

“Honey From the Rock” by Jacqie Wallen



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In the lectionary readings for today God is complaining that people don't turn to Him but instead, act as if they were gods themselves. In Jeremiah He says: "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Imagine that! People are ignoring God, the fountain of living water, and relying solely on their own cracked cisterns. They probably don't even know their cisterns are cracked – that's how proud they are.

In Psalm 81, God tells his people, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." He wants to feed them with the finest of wheat and satisfy them with honey from the rock. We know God can produce wonderful things from rocks. But the people are not interested. They are too proud.

C.S. Lewis said: *According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.*

Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over. I pointed out a moment ago that the more pride one had, the more one disliked pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?' The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise.

Pride is competitive and it is not compassionate. Instead of being happy when others are happy, or lucky, or famous, we are unhappy, because we are thinking of what we want for ourselves and feel we deserve it more than they do. Pride is essentially an antisocial emotion and, as such, it is the enemy of community.

For community, we need to turn to the fountain of living water rather than relying on our own cracked cisterns; we need to eat God's fine wheat and honey from the rock. Scott Peck, who has thought deeply about the concept of community, has said: "Community is a spirit – but not in the way that the familiar phrase 'community spirit' is usually understood... The spirit of community is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that community is solely a Christian phenomenon. I have seen community develop among Christians and Jews,

Christians and atheists, Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Hindus. People of any religious persuasion or none whatever can develop community.”

Ernest Kurtz called his biography of Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, Not-God. Many feel that the reason AA helps people abstain from alcohol is because it emphasizes the concept of God, or Higher Power. Kurtz stress something quite different. Kurtz feels that the secret to the success of AA is that it teaches us that we are not God. We are a human being among other human beings, no better or no worse...no more or less important...no more or less valuable...no more nor less entitled. To me, this is not just the secret of sobriety but also the secret of community. I think it is no accident that AA has thrived for 75 years with a decentralized form of organization governed only by “group conscience” or consensus at the group level. The traditions of AA stress that the common welfare of the group must come first and that principles must be placed before personalities.

Community is important to me and I was drawn to Seekers because of my search for a spiritual community.

Scott Peck has said: “The key to community is the acceptance – in fact, the celebration – of our individual and cultural differences. Such acceptance and celebration – which resolves the problem of pluralism and which can occur only after we learn how to become empty – is also the key to world peace.” What does Peck mean by empty? I think he means it in the Buddhist sense: free of ego, free of selfish grasping, free of the misconception that we are God.

Of course, there is never going to be a community completely

like that. We are humans, after all—some of us, and I'll put myself in that group, even more so than others.

As Albert Einstein said:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

But to me a community is a place where people try to be like that—knowing they are not-God. Accepting of others...celebrating others' uniqueness and gifts. To me a community is a place where people are willing to grow along spiritual lines and willing to work to loosen the grip of ego so as to embrace what is good for the group as a whole. Seekers seemed to me (and still seems to me) a place where people are trying to do that.

I think Seekers are pretty good at community and I have thrown my lot in with Seekers, first by joining a mission group and then by becoming a Steward. I want to grow old in Seekers and have been saddened and disturbed by the fact that in recent

years, a number of our valuable elders have left the area to join retirement communities that are some distance away. As I have watched them, I have made a decision for myself. Seekers is my community and I want to move closer to Seekers as I get older, not farther.

I developed a course in aging for undergraduates at the University of Maryland about five or six years ago and have been teaching it ever since. I learn a lot every time I teach it and, for me, it serves as an opportunity to review my life and as an opportunity to think about planning my future. One of the things I have learned the research I have done for the course is that most elders would like to age in place, meaning they would like to stay where they are. Another thing I have learned is that most elders live in the suburbs, which is not the best place to age—large houses with big yards, long distances to stores, little public transportation, a relatively transient population. Often they find themselves having to move to a retirement home, an assisted living facility, or a nursing home when they are quite old, losing the ties and connections they so wanted to maintain at an age where it is much more difficult to form new ones. Often people wait far too long before they make plans that will assure them of a community to support them into old age. A kind of pride, I guess, that we are all vulnerable to, a “it-won’t-happen-to-me” mentality

Rabbi Barry Block told the following story about his then 80-year old grandmother. When her doctor raised the discussion of living arrangements for her old age, she told her doctor, quite emphatically, that she did not want to get old. “Too late, Sabina,” her doctor replied, “You already are old.”

I think most of us are like that in late midlife and beyond—in denial about the issues we may face in the years to come—until something happens and we must make the best decisions we can under the circumstances.

One thing that got me to thinking seriously about where I would live when I was old (my students always smile when I say anything about what I'm going to do when I get old because because, like Sabrina's doctor, they think I already am old) was ,as I said before, becoming aware that some long-term Seekers were beginning to move away to retirement homes. A recent stimulus was learning that the people who developed the cohousing community that I used to live in were developing their third cohousing community just a few blocks from Seekers and right next to the Metro station. In this one they are going full out for being green and sustainable and just generally ecologically correct. It's going to be right on the new hiking-biking trail that will run through Takoma DC. They are targeting it to young, first-time home buyers who want to be close to public transportation and "empty-nesters" who want to simplify their lives.

Cohousing is all about community. Cohousing communities are intentional communities that are planned and managed by residents who are consciously committed to living in community. In a cohousing community, residents have their own private home, but also have substantial common space that includes open space, a courtyard, a common kitchen and dining room, a fitness facility, guest rooms, a children's playroom, and more, depending on the desires of the community. Community members take care of their common property together and are committed to their relationship to other members and the cohousing community as a whole. Most cohousing communities use some form of consensus as the basis of their group decision-making.

There is lots of room to develop humility in this setting (!) and it is the common commitment to personal growth that makes decision-making and other aspects of community life work.

When I found out about the new community, Metro-Village, a

realization came to me instantaneously—I don't want to have to move away from Seekers when I get old. Seekers is my church and I expect to become even more involved with it as I age. I want to age in the context of Seekers. I want to move closer to Seekers, not farther.

So, in addition to Seekers, I plan to throw in my lot with the new cohousing community, which should be ready for occupancy in two years or so. And not just with the cohousing community—I have a vision for the neighborhood surrounding it.

In teaching my aging course, I have learned about the Aging in Place Initiative and about the Green House Project. According to the website [senior resource.com](http://seniorresource.com), "Aging in place" is growing older without having to move. According to the *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, it is not having to move from one's present residence in order to secure necessary support services in response to changing need. A growing edge trend is the creation of "elder-friendly" neighborhoods that may be very diverse as far as the ages of their residents but that still have comprehensive programs in place to address the needs of elders who are aging in place. One such initiative is a joint effort of an organization called Partners for Livable Communities and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Its purpose is to provide communities with technical assistance to help them become places that are good for people to grow up and live in but, importantly, good for people to grow old in. Communities that are good to grow old in provide a range of housing types at all levels of affordability, opportunities for the elderly to use their talents to take leadership in helping their community, cultural and recreational opportunities, safety, and easy access to public transportation and support networks and services. They also provide services and protection for the

vulnerable elderly. I would like to work with the Aging in Place Initiative to make the area around Metro-Village cohousing and Seekers Church that kind of community.

The Green House Project advocates locating long term care or skilled nursing facilities in local communities , so that people do not have to leave their communities even if they need more care than they can receive in their homes. The Green House Project envisions intentional communities for elders who need care in every community regardless of ability to pay. Green Houses are small (8-10 elders), highly green, residences in which residents and staff work collaboratively to manage the home and the staff are nurtured as much as the residents. Green Houses were first proposed by William Thomas, who wrote the book *What Are Old People For?* Thomas also invented a profession to go with the idea of Green Houses. This profession is the "shabazz", who understands that aging, too, is a developmental stage and who is committed both to the elder's growth and development and to his or her own growth and development.

I am getting involved with both the Aging in Place Initiative and the Green House Project to create a livable community for the elderly in this neighborhood. I am already enrolled in a December training for the Green House project which I plan to apply to the Growing Edge fund for some support with. I hope you will all support me in these projects and that perhaps some of you will become involved. Especially, I hope you will join me in the Skylight Room after worship for a presentation on Metro-Village and an optional site tour.

What does all of this have to do with cracked cisterns and honey from the rock? I believe that building and being in

community is one way to reduce the power of ego and to become more willing to grow along spiritual lines. Like Scott Peck, I believe that the secret of community is also the secret of world peace and my dream is that we can contribute to the creation of community in neighborhood around Seekers Church and Metro Village. As I grow older, I want to drink that sweet honey from the rock and I want my whole community to be able drink it, too.