Parenting As a Spiritual Journey

Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions

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Ch 5
Community/
Belonging

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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Chapter 5

COMMUNITY

Belonging

"In my invented religion there are no services—
just announcements and refreshments."

There is an old folk expression (I've heard both Africans and Jews take the credit) that says, "It takes a whole village to raise one child." Life was difficult for the people who coined that phrase, whoever they may have been, but one aspect was easy. They knew where their village was and who lived there. For some of us, finding a village to help us raise our children is a long, difficult task. By the time my older daughter was in kindergarten, she hesitated to volunteer at her new Hebrew school for a role in the upcoming play, fearing that by the time it was performed we might no longer belong to that synagogue. (We *had* switched around a lot.) Fortunately, our search ended at that point. But during those years of synagogue hopping, I learned a painful lesson: there is nothing less spiritual than being in a "sacred place" that evokes nothing sacred for you. And there is nothing lonelier than being with people who are a community for each other but not for you.

Hard as it is to find the right one, community—whether gathered around a religious tradition, a political cause, or a passionate interest—is enormously helpful in the spiritual journey of parenting. The Talmud puts it more strongly. At one point, a rabbi exclaims, "*O hevruta, o metuta*," which loosely translated means "Give me a community or give me death!" The values and the faith we glimpse when we are alone or with our family take on substance when we congregate in a special place with others.

When I was still a rabbinical student, I learned a profound lesson about community, not from my professors at the seminary but from my congregants in my student pulpit. In my last years of rabbinical school, I traveled every Saturday morning to the Upper East Side of New York City to lead services for a group of well-heeled, liberal Jews. Most of them had learned the prayers we were saying together long before I was born.

When it snowed, my congregants, many of whom were over eighty, would all show up! When I expressed surprise, they explained that they did not want to disappoint the rest of the group. For me, part of a generation that regarded religion as something designed to meet *our* needs, this was a startling concept. More incredible was our congregational meeting about Anna, a mentally ill, homeless Jewish woman who had somehow discovered our services. She regularly wandered in with her shopping bags to sit in the back row and talk to herself. She smelled bad, was occasionally disruptive, and made me more nervous than I already was in my new job. I assumed that we would find a way to get her to stop coming. But several of the congregants would not hear of it. They recalled Robert Frost's "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." A religious community is a home. Anna was a part of our extended family, and we would have to find a way to stretch to include her. So we did.

Many people told me that when they were young adults they had been very much on their own, dropping in and out of institutions and groups as their needs required. Then they became parents. As one father put it, "All of a sudden, I wanted to feel nailed down."

Raising children can be a lonely endeavor, even with a partner. I knew this from my own experience, and talking to Gail reinforced it. Gail had been a Roman Catholic nun for eleven years when she met Bill, a monk, at a summer computer institute. They enjoyed long strolls and deep conversations together. As their friendship grew, they noticed that the other students seemed to leave them alone as they took their evening walks. After everyone on campus knew that they were in love, Gail and Bill finally figured it out too. After much soul searching, they both wrote to the pope and their superiors and asked to be released from their vows.

When I interviewed Gail, I was interested in her transition from nun to mother. Did she miss the hours devoted to prayer and contemplation? Gail's answer surprised me. "The main thing I missed when I became a mother was community. Both Bill and I were used to living in communities where there were many people around to pitch in and help out. The sisters and brothers all took responsibility when there was a task at hand. All of a sudden we had a job to do that ultimately was the responsibility of just the two of us. It felt lonely. When Bill was overwhelmed with work and errands and child care, I wanted to support him, but I also wished I wasn't doing it alone. When I needed Bill's help and he gave it, then I wished someone was there helping him."

A family is supported by being part of a group of families, a unit larger than itself. That support is physical—a hand to help, a meal cooked, a child driven somewhere—and it is also spiritual.

First, a community helps parents to teach values. Values are stronger if they are backed up by a group, particularly one with a tradition behind it. Jane is the daughter of a very conservative Protestant minister in the Midwest. She went to church every Sunday morning and evening and every Wednesday afternoon for the first eighteen years of her life. She recalls sitting in church and removing her mother's rings and sliding them on her fingers and then back on her mother's hands. She remembers nothing of the service, but she thinks she got something important "just by going." "I did not resent it any more than I resented brushing my teeth. We just did it. Even when it lost its meaning, it still had meaning. Eighteen years of my life—but I don't feel all those hours were wasted, not at all."

While nothing of the content of her parents' faith "took," she believes there was power in the way she was raised. "It gave me depth. There was something important I learned in that rigor and routine." What Jane took from her religious rearing were passion and discipline. Now she lives in California, a politically and religiously progressive Jew. "I met a liberal rabbi in Kansas," she explains, "who looked me in the eye and said he couldn't even promise me that there was a God. I knew right away that was the religion for me!" But Jane doesn't regret her hours in church. She now applies those qualities of character she learned as a child to the very different religious life she has chosen. Unlike many in her generation, she comes regularly to the services at her ultraliberal synagogue.

Jane sits with her daughter on her bed each night without fail and talks to her about her day. Sometimes they sing together, often choosing a

song they both enjoy singing in synagogue. It is based on a two-thousand-year-old teaching of Rabbi Hillel.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
But if I am only for myself, what am I?

One night they were discussing the day's events and Jane was trying to help ten-year-old Sarah see that she needed to help out more around the house. Jane began to sing quietly, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Her daughter spontaneously joined in with the words "If I am only for myself, what am I?"

It was a magical moment. "I wasn't lecturing or inculcating a value," says Jane. "I drew it out of *her*. It had been put in there by the tradition, by the community, not by me. This value came out of her mouth and met itself coming out of my mouth. At that moment, it became real. We both looked at each other in amazement. I could have taught her about selfishness without having someone else teach her that song, but it wouldn't have been nearly as profound."

Second, a community provides people. By growing up with other people, we learn about the varieties of human nature and the vagaries of human existence. For many reasons, households today are smaller than they have ever been, and extended families are more geographically scattered. When I was young, each of my parents had many aunts and uncles. Social life revolved around relatives visiting our home. Although they were all Jewish, there the similarities ended. Some were very old and some were very young, some were poor and some were rich. Aunt Lena was one step above homeless, while Uncle Joe bought a new Cadillac every other year. Some of my relatives were smart and some were not. And things happened in an extended family. People were born, people died. Life, we learned, went on. An old saying has it that a house is not a home until there has been a birth, a death, and a wedding in it. These days, few people live in the same home from birth to death, and even fewer are born at home, marry at home, or die there. Our communities become our homes.

In our society, where expressions of sadness and grief are generally unwelcome, a community can be a safe place to mourn, a receptacle for messy feelings that at best are only tolerated in other institutions. When I asked Howard, who grew up in a small town in South Carolina, how he understood death as a small child, he said his religious community was a huge help, but not through the formal curriculum. When his Sunday school teacher's sister—a young mother—died of leukemia, the whole class went to the funeral. People cried and screamed at a loud pitch.

Howard recalled, "Afterward, everyone went back to the teacher's house with her family. Children were running about, yelling and laughing. Great quantities of food were consumed. All of life—the pain, the vitality, the absurdity—seemed to come together." Howard began to understand that loss, even a very terrible one like that of a young woman, was something that happened and that people survived it.

"The place was full of people from the church, and everyone belonged there. The minister spoke and gave everybody permission to be however they needed to be. He told the children, 'You know what it is like to have a little sister. Well, your teacher's little sister died, and it is a very sad thing.' Crying did not mean losing face. But running around happily and being a kid were also allowed. We kids knew that coming to the house had helped our teacher, and we felt good about ourselves for being there."

Community can offer the gift of acceptance. A good community, in the words of Mr. Rogers, "likes you just the way you are." For Joan, who is African-American, her church was a place where she could be safe from the racism outside. People fussed over her there. Even though she didn't like Sunday school, she still has every one of her textbooks, with her name written on the inside cover, neatly stacked on a shelf. "It was my home and they were my family."

Janice joined a synagogue mainly for "the sake of the children." Janice was surprised to discover how good she felt in that community. As a child, she had found going to synagogue a trial; she was certain she would say or do the wrong thing. "The funny thing is," she said, "I joined to give my kids a place to hang their hat, and I was the one who got hooked."

Each Friday night during services, a different woman lit the candles. When Janice first began to attend, she noticed that all the women would cover their eyes just before they recited the blessing. But in her childhood home, her grandmother and mother never covered their eyes. They extended their arms in front of them, palms down, as they faced the candles.

So when it is was her turn to go up in front of the whole congregation, that is what she did.

"My daughter was outraged!" Janice said. "She complained that no one else did it that way. I explained to her that this was *my* way. I like these people and they like me, so it doesn't matter. As I was explaining it, I realized what a gift she had given me by providing me with a motive for joining the synagogue. I had feared a religious community precisely because I didn't want to be judged. But I had discovered a community that said, Come as you are." Community, when it is doing its job well, helps us to experience in a very immediate way the more abstract claim of faith that God "accepts us as we are."

You may have noticed that all my examples so far involve religious communities. This reflects my bias—an occupational hazard of the clergy.

Religious communities do have certain strengths. Community in the context of a religious tradition can often be transferred from one place to another. Nora said, "We were always moving when my kids were young. But wherever we moved, we knew we would join the Presbyterian church; the kids would already know all the hymns, and soon we'd feel at home again." Almost everyone I know has said at some point, "I can pray better in the woods than in a building." But communities that are housed in buildings also have their role.

Karen, for example, experienced the church building as a repository of meaning when she was young. Later, it stood ready to serve that role again when she needed it as a parent. She had grown up in a devout Catholic family. She loved the church and the people she worshiped with every Sunday. She remembers driving in the car with her mother on weekday afternoons and passing their church. "Let's make a visit!" her mother would sometimes say. They would park the car, go into the empty sanctuary, get down on their knees in the silence, and pray for a few minutes. Karen always felt those were special times of connection with God. The walls held messages, left over from all that had happened within that place.

When Karen got older she stopped going to church because she objected to so many of the official policies. But she never stopped talking to God in her own way. As a mother with four children, she taught each of them to pray to God "like a friend who wants to hear your every secret," but she did not even consider having them baptized or taking them to religious services. Then her seven-year-old son, Brian, was diagnosed with cancer. During the last three years of his life, she spent many nights awake—wiping his brow after a surgery, reading to him, singing to him, lying in bed and worrying while he slept. "The thought that wouldn't let go of me was that I had brought him into this world and now he was suffering. I was the parent, the one who was responsible for him being here, the one who was supposed to take care of him, and I couldn't do anything to stop his pain and eventual death. I wanted to do everything I could for him—all the treatments, macrobiotic diet, support groups. Finally, I realized I also needed to feel I was in someone else's hands." She also seemed to need something more than the woods.

One day, she simply walked into the Catholic church nearest to her home, hundreds of miles from the church she had attended as a child. Immediately she was in touch with all her old feelings of contact with God—feelings left over from her spontaneous childhood visits. During the three years between her son's diagnosis and his death, Karen went to mass every Sunday.

In addition, on Tuesday nights she and Brian went to a charismatic prayer group in the basement of the church. Most of the other participants were elderly women. They would join hands in a circle with Brian in the center and pray for his healing. "For Brian, it felt like he was surrounded by warmth and light. He loved it, and it helped him get through the painful treatments. He was even baptized." When Brian died, they held a funeral for him in that church, and all the women from the group attended, along with many other relatives and friends. Karen knew that she had not been alone after all. She felt held both by others and by God. After the funeral, Karen went back to the church a few more times, but all she could do was cry. "Now, my family and I pray at home, but I don't think that will be the end of our story."

This same point was made by a father with whom I spoke who had opted out of religious community. This man is an anthropologist who has spent seven of the last twenty years living with primitive tribes. His children, who were raised before his fieldwork days, had no religious affiliation in their youth. "If I had it to do over again," he said, "I would rethink how we created their sense of community. We relied heavily on their school, which seemed to offer a strong social network in which to live our lives—people to whom we felt responsible and on whom we could rely for

[illegible] but when our kids went away to college, they didn't seem to know how to reconnect. My fieldwork has made me realize how different life is for people who know they have a place in the world where they belong. I call it 'psychological Blue Cross.' I wish I had given my kids a sense of being part of something bigger than their school."

For some parents, the problem with religious community is the public worship. "I don't believe the words in the prayer book, so how can I attend services, much less force my kids to do it?" But what goes on in a house of worship during services is only partly about the words in the prayer book. Parents often discover this because they don't always get to hear the words.

When Sam's son was a baby, he would take him to synagogue and hold him in his arms for the duration of the service. Sometimes he held the book, sometimes not, but he found being there with his child one of the most powerful worship experiences he'd ever had. Later, forced into the hallways by his toddler's need to run around, Sam found himself without book in hand, watching little children as he heard the prayers from the next room. Sometimes he would just set up shop in the hall right from the start.

Why didn't he just stay home? It was still important to him to be under the same roof with others who had come at the same time to touch base with what was deepest in themselves. His own prayers, often unspoken, were enriched by the prayers of others nearby. The words in the book mattered least of all.

As for children, I gather that boredom is not the worst thing that can happen to them. One woman I spoke with never attended any public religious events until she was in college. As a child, each year she would watch the Christmas mass on television enviously, fantasizing that she had a place in the worshiping throng. She longed to be part of something so beautiful and grand. As she put it, "I think I had a hole in my psyche, a God-shaped hole." Another told me that she went to Catholic mass almost every day with her grandmother. "I could not understand what was being said, but I was definitely inoculated for life. I have changed my beliefs and practices many times, but my deepest faith, an absolute conviction about the existence of Spirit, has never left me."

But there is also the other side. For some people, traditional religious institutions simply don't work. Beth, for example, divorced her husband shortly after learning that he had abused each of their children. After hearing the whole story, the rabbi of their Orthodox synagogue made it clear that he did not believe Beth's story, that her husband was still welcome as a member of the community, but that she was not. Beth finds community in other contexts now.

Marta Sanchez is a social worker in a program for pregnant women on medical assistance. She sits down with each of her clients and helps them map out their support systems on paper. "I always ask about the church," Marta said, "and sometimes the women agree that it is part of what supports them. But often, they look blank. 'What do you mean, support? Does the minister pay my rent?' Many of my clients think of the church as another institution that has failed them. When the church helps them with the real challenges of their lives like food and child care, then it begins to be a community for them."

Meg describes herself as a "recovering Catholic." Missing community, she decided to take her six-year-old, Lori, to the local Unitarian church on Christmas Eve. Meg loved hearing the familiar Christmas carols as the room grew darker and night fell. When they began lighting candles, Meg was in heaven. At that moment, Lori tugged at her mother's sleeve. Meg turned to see her daughter's face in the glow of the candlelight; Lori looked like a little angel. Meg leaned over to listen to Lori, imagining she was about to utter one of those sweet and profound comments you tell people about for years to come. "Mom," Lori said, "I was thinking I'd like to get Cheese Doodles on the way home." Meg realized that she needed to search for a community that touched both their souls; she eventually discovered it in a wonderful adult and child choral group.

In researching this book, I met many people like Meg. They showed me the variety of communal contexts in which families find spiritual nurture. The person who spoke most passionately and eloquently about the function of community in her spiritual life, for example, was someone who had found it in her urban neighborhood.

"My neighborhood isn't just people living on a block; it is a community. When one of us sees someone who looks unfamiliar in someone else's backyard, we call the police. Sometimes it turns out to be someone's father-in-law and we all have a good laugh, but it's worth erring on the side of caution. We protect each other. Last fall we all decided to enlarge the tree pits on our block, and then together we planted five hundred bulbs. We are constantly having block cleanups. During one of the

snowstorms, I called everyone on the street and told them to bring whatever they were cooking and come for dinner. We didn't choose each other, but now we support each other. Since I've lived on this block, two people have died, and I saw them carry the bodies out of the house. Four babies were born, and I watched them carry the little ones in. When I'm sick, my neighbors do my shopping. I will put it bluntly: I consider it a spiritual experience to pick up garbage on my block."

Why? What does all this have to do with a spiritual life? Let me paraphrase what I heard from this young mother: "Life is a series of concentric circles of connection. I am connected to myself, then to my family, then to my community, then to my city, my country, the earth, and finally to God. If a step is missing along the way, it makes the rest of the connections more difficult. As passionately as I feel about my family, I need to also have that passion about a larger group of people. As much as I love humankind, I have to love a smaller group first. For me, the connecting circle between my family and God is the neighborhood in which I live."

The operative word is *belonging*. Belonging to a community is an experience that helps us believe that we also belong in the universe, belong to God. Lois received this gift through her child. While she was pregnant, Lois watched with envy as her next-door neighbor—who had just had a baby—would answer the door to pots and pots of soup from her church friends. Lois looked around for a religious community but found all the churches near her home to be smug and self-satisfied. She was not sure about her own beliefs anyway, and she sensed these places would not welcome her doubts. Then her first child was born with Down syndrome.

Within a short time, Lois had found her community. She organized a group of mothers of children with Down syndrome that met weekly. Soon these people began to care for each other, support one another through life's passages, and mediate love for one another.

"How ironic!" Lois reflected. "The so-called tragedy of having a child with special needs was really a gift in this respect." It led Lois and her family to discover a life shared with others, without worry about creedal correctness. And the irony deepens. Through that community, Lois began to learn faith in a God of acceptance and love—an entirely new belief for her. "One day, my son was sick and three women from my group came by with food. All of a sudden, I remembered my neighbor with the pots of soup. I laughed! I had gotten the soup I had hoped for, and a whole lot more as well." Through the experience of belonging, Lois experienced God. She summed it up: "At this point I honestly *could* join a church, but now I don't need to, at least not for the reasons I originally thought."

Susan was overwhelmed with four children under the age of eight. She went to a church, but that wasn't where her deepest connections were found. She knew she had some good friends out there in the world, seven or eight women who lived in different parts of town whom she could count on in a crunch. It was they who gave meaning to her life, provided her with whatever sense she had of being held and upheld. But most of these women didn't know each other. One day, when Susan was feeling particularly exhausted, she suddenly realized that it would help her to feel supported if she had a community. So she decided to build one for herself. She invited her friends to meet once a month and share their lives through talk. The group became a community for one another, a source of sustenance for each of the members. The sharing in the group became Susan's primary religious experience. Motherhood had awakened in Susan the need; community had filled it.

I encountered more than one couple who bonded so fully with the people in their childbirth preparation class that after sharing that intense experience, they went on to meet regularly—with the now born children—and create a community in which to raise them. Some mothers discover in a nursing mother's class or group the raw material for a community of support that continues long after the children have stopped feeding at the breast.

So the last word is not a plug for religious community. Rather, it is an observation that serious community, in whatever form it appears, is inherently religious. And it is remarkably the same, in its essence, all over the world. Jacob raised his child in the intense communal structure of the Old Order Amish. He told me about his daughter's experience in life. The family left the Amish world when Rebecca was twelve. She attended public high school and then college. Later, as a member of the Peace Corps, she found herself far from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in a small village in Africa, in a different terrain and climate, speaking a foreign language and eating strange foods. Rebecca's first letter to her parents from Africa was short and to the point: "I feel completely at home." When Jacob interpreted that missive, what he learned was this: the village Rebecca was

living in was a true community, an experience she knew from her childhood. The particulars of time and place differed, but the essence was constant.

One of my young informants, a thirteen-year-old girl, told me that after being exposed to a variety of religious services, she invented her own religion. It was the essence of simplicity. "God created the world and that's it. You die and that's it. It doesn't matter what you wear to the services. Actually, there are no services, just the announcements and the refreshments."

This girl may not have gotten all that religion has to offer yet, but she has begun to appreciate sharing life with others. As she gets older, she will find that she was right not to leave community out of her invented religion. For many, the home a community offers is a profound glimpse of grace. As Robert Frost said about home,

> *I should have called it*
> *Something you somehow haven't to deserve.*

Chapter 6

PLAYTIME

Character

> *"We'll always love you, but we want to*
> *raise you so other people will love you too."*

In Yiddish, the word *mensch* literally means "human being." It connotes quite a bit more. A mensch is someone who acts with integrity, someone who is responsible, who is decent and fair and honest. Another Yiddish word, *edelkeit*, complements it. *Edelkeit* means nobility of soul. A person possessing *edelkeit* is compassionate, loving, generous of spirit. When I asked parents what they wanted for their children, this is what they told me—those few who knew Yiddish and the great majority who did not: "I want my child to be a person who radiates *edelkeit*. I want my child to be a mensch."

When playtime comes, the little mensch in training is brought to the playground, carrying his beloved ball. The parent watches from the bench, pretending to be interested in the other parents' gossip, really interested in the child. When someone else wants to play with the ball, what will he do? Will he display the *edelkeit* I have tried so hard to instill? Will he be the mensch I so want him to be? Or will he push the other child into the sandbox? And then comes the question that makes parenthood the spiritual journey it is. If he doesn't act as I hoped, will I be a mensch? Or will I push *him* into the sandbox?

The challenge of shaping our children's character is a spiritual education for us. Sometimes, children's innate goodness startles their parents and evokes their awe. Just as often, however, parents are shocked and frustrated by their child's crabby, selfish, or even violent nature. Parents discover anew the underside of humanity. And in their response to their