



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Loneliness

I prefer, when possible, to do my serious writing in solitude. In my fantasy I see myself escaping to my mountain cabin, locked away from the world, alone with my thoughts and God. Here I am surrounded by mountains and forests. At the bottom of the hill is a bubbling stream, gurgling over smooth rocks, flowing peacefully over white sand. My only companions are the squirrels, chipmunks and feathery creatures which flutter on the window sill. My days are spent writing, a steaming cup of hot coffee and a slice of cheese nearby. Evenings are spent sitting in a rocker on the porch, breathing the clean mountain air, relaxing, catching a whiff of burning leaves or hearing the distant bark of a hound, the lowing of cows coming home at dark.

Those are my fantasies. But once I am there, as I was this last week, locked away in my little mountain retreat, everything is different. Days are spent writing. But the evenings are filled with loneliness. I, the one who is constantly saying I need to "get away from things," find myself almost frantic for

companionship, yearning to hear the sound of my wife's voice, listening for the children, wondering what is going on back at home.

The idea of spending a weekend alone in a motel, or even an evening, as appealing as it is before I get there, somehow grows sour after the experience begins. I peer out the window or drive through the streets, looking for a familiar face — or some other lonely person.

We are all like that. Created empty. Busyness is only a temporary escape. So is liquor. Listen to the plaintive ballads and songs of emptiness that come out of Music City in Nashville, the cry to be touched, held, stroked and loved. Listen to the soft calls from neglected housewives in the suburbs, the despair of college and military youth, the desperation of the suave businessman. Famous politicians turn to sex. Movie actors, filled it would seem to overflowing with acceptance, degenerate into debauchery. Walk into an adult book store and see the hollow-eyed youths and empty middle-aged men wandering about, flipping through

the magazines, fantasizing, dropping their quarters in the peep shows to see 30 seconds of flesh, hoping, through some vicarious miracle, to experience some kind of love. Always leaving as empty as they came.

Last year, walking through a poverty-ridden village in Nepal, I was almost overcome by the hoards of young boys and girls, ranging in age from those in their late teens to those who had just learned to walk, who thronged around me. They grasped at my legs and hands, mouths laughing but eyes vast pools of emptiness. Their bellies were bloated from malnutrition, yet they would rather be touched and loved than eat the food we had brought on the airplane. There was time later for food; this was their one chance to be touched, embraced, stroked by someone who seemed to care.

The fool pretends he is not lonely, or covers it with material things. The wiseman admits his emptiness, and in honest confession opens his heart to the only one who can fill the vacuum — God.