

THE  
PLANS HE HAS  
FOR  
ME

*Young Adults Tackle Questions About  
Life, God, and the Church*

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E D I T O R

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## How Do I Find My People?

Bethany M. Erb

**W**hen I was eleven years old, I wanted to fit in like tuna in a can. One summer day, the neighbor girl, Vanessa, invited my older sister—my best friend at the time—to spend a day off-roading on her parents’ farm. I was not invited. Imagine the agony I was in that day, envisioning them driving ATVs through freshly mowed cornfields and splashing through puddles. Together. As in, *without me*. I hated feeling left out, like a colorful, grand adventure was happening right on my doorstep and the door was locked from the outside.

When my sister returned, hair tangled and bursting with stories, I tried to look like I had not spent the day organizing my ChapStick collection (my younger self viewed ChapStick tubes like index funds during a bear market—to be bought and held for the long run).

“Did you have fun today?” she asked me innocently.

“More fun than you had,” I said, sashaying past her into the house. I stuck my nose up high, as if Chanel No. 5 wafted from our attic, avoiding eye contact.

I hoped she would feel what I felt: a combination of jealousy and sadness. If someone had asked me how I felt then, I probably would have said something like, “Vanessa is the worst. I hope her hair falls out and she gets a proliferative poison ivy rash.” My wish contained a belief twisted around a fear: my people could be taken away at any moment—and how could I be sure they were my people to begin with?

Before we go any further, I want you to know that this chapter may feel a bit scattered. If you are like me, rereading this for the twenty-seventh

time (in which case, I am flattered but recommend fresh, and probably better-written, reading material), at some point, you will think, “Beth, can we pick a train of thought and stay aboard?” I hear you. To me, this chapter moves around like a Mexican jumping bean. I promise that there *is* a more-than-zero-percent chance that it will come together in the end.

Back to younger me.

Remember the 1993 comedy film *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray relives the same day over and over until he decides what he truly wants in life? That was me during high school, trying to keep that summer day from happening again. I thought of connection as a zero-sum game; being wanted and belonging could unexpectedly run out. Slow to a drip. Explode.

So, I tried to manipulate the game, each day the same of its kind, rigging the odds in my favor. I tried to guarantee a saccharine-sweet community that made up in breadth for what it lacked in substance. A half-truth here, a faux “me too!” there, an over-inflated exam score not-so-far over there—I did whatever it took for me to feel like there was a good reason for me to be present in a particular room. In my mind, at that point in my life, finding *my* people did not matter. Almost *any* people would do.

In thinking about connecting with people, the twentieth-century poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot comes to mind. In the poem, Prufrock is afraid to do something.<sup>1</sup> Eliot does not tell us what that “something” is, but he does tell us the speaker, J. Alfred Prufrock, cannot make up his mind about whether it is worth doing or not. Prufrock thinks hard about whether to force a moment to its crisis; he wonders if he “dares to disturb the universe” by having a conversation—most likely “The Talk,” as women know it, and which many men are said to fear—with a female friend. In short, Prufrock is afraid he has misread the signals and what he thinks is a romantic connection is just his friend being nice. He wonders whether it is worth saying he is into her if she replies, “That is not what I meant at all.” *Oaf*. You do not have to be Prufrock to know how not fun it is to have someone say those words to you. Prufrock fears expressing his true feelings if all he gets in return is clarity.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is an ode to the threat of being misunderstood and unwanted. There is the chance that Prufrock and his female friend’s slippery connection will fall through the conversation’s fingers, and that flickering hope—*this could be my person*—might be quenched, leaving both parties a little less eager to make eye contact with

each other and back on the streets, searching for the spark.

In poker terms, Prufrock cannot make up his mind whether to bet on himself or play it safe and fold. Should he risk looking silly for the sake of showing up as himself when he is around other people? He wonders whether to trade what he really wants for more of the same indecisions and visions that guarantee a future of small talk and walking home alone. Prufrock cannot decide whether he should stay quiet, blend in, and deny himself what he wants out of life or get big, take up space, and figure it out along the way.

In short, as Hamlet put it, “to be or not to be” is his question.

When I read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in college, it changed my life. I don’t mean that in the “I bought a screen-printed beach towel with a Goodreads quote from the first stanza” sense; I mean that it shifted my gears and rattled my marbles, as my grandfather would say. I thought Prufrock was an overthinking hot mess with shot nerves and a bad case of social anxiety. I hated him and everything he stood for. I hated him because he was a lot like me in high school.

Prufrock lacked a gift that all of us want in some shape or form: community. Reading the poem, you are forced to stare at a future made from a present shaped by fear: a life “measured out in coffee spoons”—a life of caring more about what other people think than what you think of yourself.

That sort of future does not sound great to me. Asking permission to be ourselves is like having food poisoning while our friends enjoy taco night: it is not fun, and it leaves us with the leftovers. We wait for whatever space is left before we speak up in a group. We hold back from saying what we believe to be true because no one thinks to ask us. We make ourselves small to fit the shape outlined by personalities around us rather than (kindly) jostling some elbows to stay true to our convictions. We serve ourselves scraps of dignity after those around us eat the whole enchilada.

In a similar way, shared memories build connection, while solitary memories can make people feel left out. This is why storytelling is a great example of building community. You know that feeling of laughing with a friend over a memory as your laughter builds and crescendos? You bring up a detail (“remember when Aunt Bee’s wig fell in the pool?”), and your friend chimes in (“Brad thought it was a freshwater sea urchin!”), and you keep bringing up details that make the story more and more hilarious to you both. That is *connection*, and it feels good. It gives us warm fuzzies

on the best days, and it restores the heartbeat of friendship on the tough ones. Spending time with our people makes us feel like we are in on something—we feel wanted, and in turn, we want to be exactly who we are in the moment. Comfortable. Relaxed. Open to whatever happens next.

I think Prufrock can teach us a lot about finding our people. When we think about finding our people—the salt-of-the-earth, share-a-cup-of-flour friends who can be relied on for anything from jumper cables to date-night recaps (play-by-play, ladies; pass the La Croix)—it can be daunting. Prufrock reminds us that the search for community is worth the risk it requires along the way. His constant back-and-forth with himself about how to show up reflects how our anxieties wear on us over time. When we try to win in conversation by one-upping everyone or trying to manipulate someone's perception of us, we are being like Prufrock—we want to connect with others, but fear gets in our way. Instead of letting our guard down and taking a chance on ourselves, we sit on the sidelines of life, wondering whether we, as Prufrock put it, “dare to eat a peach.”

Ironically, all our pretending and posing keep us from finding our people. Let's look at a scene from a classic movie that can serve as an analogy for us. In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, there is a school dance where the floor starts splitting in half, revealing a pool.<sup>2</sup> Some dancers fall into the pool by accident, while others jump in; some stay put, looking down at the fun. In a similar way, trying to rig the game to get community is like being on one side of that pool and realizing your dance partner is on the other side; as time goes on, the space between you widens. Unless you do something, it soon becomes almost impossible to get to where you want to be—across the divide.

When we try to force community by being what we are not, we end up further from others than when we started. We end up feeling alone in a crowded room, not quite sure who we are when the music stops. We can see who we want to be in community with, but we are separated by our lies to ourselves and others about who we are, what we know, and where we are going. We are separated from others by our fear—anything that we do or believe that keeps us from showing up in truth and love. When we let fear put us on a leash, it is hard for others to see the human in us. We lose the part of us that guides us to our people.

I think we find our people when we hold our breath and leap. When we jump in the pool, we find what we were looking for on the sidelines.

We take the plunge into cold, unfamiliar territory and find it is not so bad after all. Or maybe it is bad but also good, too, all at once. Jumping into the pool is a fresh start. It is wearing a party outfit sewn with purpose instead of perfection, armed not with fear but with the bravery to show up without weapons of self-defense. Our purpose is to get wet, laugh a lot, and create memories to tell our grandkids. We bet on our ability to dog paddle with the best of them, and we join the partygoers with smeared makeup and soggy tuxes having the time of their lives. We discover that this is what life is about: showing up, speaking truthfully, and straddling our safe zone.

It is not perfect; it may take a few practice runs before we jump. For a while, we might need a life preserver to stay afloat. But instead of teetering back and forth, wondering whether we dare to be who we want to be or not, we close our eyes and catapult off the edge (maybe we keep one eye open, just in case). As the proverb goes, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Living a life beyond fear starts with a single to-do on our list: we think of something we are scared to do. We do it. We do it again. We take big breaths in between.

When I first jumped into the pool, it was terrifying. After reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” I decided to experiment with living despite fear. I challenged myself to do one thing a day that scared me (a lot of things scared me, so it was easy to plan a few days out). My first challenge was to make small talk with a gas station attendant. When I got to the counter that day, I waited till the last second after my credit card was approved, muttered something inane about the weather, and high-tailed it back to my car, heart pounding. I drove home with a huge smile on my face, composing my next gas station script.

The next day, I had a full tank of gas but went back anyway. It felt good not to be running on fear’s fumes. Since that day, my daily challenge has ranged from scuba diving with sharks to working as a ski guide at an adventure events lodge in Italy. My heart has never stopped pounding, nor my palms, sweating. I think that is the point. Fear will never stop trailing us, trying to put us on a leash. We ignore it and walk by faith. That’s when the fun begins.

I used to think that community meant finding blonde-haired, volleyball-loving girlfriends who had opinions on things like Ben & Jerry’s ice cream flavors and SoulCycle instructors. (To be fair, I have girlfriends who

fit this description, and I love them dearly—I am one of them, come to think of it.) Thankfully, over the years, my idea of community has become a lot more colorful. My people tend to be outside of my comfort zone, in all shapes and sizes.

Connection lies around the corner when we embrace the challenges knocking on our hearts. When we step out in faith, embracing the call to make our dreams real, we go to new spaces. We meet people in these spaces that want the best for us. When we unleash ourselves from fear, there is room for others by our side.

For example, I once had a dive partner named Mick during a search and rescue PADI course in Cozumel, Mexico. Mick was a semi-retired Canadian plumber with bushy eyebrows and gray, curly hair that gave him an appearance of constant surprise. He worked as a confined areas specialist in commercial plumbing, meaning he was eerily calm. He peppered his sentences with non-ironic “ehs” and did everyone’s job, sometimes forgetting his own job in the process.

I liked Mick a lot. He played guitar at night after we finished dive training, and he talked about how much he loved his grandkids. I tried to explain the American health-care system to him and gave up when we got to copays. We got chocolate croissants together at the local coffee shop, and he told me about his animal encounters in plumbing pipes.

We did not spend much time together, but we made up for it in quality. Mick and I became friends—and we’re still friends. On our last day together, we hugged goodbye at the ferry. I was saying goodbye to someone who had my back and had become a good friend. On the surface, Mick and I look as different as apples and oranges. Below the surface, we share a passion for the ocean. We enjoy exploring under water, identifying fish, and learning how to protect coral. We work well as a team, thinking through what-if scenarios to keep those around us safe. We like learning from each other, sharing stories from our travels and the people we met along the way. Most importantly, we like to laugh.

Perhaps my friendship with Mick can teach us something about finding our people. When we answer the call lying on our hearts, we find our people. We start showing up and taking steps toward our visions, and there we meet others chasing similar visions. We go in the same direction and share our food when we get tired. Maybe our paths split, and we say goodbye for now. Or for later, too. It is not always fun; there may be no five-star hotel with a



vacancy. But a good life is about more than comfort. A livable life is about doing what we fear in the present to create a future that does not scare us.

One individual who demonstrated living life to the fullest was my brother-in-law. My older sister's late husband was a mountaineer who died in an avalanche a year ago. He was known in our family for his kindness and quiet sense of humor. He went out of his way to mentor rock climbers at his local gym. He and one of his closest friends died that day. I will never forget hearing my mom choke out the news over the telephone. Later, my sister told me, "He died doing what he loved."

We know that is true. My sister's husband loved being outdoors; he was in his element battling the elements, figuring out a climbing route, or flying down a ski hill.

Before they were married, my sister said she had to accept that what made her want to be with her husband was what could end them—his passion for living life despite fear. His moral compass, calmness, and resilience were forged from the fires of doing unordinary things. My brother-in-law was one of the most peaceful people that I have ever met. He knew what he was born to do—to guide others to appreciate the great outdoors and explore it himself—and he did it until his last breath.

I do not tell you this story to scare you away from stepping outside of your comfort zone. Hopefully, this story has the opposite effect. We think there is plenty of time to start living. I think we often have less time than we think. Some of us have only a short time to craft a life that brings us peace. When I think of my brother-in-law, his spirit reminds me to seize the day. His choice to live life to the fullest spurs me to climb my own mountains—metaphorically and literally. I hope his legacy inspires you as well.

We were born for great, good things that lie beyond fear's leash. Today is the day to jump in the pool. When we come up for air, our people will be there to hold us up.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Discuss it

1. Have you ever experienced the feeling of disappointment and envy the author describes at the beginning of this chapter? What was the true root of those feelings?

2. How have you tried to “manipulate the game” to create a false sense of community for yourself or force community where perhaps none was natural?
3. What’s currently keeping you from finding, accepting, or building community for yourself?
4. What are some ways you could “be community” for others right now?

### **Apply it**

Identify things you can do to find your people—those who share your interests and passions. Consider groups you can join, events you can attend, classes you can take, places you can go, people you can introduce yourself to, or other ways to meet people. Then take the next step and sign up, send an email, buy a ticket, and make it happen.

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1. T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 9, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>.

2. “Pool Scene,” *It’s a Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra (1946, Liberty Films).