TOWARD
ENLIGHTENED
COMMUNITY

*for possible, wonderful
living-together community*
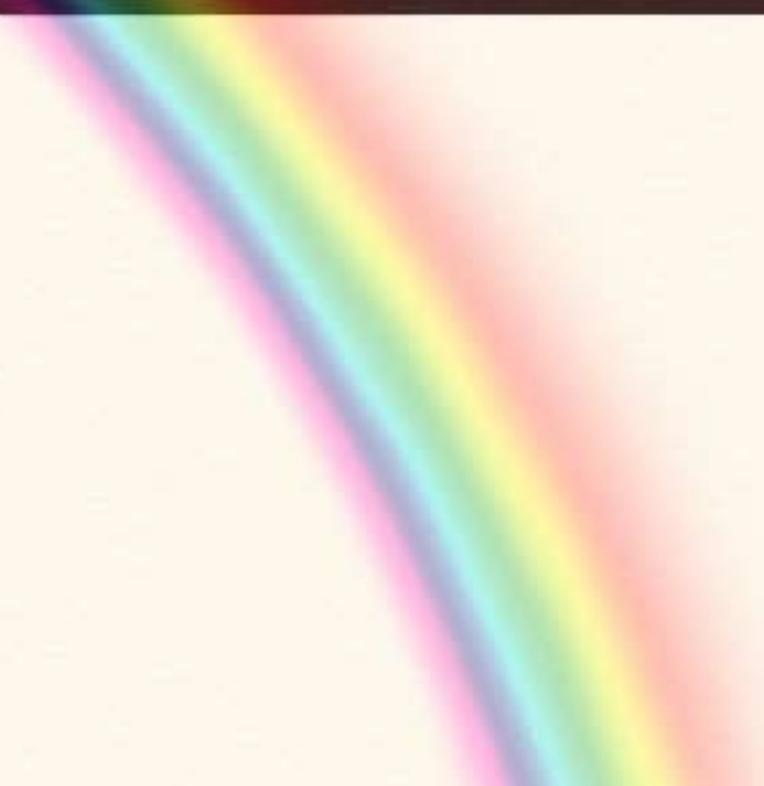
Toward Enlightened Community

Introduction

Since the hippie heyday of the 1960s, when communes popped up like mushrooms and faded just as fast, community has lost popularity in the United States. Indeed, the popular mind has turned against community, citing innumerable problems and pitfalls as evidence that community living is, in general, foolish, if not dangerous. Thus, the very possibility of community living is viewed with considerable skepticism, and even irrational fear, by many.

Many of these concerns are, of course, valid, though greatly exaggerated. It should go without saying, however, that few people have the intellectual/spiritual drive necessary to look honestly at the various challenges involved—much less the perseverance and commitment to overcome them. Thus, the possibility of viable and beneficial community is, indeed, little known; and workable communities are scarce as hen's teeth.

One of the unsung foes of community living is, without a doubt, ego itself. Ego, as you know, has ways of messing up even the best of life's possibilities—particularly those possibilities, in fact. Ego uses pitfalls as an excuse to rule out things it finds most threatening—and to justify the avoidance of contexts in which it feels, shall we say, less likely to succeed. Community is one such context. Therefore, an impressive arsenal of anti-community arguments exists in the mind of nearly every citizen of modern society.

However, despite its pitfalls and challenges, community has much to recommend it. The benefits of community living run the entire gamut from spiritual, emotional, and psychological, to pragmatic. But that, of course, is something that must be experienced to be believed.

Perhaps, for most people, the appeal of community living would grow only if there were a compelling need for it. But that eventu-

ality may not be as far-fetched as many would like to think. For reasons related to inexorable trends of both social and economic nature, community living will almost certainly enjoy a new surge in popularity in the not-too-distant future. With that in mind, we felt it might be time to refresh the consideration of community, and hopefully, this time, inject some sanity, born of our successful community experience, into the mix.

Note, however, that in keeping with our particular values, the considerations herein focus less on the economic/pragmatic values of community, and more on aspects of emotional and spiritual import. We think these are the ones that make or break community, anyway.

If such considerations interest you, read on . . .

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Motives for Community

Community and Utopian Ideals

The notion that a community can somehow create a Shangri-La and thereby fulfill every human need for comfort, aesthetic pleasure, etc., is certainly a hopeful dream. It can even be useful, as a star is useful. But of course, no dream is, in and of itself, sufficient for its realization.

Heaven on earth cannot truly be realized the way the utopian ideal implies—simply by creating an ideal environment, inhabited by "beautiful people," living in an exemplary social order. The true realization of heaven on earth depends almost entirely on the quality of social relations—how the community members relate to each other. And in that, the determining factor is members' effectiveness in subduing their own egos—because ego-transcendence determines the quality of love upon which all other forms of life improvement, both big and small, ultimately depend.

So, in reality, for truly successful community, it matters little which particular philosophic ideals are upheld. What is absolutely crucial, and most spiritually significant, is that deep and truly loving human relationships form, and endure.

Historically, intentional human communities have often been associated with utopianism. And apparently, even in today's climate of "realistic" skepticism, people interested in community still tend to expect that a community should be their idea of utopia.

The utopian vision is good news, and bad news. The good news is, a great vision is a source of inspiration, a star to shoot for. The bad news is, people with utopian ideas often misunderstand the true nature of their goal, and how to reach it. If so, their moon shot falls short. It falls short because, while the dream may be glorious, the dreamer does not sufficiently incorporate, as the means to dream realization, the need to escape the gravitational field of selfish and divisive living.

The poor track record of utopian ideals

Naive utopian idealism—pie-in-the-sky thinking—is to blame for the failure of many communities. Certainly that was true of many communities that mushroomed during the '60s. Full of ideals but short on long-term planning, hippies erected teepees and straw houses, wore tie-dyed shirts, got stoned, and laid around all day, sometimes indulging in a bit of gardening. No wonder they couldn't pay their bills.

Perhaps, looking beneath the surface, we could say that most of these communities didn't fail for merely economic reasons, as it might appear. The underlying reasons for failure, the true causes, were spiritual and human: Laziness. Jealousy. Intractable resistance to cooperative effort, or possibly, to effort of any kind. At the bottom line, the flower-children communes failed because they lacked sufficient appreciation of the need for a life of ego-transcendence.

The shopping list approach to finding community

Even today, most community-seekers are almost as unrealistic as the hippies were about the real requirements of community success. Frequently, people search for community with long checklists in hand—lists of characteristics that, to them, represent the perfect community. There are all kinds of things that could be

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viewed as the makings of utopia, for example:

- Pleasant living environment
- Attractive people
- Agreeable philosophy
- Desirable spiritual "path"
- Desirable procedure and techniques
- Desirable structure of governance
- Preferred dietary practices
- Organic gardening

To many people, the perfect community must have many, if not all the features on their particular list. Generally, if anything about a community seems imperfect, the person will continue shopping. Thus, their perfect community is often the only *acceptable* community.

Utopian dreams, when too tightly held, may serve only to eliminate the possibility of viable, harmonious community. Unrealistic dreamers reject most—if not all—real possibilities. Or worse, they get involved in a community that *seems* to meet their requirements; but later, when the inevitable imperfection rears its head, they will be shocked, lose enthusiasm completely, and withdraw bitterly. That pattern, obviously, is both childish and destructive.

We should not need to say this, but we must: to enter constructively into community, one needs to relax ideas of utopia, and consider things realistically. Honestly, the *expectation* of finding a ready-made utopia is just as vain as looking for the "perfect mate." Perfection exists, absolutely, but not where people tend to seek it. Perhaps the *real* utopia is not a place of absolute perfection, but rather a place where imperfection is handled gracefully, with understanding and compassion.

A realistic approach to community

A realistic approach to community balances high idealism with solid realism—and, most importantly, personal responsibility. Community members must scrupulously avoid the blaming, irresponsible attitudes of unhappy couples who keep marriage counselors in business. Sitting in judgment upon one another, each with folded arms, both people complain that "my partner isn't doing what I want"—and both demand that their partner shape up.

With any luck—or better yet, with any openness to the ways of love—these poor souls will come to their senses. Success in love is impossible for two people whose primary concern is to have their wish list fulfilled. In my experience counseling couples, even when the wish list is entirely met, the chances for success remain low. It may be even lower than otherwise; for when reality steps in, and the relationship runs into difficulties *anyway*, the shock is greater.

A couple's only hope is if each will accept personal responsibility to bring to their marriage the qualities of love, compassion, tolerance, and forbearance that allow for success in relationship. Ah!

Community is relationship

All of these observations hold equally true in the matter of community involvement. Community is not a faceless entity, but a group of individuals. Therefore, when approaching community, and wondering about the chances for success, it makes sense to realistically consider what good relationships require. What makes any relationship work is not having your demands fulfilled, but having a healthy orientation. Thus, I would vote most likely to succeed any social arrangement, regardless of scale, in which each individual is strongly aware of the need to take responsibility for

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themselves, their personal attitudes, and their positive, constructive participation.

At this point, it might be a good time to review the utopia question: *If* personal responsibility is required, does that alone rule out the possibility of utopia? Believe it or not, for many people, it would. Many people prefer to think that "not having to be responsible" is—or should be—the defining characteristic of any utopia. Nonetheless, this should go without saying: *personal responsibility is the bedrock of community success.* And, it is undeniably the foundation of anything *like* heaven on earth.

Make love, not demands

Underlying true personal responsibility is love. Thus, if the truth be told, in both matehood and community involvement, love is the *real* secret of success. Love is what *really* makes things work. In either marriage or community, if people remain in the irresponsible position of unlove, you can be quite confident that the situation will not work, or will function with great difficulty.

Needless to say, it is understandable that people approach marriage or community with some fear, apprehension, or worry. There may be justification for all kinds of concerns. But the fact remains, no amount of concern can do what love can do. While fear and concern separate; love bonds. While fear makes relationships of all kinds fail; love alone helps them succeed.

Here, then, is why success is impossible for a community whose members have an excessive shopping-list mentality: there's not enough love. There might be plenty of love on the list, but is there enough love in the person who made the list? The shopping list orientation towards others tends to produce forms of "love" so conditional as to be unworthy of the name. For success in relationship, it is necessary to replace childish expectations with mature responsibility.

Love vs. self-interest

Many people approach a community because they want an ideal living situation for themselves—one that will suit their needs, support them in their spiritual goals, or provide comfort, security, etc. While there is nothing wrong with self-benefit, the motivation to live a life of genuine love needs to *predominate* (no matter what other motivations may exist in the mix). No smaller goal—especially no selfish goal, however benign or spiritual it may seem—can support the kind of ego transcendence and living love required for community health.

Again, there's nothing wrong with selfishness—or rather, self-interest—to a point. God wants you to be happy, your mom wants you to be happy, your friends want you to be happy—and of course, you want to be happy (both for yourself and for the benefit of others). So, the desire to be happy is perfectly consistent with any sane will. But self-interest becomes problematical when it is so tightly held that the common good becomes an afterthought, a mere footnote. With that orientation, one can hardly hope to get along well with others—much less to embody a truly loving spirit toward the wholeness of which one is, in fact, a part.

> *Utopia:* One man with a cave full of diamonds!
>
> *Hell:* TWO men trying to share a cave full of diamonds.
>
> *Utopia:* One person who finds a context to fill all his or her needs.
>
> *Hell:* A community full of people who have found a context to fill all their needs.

The closest possible approach to Utopia

I think if anyone recognizes community for what it *really* is—not so much a utopian experiment, or a subjective paradise, but simply a place where people live and function together in friendly

alliance—that would be a much more realistic view of the situation. And if that friendly alliance was rich in love, the resulting context would, in some respects, be heaven on earth. Certainly, where love abounds, success is much easier to achieve.

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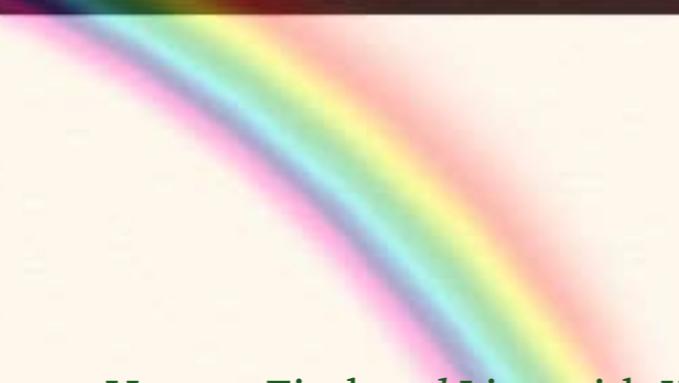
How to Find *and* Live with Kindred Spirits

W hen it comes to fellowship or community, people tend to seek "birds of a feather"—people of similar views, values, etc. Amazing, how little luck people generally have. Even with the powerful aid of modern communications that instantly cast the net of seeking worldwide, many people still cannot seem to find other people of acceptably similar views. Is this possible?

Birds of this feather can't flock together

Perhaps this is closer to the truth: many birds of the modern feather cannot flock at all. It is certainly obvious, in modern society, that few people can effectively *bond*. Thus, a bird of like feather is unjoinable, by definition. A second common trait is another wedge that separates: insufficient value on humanity in itself. And, along with that, insufficient appreciation of the human need for companionship and support. That, in turn, leads to insufficient value on community. No wonder so many fly solo these days!

Nonetheless, based on relatively superficial similarities— shared beliefs, common interests, appearance, living arrangements, etc.—people continue to seek kindred spirits.

The glue of shared belief

Shared belief is supposed to be a magic bonding agent. Communities, churches, clubs, and marriages—almost *always* rely on the premise that shared belief will make for harmonious association. In all those various contexts, people are shocked when they discover the truth: that often people who share beliefs *still*

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can't get along. Indeed, people and groups who place the *most* importance on shared beliefs are the *least* likely to get along, because they tend to overlook other relationship success factors too much.

That said, there is no question that some amount of philosophical coherence forms a good basis for any relationship, and can help establish community purpose. Nonetheless, matters of orientation that are even more crucial to the success of any relationship are, in fact, matters of heart—and spiritual priority. In what priority do people hold the value of love, compassion, forbearance, tolerance, and forgiveness? If those values are not held higher than all other values involved, no amount of philosophical agreement will suffice to hold the people together for long.

Philosophy over love is upside down

In reality, no person who places philosophy above love can succeed in relationship at any scale. So many marriages, optimistically formed on the basis of common interests, shared religion, similar philosophic values, etc., have failed when love was insufficient. The same happens all the time in larger groups as well. A deep commitment to walk in compassion and love, holding those qualities as the uppermost values, is the only conceivable means to relationship success.

It is precisely the excessive value on philosophical beliefs that almost guarantees the undoing of any group built on beliefs. The heart of the problem is not the philosophical differences that inevitably arise, but rather, the dogged and childish attachment people have to their particular views. People in community will actually beat each other over the head with their beliefs. For instance, they'll argue, "What you're doing doesn't conform to this and that aspect of our teaching, or what we believe"—and they

will represent their own understandings in a very cruel and heartless manner.

How tragic it is when people in a community fight for their ideals in the same narrow spirit that one dogmatic religion fights against another. You can feel how little the bickering community members appreciate the humanity of their associates, compared to their particular beliefs, paths, notions, intentions, and so on. It leaves you no choice but to conclude the obvious: that a person with such a value system is unable to get along with anybody—especially anybody with similar priorities.

People who are too deeply committed to ideas, even very good ones, can be spiritually lost, and humanly quite dysfunctional. Indeed, their dysfunctionality results from the very fact of having such a high premium on ideas over humanity. The importance of shared beliefs would be held much more lightly if the people had a higher priority on humanity and human relationship itself, in its pure and essential form. Virtually any two souls can share a magnificent, wonderful love—a love that stands beyond narrow interests, particulars of belief, persuasion, and the like. If you know that, and are prepared to live accordingly, you may be a candidate for successful living-together community. But this winning orientation, unfortunately, is rare.

The deeper requirements for social harmony

The achievement of social harmony is a deeper thing than mere belief. No belief system, no matter how lofty or tightly held, in any way guarantees that the essential and necessary skills for close and viable intimacy will be present—or that they will be present in a sufficient measure to allow for community viability.

For those who seek fulfillment in community, it is essential to personally fulfill the requirements upon which successful community absolutely depends: a profound appreciation for humanity itself; a truly loving orientation; and a deep desire to be with

other people intimately—perhaps not entirely regardless of their beliefs, but largely so. Once a person fulfills those requirements, he or she finally has an excellent chance to live in community with kindred spirits, and have that community *succeed*.

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Scalable Love, Scalable Egoism

We think of love as something that happens between two people, which of course it does. But love is scalable—meaning, genuine love can be shared with many people, not just between two—and it can be just as good on a large scale as it is on a small scale. What a wonderful thing to imagine! The same truly loving attitude that we can have toward one person, we can also have toward many. Such warm, embracing love would create a harmonious community, nation, or world, just as it would create a harmonious relationship. Personal love exercised on a large scale is a particularly beautiful vision, and an even better *experience*.

Scaled-up love vs. scaled-up ego

Obviously, the fact that love is scalable is *crucial* to the success of community. This is not to say that you could have exactly the same *kind* of love for twenty people as you have for your mate. But, you could have the same compassion, the same desire to be of service and benefit, and the same enduring commitment. And surely, those attitudes would go a long way toward creating a harmonious and emotionally functional community.

But we need to point out, the scalability of love works beautifully only if what we're scaling up is genuine love—the love that uplifts; that bridges; that heals all wounds; that "conquers all." As you know, much of what individuals and couples think of as love is not truly loving. Possessiveness, lust, attachment, hyper-control—inasmuch as these egoistic elements are associated with love, what's being shared is *not* positive. And needless to say, that accounts for many of the difficulties people have in intimacy and

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in matehood—as well as most of the difficulties people suffer, or expect to suffer, in community. In community, as elsewhere in human relationships, the fly in the ointment is egoism. Selfishness.

Though there's a lot of true love in the world, there's even *more* egoism. The very fact that people are so used to egoism, and expect ego to predominate, explains why they have such a hard time imagining harmonious community. Whether they realize it or not, when most people think of close human relationship, they envision ravages of egoism, not victories of love.

Without a doubt, egoism too is scalable. And therefore, unfortunately, when people get together in groups, what they are liable to experience, more often than scaled-up love, is scaled-up egoism. Exactly as they expected—and reasonably so. Insofar as it's *always* difficult for ego-driven individuals to get along with others, it's not surprising that groups of people living in close quarters would make each other miserable with their bad habits of selfishness, manipulation, and conflict. We may realistically expect, too, the scaling up of lust, promiscuity, and possessiveness: and then, jealousy, mate swapping, etc. While the latter vision may seem alluring, the reality always turns out painful and destructive. Clearly, when the usual tendencies of egoic individuals are expanded—and perhaps, in some respects, intensified—life becomes a larger-than-normal nightmare.

The dark cloud and silver lining of scaled-up egoism

Clearly then, one of the reasons people don't want to join community is they are *very* aware that egoism is infinitely scalable. And as ego scales up, it becomes more and more hellish—or so it seems. At least, its effects become harder and harder to overlook.

But the truth is, even on the *smallest* scale—one person, living alone—egoism makes life miserable. On a slightly larger scale, egoism creates a bad marriage and a miserable family life. On an

even larger scale, it makes a miserable community—not to mention a troubled and peaceless nation. And finally, egoism at the global level is an international menace of horrifyingly destructive power. As unsavory as it is to call attention to these facts, we do well to recognize ego, at every scale, for the destructive thing it is. When we directly see and acknowledge ego's impact, not just in the community context, but in *every* context, we begin to see the *truth* that *ego*—and not something inherently evil in community itself—is at fault for many of the pitfalls of community living. Egoism is, in fact, a plague that causes suffering wherever its human carriers go.

There can be no question that untrammeled ego makes a big mess in any social environment. When the presumed purpose of life is to get one's way and to pursue narrow self-interest, community living is indeed inadvisable. But, as we said, when ego dominates, there's no escaping trouble in *any* context, at *any* scale.

There are, however, a couple of appreciative things we can say about ego in community.

Number one: If community members understand the liabilities of ego and are committed to transcending them, the challenges that result from scaling ego to community size can be very good for the soul. One can get plenty of spiritual exercise in dealing compassionately with the experience of egoism in a community. Sure, it's a workout: it takes big love, big tolerance, big compassion to deal with ego. But the exertion involved can be very strengthening, spiritually.

Number two: The revelation of egoism in live-in community gives us an ideal opportunity, not just to show tolerance to others, but also, most importantly, to change our own egoistic ways.

In these respects, it is immensely useful that close human association on a larger scale allows people to see and experience the negative effects of egoism—in themselves and others; and on themselves and others. We enjoy a great spiritual advantage whenever ego seems magnified, as it is in community, compared to less obvious forms of egoism in a solitary existence or a nuclear family.

Dramatic examples are always helpful to stir people to action. Consider, for example, public response to the appalling conduct of their national leaders. Until the ugliness of national policies and actions reaches great extremes, few people object, and the dirty business proceeds as usual. In a similar way, until the effects of selfish living exceed the tolerance for pain—which rarely happens when people live by themselves—we may leave our misery-producing egoistical traits unchecked indefinitely, much to the detriment. That's exactly why, from a spiritual viewpoint, and from the viewpoint of emotional-psychological maturation, the stark revelation of ego constitutes, in itself, a *huge* advantage of community living (when compared to more isolated—and private—lifestyles).

Egoistical forms of "love" scaled up

As we said earlier, the scalability of love works beautifully *only* if it's really love we're scaling. In common society, the usual standards for what is called "love" are generally quite low, and even egoistic. For example, it is considered normal that people in "love relationships" should be—or will be—possessive, jealous, self-serving, self-protective, etc. Therefore, when people imagine the prospect of what they call "love" scaled up, what they envision is horrifying.

Consider, for example, the terrible impact of possessiveness in coupled relationships. Conventionally, many people take it as betrayal if someone they love loves *anyone* else. Couples who

think that way make each other miserable. And they certainly won't permit each other to scale "love" up, by extending their hearts to numerous people. Certainly, if they were to try to do so within the usual egoistic mindset, the results would indeed be disastrous.

But again, we must admit that ego-styled "love" creates big problems even when it's *not* scaled up. It may create larger problems on a larger scale, but it creates *plenty* of problems on any scale. For example, where jealousy rules, universal love is prohibited. Many if not most married persons deny their mate a truly substantial and broad social life for purely selfish reasons, and think nothing of it. Some people even resent their mate having same-gender friendships. What a confining existence! Surely, to impose such inhuman restrictions on a child of God is anything but loving.

Indeed, the *beauty* of community is the same as the *problem* of community: that egoistical "love" so obviously does not work in the community context. For community living to be viable and harmonious, one must actually move to a higher level of love, a truer form of love. This non-negotiable requirement provides much-needed incentive to improve and purify the spirit of love, both in our primary intimacies and in *all* relationships.

Conversely, the big disadvantage of coupled love is precisely what people perceive as its advantage: that one can be egoistical in matehood, and more or less "get away with it." It is precisely this "loophole" for ego that sets the stage for millions of unhappy marriages, not to mention unhappy people, the world over. Being more or less imprisoned for years, chained to an egoistical spouse with practically no recourse—this is hell on earth. Any opportunity to expand from there into a larger, more conscious home, on wings of *true* love, may be a cosmic prison break for all concerned.

Scaled-up conditional "love"

When will humanity admit that nothing less than universal love can make global harmony possible? And, once that admission is secured, when will universal love be lived? And finally, how will we learn how to live it? Community living can play a very helpful role in furthering these goals.

Fortunately, the egoic tendency toward highly exclusive and conditional "love" is a human problem that shows up glaringly in community. Generally, when two people become romantically involved, they may tend to ignore everyone else, acting as if their romantic partner were the only other person on earth. Outside of community, no one else seems to mind; we take conditional love for granted in our everyday life. This rude behavior simply reflects the common attitude of a society that is, overall, uncompassionate towards our fellow human beings. Conventionally, people only give in situations where they expect to get something they want in return.

However, if you scale such attitudes up into a community context, you clearly see their error. No community based on that kind of love could possibly succeed. All you get is a group of people who are terribly lonely and under-loved, even *within* the community context. Because they are not each other's romantic interest, they receive little or no love, little or no energy and attention. Seeing this problem, and correcting it, opens wide the door to unconditional—or much *less* conditional—love.

In community, one practically *must* correct real problems that are almost always overlooked elsewhere. For example, in common society, it may not bother us too much if our neighbor down the street or somebody on the sidewalk doesn't care about us, or doesn't like us. At least we can successfully *pretend* not to care about it. But if we're *living with* people who are indifferent or antagonistic to us, that's an almost insufferable problem. Again,

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the community environment greatly increases our motivation to find humanly workable ways of living.

In a close-knit community, we are obliged to sincerely love people who are not our mates, and from whom we have no expectation of gaining anything. That challenge alone makes community useful for cultivating wholesome attitudes—attitudes that could not only save communities, but also save the people in them (and even, I daresay, save the world). The resulting moral and social improvement represents a marvelous influence on society at large—a living example of a much better way.

One might say that mated relationships have the same advantage—because clearly, only true love makes marriage beautiful. And there too, the quality of love needed to make a coupled relationship *truly* good is the same quality of love needed to heal and save the world. But most couples, left to their own devices, find it much harder to *practice* what could be called higher love. To begin with, in many romantic pairings, the bond is built in large part upon lust, selfish desires, the need for security, and various other preferences. And people often stay together largely because that's the way they expect to get things they want. Only when the big payoffs disappear do either of them find out how much *true* love exists.

Highly conditional love is an accident waiting to happen. And people intuitively know that. Haven't you ever wondered, "I'm fine the way I am, but what if I got in an auto accident, and my face was disfigured, or I became disabled? Who would love me then? Would my mate stick by me? How many friends would I have left?" The reason this is such a common and important question is because we intuitively realize that only those who would still love us then, *really* love us now.

With that in mind, think about the hodge-podge of people that would make up a community. Many of them *are* "disfigured"—in the sense that they lack the glow and inherent attractiveness

of being your one-and-only, your special someone. Most likely, many of them lack the qualities you would usually be attracted to in a friend. And in the same way, in the eyes of other people in the community, you too are "disfigured." Their love for you will be properly tested by this "disfigurement"—as will your love for them. It will take real, unselfish caring to make all of these relationships work harmoniously. Excellent! Perfect!

Community living: blueprint for world harmony

As you can see, community provides an excellent context in which to practice true love—love without any reason other than love itself. If you're not sure how true your love is, just scale it up, earnestly and sincerely try to love on that larger scale, and you'll soon find out. And that, obviously, is a very good thing. For, as they say, "No one can solve a problem they don't *have*."

Hopefully, this chapter has provided some food for productive thought. Although community living is not for everyone, the lessons it teaches can benefit everyone. The challenges inherent in community living are challenges everyone ought to face, and needs to overcome, no matter what their living situation. In reality, the lessons that must be learned for community to thrive must also be learned in the world as a whole—eventually. Individual lives, marriages, nations, and, ultimately, world peace depend on it. Universal love must soon be realized, before humanity destroys itself due to the insufficiency of it. In this very real sense, the blueprint for successful community is a blueprint for human success *in toto*.

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Community Provides Social and Spiritual Support

One of the most pressing complaints in our modern, alienated society is loneliness. Many people suffer from insufficient support and interpersonal connection. They hunger for deeper social involvement, for loyalty, and for a sense of close-knit community.

Clearly, the prevalent pattern of compartmentalized living is *unnatural* for social beings such as ourselves. A wise man said,

> *If God had meant for man to go it alone, he would have made one planet for each person.*

As it is, we have a planet *full* of people: people who thrive on each other's company; people who have an inescapable need for ongoing support, intimacy, and high-affinity relationships beyond the scope of marriage and family.

Why marriage and family is not enough

In direct contradiction to the eternal needs of the human heart, society's prevailing standards and expectations for true harmony are relatively low, even (or perhaps particularly) within family units. Family members take it for granted that bad moods are common, so we consider such moods, and the suffering they cause, inevitable. Parents and siblings alike lack both the skill and the boldness to effectively address social improprieties in each other. Also, most people lack motivation to address these problems within *themselves*. After all, nobody's perfect, and family love—in theory, at least—is "unconditional," so why bother? Unfortunately, the nearly universal acceptance of inconsiderate and hurtful behaviors at

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home reduces the quantity and quality of intimacy, and lowers the tone of family life overall.

Social support is a matter of degree

Fortunately, few of us completely lack social support. What's true is we feel we have *insufficient* support, *insufficient* social interaction, *insufficient* close intimacy in our lives.

Most of us take measures to fill our social needs. We do various things, socially, that are healthy and beneficial to us. But experience shows that we can upgrade our lives in many beneficial ways without making quite the difference we *need*.

For example, out of a desire to participate in community, a person might go to a religious service once a week, join a club, do volunteer work, or financially support a charitable organization—and yet still continue to live an isolated, lonely life overall. Thus, while these various measures help, they fail to fully satisfy our social needs.

There is often some affinity within ordinary religious groups and social clubs, but not enough. The shortfall partially results partly from the fact that, for the most part, these groups provide only a little social contact, and much of it is relatively superficial. In the usual religious involvement, for example, once a week a churchgoer enters a room with a hundred people and enjoys group worship. But then it's right back home within an hour or two. Other kinds of organizations may meet even less frequently, and under circumstances that provide even less bonding. Under those conditions, social nurturance is minimal at best. Emotional hunger persists.

Clearly, what is *enough* is largely a matter of degree. Likewise, emotional starvation is largely a matter of degree. And, a person can starve to death from not eating *enough*—or from eating empty calories.

So, when it comes to building a satisfactory emotional support system, the important questions are these: What do I *really* need?

How much of it do I need? And, with my present patterns of association, have I achieved true sufficiency, or not?

What I am about to say may be surprising, but it may nevertheless be true: depending on our circumstances and social fluency, it might be difficult or even impossible to fill our hollow leg for companionship and support outside of a living-together community. Let me explain . . .

Elements of a good, spiritually-sound support system

To thrive as human beings, we need not just *any* social context; we need a particular *kind* of social context. We need a context that not only provides contact and intimacy, but that also supports our highest goals and spiritual objectives. Otherwise, we naturally feel something crucial is lacking. Among all social arrangements, community has perhaps the greatest potential to provide sound and effective spiritual support. The following elements contribute:

> **Stronger and deeper relationships.** Social contact is not the only issue here. *Being* is an issue: being who we are, and who we wish to be. The deeper the intimacy, the more fully our exquisite qualities of soul essence will be shared, expressed, given. Surely, certain soulful realities of character—including, especially, the precious and potent depths of soul beauty—find full expression only in deep relationships. And those soulful qualities are the most splendid, beautiful, and powerfully nurturing qualities of all. Thus, a deep feeling of regret arises in a lifestyle in which those sublime qualities remain hidden, under-expressed, and under-utilized.
>
> Of course, we need not reserve our deepest qualities to share with romantic partners only, as many people presume. The only reason we might believe otherwise is because nowa-

days, people don't invest much in other forms of relationship. In casual associations, we rarely go deep enough to permit this more satisfactory kind of sharing. Indeed, we are practically constrained, by force of convention, *not* to share such qualities. We are welcome to do so only in a sensitive, soul-supportive context that encourages more heartfelt, soulful expressions of being.

Surprisingly, and tragically, many of today's romances, and even marriages, don't last long enough, or venture deep enough, to provide the proper context for truly being ourselves. Spouses complain of loneliness and lack of intimacy within their marriage. "My partner doesn't understand me. I don't know who I can talk to." No wonder many people have thought to themselves, regretfully, "No one in my life is getting the best of me, seeing the real me, and benefiting from the most precious aspects of my nature. I have so much more to give." Sad indeed!

Here, live-in community can come to the rescue. Community can provide the practical opportunity to build conscious, intentional relationships that are deeper and stronger than ordinary casual exchanges—relationships that may be deeper and more enduring than most marriages, even. These relationships have the power and profundity to provide security, heal the soul, and allow the real person to *be*.

Psychological healing. Insufficient intimacy means repression and suppression. Inside and outside of marriage, millions of people go for years harboring deeply troublesome concerns. All the while, the truth remains that only issues which are brought to the light can be effectively healed, re-interpreted, or released.

The children of God can easily liberate each other from terrible emotional and psychological ills through the pro-

cess of hearing, understanding, and forgiveness. Consider what happens when, in even a single heartfelt exchange, chronic troubles of mind are shared and understood. A person may feel profoundly, even cosmically relieved—light as a feather! In this regard, truly intimate exchanges between friends can be as effective, often far more effective, than any number of consultations with professional counselors, therapists, and the like. But again: where, in the superficial round of conventional relating, can such relief be found? Practically nowhere. This is a situation humanity should correct, and healthy community living is an effective cure.

For people who are in relatively good shape emotionally, a context of ongoing intimacy also provides the additional function of regular "psychic dusting." Problems that would otherwise accumulate and burden the soul are handled each day. Consequently, mind and heart can remain relatively clean and unburdened.

Reflection of personal weaknesses. Another important need that every human has is the need for feedback: to see ourselves from another person's perspective. This kind of "mirroring" is a huge contribution that community living can make to anyone. A house full of honest relationships is a hall of mirrors. Do you have enough social reflection to feel adequately supported in achieving your higher goals? Do you have enough feedback and encouragement in your life? For example, if you resolve to jog, having a jogging partner might help. Or if you want to overcome a bad habit, you may need some support from friends to help change it. We are truly blessed when such support is always at hand, for then we can take full advantage of it, and derive its wonderful benefits.

Further, just as it is necessary to *see* a problem to *solve* it, it is also necessary to *experience* one's areas of weakness to find the motivation to overcome them. Normally, in the absence of social stimulation, many negative personal tendencies that are subconsciously *dominant* stay below the surface. When our social circumstances are primarily superficial ones, infirmities of the soul remain hidden and therefore continue, unseen, to limit true well-being indefinitely.

The fact is, shallow and occasional forms of social interchange don't implicate us enough to reveal the negative contents of the psyche. And, even when something problematic does surface, our ordinary relationships at work, school, or church aren't committed or deep enough to allow us to really deal with it.

A dynamic and personally implicating context such as live-in community will invariably bring up—and thereby help clean up—negative tendencies. As everyone knows, with larger emotional investments in relationship, various troublesome weaknesses rise into view. While that will seem daunting at first, those clouds have a wonderful silver lining: we can at least deal with impurities of thought, belief, and attitude that lurk within, and which bring us down *even though*—or rather *because*—they are hidden. Bad things grow in the dark. Light activates, and purifies. And, supportive housemates can help us deal most effectively with what comes to light, by offering love, understanding, support, suggestions, and gentle reminders.

Being understood as we *are*. Exercising strengths is perhaps only one-fourth of the spiritual battle. The other three-fourths is overcoming weakness. So, while putting one's best foot forward has wonderful positive value, hiding one's *worst* foot tends to limit well-being and spiritual

progress. If we are to overcome negative patterns, we need an ongoing, committed context to "catch us in the act" of dramatizing certain habitual fears and hang-ups.

Many emotional problems are, shall we say, intermittent. They show up only occasionally, and that makes them more challenging to understand. When a piece of electronic equipment has an intermittent problem, the repairman wisely says, "If you have an intermittent problem in a piece of electronic equipment, I have to see it fail before I can determine what's going wrong. Bring it into the shop. I will leave it running for days. When it finally does the thing it's been doing wrong, I'll see it."

Just so, with only sporadic social contact, we may, purposely or unintentionally, go through our days without our weaknesses ever being fully seen and understood. For example, a doctor may show genuine care and concern to a patient. But, does this allow the patient to know the doctor intimately, and in that sense, truly? Of course not. The narrow band in which the doctor operates at work, and the brief periods of contact with each patient, could not possibly allow for such knowing. The remaining 99% of the doctor's personality may be dissimilar, perhaps *extremely* dissimilar, from the aspect of personality he or she habitually displays at work. The faces people show in public mislead—either because they are altogether false, or because they fail to represent the person as a whole. Social cheerfulness, for example, may represent a real—but small—facet of actual personhood.

As a single person, a homeowner, an entrepreneur—whatever your situation—your life probably does not contain enough mirroring for you to clearly see those places in yourself where spiritual refinement really needs to occur.

Without ongoing reflection of your uncompassionate or selfish tendencies—the kind of reflection rarely enjoyed outside of community—you only can grow *so* much.

Weaknesses, seen, can be overcome. When faults are corrected, soul beauty shines forth almost effortlessly. Community provides an ideal context for seeing and adjusting "in the mirror."

May the light of consciousness shine bright, and be reflected all around—and may all be purified, thereby, to the point of liberation, illuminated being, and pure joy.

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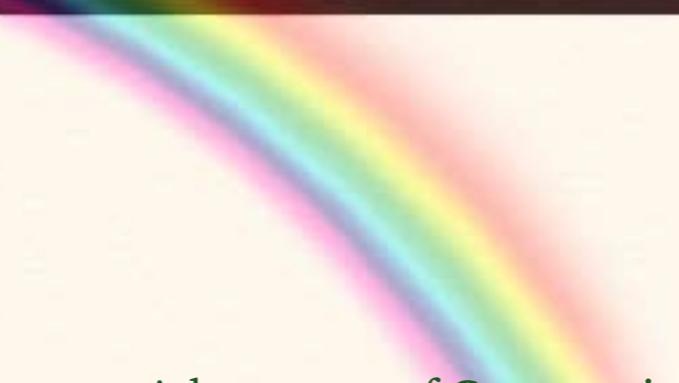
Advantages of Community to Religion

Almost every religion maintains some kind of standards for the practice and participation of its members. What will the expectations be? And does membership depend on meeting any requirements, or not? Short-term recruitment objectives and long-term spiritual viability may require different answers to these questions.

In this day and age, where discipline is often poor, and moral values are weak, standards of practice and participation—if any—are generally set rather low. This may reflect compassion; it certainly reflects realism.

But, it also reflects priorities. Most religious organizations place high priority on bringing as many people as possible into the fold. For that, hope rests on *lowering* the requirements for involvement: clearly, the lower the requirements, the more people will join. The result? A membership whose ranks are swollen with spiritually dysfunctional, nominally committed people. The flock may be large, but it is certainly weak. Obviously, compassion is wonderful; but low- or no-requirement religion has problems of its own. While a weak membership may help keep the religion in *existence*, it does little to keep religion truly *alive,* spiritually.

Here's the point: if a religion is to survive *spiritually*—instead of suffering the gradual death that constitutes the usual fate of religions—it must carry on in a truly vibrant, genuinely inspired spirit. And make no mistake, the ultimate source of inspiration is not good sermons or administrative excellence, but from God-connection. Not just *any* God-connection—*strong* God connection. The stronger, the better. From such a connection, inspiration

and energy flow like the fresh, sparkling streams of spring, rushing down from the mountain peaks into the valley.

What all religious and spiritual organizations need is not so much new membership, attractive ministers, competent administrators, or dedicated missionaries, but *spiritual pioneers*. They need souls whose personal passion is to achieve and maintain an *exceptionally* strong God-connection. Spiritually inspired individuals are the organization's hope, for only they can truly inspire the membership. And further, because of the potency of God's work through them, they perform much more than their share of the organization's humanity-healing work (the spiritual work that is, at least in theory, the primary reason for the existence of the organization).

No matter what the bulk of the members do or don't do, a spiritually strong *core group,* however small in number, can provide abundant inspiration for the rest. The power of their inspiration, not their numbers, does the job. Because their power springs directly from God—manifesting as love, radiance, inspiration, healing, and illumined mind—they can be depended upon to be *powerful* transmission towers.

Granted, everyone *can* transmit God's love, and to admit this fact is crucial. But to transmit God's love, willingness is required, and surrender—and people vary widely in their willingness and their surrender. Also, of course, strong, living God-connection is a *must*.

As a general observation, a strong God-connection seems to result from a combination of strong desire and intensive spiritual practice. In truth, practice may be optional, but strong desire is mandatory. And generally, where strong desire is found, that desire will tend to manifest itself in spiritual practice. Because of a middling level of desire, many people engage in some sort of spiritual practice more or less regularly, but minimally, and often in lackluster fashion. One can never, by so doing, inspire

oneself, let alone the entire organization, with passion and purpose.

Therefore, to address the needs of all members—both those who desire a rigorous spiritual life, and those who don't—religions must develop two distinct (but mutually dependent) branches: the exoteric, and the esoteric. The exoteric group is comprised of the general church membership, those who practice religion nominally, but rarely venture into spiritual heights. The esoteric community is made up of highly committed individuals with relatively high aspirations for spiritual realization. Out of a thousand followers, perhaps five or ten become spiritual pioneers.

Almost every spiritual tradition supports members of its esoteric branch in retreats or monasteries—crucibles of spiritual growth. At least periodically, they live together in close community, receive ongoing spiritual training, and engage in spiritual practices of greater intensity. They become exceptionally bright lights. The power of their spiritual realization feeds the entire organization, spiritually, through successive generations.

Where two or more are gathered in My name

While the setting need not be as secluded as the words *monastery* and *retreat* imply, intimate community is almost indispensable for intensive practice. And therefore, if a religion knows what's good for it, and wants to stay spiritually alive by supporting a cadre of advanced practitioners, an intimate context for spiritual growth should be created.

For purposes of generating spiritual intensity, one can hardly overestimate the value of close association in living-together arrangements. A great power arises from the resonance of souls when they join together with a common Godly intention and understanding. It is to this power Jesus referred when he said, "Where two or more are gathered in My name, there I am

also." From within such a gathering can come great energy and light that has the ability to uplift, heal, and even transform the individuals in it, and beyond. This Divine principle is one that spiritual and religious organizations have known for centuries, and used to advantage. That same benefit is always available for those who would use it.

The physics of transformation

Most likely, at stake in all this is the prospect of major transformation. Here's why: Transformation depends, in part, on energy. Both scientists and mystics have observed that certain transformations will not happen until and unless energy is sufficiently intensified. For example, water will not turn to steam until an exact amount of energy has been added to it. If the temperature remains one degree below the boiling point, the water will never boil, no matter how long it remains on the stove.

Similarly, when it comes to personal transformation, a certain concentration of energy facilitates the spiritual/emotional changes we long for. *When* we are uplifted to a certain degree, we enjoy a subtler appreciation of spiritual realities; we feel more connected, more generous-spirited; we have a greater sense of clarity and understanding; we enjoy a heightened awareness of the presence of God.

Of course, though close human association raises energy, spiritual enlightenment can never be guaranteed *just because* people practice their spiritual path in community. Individual will figures powerfully into the equation. It is possible, then, that in some cases there will be no visible benefit whatsoever. Even so, a complete lack of benefit is relatively rare; significant benefit usually occurs. Therefore, even though many other success factors, such as individual attitude and other imponderables, may prevent or limit the full success of the venture, it is well worth the effort and investment to groom a

few astronauts, and optimize conditions for vertical ascent. Overall, any religion would be well advised to make the gamble.

The mechanics of transformation

A hot fire is an efficient fire. And for a fire to burn hotly, it must be highly concentrated. Accordingly, a small firebox full of wood creates the most efficient and powerful blaze. If the firebox is much bigger than the wood it contains—or if we reduce the number of logs or spread them out in the firebox—the blaze weakens, or even goes out.

The fact that energy is intensified by close human gathering can make a collective home into an effective generator of transformative energy. The intention involved, both individual and collective, is *fuel* for the fire of transformation; the close proximity of the community context is like a small *firebox* that concentrates energy for maximum effectiveness. As we said, water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit and not at 211 degrees Fahrenheit— not even in infinite time. The same applies to quantum leaps of change in spiritual state.

Now, compare if you will, the small firebox of concentrated group practice with its opposite, the usual case: the context of widely dispersed worldly habitation. In spiritual organizations, when members are broadly scattered, the group lacks the power of energy concentration. Under ordinary conditions, followers worship together and then disperse afterwards, all going back to their own apartment or home, where the energy level is dramatically less. Whether they realize it or not, the congregants suffer the insufficiency of light, energy, and resonance at home. This is partly, but significantly, due to the small number of people there.

Even within a group living environment, the observations about the size of the firebox still matter. If the shared dwelling is too large, so that each person has far too much space, they lose

much of the energy value of the group. The same is true if people in the group always eat alone, or always pray separately instead of frequently praying *together*.

Community supports the practice of spiritual virtue

People will not advance very far or very fast unless they commit to a more intense involvement than just periodic gatherings and occasional practices. We need a spiritual context in which our daily lives can become something that continues to mold us, inspire us, enlighten us, chasten us, instruct us, and guide us throughout our days. Again, close spiritual community provides such a context.

The opportunity for spiritual growth and direction: Let's face it: in alienated, minimally relational society, ego runs amok. An isolated life is a spiritually unsupervised, unguided life. In such a life, the lower tendencies of ego and selfishness are more or less passively ignored or tolerated —or perhaps actively supported and resonated—while positive spiritual tendencies can easily be overlooked or even suppressed. That's why the usual religionist almost always plateaus at a relatively low level of spiritual development. Without more and better support, they can't go much further.

For significant spiritual advancement, we need a crucible in which we can be tempered in the refiner's fire of concentrated spiritual life—a hothouse where we can grow and learn; where people with similar spiritual aspirations and values can give us feedback; where we can practice under the challenging conditions of human relationship, and hone the crafts of compassion, tolerance, and self-understanding. Again, close association helps.

A context deliberately relieved of extremes of conventional egoic thought and influence: The entrenched, intractable machinery of society works directly against the establishment of the spiritual foundation we are trying to build. While living in the regular world, it is very difficult to free ourselves from the ordinary cultural mindset. Everywhere we turn, we are constantly under the influence of conventional, worldly supposition and belief. We are bombarded with gross cultural ideas and ideals.

When we live in a community, we are somewhat protected from worldly influence and worldly programming. Even if we mingle freely with the public in the course of daily employment, we have a resonant home base to return to each night. There we always have the opportunity to practice our spiritual principles with the emotional and philosophical support of those around us.

Community's value for the spiritual upleveling of religion

There are many levels on which religions may choose to operate, but to the extent that they wish to serve on a higher spiritual level than the usual, and draw from deeper springs of Divine connection, the creation and support of close-knit spiritual communities is indispensable. As we have seen, community provides the necessary context to create and sustain a real spiritual fire—the kind of fire required to keep any religion viable, spiritually dynamic, inspired, and, most of all, profoundly inspiring.

Community Downsides Are Upsides
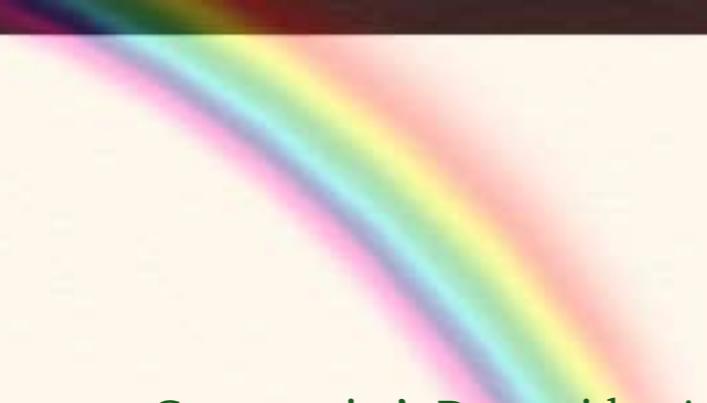
Community's Downsides Are Its Upsides

E ven if there really were a Shangri-La, many people would hesitate to move there. At first glance, living-together community has many disadvantages. For example:

- You can't always have things your own way.
- You don't have your *own* of everything.
- Living with imperfect people requires a lot of tolerance and forgiveness.
- You are "stuck with people"—without recourse.
- You have to accommodate the demands of the group.

But here is an interesting irony of life: When you examine the downsides more closely, some of them turn out to be upsides, in many important ways.

In our experience, *most* of the disadvantages of living-together community are downsides only from ego's point of view. Seen from a spiritual point of view—and indeed, even from the point of view of emotional-psychological health—the presumed disadvantages are, in fact, advantages. They prove to be good for the individual's *true* self-interests, and good for the whole. Thus:

- You can't always have things your own way.
  - *—but learning to be gracefully flexible gives you much-needed practice on the spiritually essential art of ego-transcendence.*
- You don't have your *own* of everything.
  - *—but the efficiencies of sharing liberate precious money, time, and energy for higher pursuits*

- Living with imperfect people requires a lot of tolerance and forgiveness.

  —*but developing tolerance and forgiveness is the only way to have harmonious relationships, and a peaceful world.*

- You are "stuck with people," without recourse.

  —*but sticking it out with people is the best way to develop relationships of substantial depth and longevity.*

- You have to accommodate the demands of the group.

  —*but the discipline and structure of community living is a great cure for bad habits, especially the worst habit of all: ego-identification.*

You see, ego's downsides are spirit's upsides, right down the list. And if you think about it, that should not be too surprising.

In the following chapters, we will carefully consider the so-called disadvantages listed above, *one by one*, and you'll see the truth of what we've said.

❧

The Advantages of Not *Always* Having Things Your Way

"Our true happiness is found in helping others to be happy. It should be clear to everyone that to act in complete contrast to the selfish and egotistical behavior which brings about those terrible sufferings which I have mentioned will invite not suffering, but the complete opposite—heavenly and eternal bliss."

—*One Hundred Teachings of Meishusama*

Nowadays, the idea of living-together community strikes fear in many hearts. One reason is, we're terrified of not having things our own way.

But if we think about it calmly, is it really so good for us to have things our way all the time? Look at the spoiled children of modern culture—yes, children who insist on getting what they want, when they want. No one believes that's good for *them*. Why, then, do we think it's fine for us? Perhaps we should suspect that we, too, are *excessively* attached to doing what we want, when we want, and in the way that we want.

Everyone knows self-transcendence is good for the soul, and furthermore, essential for social functionality. Without the regular practice of self-transcendence, we become reactive, irritable, and inwardly disturbed. And socially, we tend to live in frequent conflict with others. Therefore, the demand for self-transcendence in community is truly an *advantage*, not a *disadvantage*. In fact, it is probably one of the greatest things community living has going for it.

What is freedom?

We call it "freedom" to get things our own way, but what we are really referring to is not freedom, exactly, but selfishness and whimsy. In reality, it is a dangerous illusion to think that freedom necessarily means living by egotistical whim. It's nothing more than an egoic *idea* and *definition* of freedom to live a self-serving lifestyle in which we doggedly—or perhaps whimsically—pursue personal visions, no matter how small, selfish, and even self-destructive they may be.

What is freedom, really? Freedom is freedom of personal choice. *Whatever* we choose is an expression of our freedom. Obviously, then, free choice is not limited to the exercise of selfish, individualistic pursuits. We are free to choose a socially alienated lifestyle, *or* a cooperative lifestyle. We are free to choose randomness *or* discipline; sovereignty *or* surrender. In any choice—every choice—we are exercising our highest and most essential freedom: our freedom to choose.

But we dare not ignore that freedom can be—and often is—exercised in ways that are problematical. In America, where individualistic ways of thinking are rampant, we see its negative results everywhere we turn: social isolation; runaway personal debt due to unrestrained consumerism; difficult relationships; large prison populations; high incidences of divorce; and a huge psychological industry catering to widespread neurosis and depression.

Furthermore, many of the ways people exercise their freedom are addictive in nature (for example, the freedom to take drugs, the freedom to be promiscuous, the freedom to be lazy, etc.). When we make such choices, we risk imprisoning ourselves within bad habits and compulsions that ultimately *impinge upon* our freedom.

The typical American lifestyle, which supposedly epitomizes freedom, has essentially become an exercise in selfish and short-sighted choices that are psychologically, spiritually, and emotion-

ally destructive. And that life is destructive to global peace, even to planetary survival.

The pursuit of narrow self-interest is not in our best interest

Invariably, when people exercise their freedom in the spirit of narrow, short-term self-interest, sooner or later, misfortune results. For example:

- A man may belligerently express righteous indignation at work, and end up quitting in a huff—presumably, as a matter of principle. But when the heat of the moment cools off, he faces a chilling consequence: he's unemployed. That man has exercised his freedom, but not necessarily in a way that is in his own self-interest in the long run—or even the short term.

- A similar problem is also seen in relationships. People who are excessively selfish may freely fight and endlessly try to get their own way, not caring how that feels to their companions. But of course, in so doing, they will probably ruin their relationships. Then, because of their selfishness and short-sightedness, they may even be surprised when the inevitable happens: their friends and lovers leave them.

The whole notion of living a life of whim, doing whatever we want, expressing our feelings however we see fit, is terribly destructive. This brutish way of freedom—free of moral constraints, heedless of the consequences to ourselves and others—is in no one's interest.

For example, children may express extremely negative views at the dinner table, often blurting out mean and hurtful things. Those outbursts regularly ruin the tone of family interactions. Later in life, the same self-indulgent people who made their family's life hell in childhood continue their insensitive behavior as adults. Often, the entire life of such people is plagued by conflict and misfortune, because their selfish ways—which are con-

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sidered to epitomize freedom—are, in fact, the epitome of *egoism*. They and their companions suffer greatly as a result.

The implications of our lifestyle choices

In the long run, the habit of exercising freedom in self-centered ways all but guarantees social isolation. Notice that people who are habituated to selfish living generally minimize social contact, hoping to avoid the endless conflicts they will otherwise surely create. And their friends maintain a safe, respectful distance for the same reason.

Social contact—or rather, the desire for fulfilling social intimacy—provides motivation to go beyond mere selfishness, and learn to get along with people. But meanwhile, unfortunately, social avoidance only tends to make matters worse. Runaway egotism is supported, protected, and reinforced by social isolation.

Likewise, every person's chosen lifestyle reinforces whatever mentality brought that lifestyle into being. If we vote strongly for love, the context of togetherness we embrace will, in turn, help us realize our goals of love. On the other hand, if we dream, as an ego, of selfish experience, and we fear love, or distrust the power of love, we create alienation—and our experiences in and of alienation will reinforce egoism in us. How many people do you know who have been out of close relationship for a long time, and now they wouldn't touch it? In times past, they enjoyed close relationships, and were better adapted socially. Now, due to alienation, they've become crusty, inflexible, and fearful of relationship. Consequently, for them, ongoing isolation becomes practically mandatory—a virtual prison.

It's high time we face the truth about social dysfunction: the isolation caused by selfish use of personal freedom destroys social competence, or keeps it from developing in the first place. How can a person who lives alone build proficiency in the social skills of diplomacy and compromise? How can an alienated person mature in the spiritual arts of forgiveness, compassion, and self-

transcendence? Yet clearly, *without* those capabilities, success in any social context remains difficult if not impossible. Thus, with anti-social patterns of living, people routinely lose some of their most essential freedoms, and sacrifice their most essential fulfillments.

Long-term advantages of short-term sacrifices

Return to the root! Social harmony is essential for personal well-being! That cannot be denied. Nor can we deny that sometimes, short-term self-interest conflicts with the requirements for social harmony.

Some personal sacrifice and compromise is required to get along with people, but the benefits are much greater than the losses. For instance, if I want my brothers and sisters to be happy with me, I must forego eating the last piece of cake at the dinner table for my second helping, or at least share it. Dilemma! If I take the last piece of cake, I will enjoy eating the entire thing myself, but I will harvest disharmony, and suffer my siblings' resentment. On the other hand, if I give away or share the last slice, I will have lost the opportunity to eat the entire thing, but I will have maintained good will—perhaps even increased it. Trade-offs! It's up to the individual to ponder the costs and benefits of the choices available. But a wise person may very well realize that short-term self-sacrifice has long-term advantages—even to himself or herself.

How personal freedom can be used constructively

Is there any loss in using freedom in such a way as to serve both the individual good, and the good of all? Of course not! We need not fear the loss of freedom, but rather, we should acknowledge the wisdom of using freedom wisely, responsibly, and constructively.

For instance, we are free to love; we are free to serve humanity; we are free to give to charity. We are just as free to release

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grudges and grievances as we are to create them and hold onto them. We are free to be truly, authentically, good. We are free to enter into community, and to develop the spiritual skills of co-operation, compassion, communication, and constructive com-promise (which are woefully deficient, and therefore desperately needed, in modern society). We are free *not* to slavishly pursue the prevailing ideals of a sick and troubled society. All these free-doms constitute the exercise of personal choice.

The fact that common society is a collection of ego-driven individuals, becoming more and more ruggedly independent every decade, is precisely what makes this world so inharmoni-ous, so immoral. There are so few constraints on egoism that egoism just grows unchecked, like a weed, like a cancer. Few peo-ple have enough skill at self-transcendence to hold marriages and families minimally together—let alone the ability to participate constructively in an intentional community of human adults. If the world is to last, *that* must change.

The average person maintains excessive control over social contact and, at the same time, insufficient control over the de-structive tendencies of his or her own ego. We must wean our-selves of that extreme attachment to individualistic purposes. And there's no better context to do those things than in community.

The only way to heal our sick world is for its citizens to *learn* and *exercise* the various skills needed to create interpersonal harmony and, with that, inner peace. As long as we avoid the challenge of interpersonal cooperation and harmony, the world will continue to go downhill. But if we boldly embrace that chal-lenge, in a spirit of unselfish cooperation, things will improve. Without a doubt, a life in which we transcend our selfish, self-directed ways has great advantages for us and our entire planet.

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The Benefits of Being "Stuck with" People

A common concern about living-together community is the prospect of "getting stuck with" people. Quite a commitment, communities require! But then again, high commitment is exactly what makes community so useful for personal and spiritual growth.

Serious spiritual life practically *requires* you to close your back doors. Real growth starts the moment you stop avoiding your own problems, and start to correct them. When you make a substantial commitment to spiritual community, your investment helps hold you in place when you see disturbing things about yourself in the mirror of close relationship (things that, in an ordinary life, a person would probably ignore and avoid). Then you get to deal with your challenges, rather than run away from them.

Training wheels for long-term relationships

With respect to the longevity of relationships, being "stuck with" people is, without question, *different*—and actually *better* in many ways—than the fickle relating patterns prevalent in common culture. Many people today, as a regular habit, run away from social difficulties. If something problematical arises, relationships are simply terminated. Spontaneously. Conveniently. Sometimes "politely"—without a word. Though this "solution" is often painful, and sometimes devastating, it is standard operating procedure.

Obviously, where sudden termination of association is the normal response to difficulty, there is no chance to refine relationships over time. Opportunities to refine *oneself* diminish too. The people involved have no hope of transcending their limitations and

becoming more compassionate, more loving, more constructive. So it's a very good thing that in *committed* community, the option for whimsical, convenient separation simply does not exist.

In close community, you have a chance to work through difficulties where, otherwise, you might simply run away. Apart from such strong commitment *and* support, you could end up repeating the same cycle over and over, with the next person and the next—never learning what needs to be learned, and never developing improved ways of living. But with the help of commitment, instead of ending relationships, one can end lifelong problems of attitude and orientation—and *keep* relationships.

The fruits of togetherness over time

Community provides a context for functional relationships with many people. In those relationships, whatever you do is always reflected back to you. This helps you see yourself through others' eyes, and become conscious of the attitudes that you bring. The resulting self-insight can be humbling at times; but for a person who wishes to improve, it is *invaluable*.

Nobody is perfect. That's true *everywhere* you go. But in community, that fact works strongly to your advantage. The challenge of living and dealing with people who are imperfect, and not jumping ship in response to their imperfections, strengthens in you the qualities of long-sufferingness, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, and understanding—all of which are essential to your ability to get along with people. I hate to say it, but . . . *The very people who are found most irritating in community often stimulate the most growth for those around them.* (If, that is, those around them are willing to apply themselves to responding rightly to that person, rather than simply becoming irritated.)

Finally, all relationships deepen with time, shared experiences, and intensity of interaction. Consequently, extended community living yields a quality of relationship almost unobtainable in the

superficial and transient context of casual social relations. The resulting well-tempered and well-tested relationships provide an uncommon wealth of understanding and depth of commitment. And more than that, they offer substantial emotional security in an otherwise frighteningly fickle, non-committal world.

As always, life is what you make of it. Clearly, you can make something incredibly good out of being "stuck with people." This is yet another aspect of community life where a perceived disadvantage is, in truth, a major advantage.
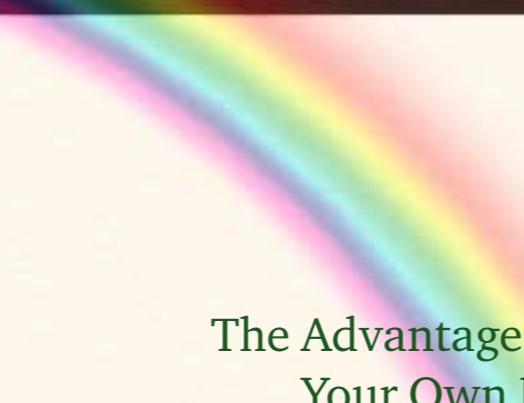
The Advantages of *Not* Having
Your Own Everything

A frequent concern about community living is giving up—or sharing—personal possessions: "I want my own stuff—my own everything!" The way of common society is exactly that. And certainly, not having to share anything is *convenient*. Thus, when a neighbor comes to borrow a hedge trimmer, the response may be, "Why don't you get your *own* hedge trimmer?"

Actually, there are reasons not to own your own everything. As the saying goes, "Everything costs." So if you own everything, then everything costs *you*—a lot! We don't notice exactly *how* much until a change in our circumstances—such as being injured—makes us feel expenses more keenly. After a significant reduction of income, the cost of carrying what we have suddenly becomes obvious.

In many lives, marriage and family are the only form of true economic community. But even that small system yields tremendous improvements in efficiency compared to living alone. People find that out the hard way after a divorce. All of a sudden, two people who previously shared many things need to "have their own everything": two houses, two utility payments, two televisions, two sets of furniture, etc. Suddenly, both individuals must work harder just to stay afloat, or accept a significantly reduced standard of living. Thus they come to appreciate—in hindsight—the efficiency of communal living (even on the family scale).

In the world today it is becoming increasingly difficult to survive on our own. When we pool our resources and share the basics, we come out with more disposable income, more free time, and more free (available) energy. In this respect the so-called

disadvantage of "having to share" works to the advantage of every individual within a group.

The economic costs of having your own same thing

When everybody has their own everything—their own house, car, television, everything—it takes a lot of time, money, and energy to maintain that luxury. Thus, social isolation comes with a big efficiency price tag. In a community, not only are housing and food cheaper, but much *time* can be saved by the way practical needs—such as food shopping, laundry, finances, housecleaning—are handled. For example, two people can easily buy and prepare food for ten. The net savings? Several hours per person, per week. It adds up.

Overall, each individual community member spends less time doing practical chores than people who *have* their own every-thing, and *do* their own everything. The time saved can be spent on other more creative projects. Saving the world, possibly?

How the efficiencies of communal living can help the humanity as a whole

We'd all like to contribute to the upliftment, upleveling, and healing of society, and of the humanity as a whole. But how many of us have enough time and energy, the way our life is currently configured, to help significantly? More often than not, it takes nearly all our time, energy and money just to handle the basics, and make ends meet.

Community living is easily twenty percent more efficient than isolated living. *If we had it*, twenty percent more time and energy would be available for helping save the world. *If we had it*, twenty percent more money could be used for charitable purposes.

It is chilling to realize that in these times of economic belt-tightening, when the needs of the poor are tremendous, many who are—or were—more fortunate are suffering financial trou-

bles of their own. They are, year by year, losing the ability to help. Consequently, charitable contributions are decreasing dramatically—much to the distress of food banks, church groups, and the needy people of the world. And what will happen tomorrow?

Economic trends represent, in themselves, a dramatic call to the need for increasingly efficient ways of living! And, perhaps more compelling, today's rugged individualist may well, due to these same economic pressures, be tomorrow's homeless.

Throughout history, in order to accomplish undertakings of world-changing significance, people have banded together in groups. The fact that they pooled their resources of time, money, and energy was often a key factor enabling the advancement of their mission. All because everyone does not need to have and do *everything*.

So, for many reasons, this (so-called) disadvantage of community turns out to be an advantage in disguise.

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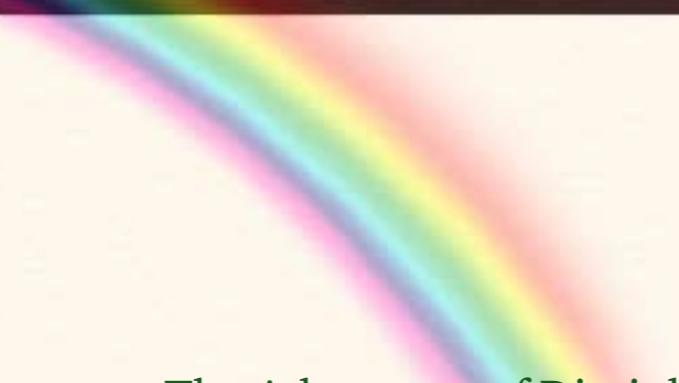
The Advantage of Disciplined Living

Many people fear the structure and demands of daily living in community. Perhaps, in some cases, this fear resembles the dread felt by an out-of-shape student for the first day of soccer practice. However, like exercise, discipline is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. *Particularly* when we're used to living randomly, discipline is just what the doctor ordered—both for the development of character and the achievement of personal well-being.

Perhaps you have heard stories like this one: A weak and spoiled child goes to a summer camp. There, unlike at home, the child is expected to do chores, to exert self-discipline, and to try to get along with the other children. What happens? At the end of the summer, a child who left home in a negative state of being returns *much* more wholesome. Surprised at the wonderful change, the delighted parents exclaim, "*Wow*! Look what's happened to you!"

The disciplined structure of community living yields similar benefit. It is healthy indeed to be under such daily demands: it straightens people out. For example, a lazy man in a group situation where people need help with a project will probably be asked to pitch in—or at least will feel a strong obligation to help. He may very well end up transcending his laziness and helping.

Obviously, if he were living in his own apartment there would be no such obligation. So he might just end up sinking into the mud of his own laziness, getting out of shape socially and spiritually, and becoming more subjective, more eccentric, more neurotic, even depressive—all due to his lack of discipline, and insufficient social participation.

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Clearly, the discipline required to participate in community builds character. That discipline is not, then, a disadvantage, but a tremendous advantage. It provides a means of escape from bad habits and ultimately, from the iron grip of egoism itself.

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The Advantage of Exercising Tolerance and Forgiveness

Most people know that it takes tolerance and forgiveness to live among people who—like oneself—are imperfect. This may sound like a disadvantage, but from the point of view of the Spirit, it is a golden opportunity.

Spiritually and psychologically, developing tolerance is most healthy. A life with nothing to tolerate may be pleasant on the surface, but is terribly unhealthy in the long run. Spiritual exercise is better than the lack (or insufficiency) thereof. And if you can handle it, more spiritual exercise is better than less, because it develops stronger muscles.

A person might ask, "How much can a person tolerate, how much can a person forgive?" And I would say, "Which person? Jesus? Or is this a question about yourself?" Obviously, the answer is different from individual to individual, according to their personal will.

There's no real question about how much a person *should* forgive: everything. Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus, and Martin Luther King forgave even their murderers. But the question is, "How tolerant and how forgiving do *you* want to be?" If you're serious about your smile, serious about your well-being, then you'll want to be about as tolerant and forgiving as *possible*.

Intolerance comes at a high cost

The usual man decries intolerance yet, at the same time, personifies it. It is easier to require tolerance of others than to require it of oneself. But the luxury of personal intolerance comes at a high cost; a chronically intolerant person is likely to cause trouble in any social context, however small or large. Thus, intolerant

people often end up alone. And of course, people on the receiving end of intolerance suffer too.

People drive themselves crazy if they dwell on things they find wrong or irritating, but cannot change. It's neurotic, and self-destructive to focus on the part of the cup that's half empty. Letting go is required.

In community living, people may sometimes be found irritating. And if you become excessively irritated, you lose your inner peace—you are disturbed. Growth opportunity is created by the stress of internal reactions. The stress calls us to forgiveness, to tolerance. It calls us to release concern about things we can't fix, or productively battle.

It's wise to develop the spiritual muscles of tolerance and forgiveness in oneself. There's only one way to accomplish that: exercise. The *good* news about community is you get a lot of exercise in the areas of tolerance and forgiveness—a lot more than you'd get in isolation.

The only person that you can really change is yourself

Many people believe happiness is found outside of themselves. They consider the world to be "making them unhappy" by not being what they want it to be. Nonetheless, the outer world is only so workable—there are many things we can't change. When we find we can't change others to suit ourselves, we end up being forced to make the kind of changes we need to make: *inner* changes. We change how we hold things.

Friends, try to show tolerance. Consider the impact of your reactions, and let them go. Think more constructively. That way, you find a certain sense of satisfaction, a certain sense of relief. You develop a better attitude, a better way of communicating, a better way of handling life. You enjoy more peace and harmony, both personally and interpersonally. And your peaceable be-

ing, your higher vibration, the fact that you are more happy and accepting—all of this will have a Divinely positive effect on the world around you.

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