

The Road of No Return: Notes on a Spiritual Journey

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“For the years of my life are numbered, and I am leaving by the road of no return” (Job 16:22).

There is a fine but unknowable line between the quantities and intricate motifs of faith and practice. Still, the tension within this border compels people to seek within themselves the spiritual harmony they desire and need. Sometimes, this journey takes some very radical turns. Dissatisfied with what one might find with one group, one is led to look elsewhere, until at last, that harmonious chord is touched, or at least identified. This is what happened to my family when we left behind our lives in a small city in the Southern United States, and joined a Hutterite community in Minnesota a few years ago. We have since chosen to remain here, and committed ourselves to the church and the community for life.

This distinction between faith and practice will always remain, even as it will always be invisible. Still, we know it is there, we comprehend its consequences, and thus we proceed on our way, especially if we live with others in tight-knit, spiritual community.

When my family became Hutterites, we realized we were traveling on uncharted ground. Though there had been a few others who had joined the Hutterites from “outside,” and many others who had tried but eventually left, we knew there was no simple or even complex path for us to follow. Our entry into this culture – coming from an English-speaking, professional, middle-class background, into a German-speaking, Russian-peasant communal background that is strongly familial – was not only a leap of faith, but slightly reckless, too. We had no idea of the struggles or obstacles we would face, and so great was our enthusiasm at first that we tended to ignore the possibility that we might not like what we found.

From this, however, we learned our greatest lesson not only about the Hutterites, but about living in community and living as committed,

convicted Christians: There is no easy road; indeed, there is no identifiable path at all, except for one's faith. And once one finds this path, and discovers where it will lead, one cannot turn back unchanged. It is truly, as Job laments, a road of no return.

Man, because of his inner convictions of faith and outer leanings of practice, seeks and cultivates the culture of community by the very essence of his nature.

This, because it is basic to man, should be a clear means to a meaningful life, if we do not hinder our communal inclinations. However, because we are human, we seek perfection instead of goodness and a perfect balance between our faith and practice instead of a gentle, changing, unbounded harmony. This, because we are awash in faults, is why we will never attain utopia, and why we will always have a terrible struggle on our hands whenever we endeavor to become a community.

Despite the image many have of the Hutterites – of being slightly outdated and more than unaware of the mechanics of human nature – we have found this to be utterly untrue. I think this is where the Hutterian life has some of its great beauty. After centuries of living in community, with all the ups and downs and tragedies and fallow periods, the Hutterite mind, if such a thing can be said to exist, has become ingrained with the reality of community. It seems once one truly enters into such a community, that the struggles and hardships of living with other people – because they do not simply vanish – are so familiar as to defy words or explanation. The difficulties of community are just as familiar among the Hutterites as a blue sky, or the sting of a bee. Our sermons preach it, our stories and histories illustrate it, our immense Chronicle recounts it – time and again, the failures and near failures to make community work. Nonetheless, because of faith, we have continued, and so here we are today. Even in communities where the spiritual state is lacking, and there are some like this, the inclination toward community exists in virtually every soul, and dynamically so. It is simply part of the soil on which every community is founded.

But to the one who comes in from the outside, these mental imprints are not present. It is as if we must learn centuries of lessons in a relatively short time, and without fail, this will be an intense, potentially painful period. It is a period that must be passed in the light of faith.

First of all, we must defeat ourselves, and open ourselves to the working of God, and of the community. We also must battle those things that we bring to the community – our desires, opinions, vices, beliefs that might not harmonize with those of others, even our inner struggles – before we can truly enter into the core of what we are seeking, and what others are seeking, too. We must shed from our souls and personalities the things of the world, the hidden weights that hang from the hearts of everyone who seeks God, and also others who are fellow believers.

We must also battle our impatience, our lack of willingness to accept the flaws of others – our lack of love, really. And once we battle these things – and because they are human faults they never go away – we must fight day after day to keep every inch of spiritual ground we've earned. For there is always a force – whether it is inside us or from elsewhere – that seeks the undoing of every place and moment of harmony, of the unity that only God can create.

This is why we might fight not only for today, but for tomorrow as well. We must fight and struggle and pray in the singular hope that God will break into our darkened hearts and illuminate us, and by illuminating us, show the way for others. Meanwhile, others show us the way, until at last – maybe by tomorrow – there is an even greater illumination than we ever imagined.

When we first came to the Hutterites, we had no concept of what it was to live in community. Our modern society does not prepare one for this. Even though we thought we were coming with open hearts and contented minds, we soon saw that there was much more leading to be done, and an even greater opening – and emptying – yet to occur. Though it shouldn't have, this discouraged us. Try as we might, we could not seem to find our places in the community. Added to this were tensions present within the community that had nothing to do with us – conflicts over innovations and diversions from traditional Hutterite life, as well as a growing dissatisfaction among some who longed for what they thought was a more serious life of repentance elsewhere. When we arrived, there had actually been some families who had left to seek community in another place, and others who would leave within our first year. (Most have now returned.) Naturally, there was some unavoidable friction between these groups and our family, because we seemed to be embracing, even blindly, what they were in the process of testing and rejecting. Our community also was going through some lifestyle changes, with more emphasis on higher education, experimenting with different livelihoods than most colonies engage in, even the presence of certain musical instruments. It was an exciting time actually, especially to one looking in from the fringes. However, once one waded hip-deep into the current, the perspective was far different. It was the true-north perspective, actually, and a far more realistic way of living out what we encountered. Not only were we seeing the positive changes, but we were enduring the tensions that always accompany them.

Then there were the cultural factors to be met and answered. When we first came, of course, we did not speak German, much less the obscure, unwritten *Hutterisch* dialect, though we were open to learning them, and have been reasonably successful in doing so. We felt this was important, because we did not want to come in and rearrange the Hutterian lifestyle on our account. Instead, which we said time and again, we wanted to be like

the people already here, not vice-versa. There were also differing outlooks from what we had encountered before, a kind of physical and mental austerity bred from hard living, even years of poverty for some of the older people. Our approach to medical care, for example, while accommodated, probably was far more indulgent than with many around us, though health care in the colonies is quite thorough. The fact of our extensive education and careers also played a part in the mix; naturally, we were among the few (though there are others in the colonies) who had college degrees and experience in the corporate or professional world. We also had come from that strange and ever-evasive place called simply “the world,” and for this reason alone we were different, and in countless ways.

However, instead of these differences being obstacles, both we and the people we found here decided to take the opportunity to bridge these gaps by love, and use them to draw us all closer together. Most of the time, this was done simply through openness and understanding, and not dwelling on the differences between us, because there was simply no reason to. Still, it was a difficult and inexact science, and tensions and misunderstandings remained. But slowly, even these were set aright, which is the beauty of community. And yet, there were setbacks and hurts, because we are all human and imperfect.

In addition, we were textbook overachievers. My wife, who had been a professional “in the world,” found it difficult at first to gain acceptance in the colony (within herself mostly) as a cook or a *kleine-schul* minder or as one of the garden brigade, even though she enjoyed all these kinds of work and actually went out of her way to take part in them. After years of overdoing in journalism, I found working in our shop, or on our farm, or in our school to be somehow insufficient, as if I was not making a substantial enough contribution, because I simply did not excel at every aspect of these pursuits. After awhile my confusion led to inner stagnation and the problem only deepened. Then, factor in our own struggling human wills, and our adjustment to a new place and way of life, and our pride and our countless human failings that kept us from surrendering fully to what God was asking of us – indeed, we didn’t know how – and our predicament was quite considerable looking. Naturally, because we were confused, and because others around us had their own problems and didn’t always know how to reach out to us, the view of what was really happening sometimes became fogged beyond clarity.

We felt we were failing constantly, though around us, in others whom we regarded as somehow more “perfected” in the way of community, this same battle was also going on.

I remember thinking and saying time after time that what I needed was not to travel more deeply into this enigma, or to surrender to what I didn’t see or understand, even though this is exactly what God tells us we must do.

What I needed, I thought, was guidance.

Of course, there is guidance, and there is being told what to do. Guidance, true guidance, we can find in countless places – in the Bible, in each other, in prayer. Being told what to do is something altogether different, and the community we had chosen did not approach matters this way, which led to our first great awakening: What we wanted was not really guidance, not even advice, but to be told what to do. And truly, it is in not being told what to do that community – and the experience of God – finds its real beauty.

Other people – whether our neighbors or our colony ministers – cannot really do this leading. Only God can, which was another lesson we had to learn. When at times we felt perhaps a little isolated, or as if we had been left to fend for ourselves spiritually, it was because God was at work in us. Those around us, though they supported us, really could not help us through these experiences, at least not in an active, take-charge way. They could only travel along with us, experiencing their own struggles even while trying to allay ours as much as they could, until at last it became apparent to us what was happening. Adrift on the same waves, occasionally finding refuge in the same calms and doldrums – this was our experience of community: Not a utopia, not a haven of unending peace, not some shimmering marge of contentment. Community living, from the inside out, is little less than a hurricane, a storm of bellowing winds that threaten to tear us all apart, yet sometimes thrust us back together in such a way that we can only help one another, in order that we ourselves might survive and take refuge with one another, and with God. This collectivism is the collectivism of true community, of survival, of moving forward together.

It is a living collectivism, not an illusion or a construct. There is nothing idealistic about it, and thus, it is far from perfect. It operates as a function of its own imperfections, because of them and in spite of them, because we are all humans with sinful and selfish impulses that benefit no one but ourselves some of the time.

Living in community, then – earnestly and wholeheartedly living in community – is a non-stop, incomprehensible struggle with more surprises than predictable circumstances, and more heartbreaks than periods of indescribable joy. It is no less than a miracle, therefore, that we can live in community at all – or even endeavor to create a communal place for ourselves in this distraught and distracting world. That we actually do manage to pursue this communal way is yet another miracle, and really, almost an irony of our human nature.

Even though we desire community as humans, our human nature pulls us apart and causes us to isolate ourselves, sometimes beyond the reach of anyone around us. Other times, we are granted the privilege of actually living in a peaceful community, and thriving as beings in a collective of

other people. Still, we are very vulnerable, for at any time, our old natures can rebel or reassert themselves, and before anyone knows it, community is gone, togetherness is gone, sharing is gone, and most of all, our common interest in God is forgotten, if not destroyed. Our human nature does not like giving up its individual identity like that; we as humans do not like surrendering to something greater or deeper or more intelligent, or to something that is not of our creating.

And this is where theology enters in, and most important of all, our common striving for God.

Without this, community – or at least meaningful community – is impossible. For centuries, but especially in the past 200 years or so, countless utopian societies have sprung up in our world, particularly in idealistic and spiritually diverse North America. Many of these we have heard of, usually because they were among the more successful endeavors: The Shakers, the Inspirationists or Amana people, the Oneida community of John Humphrey Noyes, the New Harmonists or Rappists, to name a few. All of these communal efforts, though they enjoyed years of prosperity and growth, eventually fell apart, just like the many, many others we have not heard of, but which seemed to seek community in just as energetic a manner.

There are many reasons for this vulnerability among such groups. The Shakers, because of their celibate, gender-separate beliefs and lifestyle, were almost doomed to decimation because there was no means of growth, only decline. On top of this, the Shakers were burdened quite a bit by defectors, or those who came for a while and then left, or even took advantage of Shaker hospitality on a seasonal basis. The Shaker theology, dwelling as it did on a millennialist philosophy that never took hold in wider society, also played its role in the group's decline. Perhaps what hurt the Shakers most of all, however, was the group's emphasis on the divinity of its founder, Mother Ann Lee, who was seen as not only a revered elder but as a visionary prophetess with nearly god-like attributes. This kind of emphasis on a human rather than on the central idea of God has been the unraveling of countless spiritual groups, communal or not. By ascribing divinity to human beings, these groups make spiritual unity impossible because there will always be disagreement over such human-based doctrines, and because despite any virtues these people might possess, they are still not God, despite what their followers might claim. From this disunity often arises authoritarian leadership, and from this, in extreme cases, "cultism." In lesser cases, spiritual and material self-destruction can be expected at the very least.

This same human-centered-ness was part of the undoing of the Rappites as well as playing a role in the demise of the Oneida group, with its unusual sexual practices, and the Amanas. Indeed, of the above-named

groups only the Amanas (and one small Shaker community) remain as a religious entity, though the Inspirationists long ago abandoned communalism in favor of individual free enterprise. The spirit of “community” among the Amanas, at least in terms of their ethnic identity, remains alive, but not nearly to the degree as before. They remain now as a significantly altered church, and beyond this, as a well-preserved relic of their own culture.

There are those who say the Hutterites are also a dead entity, but this is an ill-informed conception. Despite a lack of aggressive outreach among the colonies, and an acknowledged need for deep spiritual renewal in many places, the Hutterian Church remains very much a living, changing group, with many signs of a very rich and vital life. Just comparing the colonies of today with the scholarship of even a few years ago will show immediately a broad spectrum of changes and different attitudes, brought on by a number of diverse influences, even though the basic mechanics of Hutterian life remain the same.

It is a mistake, really, to relegate such a group to the cobwebs of sociology, though it would seem this has already happened.

Granted the majority of the 400 or so Hutterite colonies in North America would probably be unwilling or at least very hesitant about taking in newcomers, which places some very serious limits on the church as a whole. Still, within the communities’ own confines there remains a distinct line of progression, a sense of permanence that seems to assure a future for every community and its daughter settlements. With or without converts, the communities fully expect to endure, and they very well could.

As humans, as seekers, we look for paths, for lines of entry, for gaps in the trees where the shadows part and the light illumines. The paths we follow define us and largely predetermine for us our destinies. We like it this way. This is why we struggle so deeply when there is no path to follow, and worse yet, when we are making the path ourselves, proving the ground even as we tread on it.

In most community orientations – the military, workplaces, and notably in the monastic life – there are somewhat rigid programs to help “form” newcomers into the mold and type of the others there. This “formation” is often viewed as a breed of coercion, and in subtle ways, it probably is, especially in a setting like the military, where one definitely ceases to be one’s own god and guardian. In the monastic setting, which is distantly, dynamically similar to the Hutterite life, this formation is viewed as utterly necessary, not only to help shape strangers into a productive and spiritually sound group, but to help with the adjustment of moving from one style of life to another life that is totally, radically different. To be sure, there are arguments to be made both for and against this means of discipline, which I cannot present.

But among the Hutterites, there is no means of “formation” for outsiders, because it has been so seldom needed. It is an accommodation, or more precisely, an adaptation that has not been needed. Generally, one’s adaptation to the community is left to the community itself, its ministers and, of course, the individuals coming in. Yet this is probably what my wife and I were yearning for in some way when we came to the community – a predetermined, or at least time-tested path to follow and thereby achieve “success.” The fallacy of this should be apparent, however. Because there was no path, we were able to make our own, which to most people is an almost unimaginable luxury. Instead, we threw this opportunity away. We worried and grappled, becoming at one point very intense conformists, for instance, to rules and timetables that not even the old-timers followed. We became members of the letter, and not of the spirit of the community. Fortunately, this deception did not last long.

Here, one adjusts by gently complying and conforming, and testing the waters for oneself. Certainly, the rules and customs – none of which are written down, meaning no manual for beginners – are enforced if they are flagrantly violated. And at that, any rebukes are relatively mild compared to, say, being upbraided in the typical urban workplace. Otherwise, one is given work to do, training where it is necessary, a place to live, clothes to wear if needed, medical care, plenty to eat and sermons to listen to five or six times a week (even in English in some places, including where we live). This, if one is looking for formation or training or indoctrination, is all there will be. Beyond this, one is generally left on one’s own as far as fitting into the community, or finding one’s place.

On the face of it, this should be simple enough, if one truly longs for this way of life. But looking back, and even looking at the present, I am alarmed at how much tension we put ourselves through. By drifting about and trying to find a path, a form to follow, we lost the ultimate opportunity to make our own path, one that would have been productive and comfortable for us, and keyed to our own pace.

Looking back over our experience, and hearing the stories of those who have tried this way and left, we can see how certain personalities might not succeed. Those with an agenda, those who have their own banner to carry (i.e., a special talent or job to pursue), those who want the rich Hutterian culture to simply part and turn into something more familiar to them – these are the people who eventually, and quite quickly, tend to leave. Others, of course, find themselves called elsewhere, or just aren’t able to hurdle the language or culture gap, or the clothes or the obedience required to those in positions of authority. Others yet – and I think these are the majority when it comes down to it – simply get discouraged, feel unwanted and tether-less and pack up one day and leave. This is especially disappointing because with open dialogue, such problems can often be remedied. However, this

brings us back to what arguably might be a serious shortcoming in the Hutterian system, at least when it comes to outsiders.

There are so few seekers who seem serious, and so little actual “mission” carried out by the colonies, that when a seeker comes and then gets discouraged, the community *simply does not know* what to do in every instance. On the surface it might appear that no one cares to do anything – which we’ve heard people say, and which we’ve even thought a time or two ourselves. However, deep down, the desire not to seem coercive and not to appear to pressure anyone to do anything against his will or judgment – these seem to drive the apparent silence that meets many conflicts. We discovered, in our first months in community, that there is sort of an art to solving one’s own problems in these instances, relying primarily on prayer and simply moving ahead by taking no action at all. Waiting and seeing – patience – is always the best policy, we found, though it is not always the most efficient-looking or satisfying.

In our first year or so in community, we were tempted, like most are, to give up on what we had found here, believing it illusory, or at best, simply not for us because of the cultural factors to be overcome. We became quite hypersensitive to the least of conflicts, to the suspicion that someone was gossiping about us (in another language, at that), or to the innate spiritual doubts that inevitably plague anyone. We began to seek and sense conflict in the most remote corners because, we felt, only by rooting these things out would we resolve these nagging doubts that kept cropping up. Fortunately, our better, calmer natures prevailed, because in reality, these conflicts were largely magnified beyond proportion – most likely by the stress we put ourselves under, and by the natural stress of making a major change in life.

Why we did not give in to this temptation I cannot truly say, except to note that our underlying conviction to stay here and take part in the community never let us go. Once we had entered the community, our roots seemed to have dropped into the soil immediately. Indeed, this rooted-ness – the idea that we actually belonged here, in this place, with these brothers – was what kept us here, and not the reality of what we would find back out in the “world” again. In fact, we were not afraid of that, because we knew the quantities of despair and violence and amorality that exist “out there.” We had lived with them all our lives, and had found our own ways to avoid them. Still, this was not the life we wanted; we did not desire a life of avoidance, but of engagement with others of like mind.

Instead, in times of the greatest temptation to leave, I found myself thinking again and again of the scene we found when we moved into the colony, when we drove over the icy road to the house we still live in, when we entered the yard and unloaded our few possessions and went inside and realized, quite succinctly, that we were home, at long last. I will never forget the hue of the December sky that evening, or the bitter cold, or the

depth of the snow, or the towns and grain elevators we passed on our way in those last few hours of our final journey. They are very much a part of our residing here, and I return to those images often, because they remind me of the great and abiding peace we felt when we actually found ourselves here, in our refuge, in our home. Every mile we passed, every county line we crossed, seemed that much closer to the peaceful resolution of our lives that we felt lay ahead. Certainly, this is not a new sensation for anyone embarking on a great journey. But it is perhaps the fear of the loss of that peace, I believe, that has kept us on our roost this long – that, and the conviction we have, deep in our souls, that this is the right place and time for us to live in community.

Beyond this, it is inexplicable, except in the mystery of Christ.

In a Hutterite colony, as opposed to many other communal groups, there is absolutely no pressure exerted on outsiders, and even to a degree on insiders, to join or make a commitment one might not be ready to make. In fact, this lack of pressure we took at times to be a lack of regard, either for us or for our future in the community. How little did we realize what this hands-off approach really meant. In our life of faith, we leave God to make these determinations. Man, to our way of thinking (which I see now), should neither coerce nor unduly cajole, for by doing so, we compete with God and the work He is doing.

This is hard to describe if one is not willing to take these issues as matters of faith, but in the Hutterite life, this is the way it is. Indeed, in one of our old baptismal documents, attributed to Jakob Hutter himself in the 1500s, it is written that “we do not seek to attract members by smooth words” but by the examples of faith and practice, differ sometimes as they may. I can attest, wholeheartedly, that this is still the case in the colonies, and for most people, it makes the path not only hard to find, but to follow very far once it is revealed. So it was for us anyway.

To one who might choose someday to enter into this life and faith, this could very well be a determining factor when the time comes to stay or go. It is a realization we nearly did not make.

In looking at the history of the Hutterites, we can see periods in which the emphasis on communalism had all but disappeared. These were also, without exception, times of great spiritual decline. No doubt, the Hutterites of those days were looked upon as a failed endeavor from both within and without, if they were not forgotten or overlooked altogether. Having forsaken their earlier zeal for communalism, propelled as this was by persecution, the brothers went into a slow but numbing decline – a trend that was reversed, we are told, by nothing short of divine intervention. Indeed, if we believe what we are told, the communal vision of Michael Waldner, who restored community of goods in the mid-1800s, in the Ukraine, was more than a Biblical and philosophical longing. To read the

accounts he left, an actual vision from beyond left him convicted of the rightness of the communal path. On the one hand, he saw divine joy and salvation for those who shared all and lived together as one; on the other waited nothing less than a blistering eternity of hellfire. One can imagine this hellish imagery, aside from appearing to be a visible, viable warning, represented also the inner despair some of the brothers and sisters must have been feeling, finding themselves in this state of decline. This fire was a trial and punishment of the present, not just of the future. By traveling back to the Christic, communal center of generations past, Waldner felt the Hutterites would find their only chance at rehabilitation and salvation. They largely did, even though many abandoned the communities, and even more migrated to North America only to strike out on their own once they had arrived.

But perhaps the Hutterites, more than any other group in modern times, show that without Christ-centeredness, without an unfailing emphasis on God over any man, community (and indeed true Christianity) is impossible.

True, other communities have existed that were not spiritual in foundation, but which pursued a certain ideal or lifestyle. This, too, is building on sand, because invariably, differences of opinion arise. And when humans cannot solve these problems of day-to-day living, where is one to turn? In spiritual communities, the answer is obvious; but in those without such grounding drift and eventually destruction are inevitable.

Of course, there are many groups that have been very much God- and Spirit-centered, and honestly and earnestly pursued community as a way to truth, yet failed to achieve any longevity. This can have many reasons, and really, there is no way to judge the meaning of such longevity when it does occur. Often, some strange teaching will enter into a circle, or a disastrous sense of distrust, which we believe to be the work of Satan.

For the Hutterites, we have survived nearly 500 years, longer than any other modern communal group. This does not mean, though, that we are immune to anything or that we will be here in another 100 years. It simply means that God has suffered us to survive, and that for now anyway, we remain in His grace.

If we were unable to believe this – that we are here only because of God, then what are we to believe? How would we survive? Can we as men take credit for any of this? Can we say honestly that we survive to this day because of our own efforts? We believe that we cannot, and so we must ascribe and attribute to God, the One who is greater than any of us, even incomprehensible to our deepest and most brilliant minds.

This is a mystery, to be certain, a mystery we will never be able to discern, and which we should simply accept as it is.

The reality is this: We have all entered on a path that God has devised for us, no matter our place or station in life, whether we are in community

or out of it, even if we do not desire community at all. We are all on the road of no return, that Job spoke of, embarked however fully on our own personal spiritual and temporal journeys.

What a gift it is when our journeys coincide, when they intersect with those of others of a like mind. The world seems suddenly a great deal smaller and our ideals a great deal more realistic. God seems possible, quite simply, when we find others who are looking for Him, too. Instead of staring into the dark, instead of traveling this road without a map or without any idea of where we have been, we feel we can actually see God reflected in our fellow believers.

This is the mystery of the road of no return, and the gift of community.

Both are truly treasures, if we do not give them up. Both are actually the same thing, held out for us to accept by the holy hand of God.

This is what we believe.