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Crafting Community (Chapter Eight of The Contented Soul: The Art of Savoring Life)

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CRAFTING COMMUNITY

*I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the
sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.*

JOHN GALT IN *ATLAS SHRUGGED*, A NOVEL BY AYN RAND

*Share each other's troubles and problems,
and in this way obey the law of Christ.*

GALATIANS 6:2



Norm Ewert and Sharon Coolidge live simply in an affluent suburb. They are Wheaton College professors committed to caring for the poor around the world. Before she and Norm married, Sharon had purchased a small home a couple blocks from campus. After they married, they expanded and remodeled the 1850s home, using recycled materials (leaded windows from a school, French doors from a church, a carved staircase salvaged from a house fire) and adding a reservoir to capture and reuse rainwater, a solarium with well-placed windows for passive heat, and thick walls for insulation. As Mennonites they live simply and compas-

sionately, using their resources and energy to help others forge sustainable lives. They are strong supporters of Ten Thousand Villages, a nonprofit program of the Mennonite Central Committee that works with artisans from Third World countries, providing a market and fair prices for their crafts so that they can earn a livable wage. Norm and Sharon extend care toward a broad community, a "home" that reaches far beyond boundaries marked by family, neighborhood, church and nationality. And in caring for others, they find contentment in their own lives.

Some profound moments of contentment come in recognizing that we are part of and belong to something much bigger than ourselves. Conversely, some of our most profound moments of discontent are experienced in isolation, as though we belong to no one or nothing.

To belong to something bigger than ourselves, we must relinquish some measure of control over our circumstances. Sometimes we decide *not to choose* something that we think will bring us contentment, because in choosing it we may harm others or creation. When author and journalist Bill McKibben was a scholar in residence at Middlebury College in Vermont, he wrote: "We're the animal that can decide not to do something we're capable of . . . decide that something else—our family, our tribe, our community, the rest of creation, the divine—matters as much as we do, and thus sets limits on our behavior."¹ When, for the sake of others, people choose not to do something they are capable of doing, they strengthen a sense of responsibility for the well-being of an intangible whole that transcends their individual lives. The world is broken and uncertain, but it is our home.

So we bike, walk or drive a smaller car. We consume less and buy more conscientiously. We choose to turn off the television or isolating video games—or get rid of them altogether. We encourage good citizenship, which is sometimes at odds with a society that depends on good consumers. Instead of following various whims, we choose to stay put in our church and neighborhood, forging strong community ties.

Desiring a sense of community comes naturally enough. Although we are self-determining individuals, we generally yearn to belong. We are social beings with a will to relate, made for relationship, drawn to others.

On a sunny winter afternoon the day following a storm that blanketed us with a foot of snow, I made my way to Herrick Lake for a walk in the woods. I expected to be mostly alone—it was only eighteen degrees outside. But I found that the absence of wind and the presence of sun had drawn a community of like-minded souls with boots, cross-country skis, snowshoes, sleds and ice-fishing paraphernalia. Being alone would have been fine—but finding a community of others who appreciated the beauty and blessing of snow and sun made my soul smile. We greeted each other, knowing that our presence sustained a community of people who have for generations appreciated and celebrated the wonders of a forest wrapped in winter.

We grow wiser and become better people when we invest in the crafting of caring, strong communities in which people sacrifice personal freedoms and conveniences for the sake of children, the elderly, the mentally and physically handicapped, the poor and marginalized. We serve a larger common good when we choose not to consume, develop or build for the sake of preserving the earth's fauna and flora, its natural wonders and resources.

LONGING TO BELONG

Psychology, like technology, deserves two cheers. Both have done humanity good along the way. Psychology uncovered some of the mystery around our human longing to attach at birth, to be held, to belong. But in the pursuit of the good life, some strands of psychology now encourage us to abandon the notion of self-sacrifice as servile. Pop psychology, supported by the philosophy of individualism, has told us to be wary of self-sacrifice or a strong sense of obligation to others because it is detrimental to self-actualization, mental health and thus contentment. We are

given permission to pursue whatever beliefs and lifestyle we want, regardless of our parents' or our community's values. Truth is relative, and our views about right and wrong are socially constructed. *Free will* and *self-determination* are key words of the day.

Since we are created to attach to others from birth, desiring the giving and receiving nature of relationship and connection, the detachment of the self-determined soul has left us wandering. With no larger body to direct our orbit with a gravitational pull, we have drifted.

Most of us, even if we have a relatively intact desire and ability for attachment, will make choices that hurt us and those around us. We try to satisfy longings for connection but sometimes wound others and ourselves in the process. We tend to live by a minimalist ethic that says unless someone's actions are actually hurting someone else, they ought to be free to choose their own way. They are free to participate or not in the electoral process, to sleep with whomever they want so long as it is consensual, to consume unlimited resources so long as they can afford them. A minimalist ethic is an ethic of detachment. It neither strengthens our communities nor brings us contentment.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim studied Western societies in the late nineteenth century. In his classic study on suicide, he found that in societies where rules about how people ought to behave were breaking down, people felt increasingly isolated and anxious. Suicides motivated by this sense of normlessness and disconnection were the result of *anomie*—living in places where expectations of behavior are confused, unclear or absent. Durkheim believed that humans need help regulating egotistical impulses for their own sake, as well as for the health of communities. He endorsed a moral liberalism that emphasizes our need for self-discipline and our obligations to others. The capacity to be sacrificial and altruistic is a good and important virtue, he said, and if religion couldn't continue as the guiding light for moral principles, then a civil society would need to rise up and be strong enough to take its place.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Singapore has a standard of living that is on par with that of the United States. Women can walk down the street alone at night without fear or anxiety. Singaporeans are free from fears associated with poverty, crime and disorderliness. However, their freedom does not mean being free to pursue personal fulfillment in whatever way an individual defines it. Restrictions on personal freedom in Singapore are stringent. News is owned and censored by the government. Chewing gum is banned, as is eating on the subway or forgetting to flush a public toilet (all of these result in significant fines), and caning is used more than a thousand times a year as public punishment for offenders. Yet there is no unemployment or homelessness, and everyone has medical insurance. Traffic flows without congestion, there is no pollution, and there are plenty of green open spaces.²

Whether or not we think Singaporeans are content with this arrangement depends on how we'd load the scales balancing individual freedom and rights on one side, and community obligations and responsibilities on the other. In cultures where contentment and the good life are rooted in community, ties and obligations to others are valued more than individual fulfillment and choice. Freedom means not having to worry about whether or not you (and members of your community) can feed, clothe and shelter your children. The tradeoff is greater restriction of personal choices. Parents focus less on raising children to be independent and more on raising them to be responsible family members and good citizens. Children tend to avoid behaving in ways that might bring shame on their parents, extended family and community. The young marry spouses their parents approve for them, and they live in ways that increase the family's honor and respect. Parents help the young succeed, supporting them as needed, and know that in return they will be cared for and honored in their old age. The young and the old recognize that they belong not to themselves but to the family and community from

which they came. Sociologists call such cultures “collectivist” because they emphasize responsibility to group needs over individual rights and aspirations.

In individualistic cultures we define freedom as personal choice—the right to choose our partner, our life path, where we live, what we buy, what kind of work we pursue, who we hang out with, how we express ourselves. We value autonomy, and want acts of good will to be chosen rather than coerced.

Developing a civil society that values responsibility as highly as it does personal rights is the goal of a group of people who call themselves communitarians. They consider communitarianism to be a public philosophy and a social movement made up of academics, writers, politicians, policymakers and ordinary citizens. Communitarians assert that a community can and should develop a shared picture of what it values and what is good, and that a shared vision is preferable to individuals’ determining their own values and definitions for what is right or wrong. At the same time, communitarians recognize that communities can be imbalanced and hold wrong beliefs and values. The communitarian movement does not support oppressive marital relationships, for example, but it does support marriages that last, as opposed to liberal divorce laws that make it easier for family ties to be dissolved. Communitarians emphasize the moral obligations people have to families, communities and societies. Rights and responsibilities belong together. Social order and personal liberty are mutually supportive tensions—and communities need to be careful not to overemphasize one or the other.³ Those of us who value community life are challenged by their principles as we re-think our own claim to personal rights in light of our social and personal responsibilities.

I begin my Sociology of Families course by showing students a quote from Kuwana Haulsey’s *The Red Moon*. This novel tells the story of a girl raised in a traditional tribe in Kenya who, at the point of the quote, is

trying out the modern ways of her fellow students as she attends a university in Nairobi. She has met a janitor from a tribe similar to her own, and they become friends. At one point he says to her, “Whether you like it or not, it is your family and your tribe that really shapes you. You can fight against that for the rest of your life if you want, but it’s much easier to just accept it.”⁴

I have my students spend a few minutes journaling a response. Does this quote irk them? Do they agree with the janitor’s statement? Whether or not they agree, how do they respond to it as those detaching from family and community back home to attend college and begin an independent life? Those who choose to verbalize their thoughts tend to focus on the need to find their own path, to choose their own way, deviating if necessary from their family or “tribe” even as they recognize the significance of their family’s influence on them.

My students, like all of us, are products of the twentieth century, when our greatest obligation became to self-actualize, to be the best we can be, and in that find fulfillment. Self-actualization requires some detachment from our sense of obligation and responsibility to our roots. We are to be loyal primarily to ourselves and make our own bed so long as we are willing to sleep in it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French social philosopher, came to the United States in 1831 to see what he could learn about the character of this young democracy. In a two-volume work called *Democracy in America*, he wrote about the “habits of the heart” he observed. A repeated theme that captured his attention was the rugged independence he observed in Americans. He first used the term *individualism* to refer to a kind of state-sanctioned egotism. He admired parts of the American spirit, yet he also saw Americans seeking their opinions only within themselves, becoming increasingly disconnected and unconcerned about society. In his judgment,

individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others [virtues] and is at length absorbed in downright egotism. . . . They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.⁵

Tocqueville's critique of the United States is often referred to in articles and books and used in college courses exploring American politics, community, religion, and private and civic life. Citizens of the United States celebrate freedom and equality—strengths Tocqueville identified in the young democracy. But he warned (and contemporary writers like Robert Bellah⁶ and Robert Putnam⁷ affirm) that radical individualism erodes community ties, diminishing a sense of duty to look out for the well-being of others. Voting turnout, volunteer work, writing letters to representatives and newspapers, and involvement in community events have declined. Care for the elderly, the young, the poor, orphaned and widowed that was once carried out by families, churches and communities has increasingly come under the responsibility of governmental agencies.

In our celebration of freedom, we elevated our personal agenda and rights above obligations to anyone or anything else. Some, like the communitarians, want to help us recognize the cost this exacts on our lives and the lives of those with whom we live. Instead of freeing us to experience greater happiness, we are overly focused on ourselves, an unhappy and lonely people. Our pursuit of self-fulfillment has not brought

a better world but rather a self-absorbed one.

FORGING STRONG AND CARING COMMUNITIES

Years ago, sometime after the Welcome Wagon had left but before we had scheduled our free haircut or picked up our free pound of premium beef, we became aware of various Wheaton city ordinances. Having moved from the rural U.S. Northwest, we felt a bit overregulated at first. It took awhile to appreciate the need for ordinance sec. 14-27: "removal of dog excrement from property not of owner." Cars couldn't be parked on the street after 2:00 a.m., and community residents were supposed to retrieve garbage and recycling bins from the curb within twenty-four hours of pickup. We quickly learned to take full parenting advantage of the curfew ordinance for minors, and we appreciated ordinances concerning "loud music or noises" and the requirement that businesses remove snow and ice from their sidewalks within twenty-four hours of snowfall. I wondered what story precipitated the ordinance making it unlawful to hunt in the city, but we appreciated that one as well.

Wheaton, like most communities, tries to balance the rights of individuals with public needs for order and safety. So while communities allow drunkenness inside one's home, they do not tolerate drunk driving; parents have the right to discipline their children, but we do not tolerate child abuse; freedom of expression is protected, but vandalism is punished.

Most of us prefer the freedom to choose to do right rather than being forced to do so. We'd rather shovel snow from the sidewalk in front of our home because we are people of good character than because a law requires it. Nor do we want to shovel snow in the fear that if we don't, someone may slip on our property and we will be sued. We prefer the chance to do what is good for the community without being compelled.

Determining what can be left up to people's sense of goodwill and neighborliness and what cannot is tricky business. The more we regu-

late, the less people choose to do good on their own volition. Weaving between the rights of individuals and the needs of the community is a challenging task.

Some faith-based colleges and universities make their desire to forge strong and caring communities explicit in a written code of conduct that students, and sometimes faculty and staff, sign and are expected to abide by. The following paragraphs come from the preface and introductory comments of the Wheaton College Community Covenant, a statement that all members of the college community are expected to uphold.

[W]hile the College is not a religious order, it yet demonstrates some features that are similar to religious orders, communities wherein, for the sake of fulfilling the community's purposes, its members voluntarily enter into a social compact. At Wheaton we call this social compact our community covenant. . . .

Our mission as an academic community is not merely the transmission of information; it is the development of whole and effective Christians who will impact the church and society worldwide "For Christ and His Kingdom." Along with the privileges and blessings of membership in such a community come responsibilities. The members of the Wheaton College campus community take these responsibilities seriously.

Schools like Wheaton College make an assumption that a community can put obligations on members, even if it means prohibiting personal freedoms that are granted by our larger society. By upholding a covenant they seek to be intentional, voluntary communities driven by a mission that depends on participants' recognizing that privileges of membership come with obligations and opportunities correspond to responsibilities.

Sometimes such institutions are caricatured as "total institutions" as described by sociologist Irving Goffman in his exploration of asylums in the 1970s. Total institutions force change on individual behavior by dic-

tating all of life and choreographing all social interactions. Increasing skepticism and decreasing public confidence in the 1960s meant that any institution seeking to shape or channel individual expression or choice became subject to criticism. We valued individual choice and self-determination to the extent that constraints imposed by an institution were likened to the evil "We" denounced by novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand.

Alan Ehrenhalt, author of *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America*, says people do want the good parts of community we idealized from the 1950s, back when Ernie Banks was loyal to the Cubs and neighbors stayed put and knew each other.⁸ But a strong sense of community existed in the context of limited choice and a willingness to submit to authority or to the greater good. However much we dislike it, Ehrenhalt asserts that community, limited choice and authority are inextricably linked. Strong communities are forged when people are willing to voluntarily abide by and submit to agreed-upon expectations in spite of any legal right to do otherwise.

DEVELOPING GOOD SAMARITANS

Forging caring communities also requires our willingness to speak up when others' actions are hurtful. I don't like to confront people—I hide behind the idea that it must be someone else's job to quiet noisy teenagers in a movie theater or to remind a hiker tossing aside an empty Fritos bag of the "leave no trace" policy. I'd rather put up with the noise and pick up trash. Yet I appreciate it when someone speaks up in a theater and tells others being disruptive to quiet down. And when my neighbor Joe yelled at a driver to slow down as he sped down our street, I felt a renewed sense that this is my community and I am responsible to speak up for it.

I suppose we all have our threshold, and when I found mine I was thankful to discover I had one. I was watching boys at a local park tor-

ment a squirrel by surrounding the small tree it had run to for safety. A couple of the boys tried shaking it free of its life hold on a flimsy branch while others threw rocks at it. I summoned my courage, approached them and told them it was unlawful to torment the park's creatures. (I imagined that somewhere in City Hall there was a town ordinance about this.) They responded with amazing respect and a touch of shame—as though they knew better but had been caught up in a moment of “boys being boys.” Perhaps they returned to their squirrel tormenting the next day, but at least for the moment I had replaced anomie with a sense of community responsibility. In the process I accepted my obligation to communicate a vested interest in care of and respect for this public gathering place.

When we confront peers for telling racist or sexist jokes, we are upholding what is good for humanity, embracing people perceived to be “them” as part of “us,” whether they live next door or far away and even if they seem more unlike than like us. How big should we draw the circle around the community to which we belong? To whom are we obligated?

When Jesus told a teacher of the law that he must love his neighbor as himself, the teacher asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:25-37). Jesus then told the story of the Samaritan who acted neighborly to a wounded Jew, who would likely have snubbed and disregarded the Samaritan if he weren't in such desperate straits. Jesus answered the question by saying, “Go and be neighborly.” He was unwilling to draw a circle that would leave some outside our responsibility of care.

As Apollo 9 quietly orbited Earth in 1969, astronaut Rusty Schweickart's view of the world was dramatically changing. He started seeing the world as an indivisible whole. Several years later he put into words what he experienced:

Up there you go around every hour and a half, time after time after

time. . . . You wake up over the Mideast, over North Africa . . . and out over the Indian Ocean . . . and you finally come up across the coast of California and look for those friendly things: Los Angeles, and Phoenix, and on across El Paso and there's Houston, there's home. . . . And you identify with that, you know—it's an attachment. . . . And that identity—that you identify with Houston, and then you identify with Los Angeles and Phoenix and New Orleans and everything. And the next thing you recognize in yourself, is you're identifying with North Africa. You look forward to that, you anticipate it. And there it is. That whole process begins to shift what it is you identify with. When you go around it in an hour and a half you begin to recognize that you identify with the whole thing. And that makes a change.

You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you crossed again and again and again. And you don't even see 'em. At that wake-up scene—the Mideast—you know there are hundreds of people killing each other over some imaginary line that you can't see. From where you see it, the thing is a whole, and it's so beautiful. And you wish you could take one from each side in hand and say, “Look at it from this perspective. Look at that. What's important?”⁹

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that we should be world citizens, caring for all humanity. We live in concentric circles: our primary identity with and obligation toward our family is our innermost circle, but the circles move outward to include our city, state, nation, and ultimately we identify with and embrace the world as our global community.

Our political boundaries do have real consequences for how people live. Economic and political systems vary; we speak different languages and have different religions, customs and food preferences. We hold differing ideas about what freedom means and about how to balance the

rights of individuals with public needs for safety and order. But the boundaries are still arbitrary and are drawn and redrawn as history unfolds. As individuals we can choose how broadly we draw the circle around those whom we will embrace.

In one of my classes I use a film called *16 Decisions*. It documents life for the poor in Bangladesh and the good done by a community bank that offers small business loans to women to help better their lives. The documentary follows Salina's life up close. She is a mother as I am, concerned about her children's well-being, belonging to the earth and sharing the same time in history, breathing the same air that I breathe. Our circles of life overlap. Yet she lives so unlike me. Salina has never had a Coke, watched a movie, sat in a recliner, bathed in a tub. She has never used a toaster, a light bulb, a toilet or a sink; her home is a two-room hut made of mud and straw. She cooks outside on fires she keeps going by collecting and burning brush and dung. Salina takes birth control pills that her husband brings home from town to keep her from having more children (the pills cost ten cents for a two-month supply); otherwise she has no contact with medicine or the medical community. The community bank loaned her money so she and her husband could buy a rickshaw that he pedals into town five miles away. On a good day he makes between eighty cents and a dollar providing transportation to those slightly better off than himself. Salina doesn't vote or read, and she met her husband on her wedding day—a marriage arranged by her parents without her consent or consultation.

I don't want to forget her as I drink my mocha, bump up my thermostat on a chilly day, drive my car and buy my groceries. Salina and I belong together in this world; the resources I use to live a comfortable life are as rightfully hers as they are mine. I hold her in my thoughts, praying for her well-being while seeking ways to promote change that would grant her more access to the world's wealth.

Similarly, for a number of years I have held Luis in my prayers. Luis

was seven when I "met" him through the 1992 documentary *7 Years Old in America*. I show the video every year—a marvelous film that examines the lives of children from different socioeconomic, racial and regional backgrounds in the United States. At seven Luis was living in a homeless shelter with his mother and two younger siblings; he was a sweet, clever child who had hopes and dreams like any other boy his age. Seven years later the producers interviewed the same children again and released *14 Up in America* in 1998.¹⁰ I had doubted that the producers would be able to find Luis, but they did. At fourteen, he was a resilient youth who had found a church and a faith that helped him stay out of trouble. He had spent four years in foster care between 1992 and 1998; his father had been abusive, and his mother had struggled with drug addictions. By the time he was fourteen, his mother had custody of her children again, and Luis loved and admired how hard she was working to keep the family together. They lived in subsidized housing and used welfare to keep them out of abject poverty. Luis's family will most likely stay poor, yet he remained hopeful that he would rise and realize the American dream.

These must not just be faces on a screen. They are real people, living real lives. In 2006 Luis is out there somewhere, a twenty-two-year-old trying to make his way in the world. Luis and Salina are part of my global village.

That we are American or Bangladeshi, white or black, male or female, rich or poor has significant bearing on how we experience life and relate to others. These different experiences have consequences for justice and *shalom*. Structured inequality is passed down through generations, so that the rich generally stay rich and the poor generally stay poor. Some suburban communities have been built by people who fled urban centers in a white-flight syndrome that separated the haves from the have-nots; they left behind inner cities plagued by low-quality education and inadequate economic opportunities. Some resource-rich countries were colonized by politically powerful ones, and after independence, corpo-

rations moved in to capitalize on their resources, maintaining the dependent relationship established during colonization. Again, the poor remain in poverty while the rich grow richer.

Nelson Mandela, former South African president, addressed thousands in Trafalgar Square in February 2005. Speaking of the world community, he said, "Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times . . . that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils." He called for setting free the millions in the world's poorest countries through establishing trade justice, ending rising debts and providing higher-quality aid.¹¹ In 150 years, will the world look back at us and be amazed at how easily Christians ignored or even justified gross and growing inequality in the world community? Will they look at us the way we look at Christians who supported slavery?

All human beings share a mutual dependence on one ecosystem, one atmosphere in which we were born and on which we all depend. If we are willing, our circle of obligation will extend beyond peoples to creation—to the earth that is our home and will be a home for other generations long after we're gone. If we draw our boundaries large enough to see the earth as our community, then wise use of the world's resources and care for the earth and its creatures is part of our task.

In the grandest vision of a world experiencing *shalom*, we see the poor and the exploited defended and the earth ruled with fairness and truth. Even animals are at peace with each other. Calves and yearlings are safe with lions, and a child can put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes and be unharmed (Is 11:1-9).

As we embrace the whole earth as something to which we belong, we come to love this home of ours—created by God, our temporary dwelling place. We stop thinking of our community and the earth as existing for our personal convenience and well-being and begin to see how we are part of a greater whole. Living in harmony with others and with the created world gives us a foretaste of our yearned-for *shalom*—a vision of

a world made right. In work and service, in simple enjoyment of a sunset or a night sky, we come to see that we belong—and in the belonging we work with God to build moral and caring communities that ease our isolation and allow greater contentment to settle in our soul.

TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITIES

Bob May died in a work-related accident. Scottie, his wife, is my colleague at Wheaton College and my friend. I knew Bob as a quiet man who preferred listening to talking. At his memorial service, I learned that when extended family gathered, he would dismiss himself from the table to play with his grandchildren rather than sit through after-dinner conversations. I also learned about his strong sense of community and loyalty to his family and his church. He came to family life late, gaining three adolescent children when he married Scottie. He loved them immediately and faithfully. Since he was a self-employed electrician/handyman, he could adapt his schedule to meet needs, such as when he left immediately after a late-night call from a son who, in the prime of the foolishness of youth, needed bailing out of car trouble. On a day's notice Bob drove to New York to help another son install a new boiler—that was a story in itself. He helped widows and single women from church whose houses direly needed the attention he was capable of giving. Story after story was told of how he would hear about a need and immediately see what he could do to meet it. People spoke of how he loved to help others, and they described him as a contented soul. I left the service wanting to be like Bob.

Serving takes us out of our self and places us and our pain in the context of some community. By offering others a good turn as a regular part of our life, we remind ourselves that we are part of something that needs to be nurtured to be strong. Blessing and serving others, such as by volunteering at a soup kitchen or with a program to help teen moms or at-risk youth, strengthens our communities. As we volunteer with an ani-

mal shelter or help with fall or spring grounds work at local parks and preserves, we are reminded of the whole to which we belong and from which we draw sustenance. Blessing and serving acknowledge, appreciate and show care for others and creation. They stretch and grow our soul. In serving we receive blessing because we are made for relationship, for community, and to do good. People who socialize with friends and who are involved in church are happier than people who don't. And regardless of how wealthy, educated or diverse a community, those with engaged and active members tend to have less crime, lower mortality and higher academic performance.¹²

In *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, Alan Wolfe cautions against assuming that a welfare state like Denmark does much better than a market state like the United States at inspiring individuals to care for the weak and needy. Both allow individuals to be self-focused. In countries with strong welfare systems, the state is given the responsibility to take care of the young, the old, the poor and the handicapped. In market states, people are supposed to be responsible for themselves, and a safety net is supposed to catch the ones who can't or don't. For different reasons, however, in both market states and welfare states, people wash their hands of the responsibility to care for their neighbor or kin.¹³ Wolfe challenges readers to recognize that society is a gift that needs to be nurtured by members who accept responsibility to craft moral communities that care for near and distant kin, that recognize a sense of belonging and identity, and invest in the lives of others with whom they share a particular physical space. Bob May modeled this for members of our church and local community. He grew his soul through servanthood.

Sometimes we forget that being social creatures means we have much to gain in the mere act of being social, of giving and taking in relationships. We find contentment, fulfillment and blessing not by consuming or seeking to satisfy our desires but through good citizenship—by engaging, serving and blessing others.

FINDING OUR WAY HOME

In her memoir *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of a little girl who got lost one day. Frightened, she ran up and down the streets looking for landmarks that would help her find her way home. Eventually a police officer stopped to help her. They drove around town and at some point came upon the little girl's church. She told him, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from there."

Lamott continues: "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."¹⁴

We have the capacity for relationships that grow deep and wide, sometimes stretching across a lifetime and several generations. Our church families offer us blessing that comes from blended generations of people whose lives are intertwined. They care for us and we for them, and when we lose our way, they help us find our way home to the arms of God.

Sustained communities allow us to be present for the birthing of babies and careers, for the support of the young and aid to each other in loss and hardship. While communities are full of broken people who wound each other, communities offer healing too and hold great potential to lead us into contented lives. Communities are honored when participants recognize that this world we inhabit is far older than we are, will exist long after we do and holds more significance than any of us holds individually. Communities, both local and global, need and deserve our care and respect.

Building communities that move us toward contentment means that we will evaluate and reform them. As community members, we critique and adapt our institutions and traditions to change where they are unjust and to become stronger and more reflective of God's redemptive

work in humanity. The Protestant Reformation, the abolition movement, the suffrage movement, Vatican II, the civil rights movement and the environmental movement are examples of efforts to correct errors and assumptions that needed to be challenged and changed.

Of course not all change improves community. Changes that introduced greater choice and individual freedom after the 1960s did as much harm as good to U.S. civic society. The sexual revolution assumed that love is free, a choice without consequences. Women as well as men could sleep with multiple partners without tarnishing their social status. Two people could choose to live together without the convention of marriage to constrain their freedom by imposing obligations. But there were consequences. Sexually transmitted diseases skyrocketed, as did the rate of teenage pregnancy and divorce. Choice and freedom, empty of responsibility, led to increased poverty for women and children, destabilizing family and community life. Today almost 20 percent of children under eighteen in the United States are in poverty, and more than half of those are being raised by single mothers.

Change and reform are necessary for our communities to be strong and to respond to changing demands. We strive to balance private rights with public concerns, wanting to strengthen families, churches, civic society, nation-states and our global village.

One of our struggles with contentment is how to rejoice in our blessings when we see a world we love full of suffering caused by the sins of humanity, including the sins of our own people. Contentment that is neither blind nor naive acknowledges the personal and structural sins of our history and current lives and the need for social justice. We hold a vision of *shalom*, knowing that God will eventually complete the transformative work that has begun. Meanwhile we colabor with God to bring mercy and justice to a world crying out for redemption, and we live simply so others might simply live. We have more wealth to redistribute when we don't live up to or beyond our financial means. We become

wise voters and consumers and push for corporate responsibility and accountability worldwide.

Communities that draw us into contentment also embrace the beauty of a world that consistently points to God's glory, persevering and continuing to be reborn spring after spring, generation after generation. Contentment is a braid of three threads—future hope for an earth restored, participation in strengthening present communities and enjoyment of the good that yet abounds around us.

QUERIES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- “We’re the animal that can decide not to do something we’re capable of . . . decide that something else matters as much as we do, and thus sets limits on our behavior.” What can you choose *not* to do this week for the sake of something or someone else?
- Where does your sense of community come from? To what communities do you feel most connected? How can you invest in, foster and enrich a connection this week?
- Is Singaporeans’ life worth the personal rights they give up for it? What from your cultural heritage inclines you to put your rights ahead of your obligations? How might meeting some obligation you have draw you toward greater contentment?
- Is there a Salina (*16 Decisions*) or a Luis (*7 Years Old in America*) you could pray for, someone whose story you could be mindful of as you walk through a rather privileged life at the same time they walk through theirs?
- Is your contentment primarily a passive rejoicing in the good you have? What are you doing, and what can you do to make a greater contribution to *shalom* in the world?
- Exercise: Look for a way to be a good Samaritan this week—go out of your way to do someone some good. Afterward, reflect on the impact it had on your soul, on your sense of contentment and of belonging to a community outside yourself.