

My Journey: Where I'm Coming From & Where I'm At

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“We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but ordinary things with extraordinary love.”

Spoken by Jean Vanier, these words are often associated with L'Arche, but they apply perfectly to the community movement in which I grew up, Church Communities International, formerly known as the Bruderhof. Full community can be dismissed by many as impractical or too difficult. Yet, with God as the center, all obstacles can be overcome. Community is made up of ordinary people who have simply felt God's call to love as He loved. They take Jesus' teachings at face value and give their best shot at living out “love your neighbor” in a down-to-earth way. Before continuing, I would like to ask for all of your prayers for Richard Scott, the elder of Church Communities International. Several months ago he was diagnosed with cancer and continues to suffer from much pain and increased weakness.

The spark was kindled nearly one hundred years ago in Germany, the year 1920. Eberhard Arnold, theologian and philosopher, envisioned the brotherhood of all men. He gathered a small group to radically follow Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and to share everything in common. Post-WWI Germany abounded in revolutionary ideas. Anarchists, politicalists, expressionists, patriotists, and youthful idealists constantly flowed through the Arnold household. Tramps and university intellectuals alike were welcomed with open arms. The free exchange of ideas and heated debates fostered a spiritual awakening. The core circle grew in number. They named it “Bruderhof” or “place of brothers.”

As the Nazis came to power, the young community was driven to escape to England, and then to the only other country who would take them, Paraguay. In the fifties, they relocated to the States. This was a golden time, for although money was scarce and they were barely surviving on nonexistent finances, the church was burning for mission. The next meal or exact amount of dollars needed always seemed to surface just in time. The first property in Rifton, NY was purchased with a sum of money donated in the nick of time by an unknowing friend.

A myriad of intentional communities sprung up across the continent. God's fire was alive in deeply thinking young people, unsatisfied with the status quo. Many Co's, with their wives and others banded together to seek for something more. They wanted a counter-cultural faith that would turn their lives upside down. It was a Spirit-filled time as the community quickly gained new members. Later a uniting took place between the Bruderhof and the Hutterites with whom they shared Anabaptist roots. Since then the movement has expanded and spread throughout many parts of the world.

Today Church Communities International exists in Germany, England, Paraguay, Australia, Korea, and has locations in numerous US States including PA, FL, DC, six or eight in NY, and doubtless more in places I have missed. What has kept the movement thriving and growing all these years? It is not a charismatic leader or a special type of people “made for community;” no, the founders are long

deceased. It is not a strict set of rules and doctrine to be adhered to; as far as I can understand, the only law is the law of Love. This Love is what feeds God's living spirit, so that he can be welcome down here on earth, a tiny glimpse of His coming Kingdom.

Don't ever let anyone tell you that living in community is easy. I have done it either willingly or not- so- much- so all my life. I can testify to the nuts and bolts, the dirty work that must be done regularly in order to keep relationships honest and frank. Forgiving has to be done seventy times seven. One cannot be dead inside in this way of life. One hundred percent more intensely alive is more like it. Each person is counted on to do his/her share of spiritual work to keep the unity alive. True unity is a mystery and a God-given gift that must be fought for in every aspect of life. It is hard to describe in something as inadequate as words. Each if you are invited to visit; they would be delighted to have you. Community is a thing that to fully understand it, it must be experienced, must be *felt*.

For a kid growing up, such a place is paradise. I have already been quoted to say that I had the best childhood anyone could ever have. I was born in Germany because that's where my parents happened to be living at the time. We stayed in the German community until moving to Maple Ridge Community in the Hudson River Valley, where I lived from ages two to fourteen. My high school years were spent in the Platte Clove Community in the Catskill Mountains, following an eight month stint in which my family lived on our own in Albany, NY.

I was fortunate to receive top-quality education free of internet, computers, video games, television, cell phones, and like technologies. The community schools stressed education of the whole child, with lots of free play, blank paper and crayons, simple wooden blocks to play with, and the forest as a backyard. We dug worms for fishing, caught crayfish in the streams, sizzled tasty dishes over campfires, sang a lot, picked cherry tomatoes until they came out of our ears, and smoked "stogies" - essentially lengths of dried grapevine. Basically we had the opportunity to do all the things kids are supposed to do.

However, the beautiful premises never felt like an isolated bubble. We wrote stacks of letters to prisoners, and I remember once in second grade my class organized a walk-out on our own to protest that a man had been on death row for seventeen years. We kids agreed to fast instead of eat lunch that day, which I promptly forgot about once I got into the dining room and smelled the spaghetti.

Income comes mainly from twin businesses. Founded in the fifties, Community Playthings manufactures childcare furniture from maple. My dad specialized in lacquer research and in working the spray-line. My mom is an accountant. Rifton Equipment produces adaptive equipment for children and adults including wheelchair desks, tricycles, bath chairs, and toileting systems/aids. In high school my favorite place to work was assembling wooden childshape chairs used in daycares. The larger communities have workshops that provide more than enough work for the community members. Retiring is not in style because the elderly people take such pride, and find such joy, in continuing to come to work, rain or shine. A common sight would be a 90-year-old man working alongside a teenager. The 80-year-old women still do a beautiful job folding clothes in the laundry department. In this way, work is also an expression of oneness.

Another newer business, Danthonia Designs, sells handmade signs. The size of each individual community dictates how it earns its daily bread. Although I always lived with 200 to 300 other people, an equal number of communities house just ten to twenty people in one big house, like a L'Arche home. Many of the urban outposts comprise mainly college students. Typically the members of these mini communities work separate jobs. But remember! Sharing in common means no personal accounts. In the big communities, money does not feature in daily life because nobody gets paid and every need is provided for.

In summer, things seemed to revolve around the garden. We had acres and acres of green beans, sweet corn, broccoli and lots more that kept the kids over their heads in work. In Platte Clove we picked so many blueberries that our annual net harvest easily exceeded 200 gallons. Recently in New York an orchard was acquired that supplies apples, peaches, apricots, and plums for all the New York communities. One community specializes in raising chickens and beef cattle to be shared with all. With canning and freezing, a year's supply of fruits and vegetables can be secured. Not to mention fresh spinach, lettuce and tomatoes from the solar-powered hydroponic greenhouse that operates all winter. In a garden is one of my best places to be. I am of the opinion that the world would be a far better place if everybody had a garden.

Growing up I was always challenged to think for myself. Since coming to Lynchburg last June, people are always asking how I ended up at L'Arche. There really is no earth-shaking discovery to relate, only amazement at the wide range of connections people in the community have with outside organizations and individuals. I was encouraged from early on to be aware and concerned about world issues, and the daily struggle carried on by the majority of the world's people, who are poor. Mission and social justice are at the heart of the church.

In any event, interaction with various L'Arche Communities had occurred and I always knew what L'Arche was all about. So it was no problem to connect with Mark Russell through a friend of my parents and ask to come! What a great environment in which to explore what is most important in life. I needed a chance to be on my own, relying only on God. Now I am looking closely at things I formerly took for granted: Do I live this way, dress this way, uphold these values, or believe in God's love just because I inherited it? No, I need to experience God personally and have Jesus as the power behind my convictions.

Various individuals have expressed surprise over the fact that I have not seen my family since moving here. Yes, my family is the best one ever; I love them very much and miss them like anything. Afterwards I can show you pictures if you would like to see my siblings. My parents miss me too because I was first to leave home, but we have both agreed that it would be infinitely better if I have my own space for some time. Their only concern is that I have a firm foundation for my life and live it out only for Jesus. Nobody is under any illusion that the Bruderhof is the one and only way to live, or that the way other people conduct their lives is not right in the eyes of God.

What is God's will? Being the type of person who likes the security of a "plan," it is continually a tough struggle to give up my ideas of routes I fancy my life should take. The reason I did not immediately

slide into college is because I first need to get it straight that the way of Jesus is down-to-earth. The way of Jesus is a life of service. I want my life to be open to God and ready to do what he asks. Since being at L'Arche, I have recognized the certain "vitalness" of living fully in the present. I have dismissed the completely human habit of looking at life in "phases" or chronological segments. Nobody knows how long they have. To God, chronological time means nothing. He needs field workers to make earth ready for His coming Kingdom. This is why I am determined to seek more, pray more, and listen to God's still small voice. I have to admit that I could improve with my Bible reading. One of the things I am working on is learning how to better become inwardly quiet, to become more familiar with the Word and come to appreciate it as my best help and friend. I am determined to dive in head first, take risks, make mistakes. God will pull me out by the heels.

Earlier in a conversation with someone, I mentioned that I am a descendant of the Bruderhof founder, Eberhard Arnold. He was my mother's great-grandfather. My mother's other grandparents joined as a young couple in the fiery new start in the States in 1954. My great grandfather grew up in the wilderness of the Himalayan Mountains in India, where his parents were missionaries. My great grandmother was Swedish and came from MN. They left an intentional community in NC to throw their energies in with the brothers and sisters. On my dad's side, my roots are in Germany and Canada.

Originally I was reluctant to share my ancestry as the community's founder, because it might seem like beliefs and traditions were passed down, no effort involved. Quite the contrary: each of my forefathers made a clear personal decision to become baptized and dedicate themselves to Jesus and their brothers and sisters in community. Joining the community, in my view, is like a freeing of the spirit in which all self-will and material resources are given over to the Church. Usually this commitment is made around the ages of eighteen to twenty-five, but I have witnessed many older people drop their former lives and embrace what they call the "pearl of great price."

It would take more than a Sunday morning to give an accurate picture of the Church Communities. The small amount I have said today certainly does not do it justice. I apologize if it may seem somewhat disjointed. I am more than willing to answer to the best of my ability any questions you may have. In case anyone is curious, each of the three businesses have websites, and Church Communities International has a publishing website to which I can guide you. Much remarkable and thought-provoking reading material can be found here.

My journey has not been as long and eventful as most of yours and many others', but I am proud of where I come from and glad to share it with you. Sharing can help us learn from, challenge, and encourage one another, and most importantly bring us closer together. Please listen as I close with words by one of my biggest inspirations, Sophie Scholl. She was a student in Nazi Germany whose outspokenness ultimately led to her martyrdom. Sophie was not afraid to put herself out there, to grapple with the *real* things in life. She said,

"The real damage is done by those millions who just want to 'survive.' The honest men who just want to be left in peace. Those who don't want their little lives disturbed by anything bigger than themselves. Those with no sides and no causes. Those who won't take measure of their own

strength, for fear of antagonizing their own weakness. Those who don't like to make waves-or enemies. Those for whom freedom, honor, truth, and principles are only literature. Those who live small, mate small, die small. It's the reductionist approach to life: if you keep it small, you'll keep it under control. If you don't make any noise, the bogeyman won't find you. But it's all an illusion, because they die too, those people who roll up their spirits into tiny little balls so as to be safe. Safe?! From what? Life is always on the edge of death; narrow streets lead to the same place as wide avenues, and a little candle burns itself out just like a flaming torch does. I choose my own way to burn."

<http://www.communityplaythings.com/>

<http://www.riftonequipment.com/>

<http://www.plough.com/>