

Eight

COMMUNITY:
LOVING COMMUNION

Community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as a seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others.

—PARKER PALMER

TO ENSURE HUMAN survival everywhere in the world, females and males organize themselves into communities. Communities sustain life—not nuclear families, or the “couple,” and certainly not the rugged individualist. There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community. M. Scott Peck begins his book *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* with the profound declaration: “In and through community lies the salvation of the world.” Peck defines community as the coming together of a group of individuals “who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to ‘rejoice together, mourn together,’ and to ‘delight in each other, and make other’s conditions our own.’” We are all born into the world of community. Rarely if ever does a child come into the world in isola-

tion, with only one or two onlookers. Children are born into a world surrounded by the possibility of communities. Family, doctors, nurses, midwives, and even admiring strangers comprise this field of connections, some more intimate than others.

Much of the talk about "family values" in our society highlights the nuclear family, one that is made up of mother, father, and preferably only one or two children. In the United States this unit is presented as the primary and preferable organization for the parenting of children, one that will ensure everyone's optimal well-being. Of course, this is a fantasy image of family. Hardly anyone in our society lives in an environment like this. Even individuals who are raised in nuclear families usually experience it as merely a small unit within a larger unit of extended kin. Capitalism and patriarchy together, as structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy this larger unit of extended kin. Replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible. It gave absolute rule to the father, and secondary rule over children to the mother. By encouraging the segregation of nuclear families from the extended family, women were forced to become more dependent on an individual man, and children more dependent on an individual woman. It is this dependency that became, and is, the breeding ground for abuses of power.

The failure of the patriarchal nuclear family has been utterly documented. Exposed as dysfunctional more often than not, as a place of emotional chaos, neglect, and abuse, only those in denial continue to insist that this is the best environment for raising children. While I do not want to suggest that extended families are not as likely to be dysfunctional, simply by virtue of their size and their inclusion of nonblood kin (i.e., individuals who marry into the family and their blood relations), they are diverse and so are likely to include the presence of some individuals who are both sane and loving.

When I first began to speak publicly about my dysfunctional family, my mother was enraged. To her, my achievements were a sign that I could not have suffered "that much" in our nuclear family. Yet I know I survived and thrived despite the pain of childhood precisely because there were loving individuals among our extended family who nurtured me and gave me a sense of hope and possibility. They showed that our family's interactions did not constitute a norm, that there were other ways to think and behave, different from the accepted patterns in our household. This story is common. Surviving and thriving over dysfunctional nuclear families may depend on the presence of what psychoanalyst Alice Miller calls "enlightened witnesses." Practically every adult who experienced unnecessary suffering in childhood has a story to tell about someone whose kindness, tenderness, and

concern restored their sense of hope. This could only happen because families existed as part of larger communities.

The privatized patriarchal nuclear family is still a fairly recent form of social organization in the world. Most world citizens do not have, and will never have, the material resources to live in small units segregated from larger family communities. In the United States studies show that economic factors (the high cost of housing, unemployment) are swiftly creating a cultural climate in which grown children are leaving the family home later, and are frequently returning or never leaving in the first place. Research by anthropologists and sociologists indicates that small privatized units, especially those organized around patriarchal thinking, are unhealthy environments for everyone. Globally, enlightened, healthy parenting is best realized within the context of community and extended family networks.

The extended family is a good place to learn the power of community. However, it can only become a community if there is honest communication between the individuals in it. Dysfunctional extended families, like smaller nuclear family units, are usually characterized by muddied communication. Keeping family secrets often makes it impossible for extended groups to build community. There was once an advertisement that used the slogan "The family that prays together stays together." Since prayer is one way to communicate, it no doubt does help family mem-

bers stay connected. I remember hearing this slogan as a teenager, usually in situations where authority figures were coercing us to pray, and changing it to "The family that talks together stays together." Talking together is one way to make community.

IF WE DO not experience love in our extended families of origin (which is the first site for community offered us), the other place where children in particular have the opportunity to build community and know love is in friendship. Since we choose our friends, many of us, from childhood on into our adulthood, have looked to friends for the care, respect, knowledge, and all-around nurturance of our growth that we did not find in the family. Writing in her moving memoir *Never Let Me Down*, Susan Miller recalls: "I kept thinking, love must be here, somewhere. I looked and looked inside myself, but I couldn't find it. I knew what love was. It was the feeling I had for my dolls, for beautiful things, for certain friends. Later on, when I knew Debbie, my best friend, I felt even more sure that love was what made you feel good. Love was not what made you feel bad, hate yourself. It was what comforted you, freed you up inside, made you laugh. Sometimes Debbie and I would fight, but that was different because we were basically, essentially connected." Loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to

process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected.

Most of us are raised to believe we will either find love in our first family (our family of origin) or, if not there, in the second family we are expected to form through committed romantic couplings, particularly those that lead to marriage and/or lifelong bondings. Many of us learn as children that friendship should never be seen as just as important as family ties. However, friendship is the place in which a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community. Learning to love in friendships empowers us in ways that enable us to bring this love to other interactions with family or with romantic bonds. A dear friend's mother died when she was just a young adult. Once when I was complaining about my mother fussing at me, she shared that she would give anything to hear her mother's voice scolding her. Encouraging me to be patient with my mother, she spoke of the pain of losing her mother and wished they had worked harder to find a place of communication and reconciliation. Her words reminded me to be compassionate, to focus on what I really enjoy about my mother. In friendship we are able to hear honest, critical feedback. We trust that a true friend desires our good. My friend wants me to relish the presence of my mother.

Often we take friendships for granted even when they are the interactions where we experience mutual pleasure.

We place them in a secondary position, especially in relation to romantic bonds. This devaluation of our friendships creates an emptiness we may not see when we are devoting all our attention to finding someone to love romantically or giving all our attention to a chosen loved one. Committed love relationships are far more likely to become codependent when we cut off all our ties with friends to give these bonds we consider primary our exclusive attention. I have felt especially devastated when close friends who were single fell in love and simultaneously fell away from our friendship. When a best friend chose a mate who did not click with me at all, it caused me heartache. Not only did they begin to do everything together, the friends she stayed closest to were those he liked best.

The strength of our friendship was revealed by our willingness to confront openly the shift in our ties and to make necessary changes. We do not see each other as much as we once did, and we no longer call each other daily, but the positive ties that bind us remain intact. The more genuine our romantic loves the more we do not feel called upon to weaken or sever ties with friends in order to strengthen ties with romantic partners. Trust is the heartbeat of genuine love. And we trust that the attention our partners give friends, or vice versa, does not take anything away from us—we are not diminished. What we learn through experience is that our capacity to establish

deep and profound connections in friendship strengthens all our intimate bonds.

When we see love as the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility, the foundation of all love in our life is the same. There is no special love exclusively reserved for romantic partners. Genuine love is the foundation of our engagement with ourselves, with family, with friends, with partners, with everyone we choose to love. While we will necessarily behave differently depending on the nature of a relationship, or have varying degrees of commitment, the values that inform our behavior, when rooted in a love ethic, are always the same for any interaction. One of the longest romantic relationships of my life was one in which I behaved in the more traditional manner of placing it above all other interactions. When it became destructive, I found it difficult to leave. I found myself accepting behavior (verbal and physical abuse) that I would not have tolerated in a friendship.

I had been raised conventionally to believe this relationship was "special" and should be revered above all. Most women and men born in the fifties or earlier were socialized to believe that marriages and/or committed romantic bonds of any kind should take precedence over all other relationships. Had I been evaluating my relationship from a standpoint that emphasized growth rather than duty and

obligation, I would have understood that abuse irreparably undermines bonds. All too often women believe it is a sign of commitment, an expression of love, to endure unkindness or cruelty, to forgive and forget. In actuality, when we love rightly we know that the healthy, loving response to cruelty and abuse is putting ourselves out of harm's way. Even though I was a committed feminist as a young woman, all that I knew and believed in politically about equality was, for a time, overshadowed by a religious and familial upbringing that had socialized me to believe everything must be done to save "the relationship."

In retrospect, I see how ignorance about the art of loving placed the relationship at risk from the start. In the more than fourteen years we were together we were too busy repeating old patterns learned in childhood, acting on misguided information about the nature of love, to appreciate the changes we needed to make in ourselves to be able to love someone else. Importantly, like many other women and men (irrespective of sexual preference) who are in relationships where they are the objects of intimate terrorism, I would have been able to leave this relationship sooner or recover myself within it had I brought to this bond the level of respect, care, knowledge, and responsibility I brought to friendships. Women who would no more tolerate a friendship in which they were emotionally and physically abused stay in romantic relationships

where these violations occur regularly. Had they brought to these bonds the same standards they bring to friendship they would not accept victimization.

Naturally, when I left this long-term relationship, which had taken so much time and energy, I was terribly alone and lonely. I learned then that it is more fulfilling to live one's life within a circle of love, interacting with loved ones to whom we are committed. Lots of us learn this lesson the hard way by finding ourselves alone and without meaningful connection to friends. And it has been the experience of both living in fear of abandonment in romantic relationships and being abandoned that has shown us that the principles of love are always the same in any meaningful bond. To love well is the task in all meaningful relationships, not just romantic bonds. I know individuals who accept dishonesty in their primary relationships, or who are themselves dishonest, when they would never accept it in friendships. Satisfying friendships in which we share mutual love provides a guide for behavior in other relationships, including romantic ones. They provide us all with a way to know community.

Within a loving community we sustain ties by being compassionate and forgiving. Eric Butterworth's *Life Is for Loving* includes a chapter on "love and forgiveness." Insightfully he writes: "We cannot endure without love and there is no other way to the return of healing, comforting, harmonizing love than through total and complete

forgiveness: If we want freedom and peace and the experience of love and being loved, we must let go and forgive." Forgiveness is an act of generosity. It requires that we place releasing someone else from the prison of their guilt or anguish over our feelings of outrage or anger. By forgiving we clear a path on the way to love. It is a gesture of respect. True forgiveness requires that we understand the negative actions of another.

While forgiveness is essential to spiritual growth, it does not make everything immediately wonderful or fine. Often, New Age writing on the subject of love makes it seem as though everything will always be wonderful if we are just loving. Realistically, being part of a loving community does not mean we will not face conflicts, betrayals, negative outcomes from positive actions, or bad things happening to good people. Love allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing. When a colleague whose work I admired, whom I considered a friend, who for no reason that was ever clear to me, began to write vicious attacks of my work, I was stunned. Her critiques were full of lies and exaggerations. I had been a caring friend. Her actions hurt. To heal this pain I entered into an empathic identification with her so that I could understand what might have motivated her. In *Forgiveness! A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*, Robin Casarjian explains: "Forgiveness is a way of life that gradually transforms us from being help-

less victims of our circumstances to being powerful and loving 'co-creators' of our reality. . . . It is the fading away of the perceptions that cloud our ability to love."

Through the practice of compassion and forgiveness, I was able to sustain my appreciation for her work and cope with the grief and disappointment I felt about the loss of this relationship. Practicing compassion enabled me to understand why she might have acted as she did and to forgive her. Forgiving means that I am able to see her as a member of my community still, one who has a place in my heart should she wish to claim it.

We all long for loving community. It enhances life's joy. But many of us seek community solely to escape the fear of being alone. Knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving. When we can be alone, we can be with others without using them as a means of escape. Through his life theologian Henri Nouwen emphasized the value of solitude. In many of his books and essays he discouraged us from seeing solitude as being about the need for privacy, sharing his sense that in solitude we find the place where we can truly look at ourselves and shed the false self. In his book *Reaching Out*, he stresses that "loneliness is one of the most universal sources of human suffering today."

Nouwen contends that "no friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness."

Wisely, he suggests we put those feelings to rest by embracing our solitude, by allowing divine spirit to reveal itself there: "The difficult road is the road of conversion, the conversion from loneliness into solitude. Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into fruitful solitude. . . . Loneliness is painful; solitude is peaceful. Loneliness makes us cling to others in desperation; solitude allows us to respect others in their uniqueness and create community." When children are taught to enjoy quiet time, to be alone with their thoughts and reveries, they carry this skill into adulthood. Individuals young and old striving to overcome fears of being alone often choose meditation practice as a way to embrace solitude. Learning how to "sit" in stillness and quietude can be the first step toward knowing comfort in aloneness.

Moving from solitude into community heightens our capacity for fellowship with one another. Through fellowship we learn how to serve one another. Service is another dimension of communal love. At the end of her autobiography *The Wheel of Life*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross confesses: "I can assure you that the greatest rewards in your whole life will come from opening your heart to those in need. The greatest blessings always come from helping." Women have been and are the world's great teachers about the meaning of service. We publicly honor the memory of exceptional individuals like Mother Teresa

who have made a vocation of service, but there are women everyone knows whose identities the world will never publicly recognize who serve with patience, grace, and love. All of us can learn from the example of these caring women.

Earlier I was describing my impatience with my mother. Looking at her life, I was awed by her service to others. She taught me and all her children about the value and meaning of service. As a child I witnessed her patient care of the sick and dying. Without complaint she gave shelter and aid to them. From her actions I learned the value of giving freely. Remembering these actions is important. It is so easy for all of us to forget the service women give to others in everyday life—the sacrifices women make. Often, sexist thinking obscures the fact that these women make a choice to serve, that they give from the space of free will and not because of biological destiny. There are plenty of folks who are not interested in serving, who disparage service. When anyone thinks a woman who serves “gives ’cause that’s what mothers or real women do,” they deny her full humanity and thus fail to see the generosity inherent in her acts. There are lots of women who are not interested in service, who even look down on it.

The willingness to sacrifice is a necessary dimension of loving practice and living in community. None of us can have things our way all the time. Giving up something is one way we sustain a commitment to the collective

well-being. Our willingness to make sacrifices reflects our awareness of interdependency. Writing about the need to bridge the gulf between rich and poor, Martin Luther King, Jr., preached: “All men [and women] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” This gulf is bridged by the sharing of resources. Every day, individuals who are not rich but who are materially privileged make the choice to share with others. Some of us share through conscious tithing (regularly giving a portion of one’s income), and others through a daily practice of loving kindness, giving to those in need whom we randomly encounter. Mutual giving strengthens community.

Enjoying the benefits of living and loving in community empowers us to meet strangers without fear and extend to them the gift of openness and recognition. Just by speaking to a stranger, acknowledging their presence on the planet, we make a connection. Every day we all have an opportunity to practice the lessons learned in community. Being kind and courteous connects us to one another. In Peck’s book *The Different Drum*, he reminds us that the goal of genuine community is “to seek ways in which to live with ourselves and others in love and peace.” Unlike other movements for social change that require joining organizations and attending meetings, we can begin the process of making community wherever we are.

We can begin by sharing a smile, a warm greeting, a bit of conversation; by doing a kind deed or by acknowledging kindness offered us. Daily we can work to bring our families into greater community with one another. My brother was pleased when I suggested he think about moving to the same city where I live so that we could see each other more. It enhanced his feeling of belonging. And it made me feel loved that he wanted to be where I was. Whenever I hear friends talk about estrangement from family members, I encourage them to seek a path of healing, to seek the restoration of bonds. At one point my sister, who is a lesbian, felt that she wanted to break away from the family because family members were often homophobic. Affirming and sharing her rage and disappointment, I also encouraged her to find ways to stay connected. Over time she has seen major positive changes; she has seen fear give way to understanding, which would not have happened had she accepted estrangement as the only response to the pain of rejection.

Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this, we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love.

Nine

MUTUALITY: THE HEART OF LOVE

True giving is a thoroughly joyous thing to do. We experience happiness when we form the intention to give, in the actual act of giving, and in the recollection of the fact that we have given. Generosity is a celebration. When we give something to someone we feel connected to them, and our commitment to the path of peace and awareness deepens.

—SHARON SALZBERG