## Community

There is a mountaineering film that tells the kind of heroic tale that we love to hear in Montana. Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* depicts the true story of how his climbing partner had to cut their rope to save himself—a move that plunged Joe into a deep crevasse where he was left profoundly alone. Yet over three days, Joe manages to move himself on a broken leg out of the crevasse, down six miles of glacier and moraine fields, to reach the partner who had given him up for dead. It is a classic story of survival against the odds, and a mythological tale of a man who descends into the depths of death only to rise and find life again.

Upon watching the film several times, I recognized an ethical message easily overlooked. After three days of agonizing persistence, Joe claims that he is not continuing his journey back to camp because he thought he would live, but because he wanted to be with someone when he died. It was that feeling of abandonment that kept him going. Despite all the threats to his life, loneliness was a greater evil than death itself. And when his friend finally found him, this rugged mountaineer's first feeling was not of being rescued, but of being held.

We live in a time when 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. The percentage of adults who are currently married fell from 74 percent in 1974 to 56 percent in 1998. More than one and a half million people live in nursing homes. Most people die in institutions. Those who experience loneliness most acutely are likely those who are alone at the end of their lives. Others, perhaps, are those without family, the ones who find making connections in a busy world incredibly difficult. And even within families, people are increasingly disconnected from each other.

As a professor of ethics, I spend a lot of time dissecting sticky moral dilemmas—seeking solutions to questions that have few obvious answers, helping students think through problems and develop the skills to live more ethical lives. But every once in a while, I face the reminders that what is ethically most important in life is really not very hard to figure out. Our disconnectedness is certainly not news—although I wonder how much of the bad news in this world could be avoided if we weren't so good at making strangers of one another, and then coming to fear them.

In the end, of course, what matters most is people experiencing that sense of connection to others and their community. Those connections are often threatened, for example, when there is a divorce, when a job is lost, when children are ignored, and when death is imminent. The loneliness that can result is what Mother Theresa has called the greatest form of suffering. And in an important sense, the loss of connection among people also diminishes the strength of our community.

Unfortunately, as Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* demonstrates, most of the features of our daily life actually inhibit rather than build community. He points to factors ranging from mobility and urban sprawl, to technology and mass media, to pressures of time and money as the biggest culprits. Much of the latter comes through

our tendency to define success as material gain, a pursuit that overcomes our obligations to community and the simple things we should do to show people that they matter. By 1998, for example, 75 percent of college freshman rated being very well off financially as an important personal objective, compared to 19 percent who named participation in community action. The practice of entertaining friends at home has declined 45 percent in less than twenty years. The average American watches roughly four hours of television a day, while membership in civic organizations is declining. And within our work life, the residential stability that leads to stronger communal relationships is threatened by our overall mobility and the indifference of many employers to keeping employees in the fold.

The most perplexing ethical issue for me, therefore, is not often what we should do, but why it is so hard even to notice something so basic to our humanity. Indifference to community and the problem of loneliness comes too easy. That's why we need to learn to notice it, and do what we can to build community—from joining organizations to supporting policies that promote it. We may not be able to change radically the features of modern life that make connection with others so difficult, but we can best start with those individuals next to us, who struggle forward in life with hope of not dying alone. It's not any harder than that.

This is Mark Hanson. Thanks for listening.