

► **The Boundaries Between Community and Solitude** by Zelle Nelson

Looking out my living room window, I am lying on the couch because she is not here. I am alone, away from my community of two. The shadows of the tree branches are stark on my window, propelled by the street light, a beacon and a curse. It is the symbol of life and community outside my door.

I do not want to return to the bed this night without her to lie next to me, warm and soft against my body. In our bed there are no boundaries between us. Our bed is the one time in the day we can always find community together. It seems a cold and vast place without her sharing it with me.

The solitude of my living room is pure and inspiring, it is calling me to write, and thus re-unite with my community of two... and the communities of countless many who share my state of watchfulness.

As author Gregg Levoy writes in his book, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life* (Three Rivers Press), sometimes it is isolation from the community that allows one to give back and re-unite to our community through art, or prayer - Give back to a degree a thousand times greater than if one were to stay always connected through physical, or even cyber, space.

Sometimes it is a brief retreat, or sojourn that supplies the muse for the painter, the writer, the performer. Sometimes a whole lifetime is devoted to silence and solitude, giving back to the world through prayer or meditation as monks and nuns of many different faiths often do. Even still, some walk among their communities, seemingly never connecting, but connecting on an infinite level, like poet Emily Dickinson.

In *A Glimpse of Paradise: Monastic Space and Inner Transformation*, (from *Parabola*, Summer 1993) Wayne Teasdale describes how the outer boundaries built up by a monastery allow the inner boundaries of the soul to expand. Barring out the noises and interruptions of the outer world allows the mind and the spirit to explore the expansive reaches of our inner worlds.

Yet, both inner and outer worlds can collide, and often do. Here is where the need and function of community is most greatly felt.

I was at a workshop devoted to healing; physical, mental, and spiritual. When the leader of the workshop asked some participants to share why they were attending, a woman next to me stood up and shared some very deep emotional pieces of her life. When the woman finished she sat down and was sobbing. In a room of total strangers this woman had shared a painful piece of her heart. At first no one touched her. She and we were separated by a boundary of empty space. She was alone.

Then someone reached out and put their arm around her shoulder. Comforting this woman who had given so much by reaching out. In return, some of the tension and pain that had been bound up in the woman who chose to share was released. Community was created by two key actions: One woman chose to share a portion of what was inside her, and one woman chose to reach out her arm to someone who needed comforting. We all became a community in that moment. It only took the efforts of two people to make everyone in the room feel more connected, to let tension out, and to let love and sharing in.

Sometimes we need boundaries to explore the inner parts of who we are. It is healthy and fruitful to go on our own, behind physical or personal walls, to explore who we are and how we fit into the world around us, like artists and philosophers. Yet, if we do not return and share our inner selves in some outer form, the time spent is wasted. It is the act of crossing over boundaries to share that builds and sustains our communities and ourselves.

The way we contribute and participate in all communities is governed to a large degree by our physical, mental, and spiritual boundaries and connections. Our communities and connections are driven by the character and boundaries of the places we create and inhabit. Be it a monastery, a neighborhood, a workshop, or a home, we have the ability and the responsibility to create, uphold, and crossover boundaries while we establish the connections which grow out of the character of our places and our interactions in those places.

At this moment, sitting alone in my empty living room, I am no more a part of a community than the woman who shared at the healing workshop was when there was a boundary of empty space between her and the others in the room. I choose to honor the boundaries created, by looking inward to my soul to find these words to share. I also choose to crossover these boundaries, step out under the street light outside my door, and share these words with as many people who wish to read them.

I am lucky. My wife is only away on business. She will be back and we will re-connect — re-uniting our community of two. Still, it took the initial act of reaching out and sharing to allow us to form our community of two. The rewards are immense.

It only takes two acts to allow the greatest feelings and gifts to be uncovered. One person sharing something from the inside, and another person responding on the outside.

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