

Mental Illness and Spiritual Health (Gary)

Community is hard to define but I know it when I see it. In a real community, people are more important than possessions. History is tangible, like an old apple tree that's weathered storms but still sends out shoots each spring. Celebrations are shared. The sick and wounded are cared for, not abandoned. Crises may come and crises may go but relationships endure.

I see the evidence of community all around me in Vermont. It was in the news last winter, for example, in the town of Ferrisburg, a rural village of about two thousand souls where dairy cows may still outnumber the human population. When I visited there last week, I passed by the rather touristy Dakin Farm selling maple syrup and cob-smoked ham and stopped at the town clerk's, just a block south of the Methodist Church that was serving a chicken pie supper that night.

I stopped to learn more about the old Grange Hall that once occupied the hub of community. It's gone now. Just a rough stone foundation remains. The white, clapboard building had originally been constructed in 1868 as a Congregational Church until the farm association took it over in the forties. The old pews were still in the building, where residents sat at town meeting each March, debating the budget for the students who attend elementary school next door and occasionally arguing over bigger issues like the condominium complex that was turned away after threatening to turn the little hamlet into another Hinesburg or Charlotte. The hundred-and-thirty-nine year old meetinghouse was scheduled for a make-over, slated to become a spanking new town office and community center. And most of the grants and other funding was already in place for the million dollar project when the structure went up in smoke in the middle of February, 2005.

It was arson, one of a string of burnings that panicked townspeople for roughly thirty-six hours, starting the night of the fifteenth. First there was Jim Danyow's barn on Hawkins Road. Someone used a barbecue grill starter to set ten thousand bales of hay ablaze. Then there was the Grange itself, where the perpetrator pushed open a window to gain entry, igniting a pile of old wreaths and cardboard left over from the holidays with a cigarette lighter. The next night another barn was turned to ashes on Sand Road along with a collection of antique tractors housed inside, which supplied the diesel fuel used to set the fire.

That last barn belonged to sixty-two year old James Husk, who'd disappeared from his home in Vergennes a few days earlier after a long series of rantings about the government closing in on him. He was the real article, a hardworking farmer and occasionally hard drinking good old boy who not only bought and restored old tractors but organized Antique Tractor pulls around Addison County, a fixture in the neighborhood who was never happier than when riding full speed aboard an internal combustion engine. Husk had been on a three-wheeled ATV when the vehicle overturned, striking him in the head with enough impact to put a permanent dent in his skull and send him into a temporary coma. After undergoing brain surgery and finally

being released from Fletcher Allen, Husk's personality seemed to change. His partner Carol Morris described him as confused and paranoid, while police said he became "distracted over personal issues," "obsessed with financial and tax problems" and convinced that the "IRS was watching him."

When I talked with James Husk's brother, he said the town had been about ready to hang whoever started the fires. There was that much rage, mixed with a good bit of fear. When they speculated about the culprit, people's minds turned to terrorists or other outsiders, threats emanating from beyond the borders of their own locality. The select board put up a cash reward for the arsonist's arrest. When James Husk confessed to the crimes, according to one of the town fathers, the anger "just one hundred percent evaporated." Attitudes shifted. People still felt sad and a little bewildered, but wondered how they could help. After being evaluated by the court psychiatrists and a brief stay at Waterbury, Mr. Husk was found to be mentally ill and incompetent to stand trial. Now, a year and half later, with the help of medication, Husk is back at work for Jim Danyow, his friend and former employer whose barn was the first to be torched, free from state supervision and once more an accepted member of the community.

Healthy communities are like families that take care of their own, including those who are injured or disabled: the way Ferrisburg took care of James Husk. But because so few of us live in small towns any longer, most Americans have to create their own small scale networks where authentic relationships can flourish. For many, religious communities form the extended families that reach out in times of need. Clinical evidence that being involved in a church or synagogue leads to better physical and mental health is mounting, and it doesn't take a long search of the internet to find studies pointing to a connection between spirituality and well-being. Religious commitment significantly reduces the risk of suicide among teens, for example. For seniors, the difference between attending church and not attending church is like the difference between driving with a seat-belt or without a seat-belt in terms of predicting overall life expectancy. Duke University researchers found that for the elderly having an active religious affiliation cuts the risk of depression by about half. People who say they worship regularly report higher levels of happiness and general satisfaction with their work and home life than those who lack a faith connection. And so on. The results shouldn't surprise us. We've known most of this for a long, long time.

In the gospels, we're told that Jesus had an encounter with a demoniac, or as professionals would evaluate him now, a man in the grip of severe mental disorder. He lived naked among the tombs, more ghost than living soul, isolated from his fellows who had tried to bind him with chains and fetters. With frenzied strength, the man broke every bond with which he was tied. Now people simply kept away, though they couldn't shut out his howling, for "night and day among the tombs and on the mountains," says Mark, "he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones." Jesus talks to the man, asks him his name. It's a disarming gesture. I imagine it's the first genuinely human interaction the psychotic man has experienced in a very long time. Instead of hunting him down with ropes and snares, Jesus shows an interest in learning more

about his personal story. And I like to imagine that he's frank and candid in his approach: "Hey, would you please stop hitting yourself with the stones? You're really weirding me out!" Of course all of this is dressed in archaic garb, with unclean spirits and all the other trappings of first century psychiatry. But we're told that after their conversation, folks found the two men sitting quietly together, the demoniac clothed instead of naked and once more in his right mind. And I have little doubt that such seeming miracles happened, as they still happen minus the exorcisms and such, individuals restored to their senses by being restored to their humanity and treated with simple courtesy and respect. In and through community, healing happens.

Our congregation is a community mental health center, all the more effective because we aren't a community mental health center. There are no insurance forms you have to complete here and no co-payments required. There are no counselors or clinicians on the staff and no clients or patients in the pews, only people trying to hang on to their sanity and maintain a bit of composure in a fairly crazy world, struggling some days more than others. You know and I know that there are members of our Society here this morning suffering from depression, others with bipolar personalities and eating disorders, some who experience panic attacks and quite a few recovering alcoholics. Among those who aren't certifiably ill there are a multitude afflicted with the situational stressors of grief or divorce or unemployment or unpaid debt. I could probably even name names without breaking any confidences because for the most part these people are known to us all. They're our sons and daughters, our parents and partners, our fellow committee members and companions in small group ministry. There's no firm line separating those of sound mind or able body from the infirm, because to varying degrees we are all in need of bucking up. Yet the good news is we have company. We're in this together.

As we affirmed in our reading this morning, we need one another when we mourn and would be comforted. We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid. We need one another when we are in despair. All our lives we are in need, and others are need of us.

Yet the sad fact, too, is that we fail each other. We turn away, particularly from those who seem too needy or whose behavior seems bizarre or erratic. Our communities don't always do their job. Vermont, for example, which prides itself on its tolerance and compassion for the less fortunate, recently received a grade of C- on a report card issued by NAMI, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, based on incidents like these over the last few years:

In 2001, Robert Woodward was shot seven times by police after he entered the Unitarian Church in Brattleboro seeking sanctuary in a confused state of mind.

Two years ago, Vermont Teddy Bear promoted its "Crazy About You" bear for Valentines, complete with straight jacket and commitment papers.

That same year, the U.S. Department of Justice de-certified our state hospital in

Waterbury in a report that called the conditions there “prison-like” and “dehumanizing.”

And to this day, hundreds of the emotionally disturbed remain incarcerated in Springfield’s F Unit and other state prisons, locked up rather than supported by communities that would rather have the mentally ill out of sight and out of mind.

Jail is obviously not the right solution. Warehousing people in Waterbury is wrong also. But the harder question is: what is the right thing in cases like these? This may actually be one of those rare situations where it’s useful to ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” Or the Buddha, or Mother Teresa. Or as I sometimes ask myself, “What would Roddy do?” That was probably what was going through my mind when I invited Joyce over for the night not too long ago. She showed up at one of our Board meeting in the parlors, asking if the church could spare \$50 for a hotel room for the night, a nicely dressed African American woman in her mid-fifties. Joyce told me a convincing story about how she happened to be a tourist in a strange city without money, and it was only later, after I’d offered to put her up in our guest room, that I noticed her story kept changing, that Joyce seemed to fully believe all the different versions of her yarn, and that Joyce kept talking either to herself or other unseen spirits. The next morning, after Joyce was gone, we found all the mirrors in the room covered over with sheets and towels and bottles of water placed on every piece of furniture. In retrospect, I probably wouldn’t take Joyce home again; she was just too delusional. But I can understand why she landed at our church door at 9:00 in the evening, all alone with no place to go. Because churches and synagogues and other temples and tabernacles are intended to be the place of refuge and last resort, where anyone can go with all of their troubles and find a humane response.

That’s part of my vision of what it means to be “an intentionally inclusive faith community.” And although I know we often fall short of that vision, the fact is that we sometimes succeed, like Ferrisburg and other small towns sometimes succeed in being there for each other. The day I visited last week, for example, a dance was being planned to raise the roof of a new Grange Hall. And alongside the bare foundation, there’s a sign for the construction company with a contract to begin the work. In a sense, the hard work has already been done. The anger and resentment that first flared have long since burned away and been carried off with the ashes. Relationships have been repaired and rebuilt. And while the old building that was the town center is gone now, the moral and spiritual center is holding firm.

May it be so with us.

