

Learn Something Small About...
Aloneness, Small Connections, and Christmas Tree Sellers ...
With Kyle Sauerbrunn

[Music opens, a jazzy, sultry *O Christmas Tree*, that underscores the opening below. We also hear city sounds of boots on snow and a bus turning a corner.]

Jacqueline Raposo:

Hi this is Jacqueline. Welcome. To [Learn Something Small](#).

It's coming on Christmastime in the city, and we're hauling home trees...

It snowed a few days ago — it was a frigid 24 hours of the old [iron radiator hissing and screeching](#) and the thermometer inside said it was 74 degrees, but I could feel the bricks and concrete in the walls around me shivering while the snow fell hard outside...

Can you feel the temperature of the walls around you? Or the air against your cheek?

Now, the snow is brown from boots and bus wheels, as Mitra and I walk just a block or two and back. There's ugly, everywhere — piles of garbage not picked up, bare branches against a gray sky. But then: a fresh green wreath on a very old wooden door. A hand-colored card in a first-floor window. Icicles draping from wrought iron fences.

The streets are loud with snow blowers and bass music and those big busses idling. And yet, the heavy silence of thousands of humans nestled together that settles now and then... that contrast.

I've spent over 15 holidays a New Yorker. And even before Covid set in, I've spent a lot of time being alone here: I'm disabled and immune compromised. I'm single, too. And I'm witnessing that *aloneness* sits particularly heavy for many people right now in either or both of these camps. Of course, anyone can feel lonely, right? A few years ago, I really struggled with this and so studied solitude for [my book](#), if you're curious about studies and conversations, just so you know. But this is a *different* kind of alone for many. One that — maybe for the very first time - pits *want* against *can't*.

And so today, we'll drop into one of the greatest gifts aloneness has taught me over the years that I cling to especially right now... the value of *small* connection...

[music stops]

Kyle Sauerbrunn:

My name is Kyle Sauerbrunn... It does feel different — it feels different because... I don't want to assume that everything is OK for everybody.

Jacqueline:

Kyle sells Christmas trees for Gopher Broke farm. For the last 5 years, he's come down just before Thanksgiving and worked 7-days a week through to Christmas Eve.

[shoes walking on cement]

I didn't expect to be alone in New York for the holidays this year — I moved out in January and only returned because Covid has complicated things *that* much. Maybe because of that, I found myself in the days leading up to Thanksgiving heading Mitra toward their corner of the block, worried the tree sellers weren't coming back this year... that things were to be *that different*.

[warm, twinkling music]

Yet there they were one night, their stand sparkling with lights, and I walked through running my fingers over branches until they were fragrant with spruce and pine.

Kyle:

It's an incredible month out of my year every year that I'm really excited about. And this year is no exception.

Jacqueline:

This year, they've made extra precautions for Covid, but it's been rather easy since they work entirely out doors. He has a little hut with a heater. But he's generally outside for 12-14 hours a day, when his friend Joe comes to take the night shift. As a sick girl who feels cold at 75 degrees, this sounds like my worst nightmare. Yet, these vendors who I've met all over the city are always so friendly!

Kyle:

We're moving around and we're doing a lot of, a lot of work. And, and it's just, it's a fun time out here. So you don't notice the cold as much as one might think. Yeah...

Jacqueline:

I'll address at the end of this story the environmental debate about fresh trees. But this *small* story is about Kyle and connections...

Because he does this full-force job — and other seasonal jobs like it — so that he can spend large swaths of time elsewhere: he regularly spends *months* on a canoe trip, or hiking from Mexico to Canada ...

Kyle:

...that lets me go on these long hikes, and it lets me spend time with my friends and family and visit people that maybe I haven't seen in a few years. And those things are really important to me. And I feel fortunate to have found a way to make those things happen.

Jacqueline:

Now, Covid quarantine has made clear what studies have proven many times over — *anyone* can feel lonely. But when we do, we can also open our senses to welcome people like Kyle offering us small connection. Or we can slow down our daily routines and offer *ourselves* in conversation to those who already live and work around us. And this action grounds us in community. So we can also be *alone* but not *lonely*... even if we live or hike out in the middle of nowhere... or are in indefinite solo quarantine in a city. It's not the whole puzzle. But it's an important piece.

And so, at 7:15 one particularly frigid morning, Kyle and I walked a few blocks and sat on wall and thread our stories for a little bit...

And with Trinity Cemetery looming behind us and trucks barreling over cobblestones toward Broadway ... I asked Kyle to take us back to the country... to tell us a story about one of his long hikes... one that he returns to when the world feels too lonely or too loud...

[the sound of footsteps hiking in the woods]

Kyle:

When you hike a long trail, one of the things that you have to do is get more food — you need to resupply your food every four days or so. Sometimes there's a hundred miles between roads where you can access a grocery store. And when you do get to that road, usually the only option to get to the grocery store is to hitchhike. And I think one of the most special moments that I have out there on those trails is when I'm getting to a road, I have no food left and I'm waiting for the cars to pass and my thumb is out. And it's not

sort of the experience you think about when you're hiking a trail, but it's so important to the success that that you are able to get more food every four to six days.

[sound of a car pulling up, an engine idling, and a car door opening and shutting.]

And when that car finally pulls over and the person looks at you and you look back at them and you think, "Wow, this world is so interesting. This complete stranger is about to bring me into their car and about to help me take care of one of my essential tasks that makes this wonderful experience possible," you feel so grateful that someone is sharing that generosity of their time and their trust with you.

Those are really the moments that make hiking a long trail for me so incredible — the connection with the people.

[sounds of car engine crosses into the sound of rain pounding against the roof of a car.]

Sometimes it's raining and you're just listening to the rain pounding down on the roof of their car and you're wondering, "How can they really let me in their car right now, I'm soaking wet! It's going to make a mess!" But they do anyway. And everyone gets joy out of the human connection in that moment. That's a that's a really special part of the experience.

And I find those moments here in the city, too. When somebody, for instance, stops in the rain to talk to me and I'm thinking they probably just want to get back into their apartment and dry off and warm up! But they feel inclined to have a have a chat with me.

And that means so much to me. And I hope it means a lot to them, too.

And so that human connection is transferable across these experiences, whether it's the work experiences or the times when I'm having fun on my own. That's a really special thing to me.

Jacqueline:

Kyle's become a familiar face to those in our neighborhood, but he told me it's actually uncommon for a vendor to return to the same location 5 years running — vendors often get shuffled around depending on their experience. His crafts have become familiar to us, too:

A few years ago, I bought two reindeer Kyle made out of tree stumps and branches. This year, I bought two that Joe made— Kyle taught him how. I've got Santa Clauses his former colleague made. And wreaths and other trimmings. (You can see these on my Instagram.) They have become special treasures I take out of storage with joy, every year.

And so, I asked Kyle to share a special memory of some good he's received from us in return...

Kyle:

It's interesting that you bring up the crafts that you've purchased from us...

There's a boy who walks by my stand. He lives around the corner. And the first year that I was here, he came by and he bought a reindeer. And then he would, he would walk by every few days or so with his mother and his dog, and they would stop, and they'd chat. We would always talk about the reindeer. "How are you liking the reindeer? How are the antlers doing? Are they drying out?" And the boy, eventually, he did mention the antlers are getting a little bit dry. So, I'd tell them, "Come on down and we'll you know, we'll fix the fix the reindeer up and put some new antlers on and I'll show you how to do it. And you can choose them out of the out of the bin of the spare branches."

And so, he brought his reindeer back that year. We drilled some new holes into the into the head and stuck in some new antlers.

He's eight years old now. And he's still coming back and he's twice as big. And he loves to tell me about his summers — the other end of the year — when he goes to Illinois to see his grandmother. And how fun it is to do all these things in nature. And he knows the trees. He knows the birds. He just has this connection with the outdoors that he seems to cherish each summer. And I think that when he comes by the Christmas tree stand, he finds a little bit of that — a little bit of grandma's house in Illinois, a little bit of the trees, and those things that are meaningful to him in the other half of the year. And he finds that when he comes out to the Christmas tree stand.

He reminds me a lot about just some of the little things that that are great to be curious about and how important it is to ask questions and how learning about each other is really the soul of human connection.

And it's one of the great things about the city, because there's so many different kinds of people here and so many different ways to connect with people. So, for me to have a connection with a kid who lives on the block and is growing up every year, and he sees the Christmas trees as a place to explore.

And that's really important to me that being here is more than just selling something or even more than bringing the joy of Christmas into people's homes — it's a chance for people to get to know themselves better. Especially a young kid like him. And it helps me reflect, too. I'm also here to grow as a person. Making those connections certainly brings me into myself.

[The sound of a single bird singing gently. Later, the sound of footsteps on a sidewalk.]

Jacqueline:

This year, Kyle started carving little wooden birds and putting them into scenes on tree stumps or river stones he collected over the summer. One day a few weeks ago, I saw an older woman walking home blocks away from the stand, cradling one of these bird statues in her hand as if it was a baby bird itself. I sent one to a friend's mother and the friend was so delighted by it, I've now sent her one, too. Two of my own sit beside me right now. And every time I look at them, I can't stop my face from smiling...

I'm sure not everyone connects this viscerally with Kyle or his creations. But he loves when we love them. And I know I might not see him again after this winter. And so, I while I feel a bit silly confessing that outdoor chats and bird sculptures can mean so much ... this year is *different*... right?

Kyle:

It feels different because.... I don't want to assume that everything is okay for everybody.

I want to make sure that when I come here and chat with the people who I see every year that I'm... That I'm... being conscious of the fact that... everybody's been affected this year and sometimes it's not visible on the surface. I think it's just a reminder that it's the kind of year where we try and remember that everybody's human, and everybody is going through what they're going through. And sometimes we're not able to see that on the surface.

There is the element of understanding that people's situations might have changed. Or even as simply as maybe some people just don't want to have a conversation and just need to have some time to themselves and respecting that. We love to be friendly. We love to chit chat with every customer. But also, just realizing that this is not an easy time for everybody and just trying to adapt in in those different ways to accommodate everybody on different levels.

It's been a different year in some respects. It's been the same as it always has in others. But we're grateful to be here. And we ultimately hope that the community that we come back to every year is doing well and doing the best that they can to cope with the challenges of this year.

[Low handbells come into make low, sweet holiday tones.]

Jacqueline:

This holiday season has felt so short, in a way. And it's important to lock in the good things, right?

The other night, I packed up some scones and cookies to bring to Kyle and Joe ... it was the first night the snow had melted enough for Mitra's paws to once again walk more than only a block... We turned the corner and I anticipated those bright twinkling lights only to find them ... gone. Kyle had mentioned that they might sell out of trees earlier than usual this year, because things are... different. Which means that Kyle, at least, gets to spend Christmas with *his* family for the first time in many, many years.

[Light twinkling music bells build into lighter, jauntier notes.]

Now that's a beautiful different, huh?

I leave you with two things...

First, the environmental footprint:

Kyle summarized that Christmas trees are an incredibly sustainable crop, which is how they should be considered. And unlike other crops, trees clean the air and don't require regular maintenance from large machines that pollute it. They're often harvested by hand or small tools. And most go directly to small distributors and then to stands like his. After being used, most cities like New York have programs that mulch them for parks. And if you use a plastic tree for even 20 or 30 years, that tree requires more natural resources to be made and will stay in the earth for an unknown amount of time after you throw it away. If you do get a fresh tree every year? Maybe refuse the plastic netting and look into your local mulching program.

And now, finally...

[bells layer and build into faster, sweeter, happier tones.]

If you are very alone right now, maybe listen to the music leading us out of this story and ponder someone in your life who helps you feel less alone... someone who helps you feel rooted, and witnessed, and strong. Or, alternatively, someone in your community with whom you have a small connection, and that connection brings light to your day.

And if you're not alone – if you're so surrounded by others that aloneness sounds like a gift right now – use the music to plan when you'll give yourself even a little of that: even only 5 or 10 minutes sitting in front of your tree, or sipping your coffee or tea at a window. Promise yourself some time without a phone in your hand or a to-do list in your head — embrace aloneness.

I thank Kyle for sharing his story and bringing some light to the darkness. And you for listening and doing the same.

I wish you moments of whatever you need today and this holiday season, and this very new year.

Please share, and return again to Learn Something Small with me next time...

[bells end and transition to 90 seconds of a sweet, lovely instrumental song for your meditative moment of the day...]

Thank you for reading this transcript and listening to/exploring this episode. If you have any questions or would like to collaborate on a project, feel free to contact me at the form on JacquelineRaposo.com/contact.