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— Publishers Weekly

donald miller

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NONRELIGIOUS THOUGHTS ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Community

Living with Freaks

BEFORE I LIVED IN COMMUNITY, I THOUGHT FAITH, mine being Christian faith, was something a person did alone, like monks in caves. I thought the backbone of faith was time alone with God, time reading ancient texts and meditating on poetry or the precepts of natural law and, perhaps, when a person gets good and godly, levitating potted plants or pitchers of water.

It seems that way in books. I had read a Christian book about the betterment of self, the actualization of the individual in the personal journey toward God. The book was all about focus and drive and perspective. It was all stuff you did in a quiet room. None of it had anything to do with community.

If other people were a part of the Christian journey, they had small roles; they were accountability partners or counselors or husbands or wives. I hadn't seen a single book (outside the majority of books in the New Testament) that addressed a group of people or a community with advice about faith.

When I walked into the Christian section of a bookstore, the message was clear: Faith is something you do alone.

Rick does not have much tolerance for people living alone.

He's like Bill Clinton in that he feels everyone's pain. If Rick thinks somebody is lonely, he can't sleep at night. He wants us all to live with each other and play nice so he can get some rest. Tortured soul.

I didn't know what to think about the idea of living in community at first. I had lived on my own for about six years, and the idea of moving in with a bunch of slobs didn't appeal to me. Living in community sounded so, um, odd. Cults do that sort of thing, you know. First you live in community, and then you drink punch and die.

It was Rick's idea, though, and he seemed fairly normal in all the other areas of his life. He never mentioned anything about a spaceship trailing behind a comet. He never asked us to store weapons or peanut butter, so I figured the thing about living in community was on the up-and-up. Just because something looks like a cult doesn't mean it really is, right? The other thing is that, at the time, I was pushing thirty and still not married. When you are thirty and not married and you move in with a bunch of guys, you look like you have given up, like you are a bunch of losers who live together so you can talk about computers and share video games.

If I lived in community, we would have to have about five raging parties just to shake the loser image. But I am not one to party. I like going to bed at nine and watching CNN till I fall asleep. So I was thinking I could move in with the guys and we could tell everybody we had raging parties but never actually have them.

I didn't know whether to make the move or not.

Rick kept bothering me about it. I was living way out in the country, about thirty miles from town, and he kept asking me if I was lonely out there, if I wouldn't much rather move into town with a bunch of guys from the church. He asked if I had the

chance to minister to anybody out there in the country. He asked if I was having any influence on the cows. I told him I was having a lot of influence. I wrote books. He laughed. I sat there uncomfortably while he laughed. "Books," he said. "Brilliant! You write books for people." He couldn't stop laughing. He was being very annoying.

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I moved in with five other guys about a month after talking with Rick. We found a house in Laurelhurst, one of the houses on the traffic circle at 39th and Glisan. We lived across the street from the giant statue of Joan of Arc. You'll see the statue if you come to Portland.

I liked it at first. It was a big house, and I got the best room, the room with all the windows. My room literally had windows on every wall, about ten windows in all. It was like living in a green house. I set my desk in front of the huge window that looked down on the traffic circle and the statue. My friends used to drive around the circle and honk when they went by. I always forgot I lived in a glass room so I would pull my finger out of my nose just in time to wave back. I went from living in complete isolation to living in a glass box on a busy street.

One of the best things about living in community was that I had brothers for the first time ever. We used to sit on the porch and watch cars go around the roundabout. We used to stare at the statue of Joan of Arc and wonder, out loud, if we could take her in a fight.

I have a picture on my desk of the six guys at Graceland, which is what we named the house. People thought we named the house Graceland because we wanted it to be a place where people experienced God's grace and unconditional love. But we

didn't think about that till later. We really named it Graceland because that was the name of the house Elvis lived in, and, like Elvis, we were all pretty good with the ladies.

The picture on my desk is more than a picture of six guys; it is a picture of me in my transition, not a physical transition but more of an inner shift from one sort of thinking to another. I don't look all that tired in the picture, but I remember being tired. I remember feeling tired for almost a year. I was tired because I wasn't used to being around people all the time.

The picture was taken on the porch. We were all smoking pipes. I was wearing a black stocking cap, like a beat poet or a bank robber. Andrew the Protester, the tall good-looking one with dark hair and the beard, the one who looks like a young Fidel Castro, was the activist in our bachelor family. He is the guy I told you about with whom I go to protests. He works with the homeless downtown and is studying at Portland State to become a social worker. He is always talking about how outrageous the Republicans are or how wrong it is to eat beef. I honestly don't know how Andrew got so tall without eating beef.

Jeremy, the guy in the Wranglers with the marine haircut, is the cowboy in the family. He always carries a gun. You'd think Andrew and Jeremy would hate each other because Andrew opposes the right to bear arms, but they get along okay, good-natured guys and all. It is a shame because that would be a great fight. Jeremy wants to be a cop, and he went to college on a wrestling scholarship, and Andrew is a communist. I would try to get them to fight, but they liked each other.

Mike Tucker, whom we all refer to as Tuck, was the older brother in the clan, the responsible one. He is the one with the spiked red hair, like Richie Cunningham fused with a rock star. Mike was a trucker for years but always dreamed of a career in advertising. He moved to Portland and started his own advertising

agency with just a cell phone and a Web site. He posed nude on his brochure, which got him gigs with Doc Martens and a local fashion agency. He freelances every other day and drives trucks the rest of the time. Mike is one of my best friends in the world. Mike is one of the greatest guys I know.

Simon, the short good-looking guy with the black hair and sly grin, was the leprechaun of our tribe. He's a deeply spiritual Irishman here for the year from Dublin. Simon is a womanizer, always heading down to Kell's for a pint with the lads or to the church to pray and ask God's forgiveness for his detestable sins and temper. Simon came to America on a J-1 visa. He came to Portland, specifically, to study our church. He wants to go back to the homeland and start a Christian revival, returning the country to its faith in Jesus, the living God. After that, he wants to unite men and take England captive, forcing them to be slaves to the Irish, the greatest of all peoples, the people who invented honor, integrity, Western civilization, Guinness and, apparently, peanut butter and the light bulb.

Trevor, the young guy in the picture, looks like Justin Timberlake, like the lead singer of a boy band. He has tight hair that curls just out of the shoot, and he's died it blond. Trev is the kid, the rookie on our team of misfits. He is just out of high school a few years and rides a Yamaha crotch-rocket motorcycle so fast that when he lets me drive it, I can hardly keep the front wheel on the ground. He is a learner, with a solid heart like a sponge that absorbs, and he wants to become a very good man. Trevor is one of my favorite people. He is my Nintendo buddy. We yell profanities at each other while playing NFL Blitz. I usually win because he is slow with the fingers. Sometimes, after I beat him in the game, he crawls into his little bed and cries himself to sleep. After that I usually feel sorry for him, and I let him win a game or two. Rookie.



I liked them all very much, but we had hard times. I was a serious recluse before I moved in with the guys at Graceland. When you live on your own for years, you begin to think the world belongs to you. You begin to think all space is your space and all time is your time.

It is like in that movie *About a Boy* where Nick Hornby's chief character, played by Hugh Grant, believes that life is a play about himself, that all other characters are only acting minor roles in a story that centers around him. My life felt like that. Life was a story about me because I was in every scene. In fact, I was the only one in every scene. I was everywhere I went. If somebody walked into my scene, it would frustrate me because they were disrupting the general theme of the play, namely my comfort or glory. Other people were flat characters in my movie, lifeless characters. Sometimes I would have scenes with them, dialogue, and they would speak their lines, and I would speak mine. But the movie, the grand movie stretching from Adam to the Antichrist, was about me. I wouldn't have told you that at the time, but that is the way I lived.

Tuck was one of my best friends when he moved in. He is still one of my best friends, but for a while I wanted to kill him. He did not understand that life was a movie about me. Nobody ever told him. He would knock on my door while I was reading, come in and sit down in a chair opposite me, and then he would want to talk, he would want to hear about my day. I couldn't believe it. The audacity to come into my room, my soundstage, and interrupt the obvious flow of the story with questions about how I am.

I would give Tuck little signals that I didn't want to talk like eye rolls or short answers to his questions. I would stare into

space so he thought I was crazy or snore so he would think I had fallen asleep. I think I hurt his feelings. He would get very frustrated with me, go upstairs, and wonder why I was acting that way. He only did this a few times before he dismissed me as a jerk. I almost lost the friendship, to be honest.

I didn't like the feeling of having to work with people. We would have a community meeting and talk about who wasn't doing their chores or who was leaving dirty dishes in the sink, and if I felt accused I would lash back at whoever accused me. I was confident I was right and they were wrong. I could not see, at the time, that I was being rude. There were a few times when Trevor actually stood up and walked out of the room. It was always because of me. The other guys had lived with people before. They knew all about people.

Living in community made me realize one of my faults: I was addicted to myself. All I thought about was myself. The only thing I really cared about was myself. I had very little concept of love, altruism, or sacrifice. I discovered that my mind is like a radio that picks up only one station, the one that plays me: *K-DON, all Don, all the time.*

I did not understand the exchange that takes place in meaningful dialogue, when two people sit down and tune their radios, if only for a moment, to the other person's station. It must have been painful for Tuck to try so desperately to catch my station, and for me to brush him off.

Having had my way for so long, I became defensive about what I perceived as encroachments on my rights. My personal bubble was huge. I couldn't have conversations that lasted more than ten minutes. I wanted efficiency in personal interaction, and while listening to one of my housemates talk, I wondered why they couldn't get to the point. *What are you trying to tell me?* I would think. *Do we really have to stand here and make small talk?*

Tuck told me later that in the first few months of living with me he felt judged, as though there was something wrong with him. He felt unvalued any time he was around me.

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{ The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me.

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God brought me to Graceland to rid me of this deception, to scrub it out of the gray matter of my mind. It was a frustrating and painful experience.

I hear addicts talk about the shakes and panic attacks and the highs and lows of resisting their habit, and to some degree I understand them because I have had habits of my own, but no drug is so powerful as the drug of self. No rut in the mind is so deep as the one that says I am the world, the world belongs to me, all people are characters in my play. There is no addiction so powerful as self-addiction.

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In the spring of my year at Graceland, when the ground was beginning to dry at Laurelhurst Park, a friend and I traveled to Salem to hear Brennan Manning speak. Manning is a former Catholic priest and a wonderful writer who has struggled with alcoholism and speaks frankly about matters of Christian spirituality.

We sat so close I could see the blue in Brennan's eyes and that quality of sincerity you find in people who have turned trial into service. Brennan grew up in New York and speaks with a slight East Coast bite that has been sanded down by years of smoking.

An ear has to work a bit to keep his pace. He opened his talk with the story of Zacchaeus. Brennan talked about how an entire town, with their ridicule and hatred, could not keep the little man from oppressing them through the extravagant financial gains he made as a tax collector. Christ walked through town, Brennan said, and spotted the man. Christ told Zacchaeus that He would like to have a meal with him.

In the single conversation Christ had with Zacchaeus, Brennan reminded us, Jesus spoke affirmation and love, and the tax collector sold his possessions and made amends to those he had robbed. It was the affection of Christ, not the brutality of a town, that healed Zacchaeus.

Manning went on to speak of the great danger of a harsh word, the power of unlove to deteriorate a person's heart and spirit, and how, as representatives of the grace and love of God, our communication should be seasoned with love and compassion.

While Manning was speaking, I was being shown myself, and I felt like God was asking me to change. I was being asked to walk away from the lies I believed about the world being about me. I had been communicating unlove to my housemates because I thought they were not cooperating with the meaning of life, that meaning being my desire and will and choice and comfort.

There was nothing fun about going home that night. I went with new eyes, seeing my housemates as people. For the first time I saw them as people, and I could sense God's love for them. I had been living with God's prized possessions, His children, the dear ones to Him, and had considered them a bother to this earth that was mine, this space and time that were mine.

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In the short year at Graceland I hurt all the guys at one time or another. Fixing the carnage would take time. I had to make things

right with each of them. I had really messed things up. Jeremy, the guy with the marine haircut who was going to become a cop, couldn't stand me. I had run my car through the garage door one night and neglected to fix it. Jeremy parked his motorcycle in the garage and so he had to use the broken door every day. My room was directly above the garage, so when Jeremy went to work in the morning at five o'clock, he would start his motorcycle engine, and it sounded like somebody was starting a lawn mower next to my bed. I would get furious, and later that night I would ask him if there was something we could do. He said no, that was where he needed to keep his motorcycle. And that was true. So, every time Jeremy had trouble getting the broken door up and down, he would get mad at me, and every time he started his motorcycle at 5:00 A.M., I would get mad at him. The issue, of course, was not about the motorcycle or the door; the issue was about whether or not we respected each other, whether or not we liked each other.

One evening I was down in the basement talking to Tuck while he was working out. I decided to do some laundry while I was down there, but somebody's clothes were in the dryer. There was no place to put them so I put them on the floor. I didn't think anything of it, you know, because the floor was pretty clean, but it turned out the clothes were Jeremy's and, later that night, when he got home, he wrote a note on our white board to the person who had thrown his clothes on the floor. I didn't actually throw them on the floor, I just sort of set them there, but still, he was pretty heated. I told him it was me, and I apologized. He had to go for a walk he was so mad. It was the last straw for him.

When he came back I asked him if we could talk. I told him it was time we dealt with it. He kept wanting to walk away from the conversation because he was so mad, but I wouldn't let him. I was ready to apologize. I told him I didn't feel like he cared

about me because he started his motorcycle every morning, and I had become defensive about that, and that made me want to get him back, and I had done that sort of subconsciously, with little comments and that sort of thing. I had never told him, at the very beginning, that I felt like he didn't like me and I wanted him to. Instead, I had been proud and passive-aggressive. That was why we were experiencing all of this. And I told him that I felt bad. I didn't accuse him of anything, which looking back was very, very important. And, also, I didn't expect anything from him in return. I really didn't feel like he owed me anything. Jeremy listened very carefully once he had calmed down. He was great. He told me how much he liked me, and that meant the world to me. In that moment I could feel all the anger I had been feeling melt away. I couldn't even remember what I was angry about. And the next morning, when Jeremy started his motorcycle, it didn't even wake me up.

I was in San Francisco recently staying at this bed and breakfast place for people who are in the city to do ministry. It was a small house, but there were probably fifteen people living there at the time. The guy who ran the place, Bill, was always making meals or cleaning up after us, and I took note of his incredible patience and kindness. I noticed that not all of us did our dishes after a meal, and very few people thanked him for cooking. One morning, before anybody woke up, Bill and I were drinking coffee at the dining room table. I told him I lived with five guys and that it was very difficult for me because I liked my space and needed my privacy. I asked him how he kept such a good attitude all of the time with so many people abusing his kindness. Bill set down his coffee and looked me in the eye. "Don," he said. "If we are not willing to wake up in the morning and die to ourselves, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether or not we are really following Jesus."