Noreena Hertz on the Lonely Century
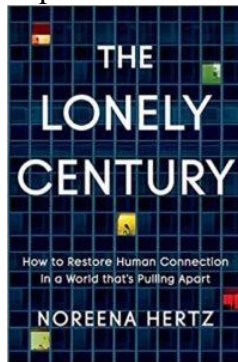
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Author and economist Noreena Hertz of University College London talks about her book, *The Lonely Century,* with EconTalk host Russ Roberts. Hertz blames social media and the individualist, pro-capitalism worldviews of leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan for the rise in loneliness in the developed world. Russ suggests some alternative causes. The result is a lively conversation about understanding and explaining social trends.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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	Intro. [Recording date: August 26, 2021.]
0:37	**Russ Roberts:** Today is August 26th, 2021, and my guest is author and Professor Noreena Hertz of University College London. Her latest book is *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart*. Noreena, welcome to EconTalk.
	Noreena Hertz: Thank you for having me on, Russ.
0:54	**Russ Roberts:** Well, let's start with a really simple, basic question. Actually, not so simple, as it turns out. What do you mean by loneliness? You mention early on in the book that you're going to use a broader definition than is commonly used. So, what is your underlying concept that you're talking about in this book?
	Noreena Hertz: When I talk about loneliness, what I'm talking about is a sense of feeling disconnected-- disconnected from friends, from family, from those closest to you; but also disconnected in a broader sense. Disconnected from your fellow citizens, disconnected from the

government, disconnected from your political leaders, disconnected from your employers.

So, I'm using loneliness in a broader sense than it's used in common parlance and yet there is precedent for this wider definition of loneliness with thinkers as far ranging as Hannah Arendt to Emile Durkheim also taking a kind of broader definition of the subject. So, it's that craving for connection and intimacy. That craving for being seen, for being heard, for being visible that so many people today do not feel.

Russ Roberts: So, this episode pairs nicely with the recent interview I did with Johann Hari and his book *Lost Connections*. And there he's looking at the role of lost connections in potentially explaining depression, the clinical depression, but your book is more about how we got here and what we might do to deal with it. I want to quote Thoreau who said, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.' Obviously loneliness is not a *new* phenomenon. Why do you think it's growing? What evidence do we have that it's growing or that it's some kind of crisis? Let's start with that.

Noreena Hertz: So, we only really started measuring loneliness in an empirical, scientific way in about the 1970s, when scientists at UCLA came up with a whole host of questions which became the gold standard for really interrogating whether somebody felt lonely. Interestingly, you never ask in these questions, 'Are you lonely?' because loneliness does have a stigma. So, often if you're asked, 'Are you lonely?' people say No. So, there's about 20 questions which people are typically asked. And, what we see since the 1970s, since it's been measured, a steady *increase* in the numbers of people who are feeling lonely, *really* accelerating this century specially since 2010. And, then again, especially since the coronavirus. And, we can see this in longitude when we're comparing data; for example, there's been studies which compare how lonely 10 to 16 year olds feel.

And, they've done it and they've asked the same questions and done the same investigations repeated times over the years. And, we do see very significant increases especially since 2010; but even, I argue, where we really start seeing this rise in a perceptible way is earlier--is really from about the 1980s onwards is what we see.

And, just because my viewers and listeners might not be aware just how *big*, how significant a problem we're talking about: We're talking about in the United Kingdom, three in five 18- to 24-year olds saying even before the pandemic that

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they felt lonely often or sometimes. Half of 10- to 16-year olds saying that they felt lonely often or sometimes. We're talking about two in five Americans saying that they feel lonely often or sometimes; and these are figures even before the pandemic, post-pandemic. It's got significantly worse with some countries reporting around 50% of the population currently feeling lonely.

5:12 **Russ Roberts:** Just as a bit of a nitpick, I don't consider these attempts to measure this really subtle and rich problem or challenge to the human condition to be so scientific. We have gathered data on it. This is true. Sometimes and often are very different. I'm happily married. I think I have some friends, but if you asked me, 'Do I sometimes feel lonely?' I'd probably say Yes. In many days, many years of my life, I would have answered yes to that question. There *is* a certain--again, it is part of the human condition. To some extent, we are inevitably isolated from those around us and long to connect with them.

And, I think the crisis--I don't know if you would call it a crisis; I think you would--the social challenge of loneliness and the personal challenge of loneliness is, that's *new*--it appears to be; I emphasize that--it appears to be more severe. It appears to be that we are more isolated from each other in many, many different ways as you pointed out. And--go ahead.

Noreena Hertz: Yeah. We even see this, I mean, and we see this kind of very clearly if we look at data, for example, on how many friends people say that they have. That's a very clear data point I think, because what we see is that currently around one in five American millennials say that they don't have a single friend at all. And that's about *double* what it was a decade ago. So, there are some data points that I think do really express *very* clearly that there's a real problem here and one that's growing.

Russ Roberts: Yeah; no and I agree. I mean, I just think we should [?shouldn't?] overstate the precision of it or our ability just to chart a trend. But, I do think the general trend seems to be--I was going to say positive, or negative depending on what you want to put on the axis.

And, you, of course, as we would expect as anyone was thinking about this, technology and especially in the last 15 years has played either a role in causing this or is a response in some ways to it.

But, I do want to challenge this notion that it's a problem. I do think it's a problem. I agree with you. But, I want to give

you a chance to respond to what sometimes my listeners respond. And, of course, they're not a random subset of the world population. Two thirds of them are in the United States. All of them are in the habit of putting earphones on or some other device to listen to someone pretty much on their own--though some of my listeners are listening with their family or with friends. But, most people I think listen to podcasts by themselves. So, this is a selected, non-random audience. But they all say, when I decry the isolating effects of technology on this program, they get mad sometimes and say, 'I like it. I like being alone. I like being by myself with my YouTube videos and my Instagram and TikTok and my cell phone, my smartphone. It's fun. I don't need people as much as maybe other people did in the past.' What do you respond to that?

Noreena Hertz: So, I'm really glad that you raised that question because firstly, it's really important to be clear that feeling lonely is not the same as being on your own and being alone. And, when you *choose* to be alone, when aloneness is an expression of your agency, then it often doesn't feel lonely. I'm a writer and thinker. I spend a lot of time on my own, and I love being on my own. And, at those times, I'm not lonely. And, yet I have experienced in my life periods, moments when I have felt that
I've *craved* connection, that I've craved visibility, that I've wanted to be heard, and felt that that hasn't been met and when I have been lonely. So, I think it's important to differentiate that and say, yes, it's important I think that people feel comfortable doing things on their own and being alone. And, this isn't about trying to stop *that*. This is about acknowledging that there's something else going on, which is: people who *want* to feel connected--an increasing number of people who *want* to feel connected--and not having that feeling of connection met.

9:42 **Russ Roberts:** Yeah, I was thinking about the word, recently, that I don't think I've said it maybe ever on this program which is solitude. Solitude is--I assume it comes from the word 'solo,' being alone or one. And, solitude is lovely if it's what you want.

I want to pick one more example though from current culture that I think is a phenomenon potentially of generational difference and perhaps not as frightening as it actually is. For my friends and myself, my wife, when we look at young people socializing, either at a party or out at a restaurant, and everyone's looking at their phone instead of interacting with each other, we find that alarming, disturbing, scary, dark. And, I'm not sure that people on their phones feel that way. I don't know if they--some of them do, obviously. We've

talked to a number of guests in the past about the fact that it's hard for people to separate from social media and they have something that you might call an addiction.

But, how do you feel about that? Do you feel there's a cultural difference, a generational difference in how these cultures of interacting with the device is going?

Noreena Hertz: I interviewed many teenagers as part of my research for the book because I wanted to understand how they felt and how they felt socially--whether *they* saw social media as something that was aiding how connected they felt or not. And, in line with the very clear correlation--not necessarily causation, but correlation that we do see between rising levels of loneliness amongst young people and social media usage--in line with that, many of the teenagers I interviewed talked very movingly about *why* it was that their social media usage made them feel alone.

I'm remembering Peter, for example, a 14-year-old boy who told me about how he would post on Instagram and then be waiting, waiting, hoping for somebody to like one of his posts; and when they didn't, he'd really be berating himself and saying, 'Now I feel so invisible. Why is no one seeing me?' And, really berating himself, 'What am I doing wrong?'

Or I think about Claudia, a 16-year-old girl who told me about how her friends at school had said that they weren't going to go out and hang out after school. And, she was in her room and she could the scrolling on her social media feeds. And she saw her friends all having fun without her; and her exclusion was so *visible* to her, and how painful it was and how she hid in her room for a week.

So, social media--it's not, of course, that kids weren't excluded in the past, but the difference is that the exclusion, first of all, nowadays is very public. Secondly, the adults in the child's life--whereas in the past, they might have realized this was going on and intervened. So, a teacher might have seen a child not being asked to sit with others at lunch, or a parent might have noticed their kid not being invited to do something because so much of the socializing is actually happening now on screen. If you're excluded from it, no one really knows and can intervene.

But also they talked a lot about--and the data again supports this--how isolating it was to directly experienced bullying or hatred online. And, an *astonishing* number of young people have experienced this in the United Kingdom. A third of 18-

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to 24-year old women have experienced abuse on Facebook, for example. I mean, that's a very significant number.

So, those are, I think a *few* of the reasons which help explain why we do see a correlation that, up until I'd say about a year and a half ago, it was very hard to establish whether it *was* just a correlation: Was it that lonelier people used social media and so, anyway, it would have been lonely? Or, was there some causal relationship?

And, then, I guess about two years ago now, there was a very important study done at Stanford University--I wrote about it in the book--where it was a gold standard of a study where they had 3000 students: 1500 were told to use Facebook as usual; 1500 were charged with actually deleting it from their devices and not use it at all. And, they tracked for two months what happened to the two groups. So, the control group, the one who was using it as usual and the other group and the other group were significantly more lonely and significantly--sorry, the group who stopped using it were significantly *less* lonely and significantly happi*er* once they did so.

And, also interestingly, they did much more in person with friends and family. So, it wasn't that they just then spent lots of time on other sites on the Internet because they weren't banned with using the Internet. They actually did more in-person. And we do know from research that in-person, face-to-face interactions are qualitatively superior. So, the interaction--and this isn't kind of an older person's perspective on this: I mean, the research on how we process information and how we develop feelings like empathy, the neuroscience behind it, makes it clear that it's just, when you're face to face with someone in a room, when you smell them, when you see their full body language, when you kind of really can see their eye movement which even on a Zoom call is hard to do, you can become much more connected. You're more likely to feel a deeper connection and also be more empathetic. And so, connections that are happening on their phones are likely to be shallower as a result and therefore be part of the problem for sure.

16:25 **Russ Roberts:** Well, you talk in your book about something that I think about a lot which is the loss of skills that people might have in face-to-face interaction, from having less of it in their lives. And I think face-to-face interactions just difficult. A lot of people have always--many people have told me, 'Oh, you must have better interviews when they're *literally* face to face, not over Zoom, but they're literally face-to-face.' And that's not been my experience at all. I think a lot of people find it comforting to be on the

phone, say, or on audio only, because they don't have to read the body signals. And, then I don't have to project them as the host. And, you don't have to notice whether I'm paying attention or not. And, I think if I'm checking my notes or worrying about the time and you're trying to have a conversation with me, it's jarring.

And so, I actually think sometimes phone, or just audio only, is actually a more *intimate* form of conversation for people who struggle with social cues and even[?] people who are pretty good at them.

But, I think the more general and interesting question is whether that ability is sort of atrophying as--atroph[ee]ing? atroph[ai]ing?--atrophying as people use them less. Especially for young people, who are growing up in an era where they do much less presumably than their parents' generation. Do you think that's true? And--

Noreena Hertz: It was actually one of the impetuses for me starting to research the subject of loneliness--*was* an observation that my students seemed to be struggling more with face-to-face interaction. I saw it when I sent them group assignments. And, I noticed that a considerable number seemed to be challenged with this face-to-face, in-person group assignment that was very much the norm when I was a student.

And, I actually raised it with a friend who is President of one of America's prestigious universities. And, he said that at his university, they were really noticing it. And, it was so bad there that they were running How to Read a Face in Real Life classes for their incoming students, where literally--there was a class where you would be told, 'If you're in a room with someone and they frown or their body language is looking kind of all defensive, this means it's going badly.' Or, 'if they're beaming and they're all welcoming, it's going well.' Which is quite something.

There's also anecdotal evidence from teachers--kindergarten teachers we call it in the United Kingdom; I don't know if it's the same in the United States. Yeah, kindergarten teachers-- that *they're* seeing some *young* children--children aged four or five--coming in school with noticeably lesser face-to-face socializing skills. Which they have attributed in part to being the kids' spending more time on their screens, even at that age. But also, of course, their *parents* spending time on *their* screens--because this was something that the teenagers I interviewed for my book would always say to me, 'Look, it's not just us guys. It's *you* guys who are your phone

the whole time.' So, not imparting them those skills. So, I think there's something really *real* here that we should take very seriously.

20:06 **Russ Roberts:** So, I've made the observation before on this program that a musical that's filmed with a straight-on camera is remarkably boring and hard to watch on TV or on film. Whereas, an actual musical, live, in person is radically different. And, whatever explains--I don't know what fully explains that--differences in sensation and perception--but I think it's related to how we react to people on Zoom. In theory, you and I are having a face-to-face conversation. I mean, really, is it that much different? The fact that I see you next to me? I can look into your eyes; while you say--it's hard to see--but I'm getting a lot of body language. I'm getting a lot of facial expression.

And, yet, it's not close to the same. Which is a little bit weird when you think about it. Because, in theory, the only difference is that this is clearly something like television. It's like me watching you in a film, as opposed to live.

And, yes, if we were in the same room, it would be three-dimensional. I would--you would not look--the lack-of-depth that I'm seeing. But, I can imagine, I know there's depth there. I know what it's like to sit in the room with a person. And yet somehow it's a radically different social experience to the extent that it's exhausting to be on Zoom for long periods of time. I'm going to be okay for this hour. I mean, I think we're going to be fine. But, in general, it's interesting how hard it is as a human being. It's something I suspect primal or primitive about our senses. But, I don't think we fully understand that. You want to react to that?

Noreena Hertz: Yeah, so I think a few observations and yes, after this past year and a half, I think so many of us are directly experiencing the Zoom fatigue and also craving more interactions. I think part of it is the fact that we are narcissistic creatures and we are distracted by our own images which are up on the screen--

Russ Roberts: Good point, yeah. Excellent point--

Noreena Hertz: 'Oh, is my hair okay? my makeup?' etc. So, we're not present fully. It's as if we were having a conversation with a friend in a room, looking at a mirror, with a mirror in front of us. So, that's already going to be problematic.

Secondly, researchers who are neuroscientists who look at the way kind of mirror neurons work in our brains. So, these

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are in *real* life, when you're in a room with someone, what happens is: when they smile--at your brain, I'm just sketching this out in a very crude way--but basically in your brain, you have neurons which will essentially mirror that that's going on. And, that's why if somebody smiles, you also feel a bit happier. If somebody is sad, you feel a bit sad, as well. So, it's going on in your brains. But in order for it to happen, there can't be this *lag* that we get because we're on not-great Internet connections and there's a slight lag. It doesn't work nearly so well when there's that lag. It needs to be absolutely in real time that you see someone do it.

So, that's part of the problem as well. Our brains aren't capable of connecting in exactly the same way because we're missing that mirroring effect that we would get in real life. So, that's another part of the problem.

And, the other is just that you have to kind of *focus* in a way that is not that natural. So, we are *performing* on Zoom, to use your TV analogy, in a much greater way than we would typically--because we *want* to be heard, we want to be seen. So, we feel that we have to kind of perform more. And, again, that creates some degree of inauthenticity which we pick up.

Russ Roberts: I'm just going to say one more thing. It's kind of off the track, but it's sort of interesting to me, which is: I do think the point about being able to see yourself is not unimportant. I don't keep track of how often I look at myself on Zoom, but I know that I do it. And, when I'm doing it, I'm watching--exactly what you said. I'm trying to see, 'Am I composing my face in an interesting and thoughtful way?' And, as soon as I do that, of course, I've stopped focusing on you. And, there's an inherent narcissism there; and it's a performance. And, of course, life has a performative aspect when we're face to face as well. I have a certain *feeling* about how I'm holding my face or smiling or not smiling or looking intently or whatever it is, and certainly Zoom--and by the way, I love Zoom. I think it's incredible. And, it's so much better than not Zoom. In COVID times, it was a literal lifesaver, I think, for a lot of people to be able to see their parents and their children. And, it works remarkably well. So, I've nothing bad to say about it. But it is, I think, obviously a poor substitute for real life and real face to face. And, I think the ability to see yourself is a part of the problem.

The other part still is a two dimensional thing. And, I'm not quite sure what's driving that, but maybe smarter people than me have figured that out. I don't know.

Noreena Hertz: Of course, it's very hard to make eye contact, because to make eye contact you actually have to look into the *camera* rather than at you, and so you're never actually making eye contact.

Russ Roberts: It's an excellent point. That's an excellent point. And, right, you can fake eye contact. I could look into the camera and think to myself, 'Oh, she's thinking I'm looking into her eyes.' Of course, I'm not: I'm looking into the camera. So, there's an inherent, yeah, deception there.

26:14 **Russ Roberts:** Let's move on to the more speculative part of the book and the part I can't say I agreed with, for better or for worse, which is the *cause* of this. So, lay out what you think is the cause of this growth and disconnection and loneliness that you're writing about.

Noreena Hertz: So, I think there were a number of drivers. One, obviously, is that we do less with each other than in the past. I mean again, this isn't about saying that if you're on your own, you're necessarily going to be lonely, but we are doing more on our own. And, if you are on your own, you are more *likely* to have episodes of loneliness. So, people live together less; they are less likely to get married. People are less likely to be members of parent/teacher associations, less likely be members of trade unions, less likely to go to church or synagogue. So, people are doing less together and that's clearly a factor. And this is something obviously that has been--this isn't a brand new phenomenon. Professor Robert Putnam, of course, famously wrote about this about 20 years ago now, I guess.

So, I'm bowling alone. But, this is a real phenomenon that has been increasing and it's definitely part of the problem.

Another part of the problem is technology, which we've already touched upon so I won't go into that here. But I do see that as a driver and as kind of a key driver but not the only one.

The one where I know where we are likely to have a point of difference--I'm excited to discuss with you our different points of views--is the driver that--the economic driver, the political-economic driver that I identify, which is neo-liberal capitalism.

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So, to be clear, I'm not anti-capitalism. I grew up in a family of entrepreneurs. I definitely believe that the market is the best mechanism for innovation.

I actually worked in Russia in the early 1990s, just after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. And, if there's anything to make someone very clear that the alternative is bad, it's spending time in Russia in the early 1990s. So, I just want to preface my conversation with that.

But, I do believe that the *particular* form of capitalism that really took hold from the 1980s onwards, neoliberal capitalism, which is the version of capitalism that was subscribed to initially, really, by--not initially--but in recent times by Ronald Reagan in the United States and by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom.

The form of capitalism which really valorized self-interest, hyper-competitiveness at the expense of thinking about others and the collective good: that that *form* of capitalism has a lot to answer for when it comes to how lonely and disconnected we currently feel. Because, if you come to see yourself as a hustler rather than as a helper, as a taker rather than as a giver, as a competitor rather than a collaborator, isn't it inevitable that the world is going to feel more disconnected and that you will feel more disconnected from those in it? I would argue: Yes. So, part of it is the neoliberal mindset and how it has affected people. And, that's part of the reason.

30:15 **Russ Roberts:** Yeah, so I don't buy that at all, for a lot of reasons. So, let me try to lay it out a little bit and you can respond. We can go back to Adam Smith--you mentioned him in your book. You know, Smith gets unfairly associated with selfishness. Ayn Rand actually had a book called *The virtues of Selfishness.* Certainly Adam Smith would have had nothing to do with that idea. He didn't think selfishness was a virtue.

Noreena Hertz: No, not at all.

Russ Roberts: He believed that people were self-*interested*; and that, again, has been true since Adam and Eve came out of the Garden. It's as old as humanity. We're alone in the sense that we are physically not connected to other people once we're born: once the umbilical cord is cut, we're on our own.

And, we do spend the rest of our life, I think, trying to create those associations with each other. We do those in many ways. We do it in business: You can't be successful in

business if you don't collaborate with your fellow employees or with your investors. Business is *inherently* a collaborative phenomenon--competitive also, of course. We associate with each other voluntarily in what is called Civil Society. We create nonprofits, and we do lots of things together in the modern world, pre-1980, post-1980. And, I would be surprised if you would ever find anything in Maggie Thatcher or Ronald Reagan--two people who I will defend only because they're dead, not on the program--I don't think they ever said that it's good to be a hustler and not a helper, to be a taker and not a giver, to be a competitor not a collaborator. They believed in being a nice person.

And, both of them, by the way, spent a lot of time valorizing the family--which I think is part of the problem as you alluded to in your opening remarks, although you almost mention it not at all in your book: That the death of the family, this traditional nuclear family in the West, the slow--it's not literally dead, but it's dy*ing*--the lack of the standard family structures that were common until the last 40 years, that's not so good for togetherness. Now, you can argue there's virtues to it. I mean, you could argue it's been great, there are many benefits from it. I think there's some truth to that, but it's got to be a big part of why we're lonely.

I just don't see any reason to think that the cultural impact of neoliberal capitalism is real.

I don't even think we live in a neoliberal capitalist world. And, all of the claims--you make them a little bit in your book--about austerity and reduced government: Government is bigger than ever. Where is the evidence that there's anything to this neoliberal capitalism tide that's engulfed us and made us lonely? So, I'll get off my soapbox.

Noreena Hertz: No, I'll give you a couple of data points to support my measured position.

The first is: you know, you talk about no evidence at all to show that kind of culturally, we see ourselves in these kinds of super-individualistic way. Actually, there is some great *cultural* evidence in terms of pop song lyrics, which we see since the 1980s, like words such as 'we,' 'us,' and 'our,' have steadily been supplanted by words like 'I,' 'me,' and 'myself,' which I see as a really interesting cultural phenomenon that helps show how we have steadily come to kind of view the world in an I-centric rather than we-centric way.

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When it comes to your question about austerity and kind of, you know, it hasn't actually played a part in how disconnected and lonely we are--we can, anyway, a *very* obvious counter to that is the very significant depletion of what we might think of as the *infrastructure* of community that has taken place since 2008 across the globe. So, since the 2008 Financial Crisis when governments across the globe adopted policies of austerity, belt tightening.

One of the things that they *really* defunded, and we see this in country after country, is things like public parks, public libraries, youth clubs, community centers. In the United Kingdom, 160 public libraries were closed down in 2019 alone. In the United States, federal funding for public libraries fell by a third over just a few-year period.

So, people need physical *places* to be together, to do things together. And, government, I believe *does* have a role to play in helping to fund this at local and national levels. And, we have seen a steady *under*-funding of that as well.

There's also an element of neoliberalism of the kind of capitalism that we've adopted in the recent years, which is, of course, that it has presided over a period of growing inequality. Now, inequality--you know, I don't have an objection to inequality per se, but I do have a problem when significant swathes of the population feel that they are being ignored. And I have a problem partly from a pragmatic position, because we see that when people feel that they're ignored, economically, when they feel disenfranchised economically--in relative terms--they often turn to more *extremist* political parties for solutions. Both on the Left and on the Right. So, I think that's another problem associated with neoliberal capitalism to raise.

You know, Margaret Thatcher was actually the Member of Parliament for the area in London that I grew up in.

And, you're right: in the Conservative Party and at the same time the Republican Party on under Ronald Reagan did [?] and support the family. And, I think the diminishment of the family *is* part of the problem here.

But, I would say that the *solution* to that doesn't mean that everyone should rush out and get married who isn't married, yes, and have kids. It's about: How do we create meaningful bonds between people who are not necessarily blood ties? How do we encourage, and also *enable* people to care for people who are not necessarily linked to them by blood?

So, you have not so much in the United States, but in most of Europe, for example, it's very standard practice to have the women after they have kids to have paid time off by employers--significant paid time off by employers. Maternity pay for the first six, nine months, even a year after a child is born. So, paid a decent rate to care.

But, we could and *should* be thinking about how we extend the possibilities for people to care, not only for their kin, but beyond.

38:28 **Russ Roberts:** There's a lot to respond to there. It's very thoughtful. A couple things. I think what happened in the 1980s and their aftermath is that governments like to talk about austerity and belt-tightening, but they don't really do it. Governments are much, much bigger--certainly in absolute terms, corrected from inflation of course. Certainly meaning real spending is larger as a percentage of GDP [Gross Domestic Product]: it's somewhat flat or growing in most of the West. Obviously it has bumps and changes during recessions or corona. But, you can look at U.K. spending, government spending, in the 2020 or 2019 before the pandemic, it's much larger than it was in 2010 or 2000. So, it's not *really* an austere time. Libraries--

Noreena Hertz: The question is where is it being spent and who is it being spent on?

Russ Roberts: That's true. So, libraries are dying out because people don't read books anymore. Whether we should have libraries is an interesting question. I do think there has to be places for people to--

Noreena Hertz: Libraries have been used really in very significant ways--recently it's not just, of course, for being places where people read books, but also being places where people often have access to computers, where they have initiatives for children. So, yeah, as community centers, I think.

Russ Roberts: So, I don't know what's happened to libraries in the West, but I do think there are challenges for people to get together in social ways. And, libraries *were* one of those ways. We had Chris Arnade on the program whose book *Dignity* deals with some of the issues you're talking about in a more granular, down-on-the-ground level. And, he talks about how McDonald's is a way, in many communities, for people to interact with each other. And you talk about that in your book: that small businesses--we can think about cafes

and hardware stores--there's all kinds of places where people get together--

Noreena Hertz: [inaudible 00:40:35], barbershops--

Russ Roberts: Barbershops, true. The place you can go where people know your name. It's a nice thing.

40:43 **Russ Roberts:** But, I think the other part of this is the--the song lyrics are quite interesting. The fact that 'we' and 'us' is less frequent maybe than 'I,' and singular, lonelier, pronouns have become more common.

And the question is: Why?

Religion, which you mention briefly--not so much in the book--is another example of where people used to find community increasingly don't. Especially in the last 10 years, by the way. And, especially among young people. It might be interesting--I don't know if anyone's done it--to look in countries where there *is* that maternity pay and other things that in theory might make people feel more connected, but also they don't have as much religion as they used to. And, whether that is working as a way of creating more of a sense of belonging and less a sense of loneliness.

But, I think the fundamental question here is what do we do about it? And, I'm a big fan of the family and I'm suggesting that the loss of family connection and religious connection is a huge part of this problem. Not a small part.

But I don't think government should be trying to *fix* it. I don't believe government should subsidize family, or ever subsidize religion. I'm now in a country where religion is subsidized. And, I think it's bad for religion, and it's bad for the country. And I say that as somebody who is a religious Jew: I don't think that's the solution. I think the solution has to come from the bottom up. I think it has to come from us.

You talk about the importance of kindness. I'm a big fan of kindness. It's in our hands. It's up to you and me. It's not something that corporations foist on us to be cruel or neoliberal theorists foist on us. It's in the air and the water we breathe, and it's up to us to change it.

And, I think we can, if we want to. Certainly each of us can make a small contribution to making the world a better place that way.

But, I just--I don't--if you're going to put the blame on capitalism or business--and there's plenty of things

businesses do that's awful--but if you can put it on the, quote, "the system," that the ways of fixing that, to me, become very challenging.

And you propose something. So, you can respond to what I said, and you can propose some of those solutions if you'd like and defend them.

Noreena Hertz: Yeah. So, I mean, firstly, I *totally* agree with you that there's a lot that *we* need to do as individuals, and we should do. And, this is where, perhaps, I differ from some people who have, you know, raised the critique of neoliberal capitalism in that I also acknowledge, you know: We, as individuals, do have responsibilities. You know. And, there are things we should do, and I'd love to talk about them later.

But, I *also* believe that there are things that governments can and should do. And also businesses. And, just, maybe to say a few words on businesses. One thing that came out *very* clear from my research was the extent to which loneliness is a problem for employers. A problem in economic terms: lonely workers are less productive, less efficient, less motivated, more likely to quit a company than a worker who isn't.

Somebody who doesn't have a friend at work is *six* times more likely to quit the company they work for than somebody who does, for example.

So, you know *really* loneliness is a big business issue that businesses would be well-served to address from pragmatic reasons, for very neoliberal capitalist reasons. So, I think that's important to understand, and my book has lots of ideas on what businesses can do when it comes to their employees to help create and foster a greater sense of connection--you know, from some really quite easy things to implement, at least once we're back in the office. Like, eating together.

So, lots of research which is that when people eat together, they feel more bonded. There was research done in Chicago with firefighters, companies of firefighters who ate together. They didn't only feel more bonded, they actually performed *twice as well* as companies of firefighters who didn't. So, that's a simple thing companies can do once they *are* back in the office or at least a number of days a week in the office.

But also picking up on your point about kindness--and, yes, we share this, that we really see kindness as a virtue; but also

as something that again makes sense for businesses to foster and encourage amongst their employees. Cisco, the global tech company, they have a scheme whereby anyone up or down the company can nominate anyone else has been particularly kind or helpful for a cash reward of up to $10,000.

Cisco, I think promoting this culture of kindness and care, has gone a long way in making Cisco's turnover of employees be half the industry average and also helps account for why they've been voted the best company in the world to work for by their employees for four years running. I'm not on Cisco's payroll by the way, but I was impressed by finding all of this out about them in my research.

When it comes to governments, I do think there are things they *can* do, actually. Of course, I don't think they should be subsidizing religion, either; but I do think investing in public libraries and youth clubs in community centers at local levels *is* important and is something that governments could and should be doing.

I think taking on social media companies in a meaningful way *is* important. I do believe that in many ways, social media companies are the tobacco companies of the 21st century. And, I do believe that they should be regulated as such. And, I know that in the United States, there *is* growing support *across* the aisle for greater regulation of social media companies. If you're creating a *public bad*--that in many ways they are--it makes sense that the market itself can't address this and that government can step in. And, it gives--

47:22 **Russ Roberts:** What regulation would you favor? I mean I'm open-minded about--I'm intrigued by the idea of things we might do. And, it hasn't been released yet, but there's an episode coming out soon with Glen Weyl who has some very radical ideas on how we might reorganize business. But, what would you--I mean, as you point out, they make their money by us using their product; they're really good at it. And, people, if you asked them, 'Do you want to have less Facebook or less TikTok or less Instagram?' they'd say, 'No, I like it. Again, I want more.' So, how's the government going to--what would you have them do?

Noreena Hertz: So, I think it's interesting to look at what the U.K. government is doing at the moment to give some kind of quite concrete--put some concrete thoughts on how this might work in the United Kingdom. There's a bill currently going through Parliament called the Online Safety Bill. And, this bill is going to impose a really significant duty of care on

social media companies when it comes to things on their platforms that create psychological or physical harm.

So, having very punitive, significant fines on companies where users as a result experience significant physical or psychological harm, I think that is something that makes sense: policies in that *sort* of direction.

I also think there is a really legitimate case to be made for banning addictive social media for children in the same way that we would ban tobacco products to be sold to children, thereby putting the onus on these social media tech companies to actually develop new products which are less addictive for this market, for this demographic.

So, I think there are meaningful interventions that can be made that could have a material impact on how deleterious they currently are when it comes to so many people's lives.

Russ Roberts: The incentives are pretty clear, right? The incentives there are: they make their money on advertising. The money they make from advertising depends on how many people are on their screens and for how long.

Noreena Hertz: Yes.

Russ Roberts: So, and they've got data on that and they can figure out what makes more versus less. Again, I think the challenge is people do seem to like it. And, you confess in the book that you do have [inaudible 00:50:17].

Noreena Hertz: [inaudible 00:50:17].

Russ Roberts: Yeah, well, they do. Right. Some of them, at least for a while.

The other way to think about this--and I like what Arnold Kling wrote about it a while back--he said: If you don't like Facebook, you find parts of it unpleasant or inadequate or whatever it is, build a better one. And, it's hard because there's a big network and we care about how many people we interact with on these platforms. But, you think, you want to encourage these firms to make more child-friendly, less-addictive products, you'd think they *could*.
Someone *else* could. Someone else could.

Noreena Hertz: Yeah. I mean, part of the challenge here, of course--and this is something which I know that the FTC [Federal Trade Commission] is currently going *after* the social media companies for--is that they buy up small

companies that *are* innovating. And then, you know, so they are essentially buying their potential competition and stifling it. So, there's a real monopolistic problem here, which, even, you know, especially actually for strong advocates of capitalism should be jarring.

So, taking them on is, I think, a worthy pursuit which would have a meaningful impact.

And then of course there's what we can do as *individuals*-- and so much that we can do as individuals. There was a fascinating initiative done in Germany that I write about in my book by a group of journalists at a newspaper [?] site, who became worried about growing political fragmentation in Germany.

And, they launched an initiative, Deutschland Spricht [Germany Speaks], where they paired up in a kind of political Tinder-type way as they called it-- people with radically different political views. So, it was an opt-in scheme. But they had *thousands* of people across Germany opting in to be part of this scheme. So, you had people who were really anti-immigrant with people who were really pro-immigration. They had people who were anti the Euro with people who were pro the Euro. *Real* different extremes. And different socioeconomic groups: CEOs [Chief Executive Officers] and trade unionists being paired up. And, then these people came together. That was all they had to do. They had to meet up for two hours and talk. That was it. And, it was *fascinating* what happened. Just after this two hour exchange, people's views of the other radically changed. They saw the other as someone much more like them, often with shared concern--actually often around family.

And, they also said that they'd be much more willing to invite someone like that to a social setting in the future. And also, interestingly, that they trusted Germans in general more.

So, I think this really exemplifies this point. And, it's something we all should be charged to do, really, because it's easy to get lazy and only hang out with people like you. But, really to try and look for ways where we do interact with and rub up with people who are different to us.

And, we talked about religion--of course, it was often *in* the church, for example, at the Sunday service where people would meet people who were very different to them and interact. And we're not having enough of those opportunities. So, that's something that we can do.

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Another thing we can do is--we've talked about how addicted we are to our phones and our devices, but we can *try* and take more control.

I, for example, do a digital Sabbath. Every Saturday I am off my devices. I don't check my emails. And, I really try and stick to that--partly so that I can just be more present with my partner, my family, with those around me. And, I try and do this in the evenings as well--have a cutoff time, put my phone so that it's not in arm's reach. So, that's something else we can do.

We can *support* our local communities. And, that is more, and that's partly about supporting our local shops, our local businesses. You know, these places, these third spaces, which *do* play *hugely* important roles, these small businesses, in anchoring and nurturing our communities.

So, shopping at your local independent bookstore if you have one. Frequent your local cafe if there is one. And, if, of course, in these times, it's safe to do so. And, you know, really challenge ourselves about this shift to a contactless existence, to doing everything on Zoom, on Grubhub, on [inaudible 00:55:15] that we have been doing, accelerated by the pandemic. But challenge ourselves so that we don't choose convenience *over* community inadvertently, because I think there's a real danger of that.

And, then I think we also--given the levels of loneliness right now, given the pandemic and given how many people are struggling--I mean, *really* think: Is there anyone in your own network who might be feeling lonely? And, if there is, you know, just pick up the phone to them, even just give them a phone call, even to send them a text. If you can meet them, meet up with them. But just showing someone that you're thinking about them, that they *matter* to you, can make a huge difference to how they feel.

56:05 **Russ Roberts:** Let's close with what we might call the opposite of loneliness. We've talked a little bit about family. We've talked a little bit about religion. But, tribalism--the tribal aspect of our humanity--is really the flip side of loneliness.

We want to be with our tribe. And, our tribe could be our immediate family. It could be an immediate--people who share a religion. But there are other tribes. And people have started, I think, with the challenges that religion and family have been facing, people have turned to other tribes to join. Some of those are political. I often talk about the sports tribes. That's a common way that people feel connected to

other people. I've suggested that sports is healthier than politics, but people don't agree with me necessarily. I respect that; and I want to mention--

Noreena Hertz: My husband would--

Russ Roberts: What?

Noreena Hertz: My husband would.

Russ Roberts: Okay, okay. He's not a--is he a Tottenham fan by any chance?

Noreena Hertz: Liverpool.

Russ Roberts: Well, anyway, but I was going to say--and it's very brave of you to come on to EconTalk knowing that you're going to meet someone who doesn't totally agree with you on everything.

57:14 **Russ Roberts:** But anyway, let's talk about tribalism, and how I think in modern times, I think it's the flip side of loneliness. We're searching for tribes to be part of. In most of human history they came naturally to us. They were our physical neighbors because that's who we lived around and near. They were our family members because that's how we got by. They were our religion, because that's how we found meaning. And, for a lot of people, those aren't available anymore. So, we're looking for something else. What do you think of that?

Noreena Hertz: Yeah, I mean, we are looking for people who are like us or who have shared interests to us, shared passions. And, one of the things I write about in the book is that even before the pandemic, we were really seeing a kind of real upsurge in things like people who were meeting up to do crafting together or painting together or--I'm part of a weekly improv [improvisation--Econlib Ed.] group where we would meet up in person and do improv every week together. So, shared passions, shared beliefs, sure. Those are definite ways people can feel less lonely. And, if you're feeling lonely yourself, think about is there something you're passionate about. And, nowadays a lot is happening virtually, there *is* stuff happening virtually in that realm as well.

But, I think the challenge with tribes is that--you know, my *hope* is that we don't just find our connection within our own tribe, but that we aim to also think about how can we create bridges between tribes. How do we move forward so that we don't *only* feel connected to people who are like us, but so that we're at least willing to connect with, engage with,

listen to, and hear from people who are not like us as well. And, I think that's the challenge and also the opportunity.

59:14 **Russ Roberts:** Well, it's a nice thing to aspire to. I'm a big fan of it, and I'm a big fan of respecting people--I try to be a fan--of respecting people who aren't like me. But I'm not sure that works so well for human beings. We spent most of our evolutionary history surrounded by our tribe and being either afraid of or fighting the people who aren't like us. So, it seems to me that that human urge to belong is so fundamental that we kind of have to fix that. In fact--

Noreena Hertz: Well, one way we can--one thing that comes--in one of the things that I looked at in my book: you know, I think, and this is something where, you know, I think there *is* potentially a role for government to play, but it doesn't *have* to be government, is in engineering opportunities for people to do things together. Because, when people *do* things with people who are different to them, that's when they often find what they have in common.

So, whether it *is* just like that German scheme where you're sitting and speaking to someone. But, if you're actually *doing* something--so, classes: if kids from different socioeconomic groups and backgrounds, you know, doing shared sports together, for example. Or, in France, there was a scheme that President Macron trialed of civic service for 16-year-olds, where people from very different backgrounds--and they lived together, did voluntary activities together, worked together, had to learn to co-exist together.

So, I think you're right. Our instinct might be in our kind of evolutionary history. It might be pointing us to only feel connected with people like us. But, I *think* in the 21st century, we *can* move beyond that and we can actually engineer ways and help people to find those ties and connections and commonalities with people different to them, too.

Russ Roberts: Yeah. I'm all for that. I think the challenge is: if you don't satisfy that first one, you're in trouble. Right? If you can't feel a sense of belonging, we're in trouble. I agree with you though, once--

Noreena Hertz: And this is where we would perhaps disagree, but, you know, the state *can* play a part in helping more people feel that they belong. And, part of the rise of the Populist Right, of course, in recent years has been because they, on the Right, were speaking to a group of people who did feel very disenfranchised--economically, marginalized,

their communities kind of under-invested in, broken, falling down--

Russ Roberts: Yep--

Noreena Hertz: And so, again: Community doesn't just happen. It needs an infrastructure. And there is a role that governments *can* play.

It doesn't *only* have to be governments. Businesses can play that role. Churches used to often play that role. *We* can play that role in nurturing our communities. But at the end of the day, the problem is so serious that I think each party playing a part could make a huge difference.

Russ Roberts: Yeah. I guess the risk is that government can make it worse, too.

I think a lot of the rise in populism, as you said, is people who felt disconnected. And, they wanted to feel connected to their country again--whether it was Brexit or the Trump phenomenon in the United States. They didn't feel part of their country anymore. The notion of being English or American felt alien. And, I think in America, the narrative that those folks hold versus the narrative of people on the other side of the ideological fence feel are just not very reconcilable. And, I don't want government actually to have anything to do--I'd like government to get *out* of that, because I think it's going to--if we're not careful, we're going to end up in some kind of very disruptive, irreconcilable differences between those folks, if one side triumphs and the nature of what government is trying to achieve.

So, I think it's a big challenge. I don't mean to suggest there's a magic, easy way to get it done. I could even imagine a role for government, but I think we have to be really careful.

Noreena Hertz: I mean, as I said earlier, having kind of cut my teeth in the working world in Russia, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. You know, the danger of excessive government intervention is *extremely* clear and real. But I think we are both essentially kind of supporting or accepting as, of course, Adam Smith did, that there *are* times when government can and should intervene. But, government on its own will *never* be the solution to the loneliness crisis. We as individuals clearly also do have roles to play.

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Russ Roberts: My guest today has been Noreena Hertz. Her book is *The Lonely Century*. Noreena, thanks for being part of EconTalk.

Noreena Hertz: Thank you.