

The Rabbi's Gift

Although it has the reputation as a universal story, *The Rabbi's Gift* was actually written in 1979 by the much-loved hermit, Francis Dorff, O. Praem. As he describes it, the story simply came to him while walking in the woods behind the Abbey where lived.¹ Roughly ten years later, M. Scott Peck, MD, had a hand in bringing Father Dorff's story to the mainstream by reproducing a version of it in the prologue to his first book about Community Building, *The Different Drum*. That version (below) was used by Scotty and his team at the Foundation for Community Encouragement to begin their celebrated Community Building Workshops during the 1980s and 90s – and continues to be a favorite of Community Building Facilitators worldwide.

You can hear *The Rabbi's Gift* in Scotty's own voice at moreat.net/rabbisgift.

There was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent

death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no

¹ Dorff, Francis. *The Spiritual Journey of a Misfit: a Personal Pilgrimage*. Sunstone Press, 2015.

piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving— it was something cryptic— was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean

me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.



Some Reflection Questions

1. What does the story mean to you? How is this relevant to your personal life? ²
2. Why do you suppose, as the Rabbi observes, “the spirit has gone out of the people”?
3. What exactly is the Rabbi’s gift? What are his actual words?
4. How can you be sure this isn’t just the Abbot manipulating the other monks?
5. Are there any costs to the monks in their accepting the gift?
6. How is power and its stewardship a theme in the monastery’s rebirth? Is there a change in the way it is accepted, shared, and entrusted?
7. How is discovery a theme – of self, of others, and of the group as a whole?
8. What is the relationship between noticing and doing in the story?
9. Why is it that the differences that had divided the monks don’t continue to do so – but become instead the source of a sort of golden harmony?
10. What would it be like to have others treat you with the sort of extraordinary respect that the five old monks discovered for each other?
11. What would it take for you to treat others in this way?
12. How would the groups you are part of be different if they existed in the sort of extraordinary respect that permeates the monastery at the end of the story?
13. Relate the following quotes to your experience of the story”

“There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.”

– M. Scott Peck

“We’re all wounded people, and so consciously or unconsciously we can and do hurt each other. At the heart of a caring community is forgiveness, one to another.”

– Jean Vanier

“He who loves community destroys community; he who loves the brethren builds community.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

² For groups that are willing to speak openly and honestly about how the story has shown up in their personal lives, facilitators will find that there is no need – nor will there be time – to discuss any of the following questions. More than okay – that’s a sign of Community.



Community Building

Community Building is a group intervention that was developed by internationally-acclaimed psychiatrist and best-selling author, M. Scott Peck, MD.^{3, 4} The method, which Dr. Peck describes in his books *The Different Drum* and *A World Waiting to Be Born*, has been used around the world to improve group performance by teaching people how to relate more authentically one to another. Through its concentrated and intensely personal three-day format, participants discover how to transcend the diversity of their backgrounds, enter into difficult dialogue gracefully, and discover the hidden order and unique ecology at work in their shared experience.

For more about Community Building, please go to moreat.net/communitybuilding

Community Building Vision

There is a yearning in the heart for peace. Because of the wounds and rejections we have received in past relationships, we are frightened by the risks. In our fear, we discount the dream of authentic Community as merely visionary. But there are rules by which people can come back together, by which the old wounds can be healed. The purpose of Community Building is to teach these rules — to make hope real again — and to make the vision actually manifest in a world which has almost forgotten the glory of what it means to be human.

– M. Scott Peck, M.D.

Community Building Guidelines

The following Guidelines are used in Community Building Workshops to help participants communicate more authentically – which helps to create the space for the group to experience Community.

1. Say your name before you speak.
2. Speak personally and specifically, using “I-statements.”
3. Speak when moved to speak; do not speak when not moved to speak.
4. Include others and yourself; avoid exclusivity.
5. Be emotionally present.
6. Voice displeasure or any dislikes to the entire group.
7. Commit to “hang in there.”
8. Each person is responsible for the success of the group.
9. Participation can be verbal or non-verbal.
10. Maintain strict confidentiality

³ Peck, M. Scott. *The Different Drum: Community-making and Peace*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. Print.

⁴ Peck, M. Scott. *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered*. New York: Bantam, 1993. Print.



These Guidelines are deceptively simple – as participants quickly discover when they try to adhere to them in a Community Building Workshop.

Chattanooga Endeavors

Chattanooga Endeavors restores released prisoners to productive roles in society through training, counseling, and support services that remove the barriers to meaningful employment and teach the skills needed to enter the workforce and live within the law. Our program is based on the pioneering work of Robert E. Roberts, Ph.D., (Sep 5, 1943 - Oct 14, 2013) to demonstrate the value of providing helping services in the context of Community Building. Although Dr. Roberts introduced many groups to this approach, only a few human services organizations were able to implement it. And Chattanooga Endeavors alone has been able to sustain it.

An Invitation to Experience Community

You can learn a great deal about Community Building by reading what's been written about the model. However, like other experiential models, the best way to understand it is to attend a Community Building Workshop.

Community Building Workshops at Chattanooga Endeavors are free. To learn about attending one, please contact us at (423) 266-1888 or info@chattanoogaendeavors.org

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