

Your Ministry, Your Health, Our Shared Life

a sermon by

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I'm going to be talking with you this morning about healing the heart of our democracy and of our fellowship by developing the habit of **creating and supporting shared relationship in community**. But rather than starting with the theory, I'm going to start with a story picked up from a four year old edition of a British newspaper called *The Guardian*. The story is from July 2010 and in excerpted form it goes like this:

Geetie Singh - an award-winning, young restaurateur - opened Britain's first organic gastro-pub several years ago in north London. She is just one delightful example of the kinds of people produced by intentional community. She grew up during the 1970s in a commune housed in an old, 40 room British mansion known as Birchwood Hall. Of that experience she says:

“My mother, my brother and I moved to Birchwood when I was two. My mom was English and my dad was a Punjabi Sikh. They got married because they both had a passion for justice but they eventually divorced because, ironically, my dad worked like a hard-driven Englishman and my mom was more of a hippy.

So she and we kids moved to Birchwood. Birchwood was Hippy enough for nearly anyone - and I have to tell you, though it was not perfect, it was nearly everything I could have ever wished for growing up. I was surrounded by interesting companions. I was not discriminated against because I was of mixed race. We had lots of indoor space to play in and acres of orchards, farmland and woods outside.

The Birchwood members were warm and welcoming and had a lot of things figured out. Everyone paid generously – but according to their income. Everyone took turns doing the shopping and the housework. We shared cooking, which meant our family turn came around once every 10 days, and there was a rotation about who did laundry. Everyone ate together which made us feel like family. We shared several common rooms but we all had separate bedrooms – which gave us all places to retreat when we needed.

And we needed a retreat sometimes because community life, though wonderful, is not easy. We loved one another but we often argued about things. It was healthy for us kids, I think, watching our parents being challenged by other adults, and having to negotiate with them. It taught us kids that adults have to work at getting along just like kids do. We learned from an early age that regardless of how old we are, we are all just normal human beings. We have to speak for ourselves and then listen to other people. All of us kids became very good at communicating with grown-ups and each other. Our opinions were respected.

We had regular “Feelings meetings.” And what a good idea that was! The meetings were regular, short sessions devoted to hearing one another’s needs, unpacking differences and smoothing out problems before they got big. At those meetings, we kids learned that our feelings were valid and valued and, again, we learned how important it is to sit down and listen to each other. That process has had an enormous impact on how I live even now.

I have to tell you living in a commune is not everyone's cup of tea. We can have community in many ways that aren't quite so intense. Birchwood challenged me some when I got older. It wasn't always tidy. I remember the balls of dust and the scuffed skirting boards, and though it didn't bother me too much at first, it did later and I know it would really bother me now. I like things a bit neater.

Still - the informal education I received in relationships at Birchwood, the education I received from the natural world and the political engagement were powerful and wonderful. We grew our own food; we demonstrated for global and local issues, we wrote letters and we took our politics very seriously.

At Birchwood, we did not have a strict academic curriculum, though, and the adults had different ideas about how to bring us children up. Some of the adults were strict, others laid-back. It was a challenge for the adults to agree on rules for kids that they all believed in and would adhere to. As a result we children of the commune, grew up with subtly different values.

I think that was one of the major failings of the commune. I know it would have been a struggle for the adults to work this out, but I think it was poor shared parenting by the adults on this point. And I think the adults should really have done the work to iron it out. A brief Feelings Meeting or two could not begin to solve this kind of issue.

And as a result of this adult failure, some of the Birchwood kids ended up deprived academically.

My brother and I did not. My mom sent me and him to a local primary school. I was well taught there, but it was surely a shock to go from a society where I had freedom and was respected as a full human being to one where I had to ask to go to the toilet. I could hardly believe it.

And the pupils from town didn't understand the concept of the commune. To them I just seemed freaky. I gave a party at the commune one time, and no one from town turned up. I was teased for living like I did and I was teased for being brown and of mixed race. – It was quite painful.

Later, when I went to secondary school, I decided I was not going to be teased any more. I punched the face of the first boy who called me a name and made his lip bleed. I became a champion for myself and anyone else who was being picked on. The result was that I ended up being suspended from school three times and suddenly I became cool. I made a lot of friends who admired my spirit and the fact that I insisted on respect for everyone. My new friends loved to visit me at the commune and hide out all night away from their more conventional families and friends..

At 16, my life at the commune ended. My mom and I moved to a cottage in town. I had had a great time at the commune, but I liked us living our own little house too. It was neater. We had some pretty china.

I have a gift for singing, and after we moved I got accepted at the Birmingham Conservatory. I found I hated it though. In stark contrast to the commune, the Conservatoire people created an incredibly harsh competitive atmosphere pitting students against each other and against their own beings. It nearly destroyed my love of music. I dropped out after a year, and haven't sung much since.

But I have found another love in life. After all the food raising and prep I did on the commune, I found I love restaurants. After the Conservatory, I moved to London, and lived with my dad for a while. I got a job as a waitress. Several years along I opened up my own gastro-pub which is organic and run on ethical and sustainable principles – kind of combining my commune life and the regular world. Now, my partner, Paul and I and our daughter, Mabel, divide our time between two little houses - one in London and one in Wales. I don't live on a commune anymore, but I still believe strongly in community. We know our neighbors and our pub is a great place for getting together with people and holding neighborhood conversations.

Living on a commune was an amazing way for me to grow up. As a child I became aware of how hard we all have to work to do our common chores, keep our relationships healthy and still make lots of room for fun together. We all need to do those things whether we live on an actual commune or not.

The commune showed me how life really works, and I respect what I learned enormously. Community does not happen by chance. It takes a great deal of thought and effort. But when we work to create it, community empowers us to shape our own lives. Life, then, doesn't just happen to us. We create it together.

So I don't live on a commune now, but I work for community among inter-dependent neighbors right where I live. It's not quite as intense as the commune and I don't have to sacrifice quite as much of my stubborn notion that things should be neat and pretty and run exactly my way.

Still, my time at Birchwood has impressed on my soul the truth that we all truly do live together on this earth. And if we don't live in healthy community, we will, with certainty, die in isolation and spoil the whole human project and our planet along with it." END OF STORY.

"If we don't live in healthy community, we will, with certainty, die in isolation and spoil the whole human project and our planet along with it."

In *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, that is Parker Palmer's point exactly.

Without healthy community, the power of our isolated ego, our fear and our greed runs rampant. The world gets taken over by corporations that, by law, are charged with focusing only on the bottom line. Human need and the needs of the planet are ignored.

To save democracy and even to save little organizations like our fellowship, we have to develop the habit of getting out of our own narrow worlds and create shared worlds together.

When we do, there is a richness that feeds our souls – like the meals and the woods and the delightful play and companionship of Birchwood fed Geetie's soul. And there's a lot of work we have to do too – both in terms of community chores and relationship building.

That's what the colored handout today is about. The handout is not perfect. I am sure there are things that I've left out. But on one side – the hand out speaks of some of the ways the community of this Fellowship feeds our soul and the souls of other people.

On the other side, the hand out speaks of areas of operation for the Fellowship. And together, since we own this Fellowship, its successful operation depends on us each doing our chores.

Your ministry in an area or two of this operation is needed. Our singers need to sing. Our teachers need to teach. Our counters need to count. Our cooks need to cook. The health of our shared life depends on each of us doing our part.

But more than that too. Our shared health, and our individual health also depend on us learning to do our parts together. – Setting our communal rules and boundaries carefully – and honoring them with both dedication and good will.

Community does not happen by accident. Whether we live on a commune or in a neighborhood or out on farms where we get together with one another at the Grange – community requires intentional work and commitment from you and me over time.

From listening to her story – I can tell how hard Geetie Singh has worked and continues to work on community. I am sure she does not hit other people in the lip any more – but I am sure she still is a spirited advocate for her own humanity and for the humanity of everyone.

And I can tell this Fellowship has worked very hard on creating community too.

Like the Birchwood Commune, I know this community is not perfect. But the beautiful grounds and building, the long-lasting relationships you engender, your caring circle, the congregation's support of the Humboldt Mediation Services, the amazing Halloween Festival you give to the children of this community, your support of social justice, your support of religious education and spiritual growth for children and adults - not to mention really fine potlucks – all point to a really strong habit you have of connecting to one another, doing your chores and creating community.

One of the three major Ends for which this congregation labors is to help people foster a cooperative, open, diverse, supportive religious community.

And in your Covenant you say that you hope this Fellowship will be a model for how community might be realized in the world.

That is no small undertaking is it? But according to Parker Palmer that's what we're going to have to do if we hope to heal the heart of democracy.

So I think Parker Palmer would appreciate what we're up to here. I think Geetie Singh would like this community too.

I know Edie and I really feel lucky to be with you and to be part of the effort. So onward – and as folks say in Spanish – Vale la pena! De veras! Vale la pena! – It's worth the effort. Really. It's worth every bit of effort we can put into it.

PLEASE STAND AND JOIN ME NOW IN SINGING #323 – Break Not the Circle

Closing Words and Closing Song

The Closing Song today will be “Gonna Keep on Walkin’ Forward.

These Closing Words come from Margaret Meade

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has or ever will.

Song – Gonna Keep on Walkin Forward...
Build Fellowship Together...