

# A Good Neighbor

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# A Good Neighbor

*Benedict's Guide to Community*

Robert Benson



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*This book is for  
Kendra & John and Emily & Jason.*

*And it is for The Friends of Silence & of the Poor,  
whoever and wherever you may be.*



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## A Beginning

*Love one another as I have loved you.*

—The Gospel of Our Lord

*Seeking his workers in a multitude of people,  
the Lord calls out and lifts his voice again:  
Is there anyone here who yearns for life and  
desires to see good days?*

—From the Rule of Saint Benedict

*Benedict's Rule is simply a practical manual  
to give guidance to a family of brothers, an  
extended household, who had to earn their  
living, who were concerned with food, with  
the care of visitors or the sick, with the upkeep  
of buildings and land, while recognizing the  
need for time to read and study—and yet  
determined to make prayer the central focus,  
the one priority of their lives.*

—Esther de Waal (adapted)



All of the Law and all of the Prophets can be fulfilled in two commandments,” said the One Who came among us to those He walked among.

“Love God,” He said. “And love your neighbor.”

This book is about the second of those commandments. Any conversation about community—discovering community, living in community, nurturing community, restoring community—is, at the very core, a conversation about loving one’s neighbor and being loved in return. Being loved enough in return that something like community or fellowship or common purpose takes place between us. Whether the *neighbor* in question lives across town or across the globe, down the block or down the hall, in the same town or in the same house.



I have never lived, and likely never will, in a community that is under the Rule of Saint Benedict, a guide for monastic communities. That is not the life to which I am called. I am called to live a life of work and family, art and prayer, in the world outside the walls of a monastery. But

in the same way that I believe that those who live a life of prayer in communities intentionally made for prayer have much to teach us about prayer, I believe that the monks and nuns who live in Benedictine settings have much to teach us about community.

There is wisdom about prayer in such places that can be transposed into my life if I will take the time to read and listen and observe and wait. There is wisdom about life lived together that can also be transposed into my life, when I listen and observe and wait.

While reading and studying Benedict's Rule some time ago now, I discovered a pattern prescribed by Benedict that helped me begin to balance prayer and work and community and rest. This pattern I came to see in the life of the One Who came among us, too. Because the Rule is based on Scripture, discovering the connection of one pattern to the next did not surprise me.

These days I am seeing another pattern, one that is four-fold.

- In the beginning was the Word  
and the Word humbled Himself  
and came among us.
- Jesus showed mercy to those who  
came to Him.

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- Jesus welcomed everyone,  
regardless of social standing.
- Jesus cared for those who were  
given to Him and to whom  
He was given.

This pattern is echoed in the Rule of Saint Benedict. It is a pattern that helps us discover and build and nurture and restore community in our lives. It is a pattern that helps us follow the second of the great commandments.



# *A Longing for Community*

*Keep seeking until you find.*

—The Gospel of Our Lord

*Open your eyes to the light that comes from God, and your ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.*

*What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace.*

—From the Rule of Saint Benedict

*Unless we learn to live with ourselves we cannot live with others. But equally, unless and until we have learnt to live full and creatively with others we cannot hope to live with our own selves.*

—Esther de Waal





**I** am among the shyest people you might ever meet.

One of my friends once wrote that he was so shy that if you sat next to him on a bus ride to California, he would probably not say two words to you unless you were sitting on his hat.

He could have written that sentence about me.

I have heard folks say this about their friends: “We are so close that we can go for years without seeing each other and then when we do, the conversation picks up right where it left off.”

I can go for years without seeing some of my closest friends and when we finally meet again, the silence picks up right where it left off. That is how you know you are one of my best friends: we enjoy sharing silence as much as we enjoy sharing conversation.

So for me to be writing a paragraph about community much less a book about community makes me laugh at myself more than a little. Though, I have learned more about community by keeping my mouth shut than I have by talking. This is a lesson I learned from the great spiritual

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thinker Yogi Berra, who said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

When I have been still and silent long enough to really see and hear, I have noticed that a deep sense of community is not easy to come by. As shy as I am I know, too, that I long for it in my own life.

In silence and observance I have also learned that most of us have this longing no matter how we live out our lives.

“We live our lives in search,” writes Frederick Buechner. “We search for a self to be, we search for work to do, and we search for other selves to love.”

*Community* is another way to say *other selves to love*, of course, and even we shy folks live our lives in search of folks to love and to be loved by in return, people who will share in the ups and downs of our journey, people who will walk beside us in the light and dark of our days. We too are hoping to find and to be found by folks with whom we have common cause and work, shared dreams and hopes, collective wisdom and experience. We too want to belong to something larger than ourselves. We too hope to be included and to be held dear and to be thought of often. The same is true of us all, the shy ones and the not-so-shy ones.

Our longing for community seems to be a part of the image of the One Who made us, a part of the divine image whispered into us when we were whispered into being in

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the first place. The hard part is to learn how to see and build and nurture community, and live in and out of and around and through it. A deep sense of community may not ever have been easy to achieve, but it seems especially difficult in the midst of the modern world in which we live.

In some ways, we have never been so able to be connected to each other as we are in our modern world. Technology has made it possible for us to be in touch instantly with people around the world; to hear news as it happens from one side of the globe to the other; to make a few clicks with a mouse or a couple of strokes on a keyboard and be looking at the pictures from a dinner party we attended last evening, at the terror of a wildfire in California, at the joy of a cousin's wedding in Duluth, or at a Washington parade in which a group from our neighborhood marched.

Some of us can talk to our dashboards while we are driving along the highway and tell some device inside the dashboard to call home for us, and the hidden wonder will do just that. We can invite dozens of folks to our house for a party and never have to write out an invitation or lick a stamp or answer the telephone to see if anyone is coming. We can go online and order groceries, connect to a website to buy books, and send flowers to folks we love without ever visiting a florist. The president-elect of the United States once sent me a personal note on my telephone before he gave a speech in a park in Chicago. It is an astonishing world.

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We live in a world where we can live in neighborhoods for years and never know our neighbors, take our children to school for years and never meet the parents of the children they go to school with, sit in a pew next to a couple for years and never know what they do for a living, and live in a city surrounded by tens of thousands of people and never feel as though we belong.

We live in a world where information and ideas come at us at great speed, where conversations have a tendency to move quickly, where messages are instant and meanings often missed. Such a world is not exactly an easy environment in which to build community. It is not even easy to say what we mean by the word when we use it.

The word *community* comes from a Latin word and according to the fine folks who publish *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)—bless them, all of them—it takes a good three columns, a shade under thirty inches of very small type, to explain its meaning. When so many words are required to unpack what a word means, that word is richer than most. The word is likely to be full of subtlety and texture and depth and wonder. The word is likely to be hard to pin down and, at least in the case of *community*, hard to find in the world.

Through all of the definitions and examples and references the OED provides, there seem to be two woven threads.

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The first thread comes from the original roots of the word. The earliest definitions yield up words like *fellowship* and *social intercourse*. There are phrases like *community of relations or feelings* and *life in association with others*. *Common character* and *identity* are mentioned.

These are the kinds of words and phrases we call to mind, I suppose, whenever we talk about our desire to live with some greater sense of community in our lives. We have a common longing for deeper fellowship with those with whom we live and work and worship. We have a longing for being known more intimately by those with whom we identify, with whom we are connected—our families, our neighbors, our friends, our coworkers, our fellow parishioners.

The second thread comes to us from medieval times. During those days the word *community* came to be used for a body of people organized into a political or geographical or social unity.

The word began to be used to describe a body of men or women living together and practicing, more or less, a community of shared goods and possessions—villages, towns, neighborhoods, trade, and church communities.

Some of those communities were the monasteries founded by Saint Benedict and those who lived under what is called the Rule of Saint Benedict.

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Benedict was living as a solitary in a cave some thirty miles from Rome when a group of monks asked him to be their abbot. His first attempt to live in community with other monks did not work out so well, and Benedict returned to his cave. A few years later he was asked by another group, and as a result, he set up twelve monasteries of twelve monks each.

Having learned a thing or two from his first attempt to be abbot for a crowd of monks—failure is one of the ways we get wiser, even if we are on the road to becoming a saint—Benedict wrote a Rule to guide the individual and collective lives of these other monks. The Rule not only guided their prayer, the Rule regulated every part of their life together—prayer and work and community and rest. It shaped the way they ate, the way they took in new monks, the way they assigned roles based on positions of authority, the way monks were disciplined, and so on.

Some fourteen hundred years later, the Rule of Saint Benedict is the foundational Rule for Christian monastic communities around the world. The Rule gives the longing for community an opportunity to be fulfilled in monastic settings.

The people who live in the community hold property and goods in common, they are obedient to the authority of the abess or abbot, and they do their assigned chores as part of a common effort to contribute to the overall purposes and well-being of the community.

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They become a community in both senses of the word—a group sharing fellowship and common character as well as a group belonging to a particular place.

They live together, work together, and pray together every day. Every day of the year. In fact, every day of their lives.

Perhaps if I could define my community as if I were living in a Benedictine monastery and my world was populated mostly by those who lived within its walls and who were as committed and bound to me as I was to them, the longing for community, for deep fellowship, for knowing and being known might become easier to satisfy. Though, I do not mean to suggest living with other folks would necessarily be easier if I lived in a monastic setting; the witness of the saints is enough to dispel any such notion. Saint Benedict himself left his first monastery because the monks were plotting to kill him. And he was the abbot.

I heard spiritual director Elizabeth Canham tell stories about the monastic community for whom she directed a retreat center for many years. She mentioned in passing that the member of the community you are going to have the hardest time getting along with is always in residence in the community before you even get there. The One Who made you and Who has brought you there will see to it.

I am happy to know that some of the people of prayer known as monks and nuns can be challenging to get along with. This is not to say, of course, that they are not people

of prayer or even that I myself might not yet become a person of prayer. I am especially happy to know this to be true on the days I am particularly challenging to get along with. Or on days when I am having trouble with someone who can likewise be a challenge. For the One Who made us has seen to it that I have one or two of those folks in the communities in which I live.

I never have lived in a monastic setting of any sort, though I do know enough to understand that the challenges and obstacles and struggles to fulfill our longing for deep communion with others may be different ones. And I know that such communities are no better or worse than the ones the rest of us live in; they are simply made up of people who are called to that way of life. And I am not called to live the life monastics live.

What I *am* called to do is be as deeply engaged in and present to and in communion with those to whom I have been given and who have been given to me. Which is what it will mean for me to fulfill my longing for community.

I also have learned from Elizabeth Canham that whatever are the challenges that come with our communities, we are to meet those challenges with as much joy and determination is possible.

One of the challenges to fulfilling the longing I have for community does not come from having no community at all. In fact, in some ways, the opposite is true.



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The challenge comes from living, as most all of us do, in several communities at the same time. Communities that do not happen to be in the same place. The resulting challenge is not insignificant but neither is it insurmountable.

First, I live in the community that is my family. My children are grown now and live only a few minutes away, and a fair number of the folks who make up our extended family live in and around the city, too. I am a poet, not a math whiz, but by my rough calculation, we reside in eight houses stretched out over 720 square miles, an area not exactly conducive to giving each other a pat on the back or saying hello while passing each other on the way to prayers or to a meal. We have times for and ways of keeping in touch, but we do not see each other often.

One of those houses is where I live with the woman to whom I am married. We do have the chores we perform together around the house and we have the kind of long conversations about making books one would expect to take place where a writer and a literary agent live, but I do not actually do my work with the community I live with.

The second community in which I live out the majority of the days of my life is a small community called Sunnyside. Sunnyside is the name for the three hundred or so houses which occupy the eighteen square blocks we call home. Sunnyside is the old name for the neighborhood. The new name is not as cool sounding to me. And according to the

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neighborhood association, when you use the new name, you take in another twenty square blocks and another few hundred houses. Being as shy as I am, after ten years or so, I still have not met everyone who lives in Sunnyside.

But we do know a lot of folks, and we are invited to sit on a lot of porches and share a lot of meals in a lot of backyards. We try to always go to the summer concerts in the park a few blocks away so we can see everyone and catch up on the news. There are two coffee shops and four restaurants in Sunnyside, and when we walk we meet people we know every five minutes. Sometimes I wish there were bells to call us to stop and pray together in Sunnyside. And as much, like the monastics, as I have in common with these folks, we do not work together or hold our property in common. Yet we are a community.

I am also a member of the cathedral parish in our town, and have been for ten years or so—proudly so, I might add. The cathedral is a fine place to worship, and after some conversational challenges largely connected to my shyness—I attended every Sunday for a year, for example, before I finally went out the back door and shook hands with one of the half dozen or so priests who were waiting after the service—I have now met enough of my fellow parishioners to bear witness that the parish is made up of generally fine folks.

And the two thousand or so of us who make up this community also live all over the six counties that make up our

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metro area, and we all drive downtown to share our worship and then drive back to our neighborhoods to live our lives. We work in other communities and we hang on to our own goods. Except for those few moments each week when we drive downtown for the Sunday service, our prayer is said in private. We say it alone together, one might say, which is no small thing but it affects our sense of community.

But according to the catechism, we are a community of faith. And I believe we are.

And if you could see and hear us gathering up together for the Holy Eucharist on a Sunday morning or gathering up at an Evensong on an evening in Lent or pounding nails into a house for Habitat for Humanity or collecting things on behalf of a thrift shop for the poor at St. Luke's, you would think so too.

For the record, I am also a member of the local literary community, a part of the national publishing community as a whole, and an alumnus of a spiritual formation community that has now grown to more than a thousand members (I have even met a third of them). And, as has become increasingly obvious in our global age, obvious even to a shy Luddite, I happen to be a citizen of the world.

For a shy person, one who shares a house with only one other person, works alone in a little building in the back garden, and has to make up reasons to leave the house, I certainly seem to live a life full of folks. There is a sense in

which I have so many communities of which I am a part that living in community should be as easy a thing to do as there possibly could be. But if, in fact, someone offers me a chance to be in community, I am going to think long and hard. I have so many associations now I can hardly stand it.

What I long for now, rather than additional communities, is an abiding sense of deep fellowship and communion with the people with whom I am currently sharing my life, no matter where they live or how often I see them.

I am coming to believe that for many of us, some of the difficulty in living our lives with any deep sense of fellowship and communion begins not with the fact that we are a part of no community at all, but rather that we are a part of so many of them.

I have read enough about and talked to enough people in monastic communities to know there are unique challenges to living in them. There are also some challenges to living *in* community for those of us who do not live in a *single* community. The first is to remember that we are called to these communities and if we answer the call to help shape community, these are the places where we are to be doing so.

In the prayer book I use most of the time, these words are said toward the end of morning prayer, before intercessions or petitions or thanksgivings are to be offered up: “We offer our prayer for those with whom we share the Journey,

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those who have been given to us and to whom we have been given.” I have come to love those words.

Those words help me see more clearly how true it is that I have found other selves to love. The truth is I now have so many other selves to love—family and friends, fellow parishioners and poets, business associates and neighbors—I can hardly stay in touch with them all. And there is no common rule for being in touch with them or praying with them or working with them. My being in community with them is made more difficult, almost daily, by the simple fact that we all live in such different ways and in such different places and under such different circumstances.

How then to be in community with these communities to whom I have been given? How then to be present to and pray with those who have been given to me? How then to love them and be loved by them in return?

This is the place where the good Saint Benedict himself begins to speak to me, and perhaps to us all.

Some of what Benedict has written in his Rule is clearly for people who are responding to a different calling. There are regulations for how many letters a monk may receive in a year, what time breakfast should be served during the harvest season, what to do with the summer robes when the time comes for the winter ones, what time to stop reading in the mornings during Lent. These bits of the Rule are for times and places and communities of which I am not a part.

Yet, some of the lessons Benedict learned and taught within a small group of monks all those years are lessons we moderns who long for community would do well to listen to. Lessons about mercy and humility, about suffering and confession, about hospitality and caring and welcome, about a kind of spiritual posture that may create the room for a deeper sense of community to grow in the communities into which we have been called—all of the communities of our calling.

What I am seeking now, in the following pages, is the guidance that might be there in the Rule for someone like me and someone like you, people who do not live with the people we work with, do not pray with the people who live in the house next door or in the next block, and do not see the people we work with outside of the place where we work.

I am in search of what the Rule can teach us about nurturing fellowship with people with whom we often share only a part of our lives rather than most of our lives. I am hoping to discover some of what the Rule has to say about building a sense of community with people with whom we share only a small portion of our lives in common.

Is there a way for us to read the lines of a Rule written for a certain kind of community and discover what is to be found in the lines and between those lines that can help us learn how to more fully live in community with the myriad of communities to whom we moderns have been given?

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I believe there is.

In the end, our longings are less about how we find community and more about how we live in relationship to those to whom we have been given.

We know to whom we have been given, even if some of the names and faces change as we go in and out of the different seasons of our lives.

Some of the people who lived down the block, ones we loved the most, have now moved away. Or our children—the ones that writer Khalil Gibran once called “the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself”—do what we had thought they might do all along, grow up and then move away to live their own lives.

Sometimes the *where* of our life changes. We change jobs, we change towns, we change parishes. We begin to work with other people who come to take the place of the people we had worked with for so long. We move into a new house and realize we know no one on the block and have to start over with a portion of our life in community. A priest leaves and a new one comes, and the crowd of people with whom we pray and worship begins to shift and change.

The longing that never changes is the one for deep engagement with and presence to those to whom we have been given. Our longing to live in communion with them, to share deeply in the part of our life we hold in common with them, to be in community with them no matter the

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distances that separate us or the circumstances that have brought us to each other—these longings have been with us for all time past. And will be with us for all time to come.

From out of the all time past speaks the wisdom of Benedict, wisdom that can teach us much about community in the time to come.



# Heroic Humility

*Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

—The Gospel of Our Lord

*The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.*

*Only in this are we distinguished in the sight of God: if we are found better than others in good works and humility.*

—From the Rule of Saint Benedict

*We are being asked to walk free of the structures and aspirations of contemporary society while still living in the midst of it.*

—Esther de Waal



**I**f one is going to wander into a discussion about community that includes some of Saint Benedict's ideas about the subject—which is obviously what you have wandered into here—then he or she is not going to get very far without running into Benedict's strong feelings about humility. The good saint seems to believe humility is the proper posture for those who would live with others. In fact, the more I read the Rule, the more I get the impression he believes community may not even be possible without humility.

And on a regular basis, the liturgy at the cathedral community to which I have been given reinforces what the saint has to say.



At our house we like a ceremony.

We like tea in the afternoon with all of the silver and the attendant rigmarole. We like to have our children with us at the house for the Christmas feast—everyone dressed up for dinner, roast beef and old china and toasts all around, and little prizes for everyone after the dessert.