

From L'Abri to The Landing

BY EMILY RODGERS

None of us intended to build a Christian community house. Some were still in school while others were navigating first jobs, but all of us needed a place to live mid-semester. After moving into The Landing, however, we discovered that we were becoming more like brothers and sisters to one another.

Passersby may see nothing remarkable about the boxy structure—a two-story, red-brick duplex at the end of the block. “The Landing,” as we like to call it, looks a bit forlorn, like the last piece of cherry cobbler in the corner of a rectangular baking dish. Yet it has become dear to us—five quarter-lifers who established an intentional community in this urban setting—in a way that none of us expected, much less planned.

The name of our house was inspired by the flock of doves and several owls nesting in the pecan trees beside the upper apartment’s balcony. This domestic menagerie reminded us of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Peace,” in which he characterizes the spiritual gift as a “wild wooddove.” Hopkins concludes:

...And when Peace here does house
he comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,
he comes to brood and sit.¹

In the spirit of this poem, we christened our home a place of active peace and determined to create a haven of it for ourselves and anyone else in need of restoration.

Recently, the deep importance of our little brick house became clear to us when we hosted a friend from Minneapolis for “house dinner”—our daily practice of munching on a hearty evening meal that one of us has prepared. “I told some of my neighbors in Minneapolis about what you do here at The

Landing, taking turns to cook dinner each weeknight,” our guest began. “They felt inspired by the idea; so now my neighborhood hosts weekly ‘community dinners’ in our homes, based upon a monthly rotation. We all love it! We are finally starting to know one another. And the idea came directly from you guys.” It dawned on us: by the simple steps of sharing a meal each night, forming the *Landing Literary Society* to discuss one another’s art, cultivating a backyard garden complete with chickens, and adhering to the liturgical church calendar, we are discovering a communal pattern of living that enriches our lives and, as our guest revealed, the lives of others. We are pushing back the culture’s unrelenting press toward individualism and independence that leaves little room for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly calls “life together.”²

None of us initially intended to build a Christian community house. Some were still in school while others were navigating first jobs, but all of us needed to find a place to live at an odd time mid-semester. Though we came from different family backgrounds, parts of the country, and Christian denominations, we had similar longings for community. After moving into The Landing, we began sharing our stories and, through that experience, became more like brothers and sisters to one another. We began to forge the sort of common memory that, Wendell Berry warns, is often lacking today:

[W]hen a community loses its memory, its members no longer know one another. How can they know one another if they have forgotten or have never learned one another’s stories? If they do not know one another’s stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another? People who do not trust one another do not help one another, and moreover they fear one another.³

Though our dinner talk might range from the local water filtration system to Victorian English literature to indie song lyrics and beyond, the fabric of each conversation is storytelling. Our common memory informs our self-reflection and decision making, and engenders mutual trust and respect.

While the members of The Landing do not claim to be adherents of New Monasticism in its totality, our common way of life adheres to several marks of the movement. Four concepts – hospitality to the stranger (Mark 3), humble submission to Christ’s body, the Church (Mark 5), nurturing common life among members of an intentional community (Mark 7), and care for the plot of God’s earth given to us (Mark 10) – serve as pillars of our small community.⁴



My appreciation for a common life in a Christian community developed around another dinner table. Or, I should say, a picnic blanket, surrounded by individuals of various ages from all over the world who had gathered at a sprawling manor house in Greatham, England. English wildflowers bloomed against the old wall that borders the property, the exclamations of children could be heard as they played amidst the gardens, and the clatter of dishes

emanated from an open kitchen window nearby. My companions—a teenage girl from Scotland, an artist from Cambridge, a college student from Mississippi, and a married couple from Brazil—talked between themselves as I observed the scene. Although I do not recall the points of their discussion, I realized then that people everywhere long for the opportunity to express themselves authentically without fear of judgment. To return to Berry's phrase, they long to "know one another's stories." This is why they come to the Manor House.

The Manor House sits on the campus of English L'Abri, a branch of the original L'Abri Fellowship founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer in Switzerland during the early 1950s.⁵ Although the Schaeffers' teaching remains an integral thread among the many strands of dialogue that take place within these communities, workers and tutors engage all genuine questions seriously regardless of the theological or philosophical leanings of the questioner. The beauty of the L'Abri model emerges as intellectual pursuits and discussions intertwine seamlessly with practical chores and activities. For L'Abri workers and students, everything is spiritual; integration remains central. "You could say that [L'Abri] is a community built around homes that offers hospitality through the act of welcoming strangers," the English L'Abri Web site explains.⁶ Students engage in daily morning prayers, discussion lunches, tutorials with workers, laundry duty, and playing volleyball during afternoon tea, among other things. Some guests remain for only a week while others stay for an entire three-month term. The liturgy of daily life paces forward as individuals come and go, bringing refreshment and remembrances of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Small vases of fresh flowers greet students as they gather at the breakfast table, demonstrating that we have been given life anew and that the God who clothes the grass of the field will provide abundantly for us as well. Edith Schaeffer called this restorative attention to detail the "hidden art" of cultivating a home.⁷ Art, along with

storytelling and spiritual formation, breathes life into the L'Abri community. If you were to ask me why L'Abri has not only flourished for over sixty years but has branched out into nine countries, this would be my reply: L'Abri (which translates "the shelter") advances a vision of life as something sacred and communal, a vision of art as something beautiful and worshipful, a vision of story as something valuable and essential, and a vision of peace as something "that comes with work to do."

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Roll the tape forward a year or two, and look at where some of the individuals who sat around the picnic blanket now serve. The artist from Cambridge returned to school to finish her degree before spending time as L'Abri's artist in residence. The college student from Mississippi left graduate school to become a teacher in a classical Christian academy, following a dream that was born during her time at L'Abri. The husband and wife from Brazil returned to their country to help establish one of the newest branches of L'Abri outside the city of Belo Horizonte.

The unity of new monastic communities transcends physical location. Although some are blessed to remain together for many years, others dissipate as members recognize that they have been equipped to serve elsewhere.

As for me, I decided to pursue a Masters degree in higher education administration so that I could be positioned to establish L'Abri-like communities on university campuses. The opportunities for translating the L'Abri experience to university settings are endless. The Collegiate Way, for example, is a movement

in higher education to reclaim the Oxford and Cambridge (and Harvard and Yale) tradition of building residential colleges in lieu of the modern college dormitory.⁸ Residential colleges foster community life with distinctive architectural elements, including a college library, classrooms, a quad for fellowship, a great hall for dining, and junior and senior common rooms, to name a few. I returned to Baylor University after my summer at L'Abri to live in Brooks Residential College as a senior.

When my friends (who fully embraced life off-campus) asked why I wanted to live in the College, I explained that I valued the commitment of faculty and administrators to cultivate an intimate community where students could develop those disciplines of body, mind, and soul that increase the capacity for human flourishing. Daily morning and evening prayers, Tuesday teas with the faculty master, Sunday community dinners, and annual traditions and ceremonies all contribute to a sense of fellowship under the Word at Brooks.

Colleges and universities across the country are adopting this residential model because they have seen the significant positive effects on the scholarship and personal development of students living in residential colleges. This can also be accomplished on a smaller scale in independent homes on or near campus. Hill House, a Christian study center located near the University of Texas at Austin, serves the local academic community by providing a place for quiet study, reflection, and conversation on topics of faith and learning within a culture of care.⁹ Headed by Greg and Mary Jane Grooms, a couple

who worked at Swiss L'Abri, Hill House hosts film nights, lectures, and community meals throughout the year. Much like The Landing, Hill House provides peaceful shelter from the urban rush to undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty while providing resources that equip them to treat all of life as spiritual.

Since the fifth mark of New Monasticism sets forth the importance of communal submission to Christ's body, the Church, it seems appropriate that local congregations should participate in creating intentional communities where people can gather to share their stories and adopt a common rule of life. Multiple congregations around the country are partnering with the Fellows Initiative to financially support intentional communities where recent college graduates train to lead lives of faithfulness and excellence in the professional world.¹⁰ For instance, at the Trinity Fellows Program in Charlottesville, Virginia, twelve fellows receive theological training and mentorship from mature Christian men and women while applying their learning in the community and marketplace. The fellows live with a host family rather than in a community house, but participate together in seminar classes and service projects.

Congregations can cultivate similar initiatives among their membership. My own church recently established LifeTogether groups (based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's text by that name) that meet weekly to practice contemplative prayer, discuss a common reading, and occasionally share a meal. Ultimately, these groups exist to provide sanctuary and accountability for those who desire to rediscover the integration of mind, body, and spirit within a faithful community built upon the teachings of the early Christians. Although these groups are not residentially-based by design, members might choose to find homes in the same neighborhood in order to nurture a common life and be well-positioned to offer hospitality to strangers.



At the beginning of *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer quotes the Psalmist: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).¹¹ The importance of dwelling with one another cannot be emphasized enough. The Psalmist is careful to add, however, that we must dwell together *in unity* if we wish to attain the good. Thus a LifeTogether neighborhood, a residential college, a L'Abri, or a Landing should not be considered mere dwellings, but places of true fellowship, peace, storytelling, and unity.

This unity transcends physical location. Although some communities are blessed to remain together for many years, others dissipate as the various members recognize that they have been equipped to serve elsewhere. This is not an occasion for sadness but for rejoicing. As we experience the changing of seasons at The Landing, we see many of our wood doves and other fowl come and go and are reminded that our time here is temporary. We will finish graduate school or find a new job, and will need to leave The

Landing. Life together shapes and prepares us for life apart. If community teaches us to cultivate the disciplines of mind, body, and spirit that increase our capacity to flourish as disciples, then we should be prepared to share this vision with others when given the opportunity.

New monastic communities are not cloistered communities; they extend into the world with transformative and restorative strength. Bonhoeffer expressed so well the great blessing of life together in intentional Christian communities:

It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day – that the time still separating us from the most profound loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let those who until now have had the privilege of living a Christian life together with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and realize: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.¹²

NOTES

1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Peace,” *Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 75, lines 9-11.

2 Bonhoeffer coins this phrase to describe daily life at the Finkewalde Seminary. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996).

3 Wendell Berry, “The Work of a Local Culture,” *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1990), 157.

4 For more information, see *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), and the Web site www.newmonasticism.org.

5 Edith Schaeffer, *L’Abri* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1969).

6 See www.labri.org/england (accessed June 8, 2010).

7 Edith Schaeffer, *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971).

8 More information, see collegiateway.org (accessed June 8, 2010).

9 More information, see hillhouseaustin.org (accessed June 8, 2010).

10 More information, see www.thefellowsinitiative.com (accessed June 8, 2010).

11 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

12 *Ibid.*, 30.



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