

On Community



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If love is the reason to be alive (see On Love) but what we experience is not actually real (see On Reality) and there are hidden spiritual forces in the world (see On Spirituality) and loving ourselves is difficult (See On Loving Ourselves) how can we possibly overcome these obstacles to live a full and happy life? How can we change from what we are into what we have faith we may become? The answer is with the help of others. It is in community we are able to love and learn what love is. It is in community we may become more aware of what reality actually is. And it is in community we come to share, deepen and experience our spirituality.

We are unable to change ourselves by ourselves. Indeed our own view of ourselves is less accurate than the view those close to us have of us. The way others see us is often more loving and more realistic than our own view of ourselves. A number of years ago when I was in training to become a psychiatrist I was working as a resident at a nearby hospital. A resident is a young doctor who has graduated from medical school, usually is licensed to practice medicine but is undergoing intensive training in his or her chosen specialty. The term resident was created many years ago when young doctors actually lived at the hospitals and thus were called residents or resident doctors at the hospital.

During my third year of residency training I became ill with viral meningitis which is a serious illness characterized by high fever, nausea, vomiting and a severe headache. There is no specific treatment but most otherwise healthy people eventually recover. I went to the emergency room for a definitive evaluation. An attending neurologist (attending meaning the doctor was no longer in training) diagnosed my condition by doing a spinal tap. The doctor removed some fluid from around my spinal cord inside the bones in my back. The tests on the fluid showed I had viral meningitis. The doctor said I should come into the hospital. I did not want to be admitted to the hospital. I wanted to go home knowing and believing there wasn't much they could do for me in the hospital. So over the doctor's mild objections I went home. The doctor told me to "call when you change your mind."

I was living in a home with three housemates. When I returned home and went to bed they set up a vigil having someone watch me 24 hours a day. I was very ill. My housemates were concerned I might die. I could not keep anything in my stomach. After about one or two days, I lost track of time and would drift in and out of consciousness. On day two – as I remember it – my housemates along with a very close friend all came into my room and told me either I was going to the hospital or they were going to probate me! Probating me would remove my right to make decisions about myself until after a court hearing. I told them they did not need to probate

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me and asked one of them to call the doctor who had diagnosed me to arrange for my hospitalization. I was too ill to make the call.

Once I was at the hospital I was started on intravenous fluids to replace all the water I had lost since I had not been able to drink anything. I had become severely dehydrated due to not being able to keep anything in my stomach. I also could only sleep a few hours at a time due to being dehydrated. I fell asleep within an hour of receiving fluids intravenously and woke up 24 hours later! The IV fluids, not available at home, had dramatically improved my condition. I felt almost miraculously better.

After another day at the hospital I was discharged to home. I wanted to return to work. My fellow residents refused to allow me to return to work even though this meant they would have to cover my responsibilities and take my night call. They told me, "Jim you just got out of the hospital. You need to rest at least this week before we will even consider letting you return to work." I rested and returned to work the following week almost fully recovered.

From this experience I learned several crucial lessons I have followed since then. First I realized the people around me truly loved me. They went to great lengths to watch me, nurture me and provide for my complete and successful recovery. I learned when I was the one who was seriously ill I was not in a position to make any decisions about my care. I learned fear could disrupt my love for myself and cause me to make bad decisions for me. My decisions are irrational and emotionally driven when I am the one who is ill. Thus I cannot trust my judgment regarding myself! I learned there are clearly situations in my life where I cannot make good decisions about what I need. I learned my reality is so impaired at times I need to rely on others to tell me what to do. There is a saying, "A doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient." I would only expand this statement to "Anyone who tries to treat themselves has a fool for a patient!"

Since each of us is so extensively subjectively personally involved in our own lives and our own selves we each can *infinitely* distort what is happening to us. None of us perceive reality. We experience what we expect to experience always based on whatever has happened to us before. It is always a miracle when we experience something new. As a therapist, psychoanalyst and person of faith it is always miraculous to me when a patient "discovers" a new reality, a new way of *unconsciously* understanding what is happening to them that results in a profoundly life changing new reality for them. Even though I may have suggested to a patient he or she considers a different point of view it is when the suggestion becomes hers or his that it has been incorporated into their unconscious interpretation of experience. The Course in Miracles calls a miracle a change in the point of view of what a person experiences. And it acknowledges this is under the control of the individual to choose to change their faith or continue with his or her prior experience.

Since we individually can create whatever reality we want, it is only in community any of us are safe. At any given moment, such as when I was ill, our personal judgment may be so impaired that we make dangerous decisions. We also frequently make seriously incorrect decisions about our lives and our relationships when we only trust our personal judgment to make these decisions. A carefully thoughtfully chosen community can help stabilize our lives and keep us

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on track in our efforts to continue to grow. It is community that supports us, nurtures us, and can keep us on a course of trying to discover what is truly real. Without community we are hopelessly self-referential. We believe what we believe without external testing that could reveal our errors. Since none of us have the whole truth, all of us only have a small part of the truth and the rest of what we believe is delusional no less distorted than a psychotic person who believes something no reasonable person would accept.

I knew a woman who was a long-term patient at a state mental hospital who believed small children were being used to make clones of Ronald Reagan! I never could determine if she had seen the movie Boys from Brazil where the Nazis were trying to do exactly that with Hitler. In that fictitious movie the Nazis were trying to make clones of Hitler using small children. This woman had murdered her husband hours after her psychiatrist had warned him she was homicidal towards him and not to have any guns in the home. He ignored the psychiatrist's advice. She also had eerily white eyebrows and was cold as ice emotionally. It was unlikely she had been abused as a child. Her siblings said she was strange from the beginning. She clearly had no use for what anyone else thought about anything. At the very least she suffered from malignant narcissism – the belief a part of oneself is superior to all other people and is also right about everything it thinks. Her technical diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia. It is a diagnosis I have seen used incorrectly more often than any other by mental health professionals. This opinion is not just mine. Repeated research has confirmed minorities are incorrectly diagnosed as being paranoid schizophrenic when the correct diagnosis was major depression. Malignant narcissism is totally self-referential. It believes a part of one's self is the highest infallible power in the universe. It also believes no one else has this power. People who have malignant narcissism kill themselves and sometimes other people too. The Nazis had malignant narcissism. Anyone or any group who acts as though they are *certain* he or she has the truth and others have either irrelevant truth or no truth are also suffering under the delusion of malignant narcissism. It is very difficult to treat.

Alcoholics Anonymous is absolutely correct when it recognizes the first step to recovery from alcoholism is to accept there exists a power higher than one's own self. It is in community this higher power may be discovered. When someone is unable to acknowledge their point of view may be mistaken they have set up their point of view as the highest power in their life. This makes it very difficult for the person to change to a different point of view that may be more real, happier, more loving and more successful for everyone. Each of us must acknowledge in some way a part of ourselves is always lost and needs the help of powers outside of ourselves in order to be found or helped. We must embrace fully the belief we need to change for change to be possible. Sometimes in therapy a patient will notice they have changed significantly over the past few months or few years and then say but it probably was not due to therapy, "I just grew up." To which I usually reply, "Do they know of others in their life who just grew up without support or change of others or are they still the same way they were before?" The patient usually becomes immediately aware others they know still appear to be the same way they were before unless they too have been making specific efforts to change.

If we wish to learn to play golf better we need help from other golfers and preferable from a professional golfer. It is in the community of golfers we too become better golfers. In a similar manner if we wish to develop a deeper more effective way to experience our spirituality and our

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love we need to join the community of people who have the same goals and are at different places in their journey. In the process of learning we teach and in the process of teaching we learn. We often learn as much from those we teach as we learn from our teachers. Alone we have great difficulty learning anything.

As said earlier, we best love ourselves through the people around us. It is out of commitment to those around us we are often able to achieve goals that otherwise we never could or would. I love tennis. Wimbledon is considered the Super Bowl of tennis to most players. For years I have had an annual party for the Wimbledon final. The party motivates me to get my house cleaned up and to get small projects finished that may otherwise go undone. As the time for the party approaches my stress level does increase but I am always happy afterwards the party went well and my home is more orderly for a while. Although this is in some ways a silly example, without a commitment to community we are left up to our own impulses that frequently overwhelm many of us. This results in feelings of failure, emptiness and loneliness.

To me it is a miracle several hundred people drag themselves out of bed every Sunday morning to attend the church service I go to. The attendance is totally voluntary. For the people who attend it is a joyful and loving celebration of our relationships to each other and to the spirituality that each of us holds. There is excitement and energy motivating me for the rest of the day and into the following week.

Through the community of our close friends and loving relatives, the members of the specialized smaller groups we may belong to – such as other tennis players or other animal lovers - and the large group experience of sharing a mutual activity on a regular basis such as attending church or even attending large sporting events, we are energized, encouraged and enriched in our efforts to grow in spirituality and in love.

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