

## Perspectives

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Spiritual community has transformed my life and has been the predominant theme in it. Like many of my generation, church or religion was not interesting to me. It was not my conscious intention to build my life around it.

Now here I am with over 34 years in spiritual community, and the last eight as a minister. What is it about spiritual community that has been so transforming that I stay involved and committed to it? First of course is a commitment to a path of spiritual discovery – each tradition has a path, or a prescription for how to attain the goals of spiritual fulfillment. Even when the language of a tradition points out a negative approach, or *via negativa*, by only saying what God or the Way is not – even in the ultimate negative approach of saying that there is no goal, and no spiritual destination, there are still methods or practices prescribed. Even if the method is just sitting! Spiritual practice is at the core of spiritual community and primary to how it transforms those who become involved in it.

We stay in a community for many reasons, but to hang in over a long haul – over the changes of our life, and changes in a community, we have to find satisfaction in the main practices of that path. Perhaps we have had great moments of revelation, or realization, or comfort. Perhaps it simply becomes a way of life, and we cannot imagine life without it, but the practices of the path become primary to how we live our lives.

Then there is the experience of community itself. In many classic monastic traditions, community life is seen as a primary austerity. Having been a Vedanta monastic at the beginning of life's journey, the austerity of community life was a shock to me. I had a fantasy of monks and nuns living in peaceful quietude, each absorbed in their contemplation of God, and only sharing from a centered, realized state with each other – filled with love and kindness. The reality of the convent was shocking. Personalities were in conflict all the time. There were

rules, and hierarchies and those with entrenched positions. There was the whole play of the human family, of how we live together in tribes, in groups, in teams – in community – only intensified in a monastic setting. If you are cloistered with people there is simply no getting away from it – not even to turn on the TV! How often have I heard in the ensuing years in various spiritual communities, someone’s shock of discovering that people are still acting like people even in religious gatherings, even in communes and intentional groups! I can sympathize with the pain of discovering that one’s fantasy is far from reality. But this is when the transformative power of spiritual community can begin.

Beginning to practice various spiritual disciplines (I know, “discipline” is one of those unattractive words) as our buttons get pushed is the real stuff of transformation. Until then it is all pretty much a fantasy. How do we continue to work with people that annoy us, maybe even scare us a bit? How do we find the Christ, the Buddha or simply something lovable in them after a conflict has arisen? How do we look at our own hearts, our projections and beliefs when we discover that despite all our vast wisdom, we were wrong about someone?

Many people talk about the safety and comfort of their spiritual community. How wonderful and how valuable that is in life. But it is not my experience. Love for me is seldom safe or comfortable, and loving people in community multiplies all that. Love is heart breaking work sometimes and absolutely transformative. Noticing my broken heart, getting it broken again and again, may have been the most important thing community has ever done with or for me. Now I am authentically present, with these people, in this room, working on this project, grieving this loss, and celebrating this life, not needing it to be any different than it is in this moment. How different that is from the place I started in spiritual community, looking for a peace that is separate and apart from the world. The transformation for me has been to hang in there and discover a peace in the midst of the world, in my own broken open heart that can love despite fear.