

A TIME TO TALK

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Some years ago, near the end of a long day at the end of a long week, my wife Holly Atkinson and I met up in the lobby of the building where we were then living. We were scheduled to go to a reception to celebrate the launch of a capital campaign for Holly's medical school alma mater. But we were both tired, and at that moment, neither of us wanted to go. Besides, we were already late. We really wanted to go up to our apartment and take the rest of the evening off.

So, for 10 minutes or so, we sat in the lobby debating the relative merits of the options before us. It was a close call, but in the end, we decided to go to the reception. It was only a couple of blocks away, and we had already RSVP'd yes. We comforted ourselves by agreeing that we could leave early.

A few minutes later, we found ourselves among a lively group. We chatted with our host, who was chairing the campaign, listened to a presentation by our host and the university president, enjoyed a short piano recital by a star student at the conservatory, and then headed home.

Several weeks later, I was participating in a meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations. I ran into our host from reception, who was there as well. He expressed surprise to see me there. "What is a religious leader like yourself doing here?" he asked.

I explained that my academic focus had been on the relationship between religion and public policy, and the focus had continued — as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and as the chair of the Interfaith Alliance Board of Directors.

"We need to talk," he responded. "Let's have lunch sometime."

We did. As part of our lunchtime conversation, I explained that I was working on a book about the importance of religion as a source of moral and civic formation. This was in the era when Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, among others, were publishing books that consigned religion to the dustbin of history. Religion needs to be revised, I said, and our view of the divine needs to be revised, but if religion disappears, our nation will be in trouble. Where else will people learn how to be good citizens, focused not merely on selfish interests but on the common good?

I told him that my then-book agent and I had been trying for some time to find a publisher who was interested in the book — to no avail. "You need to talk to my book agent," he said. He made the introduction later that day, I had a book contract several weeks later, and my book *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* came out the following year.

And we almost didn't go to the reception.

This experience, along with a couple of other similar experiences, has yielded a mantra that Holly and I take turns telling each other when we're tempted to bail out of a commitment: just show up. You never know what might happen — what doors might open.

I was reminded of this incident when I read Brad Stulberg's essay in the New York Times titled, "For People to Really Know Us, We Need to Show Up." He points out that "a hidden cost of smartphones is how easy they've made it to cancel on people — all you have to do is text and profess apologies, and then feel good about having not, at least, left someone waiting." He adds, "It is if all the plans we make are forever provisional."

Stulberg goes on to say that not canceling plans means showing up for one another. If we commit to certain people and activities, he says, if we feel an obligation to show up for them, then it's likely that we will actually show up. And showing up repeatedly is what creates community.

As a society, we are showing up less and less. Stulberg says, "In our age of autonomy, efficiency, boundaries, and self-care, we too often deprioritize, if not overlook altogether, the wellspring of strength and meaning that comes from obligation."

Besides, if we don't understand our commitment to show up as an obligation, no one will miss us if we don't show up. "When you aren't missed," Stulberg says, "you become lonely. Recent polling data from Morning Consults found that 58% of American adults feel lonely. In other words, in a room of 500 people, 290 are lonely, with a whopping 79% of young adults reporting feeling lonely."

In the past, one of the key sources of a mutual sense of obligation in our culture has been organized religion. People would make a commitment to show up week after week — not only for worship, but also for study, fellowship, advocacy, and outreach in the community. Research has consistently shown that people who regularly participate in a religious community are happier, healthier, and live longer than those who don't.

Some people today still participate regularly in a religious community, as your presence here this morning illustrates. But religious participation as an obligation has been fading, and along with it the benefits of having a solid source of identity and community. The role of religious practice is to build into our lives those obligations that are necessary to our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

After all, the word discipline and the word disciple come from the same root. On the night before Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans, he gathered his twelve disciples together for dinner — the so-called Last Supper. They talked among themselves as they ate bread and drank wine. Jesus spoke to them about his commitment to them and their commitment to each other. Much has been made ever since about the ritual of eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Jesus, a rite known in the Christian tradition as Holy Communion.

My own view is that the narrow focus on the bread and wine may well have been added after Jesus died. It's just as likely that he was telling them to get together regularly for dinner — to talk with each other about what they had learned together and the lasting power of the commitments they had made to each other. In this sense, to be a disciple is to have the discipline to keep showing up.

To be sure, religious communities are not the only places where people can find a source of identity and community. But whatever the source, it needs to be defined by sense of obligation. Our identity, both as individuals and as a community, is defined by commitments to other people that we take seriously. Otherwise, we will ultimately find ourselves alone.

One of my favorite expressions of this dynamic comes from a poem by Robert Frost, who knew well the challenges of finding an identity and a sense of community. He knew loss and loneliness firsthand.

When Frost was 11 years old, his father died of tuberculosis, prompting the rest of the family — Frost himself, along with his mother and sister, who was two years younger — to move from San Francisco to Massachusetts. After finishing high school, Frost studied at Dartmouth for two months and later spent two years at Harvard, but he never earned a college degree. He worked as a teacher, a shoemaker, a newspaper editor, and a factory worker, before trying his hand at farming, at which he failed.

Along the way, Frost's mother died of cancer when he was 26. Frost and his wife Elinor Miriam White, with whom he had been co-valedictorian in high school, eventually had six children. Two died as infants, and one died at age 8 of cholera.

Mental illness took its toll on the family as well. One of Frost's sons committed suicide at age 38, and both Frost's sister and one of his daughters were eventually committed to mental hospitals. "I have been one acquainted with the night," he wrote in one of his best-loved poems. "I have walked out in rain — and back in rain. I have outwalked the furthest city light."

Out of this crucible of loss and loneliness emerged some of the finest poems ever written in English. By the 1920's, Frost was the most celebrated poet in America, and he went on to garner four Pulitzer Prizes. The power of his poetry has endured because Frost discovered what it takes to stay connected with what matters most.

In Frost's poem, "A Time to Talk," he writes:

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, What is it?
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,

And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

Frost published this poem more than a century ago, but it's just as relevant today as ever — and even more so. When the opportunity to talk with a friend interrupts your day, it's not the time to look at your to-do list and decide that you don't have time. Nor is it the time to treat the conversation instrumentally — as a means of getting something arranged or making something happen.

No, not when there is a time to talk. Rather, consider the invitation an obligation. Put other things aside. They will be there when you return. Instead, invest your time and energy in relationships that will give you a sense of identity and community, that will provide a source of support and the experience of belonging.

In Brad Stulberg's essay, he describes hiking under old-growth redwoods in Northern California. He says, "The roots of these mammoth trees, stretching some 200 feet into the air above us, run only 6 to 12 feet deep. Instead of growing down, they grow out, extending dozens of feet to each side, enmeshing themselves with the roots of their neighbors. This is why we never see a lone redwood: they can survive only in a grove, bound together in obligation."

Stulberg concludes: "If we want the strength, stability, and staying power of a redwood, we'd be wise to enmesh ourselves in obligation with others, and to work toward a society that makes this possible for everyone."