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The Price of Being Alone

At what cost are you striving to be more alone? It is so subtle, but insidious: more wealth buys us more space to be alone. We strive to live on private lanes, with unlisted numbers, and join things that remind us only of ourselves. The last thing we want is to be thrust into the middle of a room full of people we do not know.

I will never forget the moment I left my trading desk at Cargill, Inc. in Minneapolis, in 1983, and announced to my boss and my boss's boss that I was sensing a call into ministry, that I would be leaving soon for San Jose, Costa Rica where I had plans to live with a family, learn Spanish, and help a mission organization start a church. Everyone thought I was joking, believing the real reason I was leaving was to work for the CIA. But soon, they discovered my sincerity and became enthusiastic supporters of this new chapter in my life.



After two months in Costa Rica, I found myself standing on a street corner one day in the capital city of San Jose, handing out Christian literature. I was so nervous that I had become an obnoxious, street corner evangelist and that everyone would soon shun me. But what I found, instead, was a sea of people washing over me anxious to take my literature and talk about God. I was stunned. I had thought God was a private matter that no one could address in public let alone in conversation.

Latin Americans are not like North Americans. When I was home with my Costa Rican family, often crowds of extended family members and neighbors would drop by and talk for hours. Laughter filled the rooms as everyone shared the latest story from their lives. There were no televisions, no video games. It seemed the Costa Ricans' first priority was talking, laughing, and enjoying the greatest gift of all: other people.



Central American church

When I returned to the United States and began my seminary studies, I became determined to take as many people as I could on short-term mission trips to cultures and countries other than their own. I felt I had discovered a great secret I wanted to share with the world. Therefore, for the past 25 years I have dedicated a large part of my life to leading short-term mission trips to different countries. Something beautiful and powerful always happens on each one of these trips. Often, hard charging, private-driven, type "A" personalities have melted and been transformed before my eyes, sometimes in the span of just 10 days!

I believe that at our core, we humans are built for community. Yet, so many messages in our North American culture attempt to pull us in exactly the opposite direction.

We are often led to believe that if we accumulate more wealth and independence, we will be forced to deal less with other people, especially people we do not know very well. We are driven to become more private. Yet, our private lives in the end can often wreak more havoc in our souls than anything. That is why Jesus chose to form and live in community wherever he went. He moved within community all the time alongside 12 other men and among hills full of other followers. Large sections of the Gospels are filled with his teachings and stories that encourage us to come into the light of truth, accountability, honesty, and

the beauty of community. Jesus knows that when we are alone, we are infinitely capable of telling ourselves lies that can hurt and even destroy our lives.

The great Christian writer, Henri Nouwen, once said in his little book, *Making all Things New*, that there are two essentials in the Christian life; solitude and community. We cannot survive spiritually without practicing both.



Often times, as you know, Jesus would pull away from his community in order to be alone with God. He would spend hours talking with his Father, asking for help in discerning the next challenge or mission in his life. Therefore, we need to heed that call as well, to find quality time to be alone with God our Father in retreat, meditation and prayer. But after being alone with Him, we need to return to community.

God does not want us to live mono-cultural lives. The Gospel is too vast to be captured by just one culture alone. By engaging in cross-cultural activities, friendships and partnerships, our vision of life and the Good News of Christ is significantly expanded. In fact, it is often in the midst of cross-cultural experiences that we discover new truths about ourselves and our direction in life.

Furthermore, faith is not a private matter, contrary to what so much of our North American culture tells us. Often times we are so wary of offending someone else that we steer completely clear of topics and questions related to God, theology and faith. Many times we find that in the time and place in which we live the most important facet of our lives -- our spirit -- goes unexamined and undeveloped, leaving us to wonder why we are so angry, depressed or anxious.

As a result, much of North American culture has privatized faith to the point that the Church has become marginalized and unable to play the prophetic role to which God has called it. It has become mute.

How about you? Does community scare you? Do you have enough resources on your own to avoid your God-given need for community? Do people of different color or accent make you feel uncomfortable?

Following Jesus is a high calling with considerable risk; that is why most people turn back. Jesus will take us to places that make us feel uncomfortable and even cause suffering. But often times these are the only paths that lead us toward new vistas and wisdom in our lives. Think about it -- might it be that being an active member in a community, especially one that follows Jesus, is a part of God's larger plan to save us from ourselves and the perils of a lonely and private life?