

Communal Living: A Reflection

Nathan Migdal

Having read "The Sextet Love Story: A Perfect Love Story in an Imperfect Society" by Rev. Dr. Sung Jacob Sohn, and being a resident of the Myra House Holistic Living Center for a period of nearly five months now, I present this exposition as a contemplation of the roles communal living can play in our time.

Throughout my life, I have been molded by society to satisfy my own needs and desires before anyone else's. All else is secondary to this foundational belief imbued within my mind. Ayn Rand, the founder of modern objectivism and author of such works as "Atlas Shrugged" and "The Fountainhead", would agree that this is a morally upright principle to live by. After all, if we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot care for the needs of others. Rand's sentiments do however stand in stark contrast to the altruistic philosophies of Immanuel Kant, author of "A Critique of Pure Reason" and other metaphysical texts. He argues that feelings and intuition have as much value and importance as the external world around us, which he believes is largely manufactured by our minds and therefore cannot be understood objectively by anyone.

An outspoken proponent of capitalism, Ayn Rand (during her lifetime) publicly denounced Kant's centuries-old doctrines which she believed are the cornerstone of modern post-secondary education, particularly within the humanities. From her point of view, living altruistically is a corrosive exercise, which burdens the most capable and successful members of society while lifting up society's less deserving members. The stark contrast between these two schools of thought serves as a distilled representation of our modern social dichotomy, in which we feel torn between living our lives by the tenets of logic, objectivism, and rationality, and allowing romance, instinct, and spirituality to guide our paths. Interestingly enough, the human brain can be divided into two "hemispheres" which share a similar functional dichotomy to that of Kant and Rand's schools of thought. The right hemisphere is responsible for interpreting music, generating creative ideas, and guiding spatial recognition (Kant). The left hemisphere is our center for logical thought, mathematical reasoning, and language (Rand).

Throughout our daily lives, we continually make use of these two hemispheres, often simultaneously, to guide our thoughts and actions. Yet they are opposed in many ways. One side of our minds says "let's paint today, let's go to a concert, let's do something different!" The other says "it's time to do your taxes, you need to brush up on economic policies before the upcoming election takes place, and why don't you reorganize those books on your shelf by category, they're out of order!" Like a little congressional hearing in our minds, we take an internal vote of prioritization based on the perceived value and importance of each activity in our lives then proceed from there, often unaware of the inherent (yet necessary) conflict taking place within us throughout the process. And so, understanding the nature of this fascinating anatomical trait has led me yet again to seek the middle path in life: taking care of my own needs while considering how I may benefit others in doing so.

Light simultaneously acts as both a particle and a wave, though we perceive it as a single entity. In much the same way, our lives are governed by continual harmonic contradictions taking place both inside of and outside of ourselves. We are one, yet we are all autonomous individuals. We share to show our concern for others, yet horde to ensure there's enough for ourselves. We give love, but not without hoping to receive some in return. We speak of peace, yet often create it through violence. This is at the root of all existence. Many of us have faith in an all-knowing, all-powerful God, yet logic tells us that it is improbable for such a being to exist given the natural laws governing our universe. And so, we must come to terms with the beauty and mystery that is humanity and the greater world we occupy. One of the ways to achieve this aim is through communal living, a vanishing art.

There are some in western society today who find communal living to be archaic and outdated; a relic of the past. They might even say it is a regression to tribalism. Even so, tribalism has allowed humanity to

overcome more than 200,000 years' worth of obstacles and challenges as we dispersed throughout the globe to form new societies, to flee famine, persecution, and to settle on pristine lands unspoiled by past inhabitants. It seems wise not to dispose of this ancient practice when so many have benefited from living with relatives and non-relatives in close knit societies for most of history. Just as gold was an excellent and reliable international currency for thousands of years (until Federal Reserve notes replaced it), communal living has been an integral part of the human experience until just recently in certain developed and developing nations.

As individualism roots itself deeper and deeper into the contemporary human psyche, we begin to question why it's necessary to share our lives and intimate details with others. Maybe we are better off alone or living in small family groups under different roofs, our interactions limited to "hellos" when we walk past one another on the street or step out to get the mail. Yet we find time and time again that without a strong sense of community, we feel lost and alienated from one another. When someone makes a mistake or causes us harm, we tend to take it more personally when individualism governs our lives. Why is this? Because putting too much stock in ourselves and not enough in the society we comprise creates hypersensitivity to the criticisms and wrongdoings of others. We each must now shoulder significantly more burdens than our predecessors. What used to take a whole tribe to accomplish is now expected to be accomplished by one or two. So what then is the cost of this modern lifestyle?

While living and working at the Myra House Holistic Living Center, I learned to appreciate being able to share my fears and concerns with others whenever I needed to. We were all one another's counselors at one point or another. Seeking a therapist becomes less and less necessary when you form such close relationships with your peers. On the Living Water Farm, each day I had a partner to work with seemed simpler and far less overwhelming than when I attempted to tackle complex projects by myself. Whenever the responsibility of completing daily goals gets divided between members of the house, the burden feels lighter for everyone. This concept applies not only to work but to planning recreational events, preparing food, and discussing our plans during Monday night meetings. The continual sharing of our experiences gives us a strong sense of cohesiveness that is so lacking in today's culture.

Additionally, living with nonrelatives in a close setting like the Myra House helps build bridges between people who may not otherwise think they have anything in common. Our religious backgrounds differ, our educational backgrounds vary, and our socioeconomic histories are all distinct from one another. Yet by living together, we see how much in common all people truly have, despite some obvious differences. Communal living provides us with indispensable insights into our social nature and helps shed light on why we feel so much more balanced when our trials and triumphs are shared experiences.

In "The Sextet Love Story: A Perfect Love Story in an Imperfect Society", the theme of reaching out to those in need and the immense gratification we feel by helping others is an unwavering refrain throughout the book. Happiness, when shared, becomes amplified in a sort of positive feedback loop between those experiencing it. One portion of the story that strikes me as particularly moving is the passage detailing outreach to the homeless where you (Dr. Sung Sohn) and Won (David), spend time among the most downtrodden members of society and teach them breathing techniques to improve their health. It serves as a reminder that we can all make contributions to improve each others' lives, not only through money but through time and patience given to those who don't often receive them. This is where an extreme philosophical stance like objectivism falls short for me. We all reach points in our lives where we need the help of strangers. I needed help this past February when my car was stuck in the snow after I had pulled off the highway in Utah. Fortunately for me, a man driving a pickup truck had the right equipment to pull my car out of the rut I had worked it into. We all find ourselves in ruts from time to time.

True, we cannot truly share joy or happiness with others if we are not at peace within ourselves. Though it is a substantial myth that we are better off only tending to our own matters and not getting involved with the greater community around us. Love brings with it feelings of connection and transcendence from the petty squabbles and daily trials we all face. So it follows that the more time we spend connecting (in person) with others and allowing ourselves to transcend everyday places and situations through art,

recreation, community gardens, meditation, etc., the more love will manifest itself within and around us. As astrophysicist Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson once put it: "We are all connected. To each other, biologically. To the earth, chemically. And to the rest of the universe, atomically." These words serve as literal and metaphorical truth for all human beings. Because we are connected at the most fundamental of levels, one can see after minimal contemplation that it is in our nature to be codependent, a.k.a. communal.

While technology continues to provide us with new ways to connect virtually, it is increasingly evident that face-to-face contact has declined as the "Age of Convenience" marches on. With so many ways to do business online and manage our lives electronically, more and more is expected of everyone, to where we take on an immense number of tasks each day that often prevent us from socializing like our parents and their parents once did. This may seem paradoxical, but it holds true in my own experience along with many others whom I've shared these insights with.

In closing, I believe we have reached an unprecedented juncture in human history that will be remembered in the centuries to come. We must collectively choose between being an ever more productive society that values economic growth above all else and being a communal society that accepts a more humble, connected existence with each other and our surroundings. Today, the Rand vs. Kant debate rages on in our politics and culture. Inevitably, tomorrow's world will exist as a combination of these two philosophies. However, the stakes will only continue to rise as human populations increase around the globe and the Western lifestyle is sought by more and more nations.

Desires can be infinite but the Earth's resources are not. Someday, we will have to make a decisive choice between which stance dominates our lives: materialism or interconnectedness. I for one, hope we heed the wisdom of our ancestors and the divine will of our Creator in making this vital decision. Joining the Myra House family, among other things, has granted me a renewed appreciation for the insights of my predecessors. For instance, I no longer believe the purpose of life is to live for my own satisfaction.