

**Life**

**Questions**

**FAITHFUL RESPONSES**

**Every Student**

**TO COMMON ISSUES**

**Asks**

*Edited by*  
**Gary M. Burge and**  
**David Lauber**

*Foreword by*  
**Mary S. Hulst**



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## Chapter One

# Community and Friendship

**GARY M. BURGE**

**FOR THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS**, I've been engaged in a form of crisis intervention that I didn't see coming. It is a long-distance conversation with one of my favorite students (I'll call her Beth) who graduated from Wheaton College a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> Beth was a gifted leader in her class, a sit-in-the-front-row student, an inspiration for her peers, active leading dorm Bible study groups, and a poster child for the admissions office. You know the type. She was even humble about all her achievements, which only made her more impressive. While Beth was at Wheaton, we met often and in some odd way, our relationship morphed from that of a student-professor to something else. A friendship perhaps within the peculiar confines of those limited college years on campus. I'm glad we kept up because now our emails have a foundation of hours upon hours of relationship building that came years before. Both of us are honest and tough in what we say. It's the honesty part that makes me respect her as much as I do.

But Beth is in a crisis. Career dreams didn't work out after graduation. She isn't certain about graduate school and is wise not to enroll someplace just because she needs a place to go. She moved to the city where she'd grown up, but now most of her friends are gone. The guy she thought would be "the one" disappeared sometime in the winter of her senior year. She's back in her high school bedroom living with her parents who are desperately trying to remember that she's no longer

sixteen. And—this is the surprising part—she announced to me this year that she is officially abandoning her Christian faith: “It simply doesn’t give me a satisfying worldview any longer.” She is looking now for a job, and I think she has two criteria: how much money she can make and how quickly she can move out. It all makes me wish we were back on campus together, having lunch in Wheaton’s Anderson Commons and having a fiercely honest conversation like we used to do.

The one common thread in her life—the one constant I’ve seen since she was a sophomore and I now know reaches back to high school—is that she was the runner who ran alone. Beth likes going fast and far, and she’s competitive. She often crosses every finish line first and alone. And while she collects more trophies and is cheered relentlessly, now the cheering seems muted, the trophies are boxed up someplace, and she sits in the corner of a Starbucks and gets depressed. *This is the nightmare scenario that many of my students secretly worry about.* Solitary. Filled with self-doubt. Poor. Afraid. Cheerfully working at Forever Twenty-One and hating it.

There are a lot of topics on the table here: vocational discernment, isolation, self-care, poor preparation for life after graduation, and questions about faith. And each of them is legitimate and worthy of long discussion. But these require triage because the truth is, Beth is falling apart. And has been for months.

“Are you surrounded by any sort of community that knows you and loves you—and can speak truthfully into your life?” I ask. That sort of question would be natural on a college campus where we are surrounded by innumerable opportunities for community building inside the dorm, in student development events, athletic programs, chapel, even classroom friendships. But once we graduate, as one student told me, it is like leaving the forest and entering the desert. Which is only partially true. Communities can be built anyplace with the right effort.

But Beth was at a loss. “I found this group that meets at a guy’s house. Most are lapsed evangelicals or post-Christian, and it’s pretty cynical. And we drink a lot.” That’s what I mean about honesty. “Is it a community for you?” “Hardly.”

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNITY

When we are not connected to a genuine community, we are fragile and vulnerable. If we fall, there is no net. One of the central facts about us as persons is that we need each other. We are social beings. An assured result of social science research over the last seventy-five years is that we do need each other and that people who live in isolation begin to languish. This is not only true of newborn babies who may be abandoned to a crib for hours on end but also of the elderly for whom isolation is a critical component of their well-being. Careful psychological study has been done since the 1950s on the solitary confinement of prisoners as a form of punishment. Their cell is 80 square feet, smaller than a horse stall. Researchers now consider it cruel and have shown that it creates profound psychological damage. Severe isolation eventually kills us.

But we do not need researchers to tell us this. I imagine that instinctively we know this to be self-evident. We know the desire we had in early school years to fit in. We remember the mild trauma of entering a cafeteria and anxiously hoping someone will wave and call us to a table. We know the desire we had in high school to belong to some team, club, or organization (even if it's only the prom planning committee)—a tribe really—that meant we belong to something beyond ourselves. Where our name is known. That if we didn't show up, someone might notice. That if we were sad, someone would care. And that if we had really good news, someone might want to hear it. That desire for human connection and support, for belonging and shared identity is so close to our hearts it can barely be measured. This reflex to some degree explains the rise of social networking (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) where we invite "friends" to join a networked "community." Of course, many have asked just what sort of community this really is. It's a fair question.

I remember leading a small seminar with about twenty students a few years ago. We were close and knew each other well. We were all in class one day with the exception of a guy who viewed himself (I guessed) as living on the margin. "Where is Daniel?" I asked. "Dining hall" they

answered because they'd seen him there. So I asked if anybody had his cell number. Someone did. And we shared it, and twenty texts hit his phone at once: "We miss you and can't start without you." He sprinted to the class, burst in, the class cheered, and we were underway. And it said to everyone there—not just one young man—that we care and you matter. He never forgot this and liked to tell the story laughing. He was no longer on the margin.

This instinctive desire for belonging is why societies throughout the world have built and sustained social structures and networks that give meaning and resilience to life. Good marriages, families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, and jobs each must have some component of community in them, or else, they fail in what we need most. We want to belong. We want to have membership. We want others to recognize that our being there matters. Even advertisers know this. Today they don't simply sell you a product; they sell you an identity and membership. Subaru owners aren't consumers, they belong to *the Subaru family*, which explains why they have owner rallies and events, which (oddly in my mind) gather up thousands of people whose only link is their car. In 2018, eighty-four hundred such people showed up in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, for Subaru's "Wicked Big Event." It is fascinating to wonder what they were seeking. Last week, I saw a billboard fifty miles west of Detroit. "Love is out there . . ." "Find it in a new Subaru Crosstrek." I'm confident most of us are looking for a different sort of love.

On the flip side, no doubt for many of us, by the time we enter adulthood, we have seen innumerable failed communities, friendship betrayals, disloyalties, and disappointments. I have known many students who have come from deeply broken families where the absence of affection and belonging had been damaging to them. And I've known many students who thought they were in a community at school but then experienced rejection or judgment, and this had crippling effects on their life. These adults were entering life in their twenties wary and cautious about risking the vulnerability that could come with joining another community or relationship again. "When you've been hurt

enough times, why set yourself up for it again?” is what one student told me. But our need often outweighs our logic. Our yearning for community makes us try once more. Only in the most tragic cases do a few people decide that a solitary life is going to be their destiny, and so they stop trying altogether. I knew someone in his early thirties who was utterly attached to his dog. It was obvious in how they lived together, almost like roommates. “You two are really close,” I said. My friend responded, “You really can’t count on people, but this guy, well, he’s always there for you.” I was amazed and frankly saddened. But I understood.

### CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The classic and time-honored treatment of the importance of community was written in 1938 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, who titled his book *Gemeinsames Leben* (the common life or shared life). It was translated in 1954 as *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer was a pastor during the troubling years of Hitler’s reign. He joined the Confessing Church (that resisted Nazi nationalism) and took charge of a clandestine seminary for training young pastors. *Life Together* is Bonhoeffer’s description of what it means to live in community. During this time he also published *Nachfolge* (imitation [of Christ]), which was translated into English as *The Cost of Discipleship*. These two books are timeless treatments that every Christian should know and cherish. For his efforts, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, sent to prison, and two years later on April 9, 1945, martyred at Flossenbürg concentration camp as the Nazi regime was unraveling.

Bonhoeffer’s first words to us in *Life Together* come from Scripture: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity” (Ps 133:1). He could have continued:

It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
    running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron’s beard,  
    down on the collar of his robe.

It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133:2-3)

What does it mean in these verses when it says: *For there the Lord bestows his blessing?* Where is “there?” What is this location where goodness and blessing enrich us, where we experience unity and belonging and meaning? For Bonhoeffer (and countless other writers) these words describe what should be a precious reality about the gathered community of the church. It should be a place, as Bonhoeffer wrote, “of incomparable joy and strength” for each of us.<sup>2</sup> But go slowly here. The church *may be* that building you visit once a week. But not necessarily. The church is in its simplest terms the gathering of Jesus’ disciples who come together to love, strengthen, and support one another in the context of gospel and sacrament. The church is simply a community that desires to worship God and develop a clear understanding of the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world.

But we learn in *Life Together* that this sort of community is a hard-won reality. Certainly, in 1940s Germany it was. We read about its ideals throughout the New Testament. In books like Ephesians we are offered a lofty promise that the “boundless riches of Christ” can be uncovered here (Eph 3:8), where our gifts are discovered and celebrated (Eph 4:11), and where an invested community speaks “truth in love” so that we mature and deepen our knowledge of love (Eph 4:15-16). In books like Philippians we read about Paul’s vision for how a well-knit community can be a place where we genuinely stand up for each other, where fear is banished, and friendship-destroying competition disappears (Phil 1:27-30). Even in Jesus’ final days his mind was on this church, and he prays that it will become a place that is life-giving and faithful not just to him but to its fellow members (Jn 17:1-19; cf. Jn 13:34-35).

Therefore, the first thing we need to grasp is that we *must* belong to a sustainable community of fellow believers. This can only be life-giving



when (as Bonhoeffer says) the gathering is centered on Jesus and his grace. The more profoundly we have experienced God's grace and love, the more profoundly we will be able to extend those gifts to others (Rom 15:7). When we have received God's mercy, then we become merciful. This, Bonhoeffer says, is the foundation. When communities come together in weakness—having received forgiveness and grace—then competition, judgment, accusation, and anger recede. This then forms a community unlike anything in the world; it is a divine or spiritual community where uncanny experiences of love erupt. Posturing and image management—those deadly toxins that seem to be everywhere—can now be set aside. And truth, centered now not on the whims of the society around us, but truth taken from the Scriptures and the great saints who have preceded us, centers and define us.

## **THE CHURCH**

Of course, this is the ideal profile of the church. In every respect it ought to be that place where truth is announced in an understandable way, where lives are changed, where deep friendship is celebrated, and where hospitality is common. Where we can bring our friend and not have to code-switch when we're there. Where the meaning of the Sunday morning isn't defined by three hymns, a prayer, an offering, and a three-point sermon. Nor, for that matter, where another liturgy gives just a newer formula: a hymn set with a band, awesome screen graphics, and a funny and urgent message with a guy sporting a soul patch and a black T-shirt.

Neither of these formulas is really what we're seeking. One may be more entertaining than the other, but they are not a guarantee of anything that will meet our deepest need. When we probe beneath the surface, we may discover that the deeper values we desire are not there. In traditional churches we see formal structures that were established long before we were born. We may hear music that may have the feel of religion from a distant generation. It seems that there is a social organization swirling around the place, but we wonder how or if we can fit in. Or we might decide we do not want to fit in. Few seek us out and

fewer still know what to do with us. Sometimes the church can miss the mark of becoming a community. So our aim is not necessarily to join a church but to join a Christian community—and I hope that this is a church that knows how to weave the fabric of community into its life and make us a part of it.

Here in my city (Grand Rapids, Michigan) there are two churches I find intriguing. I know their pastors, and I know their mission. They are aiming at an audience in their twenties or thirties who they claim are postchurch. These are young adults who grew up in church, understand its culture, but quit attending after they left high school. And they swore they never would go back. When the Local Church and Encounter Church began, they were not freewheeling startups. They were led by mature young pastors anchored to other mature congregations. But the key was they knew that something had to change; something was missing, and so they needed to build a community differently. On the first anniversary of the Local Church in 2018, they already had over two hundred postchurch young adults attending regularly.

I wonder how many times I have had conversations with twenty-something adults who tell me that they have given up on church. In their minds they either have a memory of a childhood relic, or they have had some sour experience of attending a church they thought was meaningless. However, in every city—and this is a guarantee—there are fantastic examples of churches where community is alive and well, where the music makes sense, where the message is relevant, and where people will eagerly welcome us and find a place for us to be who we truly are. The question is never whether they exist; the question is, Are we willing to do the work required to locate them and try once more?

This is vital because when I am in a genuinely Christian community, I am mysteriously strengthened. This kind of community helps me build a sustainable life in a very difficult world. Bonhoeffer famously wrote in *Life Together*, we need each other because *the Christ in the heart of a fellow believer is always stronger than the Christ in my own heart.*<sup>3</sup> I need to be someplace where, when I am at my lowest, there are others who are willing to help lift me up. Or when I am confused, I am with

mature Christians who can help keep me from becoming my own worst enemy. And when I am desperate and anxious, I have a phone number, someone who will listen and interpret my circumstances with wisdom, experience, and spiritual maturity. And if need be, simply come over.

But such community experiences are not one-way streets. We are not only received and cared for, but there is genuine reciprocity and we understand that listening, lifting up others, guiding the lost, and providing wisdom are our assignments too. If we step into a community and only come to take its resources, we will deplete it rather than grow it. It is no different than a friendship: if there is no reciprocity, no giving (as well as taking), then that friendship will begin to wither and die.

This is precisely what my friend Beth does not have. She went to church dutifully while she was in college, but it was not a real community to her. She did not explore, nor did she invest the effort. On her church scorecard she got all the best marks—she joined a recognized, established, respected, tall brick church brimming with successful adults—but sadly it had become nothing but a lonely experience for her. And someplace in her soul, she stopped believing in the church or in Christian community. She stopped looking, and she stopped hoping. And soon this spiritual despair bled over to her other less formal friendships. She didn't invest, and she didn't expect more from them. She evolved into a person having a solitary life, and she lost the skills (and desire) to pursue community. And she did this when she was surrounded by opportunities and other young adults who wanted the same thing. But when she left college, when she was on her own, when she entered a distant city, she didn't know what it meant to have a trusted friend, much less a trusted community. When she was collapsing, she didn't have a single valuable phone number to call except for her mom's.

### **INTENTIONALITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND COMMUNITY**

One of our problems is that we often sit back and wait for community to find us. Or we think that finding such a community will be an easy task. But both of these ideas are wrongheaded. We need to be

intentional about finding a Christian community, and we need to acknowledge that this will take work. It is the same when we wonder why we have so few friends when essentially, we are waiting for someone to reach out to us. Friendship often requires us to initiate a relationship, which then grows into something meaningful.

So in our diminishing hope, where do we begin? Perhaps something even more basic, more elementary, needs to be on our assignment list. We need to discover how to grow a fledgling community right where we are. And this may simply begin with friendship. We know we need understanding, compassion, support, and accountability. And sometimes the best place to start is with one friend, someone who can be trusted, someone with whom we can build something we've not had before. A friend where intimacy and deep knowing are possible. Imagine. Imagine having someone with whom you're not competitive or fearful, someone who will protect you from those who would harm you, someone who might love you in the sense that David loved Jonathan. Imagine. Imagine finding someone whose value to you isn't in their social status, their career potential, their beauty, or the social power they possess. Not in the things the world finds attractive or compelling. These are superficialities, and you know this already. But this is someone you find whose qualities are profound: grace, forgiveness, charity, hopefulness, trustworthiness, and love. You already know the mechanics of friendship pursuits that are empty and vain. You've known this since high school. You watched *Mean Girls*. This is something different, and this friend will likely have attributes that are rare but to be treasured.

I have known many, many students who have taken this charge of friendship and community building seriously. And by their senior year at college, they have built something remarkable. I have seen small groups of men and women who have decided to be lifelong friends, and by their senior year they live together. I've been in these homes and shared meals with these students and seen the community they are building. It is inspiring. They share meals, chores, and a vision for what their life will become. And here is the best part—they make a vow that

they will stick with each other for the rest of their lives. I have seen them return for reunions. I have heard about their annual plans to fly to a common city for a weekend, stay in a great hotel, and spend two days catching up. I know they build private social media channels (like a private Facebook page) to talk regularly. One group has a private online Word Press diary they keep, and each one writes in it weekly. But the key is that they have built friendships that have become old friendships, and these have evolved into a community that now sustains them. They show up at each other's weddings. And when they have their children, I know they are there for each other. I've seen them appear when their children get baptized. And when one of their parents dies, they do not miss the funeral. These are the people who show up in our life. And when inevitable tragedy strikes, they will be at our side. My wife has such a friend from college. Her husband died from a heart attack in his late forties. We attended his funeral, and there I saw faces and names that reached back decades. They showed up.

It is never too late to begin this process. It is so easy to think, *But this didn't come together for me when I was in college. I was left behind, or no one really wanted me to join their private exclusive group.* But here is a secret whose importance I can barely measure. *The challenge of building community will stay with you for the rest of your life. And it can begin at any time.* You may move and find yourself in a new city. You may experience major life changes. And you will have to begin anew. And beginning with friendship that expands to community will once again be necessary work. In 2017, I moved from Wheaton College near Chicago (after twenty-five years) and joined the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Our best friends in Wheaton remain good friends, but we knew we had to begin this process once more. I was alert to the possibility of new friendships, and God opened a beautiful door. An economics professor at Calvin University became a friend. He is a trustworthy person who understands what friendship means. One afternoon, he even hosted a gathering of eight Calvin faculty at a nearby pub just so I could meet more people. And as our friendship matured, our wives came to know each other, and this led

to an invitation to visit their church, which led to us joining their house group. Today, we have found a healthy church, a good community, and after a major life transition, we are not alone. We know people who show up for each other. And I know they'll eventually show up for us.

Beth needs to stop waiting for community to find her and launch out with all the imagination and ingenuity that I know she has. She needs to assess where friendship might be found. She needs to do the hard work of searching out the churches and communities where her peer group can be discovered so that friendships can be born and deepen and possibly emerge into genuine communities for her. And the church could be a part of this plan. I don't believe she has rejected the Christian faith completely. I believe she has rejected one form of it that she now views as rigid and compromised. And the happy discovery for her will be finding a church that is utterly unlike that place she once called church. Beth is now postchurch, but she doesn't know yet that there are thousands of millennials just like her who are seeking something new.

But Beth's greatest challenge will be her willingness to try. To hope and believe that there are other adults just like her who want to be in a trusted friendship that gives birth to community.

## **FEATURES OF COMMUNITY**

Christine Pohl is a professor of ethics at a seminary in Kentucky. Her recent book, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* has been a helpful guide to many of us who are trying to sort out what a genuine community is supposed to look like.<sup>4</sup> Her work on community has been a twenty-year project that first appeared in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (1999).<sup>5</sup> Then a few years ago, thanks to a major grant, Pohl began a more comprehensive research project to study the characteristics of sustainable communities that genuinely give life to their members. She organized a prolonged consultation with a large group of pastors, community leaders, and professors, and gleaned from these meetings (and many readings) the features of healthy communities. She prefers to avoid

abstraction in this effort and wants to see what real living, breathing people do when they build this sort of life for themselves.

Four themes emerged throughout her work and these have now become classic discussion starters for those who wonder if they belong to a community. At least they are high virtues that provide aspirational goals for each of us: gratitude, promise keeping, truth giving, and hospitality. Let's look at each of these briefly.

**1. Gratitude.** Pohl teaches us that gratitude has always been basic to the Christian faith because it connects with our experience of grace. When we see more of life as gift (and less as entitlement) we begin to see things differently.

However, she is clear that there are new skills we must acquire if we build this sort of community. This living requires concentration. We must work hard to notice, to remember what we see, and to speak to the person who deserves recognition. It then becomes a way of life that may be contagious if shared among many. But remarkably, gratitude is also an act of resistance against habits that permeate our world: cynicism, envy, criticism, and negativity. As a relational practice, it builds up all those it touches.

**2. Promise keeping.** Here Pohl teaches us that the great deformation of most of our relationships is betrayal. When we betray someone, we choose self-interest over the longevity of faithfulness to others. In this community virtue, we choose to become dependable, establish trust, and invest in our futures together because without reliable promises, there can be no future.

This evokes memories of what we were taught as children about "keeping your promise." This is not something we measure by single instances of faithfulness. This is about cultivating a life known by its loyalty and reliability, whose dependability is predictable. We become promise-keeping people. To love someone takes on value when it occurs over many, many years and when circumstances are either difficult or ordinary. But this too is an act of resistance today. Our world tells us to keep our options open in case something better comes along. And we are to have a sensible degree of cautious distrust because, well, not

everyone is going to reciprocate our faithfulness. Promise keeping says *no* to all this. It builds grounded and stable relationships.

**3. Truth giving.** Pohl says that a routine deformation of our relationships is deception. We do not tell the truth, or more bluntly we lie. In one sense, truth giving is related to promise giving since it speaks to our need to be faithful and honest with those we live with. Lying, on the other hand, erodes trust. But this is also related to gratitude because gratefulness eliminates the need for posturing and image management and can lead to honesty.

The Quaker tradition made truthfulness one of its most important virtues. Their outline: (1) Listen “for the truth in the words of others”; (2) speak the truth as you understand it with “cordiality, kindness and love”; (3) avoid “gossip, tale-bearing, breaking confidences, or the disparagement of others”; and (4) resist “temptations to falsehood, coercion, and abuse.” Pohl concludes, “adopting these commitments would transform many of our . . . families and congregations.”<sup>6</sup>

**4. Hospitality.** Last, we learn that hospitality grows out of gratitude as well. We rejoice in what we have, and we choose to share *particularly* with the stranger. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia* or “love of the stranger.” In this sense hospitality cultivates a sacrificial lifestyle that gives more than it takes because we have been given already so much. We don’t live with a worldview of scarcity but abundance and believe much can be distributed. However, this sharing is most often centered on time. We spend time with each other (which is also a resource), and this means we are sharing life with each other.

Someone once said that a good community is like a good hotel: it anticipates your needs and yet recognizes its own boundaries and limits. It is perceptive of what is needed and patient with those who are vulnerable. Its measure is found in the welcome it extends to those who desperately need one.

Pohl believes that together these four attributes are commonplace in healthy communities. But they can also be the aspirations of communities (and friendships) that want to grow into something better. Who wouldn’t want to live a life supported and fed by such a



community as this? Who wouldn't want to be known as a builder who contributes to making something that seems so foreign in today's world?

### **FINAL ADVICE FOR BETH**

I often find myself imagining the most honest email I could ever send to Beth. What would I say that wed truth and grace? That held both challenge and generosity of spirit? That was honest and yet did not push her away?

Dear Beth:

I am so grateful for you and our many-year friendship. I have known you since you were about nineteen, and with each passing year I have admired your gifts, your passion, and your honesty with me. Today you are forging adult patterns in life that will stay with you for decades. Since you were a child, you were sustained by a family that loved you and schools that provided you with countless programs that kept you busy, so busy that I wonder if you ever stopped to see what you really loved, what mattered, or how this busy-ness was changing you.

But now things are different. I can hear in your writing pain and desperation that I have never heard before. It is in circumstances like this when everything purposeful seems to have disappeared that we discover what is truly inside of us. But it is also a time to take stock and possibly rebuild; to start over or take advantage of what's around you.

Can I take a risk with you? You are someone who likes to achieve things, and the list of achievements on your résumé (thanks for sending it!) is truly astounding. These are remarkable accomplishments that few at twenty-five would ever complete. I'm proud of you.

As I look back over my many years with college students, I think I've discovered something I wish I'd known when I was twenty-five. The secret to sustained happiness and personal fulfillment isn't found in what we do as it is found in who we do it with. Climbing Everest is great; climbing Everest with six lifelong friends is better. Someday when you can no longer climb, you'll have a shared experience together you'll draw

on for years. And these six may become profound friends who will always be there for each other.

But you never learned this secret. Sometimes adults enjoy a student's successes and don't want to end the parade of trophies. Sometimes they are fearful that if you reject their advice you'll also reject them. So I am going to take a risk. Beth, the solution here isn't in further striving, another opportunity, one more brilliant job well done. It won't be found in that grad school you're dreaming about and what a new shiny MA might look like. You have enough trophies.

You need to stop and find a friend. And through that friend begin to find a community that will sustain you. Where honesty, trust, generosity, and hopefulness are shared. My own hope is that this community is formed by those who follow Jesus. I know I'm repeating myself, but I'll say it again. What you thought was Christian community in your many years in church was a vague and empty semblance of the real thing. A seed of cynicism was planted in you (at church? in college?), and it is growing. It will consume you eventually, and before long you'll be hosting those drinking parties you now attend (and do not admire). Do not lose hope. You know how to work hard against long odds. You can do this too. God has been enormously good to you. Begin with thankfulness that he has given you what you need to do this. When we surround ourselves with a genuine community, our life can be redirected, things can be put in perspective, and new thinking emerge. And who knows, you may become the one healed who ends up healing others.

Let's talk about next steps. Who is the most trusted person you know? And what are your options for locating the best possible community in your city? I think that God has a new fantastic chapter to write in your life. And what's in it are things that will utterly surprise you. You'll have to pull together a lot of courage to join this new story, but I can tell you one thing with confidence, if you want to, you'll be able to do it.

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