

CULTURE by Kevin Ivers

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The Profits of Loneliness

Gay ghettos across America have never been more abundant, or more densely populated. The hottest real estate markets always seem to follow the gay center of urban gravity – everyone, I mean everyone, wants to live in the gay neighborhood. It's gotten so bad in some cities that people are practically living on top of each other, four and five to an apartment or row house.

And yet, while the gay ghetto may be one of the more lively parts of town, with the most attractive men lumbering up and down the street night and day, it is also usually the deepest well of loneliness you can find.

Ask one hundred gay men today in a random survey what the most serious issue impacting their lives today happens to be – and include "loneliness" as a choice – and I'm willing to bet that at least 70 of them will choose it. It would blow ENDA and hate crimes out of the water.

Yet, go to gay websites and gay newspapers, and it's not only a problem we ignore – it's a problem we delight in making worse. Very little content is devoted to the complexities of the loneliness that we seem to face, and the consequences for our culture and our well-being, but the cash cow of any gay newspaper or website today is a highly sexualized personals section –or even worse, the section advertising prostitutes. They know about it well enough to profit from it, so they might as well perpetuate it, or count on it never going away.

It's a tragedy that so much is known about this problem, and so little is ever meaningfully said or done to address it.

I wrote a column last month about the crystal methamphetamine epidemic in the gay community, and the response was incredible. So many men emailed and called me to thank me for it, and to talk about their friends that have been "lost" to the drug. In the many discussions I had with people about Tina, I realized the deeper problem was this pervasive sense of how you can feel completely alone in a warehouse full of gay men, dancing the night away around you. How you can live in a beautiful, chic neighborhood, a successful person surrounded by successful people, and feel utterly worthless. How you can meet a dozen wonderful men who fall in love with you, and something drives you to reject every one of them. These were all common threads in the stories I heard from men who lived to tell about their Tina addiction. But not everyone follows the path to drugs from this well of loneliness.

Many gay men struggle with depression for years – a kind of anhedonia, or inability to be happy. You know those guys who always act like no matter where they are, they are terrified they're missing out on something better? Days turn into months and years, and before they know it, life has passed them by, and nothing has taken root, and they're still alone and unhappy.

Never fear, though, there's always an easy solution. Go online looking for a quick sexual fix. Scan the personals. Hire an "escort." Get a "bump" of Tina. Watch a porno video (or "Queer as Folk"). Find any one of the many high profile, well-marketed

alternatives in the complex infrastructure we've built in the gay community to deal with your loneliness. Certainly, someone will profit from your loneliness eventually if you let them.

A fundamental cost of this loneliness that chews at our community is the immense waste of human potential. Imagine the vitality we could harness if stable relationships and healthy self-esteem were the norm in the gay community. I wonder what we could achieve together if we stopped seeing ourselves as downtrodden victims, but as exceptional people with a lot to give to the world. Shouldn't this be a major issue we need to confront?

It leaves you thinking that maybe the status quo benefits too many people for a change to really take place, but there's no reason to be so cynical. Change always seems to really come from a multitude of individual actions in every day life, not from the actions of a group or a newspaper. When two gay men defy their fears and open their hearts to each other, and make an honest vow of loyalty and live up to it, it is an act of courage that impacts everyone around them. When a gay man in the depths of a drug addiction picks himself up, stops blaming everyone for his problems, says "no more" and fights his way back into the world, he is a hero to those who love him, and a symbol of resilience that they will never forget. When young gay people start believing that the gym is a place of health, and not an indoctrination camp for body-image obsession, we might have a generation that values the heart as much as the pectoral muscle. When a lonely gay man, locked in a self-created pattern of easy-fixes, decides to break away from that life and find a new path to loving himself – either through faith in God or serving others less fortunate than he – he is a role model for those who need not follow the same long journey to grace and might be spared the suffering he faced.

And someday, perhaps, the gay world will figure out a way to celebrate this kind of courage, rather than profit from the ills it seeks to conquer