henry. He was indeed a bright light in my life.

<https://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>