



SPIRITUAL LIFE • DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNITY

A SPIRITUAL RHYTHM

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*"Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you've got
Taking a break from all your worries
Sure would help a lot
Wouldn't you like to get away?
Sometimes you wanna go
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came
You wanna be where you can see
Our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows your name"*

Gary Portnoy, Judy Hart-Angelo
(sit-com theme song, Cheers, 1982-93)

Religious and secular research studies have proven that we all have the human need to belong. We have a longing to be in community and to have a "safe place" where we are known. Our culture emphasizes personal freedom and self-fulfillment, sometimes to the detriment of people living isolated and emotionally fragile lives.

We need each other, but let's face it, community can be messy. It is easier to live a holy life when all alone than to do so with someone who leaves the toilet seat up or wet towels on the bathroom floor! As the following prayer highlights:

Dear Lord,
So far, I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped,
haven't lost my temper,
haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or

overindulgent.
I'm really glad about that.
But in a few minutes, God,
I'm going to get out of bed.
And from then on,
I'm going to need a lot more help.

Community is all around us. We were born into a family. We attend classes, we play and work on teams, and we worship in congregations. Human beings are made for living in community. It is in community that we flourish and become most fully human. Then why is it that we sometimes run from this togetherness? Maybe at some time, words have been exchanged, and feelings have been hurt, misunderstandings have gone unresolved, and grumbling in the community gets wearisome. It seems so much easier to live life solo. The need for belonging will sometimes arise because God has created us for community.

In her book *Living Into Community*, Christine Pohl shares some basic practices that, if intentionally applied, can help maintain health and wholeness in any community. Several practices could be considered, but most seem to fall into the following categories:

- Expressing gratitude
- Making and keeping promises
- Speaking truthfully
- Practicing hospitality

GRATEFUL HEARTS

"If the essence of God is grace, then the essence of human beings as God's people is our gratitude or thanks." Karl Barth

Teaching our children to say "please" and "thank you" is at the bedrock of all social skills. It is so much of a

part of our interactions that it rolls off the tongue as an automatic reflex. Gratitude should be second nature. That does not mean it should become a thoughtless expression.

Suppose gratitude continues to be fresh and sincere within us as individuals. In that case, it will transfer into freshness and sincerity in our community. Gratitude reminds us that we need each other.

"Gratitude begins with paying attention, with noticing the goodness, beauty, and grace around us. The practice of gratitude becomes more central to our communities when we stop feeding the cycles of complaint and orient our lives around praise, testimony, and thanks. Our communities flourish when we regularly tell stories of God's faithfulness and goodness, and when we find opportunities to express gratitude and celebrate the gifts we have received."

(Christine Pohl)

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...

- Psalm 136:1-2
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
- Philippians 4:6

FOR REFLECTION...

- How might you be addicted to criticism, analysis, and negativity? How might you consider a practical rhythm of gratitude to squelch this addiction?
- Who in your life personifies gratefulness? How has that person affected you?
- What is one discipline that you can incorporate in your day to up your gratitude quotient?

MAKING AND KEEPING PROMISES

The phrase “my word is my bond” is a phrase that dates back to the 1500s and was the means of an agreement by merchant traders. Today, advertisers and politicians make some seemingly impossible promises, so much so that we have become cynical of the likelihood of the promises being kept.

As we live out our faith, we must consider the connection between God’s practices and our faithfulness to our promises to people. The God we serve is one who has made promises to us, lives in a covenantal relationship with us, and is faithful even when we are unfaithful. Promise-making and promise-keeping, fidelity, and commitment are central to how we relate to God and how God relates to us.

“The history of the human race, as well as the story of any one life, might be told in terms of commitment... At the heart of this history...lies a sometimes hidden narrative of promises, oaths, compacts, committed beliefs, and projected visions. At the heart of any individual's story, too, lies the tale of her or his commitment – wise or foolish, sustained or broken, fragmented or integrated into one whole.”

Margaret Farley

Promises provide a framework for every community. It is what helps make the structure strong. This is evident in everyday commitments such as promising to work in the church nursery, bringing refreshments to the church coffee hour, or keeping a confidence shared in a small group session. These are what healthy community life is built on. We live by faith in a God whose character is steadfast love, so it should not surprise us that making promises and keeping promises are also at the heart of what is best in human relationships.

Always being a person of your word is something we are all striving toward. It is important to note that

promise-keeping is not easy. Following through on a difficult promise not only gives you satisfaction but also raises the level of respect you receive from others and for which your community strives to be known for. If you genuinely want to have a life filled with godliness, have high-quality relationships, then hold promises as sacred agreements, don't miss deadlines, and make a practice to follow through on your commitments. Don't make excuses.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...

- Psalm 105:7-8
- 1 Timothy 4:7-9
- Hebrews 10:20-24

FOR REFLECTION...

- Sometimes we need to consider making fewer promises. Are there possible "promise expectations" on the horizon that you need to stay away from?
- Strive to fulfill promises as soon as possible.
- When making promises make expectations clear.

LIVING TRUTHFULLY

Healthy communities are those filled with people who love truth, live faithfully, and respond gratefully; this is the embodiment of Christ and his church. When we pursue a truthful way of life, it models the right community life and relationships. Building a climate of truth-telling in the community sets an atmosphere for all to face our need for repentance and change.

Truthfully living involves self-discipline and thoughtful reflection. The Quaker tradition offers time-tested suggestions for fostering truthful living. They include:

- Listen “for the truth in the words of others”;
- Speak the truth as you understand it with “cordiality, kindness, and love”;
- Avoid “gossip, talebearing, breaking confidences, or disparagement of others”; and
- Resist “temptations to falsehood, coercion, and abuse.”

Adhering to these guidelines takes constant commitment and calling on the Holy Spirit's strength within us to bear fruit and strengthen family, small group, team, or congregation.

Wisdom and discernment play an important part in living truthfully in community. Creating a culture of truthfulness involves knowing when we should speak and when it is appropriate to conclude that God is at work. We do not need to say anything.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...

- Ephesians 4:14-16
- John 16:12-14
- Ephesians 4:24-26

FOR REFLECTION...

- How do you live out God's reality about the goodness of telling the truth?
- How has someone's honesty or lack of it affected you?
- Who in your life tells you the truth without praise or blame? What is that like for you?

PRACTICING HOSPITALITY

There is always a feeling of being valued and belonging when we receive an invitation. When the invitation is given sincerely, we feel wanted. For some, this desire to be wanted is stronger than we are willing to acknowledge.

Extending the hand of hospitality is when we are most like God. The Lord, in His goodness and grace, offers an open-door to engage with him in caring and closeness. Similarly, we are doing the same when we extend a hand of hospitality to another.

Communities that intentionally practice hospitality discover that one of the most precious resources they can share with others is their fellowship and friendship.

It seems that hospitality has morphed into emphasizing meal planning, housekeeping preparation, and entertaining guests. Certainly, this can be a part of the equation, but it is only a small part. The welcoming atmosphere and spirit of inclusion is what is most needed and desired in practicing hospitality.

“Often, the best gift we can give another person is our time and attention. Human beings need a place in which they and their contributions are valued, and a hospitable community finds ways to value the gifts people bring. Few experiences are more lonely or isolating than finding oneself unwanted, unneeded, or unable to contribute...This means that communities and folks within them must be willing to receive. Only as we recognize our own vulnerabilities and incompleteness are we open to what others can contribute.”

Christine Pohl

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...

- Romans 15:7
- Mark 12:30-31
- Hebrews 13:1-2

FOR REFLECTION...

- When have you been so genuinely welcomed that it deeply touched your soul?
- Who has modeled the discipline of hospitality to you?
- How might the Lord be calling you to use your heart and (possibly) your home as a shelter for others?

CLOSE YOUR TIME IN PRAYER WITH THE FOLLOWING:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled
as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.*

St. Francis of Assisi



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