

JONNY SUN – You Are Not Alone in Your Loneliness TED Talk

Hello, I'd like to introduce you to someone. This is Jomny. That's "Jonny" but spelled accidentally with an "m," in case you were wondering, because we're not all perfect.

Jomny is an alien who has been sent to earth with a mission to study humans. Jomny is feeling lost and alone and far from home, and I think we've all felt this way. Or, at least I have. I wrote this story about this alien at a moment in my life when I was feeling particularly alien. I had just moved to Cambridge and started my doctoral program at MIT, and I was feeling intimidated and isolated and very much like I didn't belong.

But I had a lifeline of sorts. See, I was writing jokes for years and years and sharing them on social media, and I found that I was turning to doing this more and more.

Now, for many people, the internet can feel like a lonely place. It can feel like this, a big, endless, expansive void where you can constantly call out to it but no one's ever listening. But I actually found a comfort in speaking out to the void. I found, in sharing my feelings with the void, eventually the void started to speak back. And it turns out that the void isn't this endless lonely expanse at all, but instead it's full of all sorts of other people, also staring out into it and also wanting to be heard. Now, there have been many bad things that have come from social media. I'm not trying to dispute that at all. To be online at any given point is to feel so much sadness and anger and violence. It can feel like the end of the world. Yet, at the same time, I'm conflicted because I can't deny the fact that so many of my closest friends are people that I had met originally online. And I think that's partly because there's this confessional nature to social media. It can feel like you are writing in this personal, intimate diary that's completely private, yet at the same time you want everyone in the world to read it. And I think part of that, the joy of that is that we get to experience things from perspectives from people who are completely different from ourselves, and sometimes that's a nice thing.

For example, when I first joined Twitter, I found that so many of the people that I was following were talking about mental health and going to therapy in ways that had none of the stigma that they often do when we talk about these issues in person. Through them, the conversation around mental health was normalized, and they helped me realize that going to therapy was something that would help me as well.

Now, for many people, it sounds like a scary idea to be talking about all these topics so publicly and so openly on the internet. I feel like a lot of people think that it is a big, scary thing to be online if you're not already perfectly and fully formed. But I think the internet can be actually a great place to not know, and I think we can treat that with excitement, because to me there's something important about sharing your imperfections and your insecurities and your vulnerabilities with other people.

Now, when someone shares that they feel sad or afraid or alone, for example, it actually makes me feel less alone, not by getting rid of any of my loneliness but by showing me that I am not alone in feeling lonely. And as a writer and as an artist, I care very much about making this comfort of being vulnerable a communal thing, something that we can share with each other. I'm excited about externalizing the internal, about taking those invisible personal feelings that I don't have words for, holding them to the light, putting words to them, and then sharing them with other people in the hopes that it might help them find words to find their feelings as well.

Now, I know that sounds like a big thing, but ultimately I'm interested in putting all these things into small, approachable packages, because when we can hide them into these smaller pieces, I think they are easier to approach, I think they're more fun. I think they can more easily help us see our shared humanness. Sometimes

that takes the form of a short story, sometimes that takes the form of a cute book of illustrations, for example. And sometimes that takes the form of a silly joke that I'll throw on the internet. For example, a few months ago, I posted this app idea for a dog-walking service where a dog shows up at your door and you have to get out of the house and go for a walk.

If there are app developers in the audience, please find me after the talk.

Or, I like to share every time I feel anxious about sending an email. When I sign my emails "Best," it's short for "I am trying my best," which is short for "Please don't hate me, I promise I'm trying my best!"

Or my answer to the classic icebreaker, if I could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, I would. I am very lonely.

And I find that when I post things like these online, the reaction is very similar. People come together to share a laugh, to share in that feeling, and then to disburse just as quickly.

Yes, leaving me once again alone. But I think sometimes these little gatherings can be quite meaningful.

For example, when I graduated from architecture school and I moved to Cambridge, I posted this question: "How many people in your life have you already had your last conversation with?" And I was thinking about my own friends who had moved away to different cities and different countries, even, and how hard it would be for me to keep in touch with them. But other people started replying and sharing their own experiences. Somebody talked about a family member they had a falling out with. Someone talked about a loved one who had passed away quickly and unexpectedly. Someone else talked about their friends from school who had moved away as well. But then something really nice started happening. Instead of just replying to me, people started replying to each other, and they started to talk to each other and share their own experiences and comfort each other and encourage each other to reach out to that friend that they hadn't spoken in a while or that family member that they had a falling out with. And eventually, we got this little tiny microcommunity. It felt like this support group formed of all sorts of people coming together. And I think every time we post online, every time we do this, there's a chance that these little microcommunities can form. There's a chance that all sorts of different creatures can come together and be drawn together. And sometimes, through the magic of the internet, you get to find a kindred spirit. It's that's in the reading the replies and the comments sections and finding a reply that is particularly kind or insightful or funny. Sometimes that's in going to follow someone and seeing that they already follow you back. And sometimes that's in looking at someone that you know in real life and seeing that things that you write and the things that they write and realizing that you share so many of the same interests as they do, and they brings them closer together to you. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you get to meet another alien.

[when two aliens find each other in a strange place, it feels a little more like home]

But I am worried, too, because as we all know, the internet for the most part doesn't feel like this. We all know that for the most part, the internet feels like a place where we misunderstand each other, where we come into conflict with each other, where there's all sorts of confusion and screaming and yelling and shouting, and it feels like there's too much of everything. It feels like chaos, and I don't know how to square away the bad parts with the good, because as we know and as we've seen, the bad parts can really, really hurt us. It feels to me that the platforms that we use to inhabit these online spaces have been designed either ignorantly or willfully to allow for harassment and abuse, to propagate misinformation, to enable hatred and hate speech and the violence that comes from it, and it feels like none of our current platforms are doing enough to address and to fix that.

But still, any maybe probably unfortunately, I'm still drawn to these online spaces, as many others are, because sometimes it just feels like that's where all the people are. And I feel silly and stupid sometimes for valuing these small moments of human connection in times like these. But I've always operated under this idea that these little moments of humanness are not superfluous. They're not important and vital and they affirm and they give us life. And they are these tiny, temporary sanctuaries that show us that we are not as alone as we think we are. And do yes, even though life is bad and everyone's sad and one day we're all going to die—

[look, life is bad. everyone's sad. We're all gonna die, but i already bought this inflatable bouncey castle so are u gona take ur shoes off or not]

I think the inflatable metaphorical bouncey castle in this case is really our relationships and our connections to other people.

And so one night, when I was feeling particularly sad and hopeless about the world, I shouted out to the void, to the lonely darkness. I said, "At this point, logging on to the social media feels like holding someone's hand at the end of the world." And this time, instead of the void responding, it was people who showed up, who started replying to me and then who started talking to each other, and slowly this little tiny community formed. Everybody came together to hold hands.

And in these dangerous and unsure times, in the midst of it all, I think the thing that we have to hold on to is other people. And I know that is a small thing made up of small moments, but I think it is one tiny, tiny, sliver of light in all the darkness.