

Created for community: Out of my cave

by [Gregory A. Boyd](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

A friend once described me as “charmingly eccentric.” I’m not sure about my being charming, but I can’t deny the eccentric part. I’m not eccentric like Howard Hughes or the *Rain Man* character—just, perhaps, a wee bit short of completely normal. In fact, two experts on autism have told me I have certain “autistic characteristics.”

Weird though it may seem, while the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator lists me as an introvert, I instinctively act like an extrovert around people. I genuinely love people, and even love being around them—in limited doses. After any prolonged social interaction, however, I have to retreat into my cave (as my wife, Shelley, calls it).

When Shelley and I married in 1979 we had two major issues to work through. First, we had to negotiate how much time I spent in my cave versus how much time I spent with her. We’ve been married 30 years, and at times we still have to negotiate that one. Second, we had to negotiate how much time I spent in my cave versus how much time we as a couple spent with other people. It took a while, but this one we’ve actually resolved.

You see, like most normal people, Shelley wanted us to make friends with other couples. I was fine with this theoretically. But when it came to actually doing it, I usually resisted. The books in my cave just seemed more stimulating and less draining than actual people. But one must make sacrifices to keep a marriage working, so Shelley on occasion managed to drag me to various get-togethers.

Then a curious thing began to happen. I discovered that every now and then I actually enjoyed visiting people rather than staying in my cave. I even discovered, slowly but surely, that people could sometimes be more interesting than books—just in a different way. Over time I actually began to feel I needed to be with people. A certain vacancy in my life, which I wasn’t even aware of before, seemed to get filled when I was in close relationships with people.

Today, I can't believe how my life has changed.

For the past 16 years my wife and I have belonged to a small community of people that have become so close that I can't imagine living without them. Our community has evolved over the years, but four couples, including Shelley and myself, have consistently formed its core. We have an extended group of about 30 people, including our kids and some younger friends. Once a week, on average, our group gets together to pray, worship, minister to people in our neighborhood, go to movies, play games, go out to eat, dance or just hang out. We usually have a great time. If I may modestly say so, we're so much fun that our kids (most of whom are now young adults) often want to hang out with us.

Over the years we've laughed, cried, fought, made up, shared hopes and disappointments and grown together. We've helped raise each other's children, fixed each other's homes, worked on each other's cars and mended—and sometimes rescued—each other's marriages. We've helped each other work through personal issues as well as a vast array of relational conflicts and spiritual struggles. We've helped refine each other's politics and clarify and deepen each other's theologies, and we've grown in our commitment to radical kingdom living. When the husband in one couple lost his job, the rest of us pooled our resources to support his family for the four months it took for him to find work. At least once a year we take a weeklong vacation together. Our kids often join us.

The guys in the group are all musicians, so we formed a band that plays 1970s and '80s classic rock as well as some contemporary worship music. I'm the drummer. We're called Not Dead Yet. We're not great, but we have a lot of fun and raise a lot of money for charities.

One of the couples in our group felt called to start a ministry to impoverished children in Haiti, so we all pooled our resources to help support it. Out of this ministry several other ministries in Haiti have developed that we're also involved in. At least once a year those of us who are able travel to Haiti to tend to these ministries, sometimes taking the kids. A few members of the group have lived and ministered in Haiti for extended periods of time.

Six years ago, we all began to feel that God was calling us to move out of the suburbs into the city. We now live on the same city street within a couple blocks of each other. Until a decade and a half ago, I dreamed of living far out in the country,

atop a mountain or in an isolated cabin in the middle of a deep forest. But now I find myself living in the middle of a densely populated city surrounded by an amazing diversity of people—and I love it.

As a result of our new proximity, the group's level of interdependence has increased even more. We now share everything from cars and shovels to salt, salad dressing and sometimes even bathroom facilities (we all live in older houses where things don't always work). Our new location has also opened up new ministry opportunities. For example, we now partner with a nonprofit social service agency that serves elderly and mentally disabled shut-ins in the inner city. As needs arise, we get together to repair homes, mow lawns, shovel snow, buy groceries, lead Bible studies or just hang out with the shut-ins. You get the picture.

This allegedly autistic-tending loner has discovered the profound beauty of deeply committed relationships—and that this is how life is meant to be lived, regardless of how introverted a person might be. Don't get me wrong; I still need a lot of time in my cave. My friends accept this trait of mine. Half the time while we're on vacation, they are out doing stuff while I hang back to read, write and meditate. I've learned that being in community doesn't threaten my individuality. To the contrary, it enhances it.

Everyone in our group has eccentricities that the others accept and make good-natured fun of. It's these very differences working together that makes our group interesting. God created each of us as unique beings. But this uniqueness was meant to be woven into the tapestry of community. We are made in the image of the triune God, whose essence is a loving community. We are created for community. This is how Jesus lived, and it's how his followers are called to live.

The world is oppressed by fallen powers that influence human culture in ways contrary to God's will. One primary way the powers operate in modern Western culture is by promoting an ideology of rugged individualism that runs directly counter to God's will for us to live in community. We place unprecedented stress on our individual freedoms and rights. While people in traditional cultures tend to define themselves by their ties to a particular community, modern westerners tend to define themselves apart from such ties—over and against others instead of in relation to others.

This tendency toward individualism has been greatly intensified by the hedonistic consumer culture we've created over the past century. We tend to measure our worth by what we are able to purchase, with "the American dream" having higher priority than cultivating deep, committed relationships. Meaningful relationships take time, and time is something that people indoctrinated into the consumer mind-set never feel they have enough of. Moreover, the wealth of options that our consumer culture offers conditions us to expect to have things our way. All of this undermines our desire and capacity for meaningful relationships, for such relationships sometimes require that we be willing to forgo our preferences and put up with things we don't care for.

The combination of our relationship-eroding consumerism and our stress on individual freedoms and rights helps explain why most westerners have many acquaintances but few if any deeply committed relationships that echo the beautiful love of the triune God.

In his marvelous little book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis envisioned hell as a realm in which people are forever moving farther away from one another. Hell is the ultimate, cosmic suburban sprawl. This hellish vision is becoming a reality in Western culture, and it's something that kingdom people in the West should passionately revolt against. We are brainwashed into thinking that our clinging to personal rights and freedoms while at the same time striving after things is our ticket to happiness. In reality, it's making us miserable.

Several mental health studies have revealed that the U.S. has one of the highest rates of depression (and other mental health disorders) in the world. On the other hand, these same studies indicate that Nigeria has one of the world's lowest rates of depression. Despite the fact that the average standard of living in America is roughly four times that of Nigeria, and despite the fact that Nigeria is a country with a multitude of social problems—including dehumanizing poverty, a serious AIDS epidemic and ongoing civil strife—it has far less depression per capita than the U.S.

What do Nigerians have that Americans lack?

Judging from the Nigerians I know, I'm convinced that the main thing is a sense of community. Nigerians generally know they need one another. They don't have the luxury of trying to live life solo, even if they have the inclination to do so.

Consequently, they tend to have a sense of belonging that most Americans lack, and

this provides them with a general satisfaction in life, despite the hardships they endure. Many studies have shown that personal happiness is more closely associated with the depth of one's relationships and what one invests in others than it is with the comforts one "enjoys." And this is exactly what we'd expect given that we're created in the image of a God whose very nature is communal. It's against our nature to be isolated. It makes us miserable, dehumanizes us and ultimately destroys us.

Jesus revolted against the powers that fragment relationships by modeling what communal life under the reign of God looks like. Though he was the Son of God, he didn't try to go solo in his life and ministry. He had a network of friends, like Mary and Martha, on whom he could rely when he traveled. He banded with a group of 12 disciples who traveled and ministered with him. And he chose three people (Peter, James and John) to form his most intimate circle of friends. His life manifested the truth that where God reigns, individuals will be united together in close-knit communities.

The earliest Christians understood this. They met regularly as a large group in the temple courts, hearing and studying the apostles' teaching and enjoying fellowship with one another. But they also met in smaller groups on a daily basis in each other's homes, where they shared meals and prayed together. These earliest disciples shared everything they owned with one another so that no one in their community was in need. In a culture that had no social safety nets, this was an aspect of the early church that made it attractive to outsiders.

House gatherings were the primary social unit of the Jesus revolution for the first three centuries. When Paul addressed a letter to "the church" at a certain location, he was not referring to a large church building in which all the Christians congregated. Buildings specifically designed to be churches didn't exist until Christianity was legalized and began to attract prestigious and powerful people in the fourth century. When Paul wrote to the church at a certain location, he was addressing a body of disciples who gathered in privately owned houses scattered throughout a city. His letter would be read in one house church, then copied and passed on to other house gatherings.

Many New Testament teachings about how Christians are to relate to one another make sense only when we understand them in the context of a small house church. For example, the scriptures command us to submit to one another, confess our sins

to one another, encourage one another, serve one another and hold one another accountable. How can we authentically do this unless we're in close relationships with one another? These aren't the kinds of things you can carry out by meeting in a large building once a week with people you hardly know.

This isn't to say there's something inherently unbiblical about larger kingdom gatherings. The book of Acts suggests that the earliest Christians met in larger groups when they could. I myself am pastor of a church that holds weekend services attended by a couple thousand people, and it accomplishes some good things. But by New Testament standards, large group meetings—the typical American church model—are not adequate. Among other shortcomings, the large-group, weekend-event model of church fails to confront the individualism we're in bondage to. In fact, if we're not careful, the weekend-event model of church can actually pander to our individualism.

Think about it. Once a week we go to church (a religious building) rather than seeing ourselves as the church. As good consumers we typically choose a church on the basis of our own preferences, conveniences and needs. Since we're conditioned to assume that "the customer is always right," we believe we have the right to have things our way. If one church fails to please us, we simply shop for another that will. Since there are only so many of us religious consumers to go around, churches have to compete with one another to acquire and keep as many consumers as possible. This, of course, puts pressure on pastors to sweeten the religious product they're peddling by adding as many blessings as possible to their message and by refraining from saying or doing anything that might drive consumers away.

Welcome to "McChurch," where you are served a gospel tailor-made to suit your personal tastes and needs—one that never confronts you or causes you any discomfort.

McChurch not only fails to confront the idols and pagan values of Western culture, it often Christianizes them. According to McChurch, not only do we not have to give up our possessions, as Jesus commands, but following Jesus ensures that we'll get more of them. Not only do we not have to love and serve our enemies, as Jesus commands, but God is on our side when we applaud our nation for bombing them.

If you're looking for an explanation as to why studies confirm that there's hardly any difference in Western countries between churchgoers and nonchurchgoers in terms

of their core values, I suggest you've just found it.

Against the theology and practices of McChurch, kingdom people are called to live and minister in community with others. We cannot hope to embody the kingdom if we are doing life solo. The Bible says we are all members of the body of Christ. A member of our physical body that becomes detached stops growing and becomes useless. So too we can grow and reach our full potential in the kingdom only if we remain attached to the body of Christ. The kingdom suffers—and we suffer—when we try to do life solo.

We all need people we are committed to loving and serving, and who are committed to loving and serving us. We all need people who are close enough to us to notice when we're discouraged and who care enough to take time to encourage us. We all need people who can spot areas of weakness in our lives and care enough to confront us in love. We all need people who can notice when we're going astray and who care enough to hold onto us. We all need a community that helps us revolt against those dominant aspects of our culture that are inconsistent with the kingdom life. All of us—even quasi-autistic loners like myself—need a community of people with whom we can share the joys, sorrows, victories and defeats of ordinary life. Community is essential for our wholeness and for kingdom effectiveness, and it's essential if we are to reflect the communal love of the triune God in our life.

Close-knit, loving, mutually submitted and mutually accountable relationships—these constitute the primary context in which God transforms us and uses us to transform the world. If we can think of the kingdom as a spiritual army (which it is), then we can say the commander has decided that small platoons are the primary place where soldiers are to be equipped for battle and the primary unit he uses to engage in battle.

In the process of belonging to and fighting within a platoon, we learn how to manifest the beauty of the communal kingdom while revolting against the destructive individualism of the culture and the powers that fuel it. In community, the beautiful revolution advances.

Viva la revolution!

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