

**Chris Glaser Presentations
Georgia Winter Institute 2014
Columbus, GA**

**Taking Refuge in Community
Opening Day Wrap-Up
Chris Glaser
GWI 2014 - June 26, 2014**

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Rev. Chris Glaser blogs free weekly “Progressive Christian Reflections” at <http://chrisglaser.blogspot.com>. He is the author of twelve books. For more on him and his books, please visit <http://chrisglaser.com> .

My name is Chris Glaser, and I am a writer and blogger and speaker and workshop and retreat leader and minister who tries to encourage people to discern and cultivate their own spiritualities—and by that I mean, whatever gets us out of bed in the morning, whatever values prompts us to be here.

My role in this gathering is to help us reflect on what we have experienced as we close the day with our affinity groups. At the end of our time together, I will also offer the closing keynote that will lead us into a conversation about our next steps.

We gather tonight as a community of circumstance and of concern, but many of us hope that we leave here as a more intentional community—finding common ground, sharing ideas and resources and contacts, and networking in such a way that we remain in touch, in relationship, in community.

A few years ago I was privileged to sit at the feet of the founder of a Buddhist sangha in San Francisco, as he described the meaning of community to him. Some of you might know that “sangha” means “community,” in this context, “spiritual community.” In his dharma talk, Ji-Sing began a segment with, “I take refuge in the sangha.” But then he added, “The sangha takes refuge in me.”

I was very moved by this. This is intentional community at its best, for each of us to recognize, “I take refuge in this community.” But also, “This community takes refuge in me.” The communities of which we are a part are only as good and strong as this mutual benefit. As community we may offer sanctuary or refuge to each of its members. And yet each of its members may offer sanctuary, a refuge, a place in our own hearts and lives to a community. We may take a community to heart, preserving, protecting, and providing for it as we would our homes and families and friends.

That, hopefully, is why we have gathered together as the Georgia Winter Institute, to take refuge in this community, surely, but also to allow the community we see around us to take refuge within each of us. Sangha comes from the ancient language Sanskrit word

which means “come in contact together.” These few days we will “come in contact together” and hopefully we will never be the same.

As tonight’s “opening ceremonies” come to a close, I invite you overnight to consider not only what you hope to gain from the Georgia Winter Institute but also what you bring to this gathering. Consider the story you have to tell as much as the questions you might like to ask. And I encourage us all—myself included—to be as involved as possible to both gain and give as much as possible to this assembly. For introverts like me, we may hit our pillows at night exhausted and drained, while the extroverts among us may feel energized and empowered, and those of us in between may feel a little of both.

I’d like to offer some practical guidance from my own spiritual tradition that may help us engage as a community: Greet strangers. Love your neighbor. Do not judge. Don’t be anxious. Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Be gracious. Avoid anger. Forgive. Don’t shut others out. Don’t place burdens on others. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Be compassionate.

Part of what I have to offer is that my professor, friend, and spiritual guide, Henri Nouwen, author of 50 books on the spiritual life, spent the last ten years of his life as chaplain of Daybreak, the twelve households that make up the L’Arche community of Toronto and Richmond Hill in Ontario, Canada. Many of you know that L’Arche—French for the Ark—is an intentional, ecumenical, international community built around adults with disabilities, who are the core members, the heart of the community.

In one of his books, Henri tells the story of Trevor, a L’Arche core member who had temporarily been placed in a hospital. Making arrangements to visit Trevor there over lunch, he was asked if a few of the staff could join them, wanting to meet Henri, the famous author. Not thinking about the implications, Henri agreed, only to find a large gathering of staff, doctors, and others ready to have lunch with him in the Golden Room. When he asked about Trevor, they explained that patients were never allowed in the Golden Room; he could see Trevor after lunch, he was told.

Henri asserted himself, explaining he had come to have lunch with Trevor, and if Trevor could not come into the Golden Room they would go elsewhere. After much deliberation among “the powers that be,” they allowed as to how an exception could be made and Trevor would be allowed to join them. Trevor brought Henri wildflowers he had picked from the grounds, and once all 25 were assembled in the Golden Room and food and drink served, the group settled into polite conversation.

At this point, Trevor suddenly rose to his feet and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, a toast! Lift your glasses!” You could palpably feel the consternation among the doctors and staff—what’s this patient going to do? And Trevor started singing, “When you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass. When you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass! When you’re happy and you know it, when you’re happy and you know it, when you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass!” The solemn crowd was transformed into a smiling, friendlier group that rose to join Trevor in singing “When you’re happy and you know it.”

So, ladies and gentleman, a toast to this gathering! Please lift your glasses and sing with me, “When you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass. When you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass! When you’re happy and you know it, when you’re happy and you know it, when you’re happy and you know it, raise your glass!”

Creating Community: “The Feeling Is Mutual”

10 Ways to Make Community Work

Chris Glaser

GWJ 2014 - January 29, 2014

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Henri Nouwen, the author of more than 50 books on the spiritual life once quipped, “Community is the place where the one person you don’t want to be with always lives!” And it’s true. It’s a challenge to live in or be a part of a community. It sometimes requires encountering and engaging people you might have otherwise avoided. But it also requires encountering and engaging yourself—knowing and challenging yourself, including the parts about yourself you’d prefer to avoid.

Henri Nouwen’s ultimate experience of community came when he discerned a call to serve the final ten years of his life as chaplain of Daybreak, twelve households in Toronto and nearby Richmond Hill in Ontario, Canada. As I mentioned on our opening night, Daybreak is part of an international, ecumenical, and intentional community called L’Arche—The Ark—built around adults with intellectual and often physical disabilities. Those with disabilities are considered L’Arche’s **core** members—that is, the core or heart of the community—and they share a common family life with assistants, mutually enabled to live fulfilling and productive lives. Let me stress that: the core members and the assistants are *mutually* enabled to live fulfilling and productive lives.

The first way of making community work is mutuality—this is the best way, in my view, to avoid burnout, paternalism, false expectations, and indebtedness. The irony was not lost on Henri that it took a community built around disabilities to teach him, not only his own disabilities, but how to be fully embodied, how to be fully present—what Buddhists call mindfulness. In one of his final books, *The Inner Voice of Love*, Nouwen wrote about the need for his spirituality to become fully embodied, to be “truly incarnational.”

The best book I’ve ever read on helping others is Ram Dass and Paul Gorman’s book entitled *How Can I Help?* They travelled the country, taking down first person narratives of people who find themselves helping. And here is their summary of what they found. They write:

“To the question, ‘How Can I Help?’ we now see the possibility of a deeper answer than we might once have expected. We can, of course, help through all that we *do*. But at the deepest level we help through who we *are*. We help, that is, by appreciating the connection between service and our own progress on the journey of awakening into a fuller sense of unity. *We work on ourselves, then, in order to help others. And we help others as a vehicle for working on ourselves.*”

The authors multiply illustrate this insight, but the most poignant illustration for me comes in the final chapter entitled “Walking Each Other Home.” In first person, an elderly Jewish woman talks about the young man who walks her home, and, also in first person, the young man—an ex-offender and ex-drug addict—talks about the senior center where he tends to the elderly. First, the old woman says:

I don't know what he sees in me, to be so nice. All I know, he walks me home. We talk and joke. I learn things about how things are in the world now, which I don't know much anymore. And I don't get the feeling that I'm just a little old Jewish lady. You think that's nothing? You know how many other people I don't feel like a little old lady with? None. Nobody. That's the truth. How's that?

And then the young man tells his side of walking her home:

Try to shake having been a junkie and done time, man. Everywhere you go, you get that. That's who you are. But this woman, it's like she doesn't care. She says she had a hard life too, maybe that's it. I told her how I robbed things. I told her about jail. She says, “Your mother must have been very upset. Let's get groceries. You have time to do that?” Nobody ever treated me like I had anything to give. Just to take. So that's all I ever did. Take.

Mutuality—*give and take*—is the first way of making community. As Ram Dass and Paul Gorman conclude, “We can, of course, help through all that we *do*. But at the deepest level we help through who we *are*.” Good questions to ask ourselves when we choose to be part of a community is “Who are we?” and “Who might we become?”

My friend and spiritual guide Henri Nouwen was welcomed at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard *for what he did*, his credentials as an author and professor on religion, psychology, and spirituality. But he was welcomed by L'Arche *for who he was*. The core members of L'Arche had never and would never read any of Henri's dozens and dozens of books on the spiritual life. They welcomed Henri for who he was, not what he achieved. As I've written on my blog, I believe that each of us, while wanting our achievements welcomed, would most of all prefer to be welcomed for *who we are*. That's why family and home and community are such important ideals to us: places not simply where they *have* to take you in, but places where they *want* to take you in.

That, I believe, could be ***the second way to make community work: welcome people for who they are.***

The lesson of L'Arche for Henri was, that the most marginalized among us are often the ones who call us to community. L'Arche is built around people with disabilities; it would not otherwise exist as a community. In archaeological circles, the very concept of “civilization” has been defined by a community’s willingness to watch out for its members with disabilities. I think we can use the same standard for discerning true community. We are a true community when we fully welcome those with differences and disabilities.

Years ago I served as a speaker at a gathering of people living with HIV and AIDS, their families and friends and their volunteer and professional caregivers near Detroit. I have no memory of what I said to them. I absolutely remember *what they “said” to me*. As we helped them carry all their medical paraphernalia from their cars into their rooms at the retreat center—their IV drip bottles and tubes, their medicines, breathing machines, and various pieces of special equipment—all I could think of was how determined they were to participate in this event, to be part of the community. And by contrast, I thought about how many people pass up on going on retreats or building community simply because its “inconvenient.” I also noted that their shared concern overcame barriers of race, religion, gender, sexuality, and class, much as we have experienced here this week. They became a true community because of a shared passion that overlooked their own limitations and differences.

In the business of buying and selling properties, real estate agents will tell you that what’s key is “location, location, location!” But to welcome people for who they are, we’ve been reminded this week that what’s key is “accessibility, accessibility, accessibility!” And we’re not talking just ramps and signers, or access to opportunities and influence, as vitally necessary as these are. In the business of building community, we each need to be *personally* accessible and available. Eye contact, touch that is welcome, intentional listening, mindfulness, friendliness—this is what has knit our community together these last few days. But we’ve also learned we must share ourselves as well. Many of us prefer the attention to be on the other person, but to be truly accessible is to share our own feelings, our insights, our hopes and concerns. Woody Allen once quipped that 90% of life is just showing up. By being present to one another these several days, we have helped create the life of this community. ***Our third way we have made community work is by being accessible to one another.***

The Georgia Winter Institute of 2014—all of us, each of us—have been building community around mutuality and welcoming people for who they are, not just for what we do, and not just for what we can or cannot do. And we have done so by making not only the conference accessible, but by making ourselves accessible and available to one another. To make this community work, we have encouraged storytelling, so people may know who we are. ***The fourth way of making community work has been by transforming our personal challenges and joys into a story that may help others.***

We’ve all been part of communities in which one participant created a huge sucking sound, needing attention, needing to dominate, failing to play well with others. I suggest that to play well with others, to allow the community to take refuge in me as I described

in the opening night's wrap up, I must not demand that my community take my challenges away or be my sole source of healing or fulfillment—rather I must do my own spiritual and emotional work. A way to do that is by attending to my own story, reflecting on it in such a way as to be able tell my own story, but also to tell it in a way that may be helpful to others. Renowned psychologist Carl Rogers held that what is personal is most universal, and so we may find in our own stories universal themes that may speak to others. We have made community this week by offering our unique life stories to benefit others.

Community is often formed around a *shared* story, a *common* history. But in the absence of a shared story or common history, community is best formed around sharing our very different stories. That's what we've been doing these past few days, not only offering our own stories, but listening to the stories of others. ***Hospitality, our fifth way of creating community, is creating the friendly space where others may tell their stories***, where others may offer their gifts and their troubles. Hospitality suggests a guest and a host, and we may play both roles for one another. The guest may be a stranger, a child, an elder, a student, a patient, a veteran—the list is endless. The host may be a neighbor, a parent, a friend, a teacher, a doctor, another veteran—again, the list could go on and on.

Hospitality is also creating a friendly space where another can simply “be.” A friend who was a counselor of children was assigned a child by the courts for therapy. Each visit, the child would not say a word, instead walking around the office, looking at things, occasionally picking them up for closer inspection. After several visits in silence, the frustrated therapist explained he was going to have to transfer the child to a different therapist. Very upset, the child declared, “But I like coming here!” Surprised, the counselor asked him why, when he never said anything during their sessions. The boy replied, “Because you're the only adult who leaves me alone!”

Hospitality is an ancient spiritual practice hearkening to the days when giving sojourners shelter, water, and food in the wilderness was considered a necessity, not just a nicety. The primary spiritual practice of the first monastic communities was not prayer or study, teaching or preaching. The primary spiritual practice of the first monastic communities was hospitality to strangers. Many of us came here as strangers to one another, and hopefully as many will leave having experienced hospitality, welcomed for who we are and invited to simply be ourselves or tell our stories to one another.

Zen Buddhist Jack Kornfield tells the story of a woman from the ghetto whose son was killed in gang violence. At the trial of her son's killer, she stood up and declared, “I'm going to kill you.” When the young man was incarcerated, however, this mother came to visit him in prison, much to his surprise. They chatted casually about how things were going for him in prison, and she asked him if there was anything he could use. “Cigarettes,” he said tentatively. On her next visit, she brought him cigarettes, and she kept visiting occasionally, bringing him things from time to time. Eventually came time for his release from prison. She asked him, “What are you going to do? Do you have a job?” “No, ma'am,” he said. She explained that a relative might be able to provide him employment. “Do you have a place to stay?” she asked another time. “No, ma'am, I

don't," the young prisoner replied. "Well I have a room free at my place—you could stay there," she told him, thinking of her son's room. And so, upon his release, he came to stay with her and work for her relative. Some time later, she asked if he remembered when she stood in the courtroom and shouted, "I'm going to kill you!" His eyes widened, wondering what would come next, and he said, "Yes, ma'am, I sure do. I will never forget that!" And she responded, "Well, I did kill you. You are no longer the young man who would kill my son. You have a new life."

This is not only a story of hospitality, this is a story of forgiveness—both offering and receiving forgiveness. ***The sixth way of making community work is by offering and receiving forgiveness.*** When Nelson Mandela died last month, we were reminded of how he did not let resentment fester at the way he was treated. "Resentment," Mandela once explained, "is like taking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Writer Anne Lamott's version of this in her book *Traveling Mercies* is "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." Forgiveness may be as dramatic as the story I just told about the mother whose son was killed, but more often, the forgiveness we need to offer one another is forgiveness for our inability to be perfect, mature, or always compassionate.

Through forgiveness, transformation is possible. Think again of the mother of Jack Kornfield's story. Her ability to forgive and offer hospitality to her son's killer meant he was no longer the same man he had been, and she was no longer the same woman bent on vengeance. We recognize the fruit of forgiveness, which becomes ***a seventh opportunity of community: transformation. Transformation of the individual as well as transformation of the community.*** Having come to this event, having participated in all that's happened, we leave as different people who will return to communities that will change as a result, if ever so slightly.

Communities change from the inside out. I was leading a retreat on the spiritual life, the inner life, when two participants offered remarkable observations. One, a physical therapist, said that wounds heal from the inside out. The other, a potter, said that, when working with clay on a potter's wheel, the shape of the inside of the bowl determines the shape of the outside. I would say our communities also heal from the inside out, and that the shape of our community is determined by the shape of the individuals within it. As we are transformed, our communities will be transformed.

The Georgia Winter Institute's mission is stated in one sentence: The Georgia Winter Institute connects people with and without disabilities to work together to nurture and use our gifts to strengthen community bonds. ***The eighth way of making community is by proclaiming and modeling a vision to the world*** such as this. I mentioned earlier that the primary purpose of early monastic communities was to provide hospitality to strangers. But they were also intended to proclaim and model a vision of hospitality to the world. Writing of this vision and mission of these spiritual communities, Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote: "Society...was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single individual had to swim for [her or] his life. [They] did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a

foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them” (*The Wisdom of the Desert*, p 3 & 23).

We have gathered in this community for similar reasons. We see a world that inadequately offers welcome and hospitality to people with disabilities, whether ourselves, our friends, family members, clients, patients, neighbors, veterans, and fellow citizens. We came here to find solid ground, a community that can reach the broader world with our vision and mission. We’ve gathered tools, insights, colleagues, networks, and motivation to affect the communities to which we return.

The eighth rule of community, proclaiming and modeling a vision to the world, is really dependent on ***the ninth and tenth rules of community: gather like-minded folk to work together and draw on all available resources to accomplish one through nine!*** Otherwise we exhaust ourselves, and we are in danger of committing “egolatry,” in which our own ego alone determines what is good for our community, and this may be the ego of an individual or it may be the ego of an institution—whether a government, house of worship, school, non-profit, organization, or association. Community means we do it together. Community means we live it together. Community means we think together.

I end with another quote from Thomas Merton: “Love demands a complete inner transformation—for without this we cannot possibly come to identify ourselves with our brothers [and sisters]. We have to become, in some sense, the [community] we love. And this involves a kind of death of our own being, our own self. No matter how hard we try, we resist this death: we fight back with anger, with recriminations, with demands, with ultimatums. We seek any convenient excuse to break off and give up the difficult task.”

In the words of the Buddhist monk Ji-Sing with which I began Sunday night: I take refuge in the community. The community takes refuge in me.

Ten ways of making community work:

1. Mutuality.
2. Welcome people for who they are.
3. Be accessible to one another.
4. Transform our personal challenges and joys into a story that may help others.
5. Hospitality: create the friendly space where others may tell their stories.
6. Forgiveness.
7. Transformation of the individual and the community.
8. Proclaim and model a vision to the world.
9. Gather like-minded folk to work together.
10. Draw on all available resources to accomplish one through nine.

Questions for next steps:

What are you going to do?

Who can help you achieve your goal?

What strategy/tools will help?