

1John 3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

1John 3:18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

When I was a kid, I loved playing in barns—any barn, really, ours or anybody else’s, but mostly I played in ours. When I was very small, I wasn’t allowed to go to the barn on my own, on account of the cattle who were always shuffling around in the barnyard, but by the time I was six, I used to go up to the barn every day, I think, in the summer, just to see what was going on. I remember three different barns growing up, but the barn I remember best is the barn on our farm in Arkansas. The north side and the south side of the barn each had a row of four stalls and an outside aisle that connected them. In the center, between the two blocks of stalls, was a large hay mow, two stories high and twenty feet wide.

When we first moved to the farm, the barn was meant to store loose hay, not baled—and not only did my dad plant and cut his own hay, it was still possible to buy loose hay from farms around us. Whether he carried the hay into the barnyard with our team and our wooden hay wagon or brought it from somewhere else in an old farm truck, he’d back up to the front of the barn, as close to the siding as he could get, then climb up to the hay doors 15 feet above the ground by way of the ladder nailed to the wall. He’d work loose the hay fork that hung from a track in the roof of the barn, and drop it into the load. Then, with a block and tackle and the hay fork,

he'd pile the hay up in the mow until it was packed just a few feet below the open doors, filling up the whole center of the barn.

That was when I loved the barn best—when I could climb up the outside ladder, throw a leg over the threshold of the hay doors and balance for a few seconds on the ledge there, then jump down five or six feet into the loose hay. Over and over again. But there were certainly other attractions. There were the two or three cattle that we milked, the sweet, grassy smell of their manure, and the calves who were kept mostly separate from their mothers and had to be bottle-fed. There was the mystery of where the most recently pregnant barn cat had hidden her kittens in the hay, and the thrill of checking the nest every day to see when the kittens would open their eyes. Sometimes there were foals in the stalls, or the ponies we rode, or the draft horse team, and dad would direct us about how much sweet feed, how much corn, how much oats, to dish out with coffee cans and take into the stalls to feed them. The sweet feed was a mix of grain, alfalfa pellets, and molasses, and even just opening the bin we kept it in gave off a pleasant aroma. On a few occasions my dad turned one of the stalls into a chicken coop and we had chicks or ducklings to watch. Every so often he turned two of the middle stalls into a hog pen, and the pigs were always very conversational, and usually pulled themselves up out of the mud to sniff at you through the stall door and encourage you to scratch their foreheads.

I guess the reason the barn was so attractive to me was that it was always so full of life. Rain or shine, summer, winter, fall, spring, there were always creatures in the barn living and breathing and leading lives I could only know by my presence, and they always drew me in.

A few years back, I heard a story—maybe more like a fact—that stuck with me in a garbled kind of way. Now I don't know where I heard it, or whether what I remember is correct, or even whether it was actually true when I first heard it, but this is what I remember:

I remember that the reason barns begin to fall apart when they are no longer used is because the breath of the animals that once lived there is there no longer. In the breathing of the cattle and the horses in that shelter, there was enough humidity, especially in winter, to keep the joints tightly sealed. When the animals are no longer housed there, the joints begin to work loose, and eventually the barn collapses.

In its own peculiar way, this building is like a barn, but what holds it together isn't our breathing, but our stewardship. When our stewardship dries up, the barn begins to crumble. And by stewardship I don't mean only the way we usually think about stewardship, as a euphemism for money or care of the building. By stewardship, I mean our contributions and care in the broadest sense—our time, our strengths and gifts, our willingness to be used, our willingness to use our resources for the larger good of our own community, and on behalf of the larger and smaller communities that intersect our community.

In other words, stewardship is another name for Love, Love in a practical way. It's what John is talking about in the passage I began with:

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This building, this barn, is where our brothers and sisters are, and our life together is the arena John is referring to when he says, "let us love one another." The question is, where do we see our sister or brother in need? It's easy to think there is no need. We look around, we see a bunch of people who look pretty capable of taking care of themselves; certainly we aren't looking around in this room and seeing

the kind of hunger we associate with Africa, we aren't seeing our brothers and sisters with no clothes to wear. Our "needs", if that's even the right word, are only physical sometimes. Far more often our needs are emotional, and spiritual, and the one "need" that we all have in common—again, if need is even the right word—is this place, this living barn, as it were. And while we look around and see it standing, there's not a day that goes by that I don't pray that the whole thing doesn't collapse in front of my very eyes.

Because it could; the possibility might seem distant, but it never is. I still hold in my mind's eye an image of the location of every chair and every table and most of the faces that were in the classroom the day one of my seminary professors told us how he'd eventually come to realize that every marriage was always only six months away from divorce, if things went badly, and I think the community of a meeting is the same way—potentially only six months away from divorce. Like a good barn, it needs to be breathed in, constantly, in order to hold together. And all the money in the world won't keep it alive if the money isn't used for its God-directed purpose, and all the vision and purpose in the world won't keep it alive if material resources don't exist to back the vision, and no amount of resources in the service of a vision will suffice for anything if there are no people willing to give time and energy to steward them.

When I look at the life of Jesus, I see an example of what it looks like to give yourself away on God's behalf. Or, as John puts it, to lay down our lives for one another. From God, we have our gifts—time, talents, physical resources—so that we can give them away; we live to the very edge of who we are so that we can give away what we've been given. Which is a noble calling that can seem, sometimes, mundane, even boring. Mowing the lawn, teaching First Day School, showing up for Monthly Meeting, being aware of how the property can best nurture those who use it; leading a group; listening to those who are unable to listen to anyone; mopping the floors and doing the dishes; making coffee and bringing crackers; cataloging library books;

sticking a poem or a committee report in the mailbox for the *Traveling Friend*; sending cards; taking charge of the microphone; greeting people at the front door: and hundreds of other small things that hardly seem worth mentioning and yet, without that work, this meeting would not be here.

And won't be here if those things aren't done in the future. And you aren't insignificant, or too young, or too old, or too inexperienced to do them. And you haven't been here too short a time. Look around this room: no matter when you came, and how long it seems like everyone else must have been here, over half the people in this room have been here less than 5 years. And if all of you keep thinking you haven't been here long enough yet, dust is our certain future.

If this place, this Meeting, is a place that you need, a barn that matters to you, a shelter that you would hate to see collapse into the dust, then it kind of behooves you to take on one or two of those thousand and one chores that breath into it and keep it standing. Or to write the occasional check. Or to come to Monthly Meeting and say, for instance, "you know, we could really use a place to change diapers, or an acoustical re-design, or some new playground equipment"; or, "this mission could use our support"; or, "here is a concern of mine that I wonder whether the Meeting can support in some way." Which doesn't mean that we don't every one of us need some Sabbath times and Jubilee years, seasons when we receive care rather than give it—but for the barn to keep sheltering us, we try our best to make those times seasons of life, not life choices.

All of this, of course, seems like a very direct contrast to my usual spiel about the uniqueness of our gifts and the individuality of our paths. Or it would be, if it weren't for the fact that I believe God has led us all to this place together because in some way all our different paths can run alongside each other to some greater end, even if that end is only that we find ourselves, at last, as part of a beloved community, we find ourselves fed and warmed within a living barn. What I cannot tell you say is how you, exactly, will breathe into this place, but I feel no

compunction about saying that if it matters to you at all, even bald self-interest would suggest that breathing into it would be a good thing.

Reading the passage from 1st John this week, it seemed to me that part of the genius of it was the standard John set for how we would know whether we had met the needs of our brothers and sisters: not an absolute standard, not a law, but this: whether or not our hearts condemn us. When we think about how, as a community, we have stewarded the building and the grounds, do our hearts condemn us? When we think about how, as a community, we have put community resources toward meeting the needs of those who come here for nurture and warmth, do our hearts condemn us? When we think about our own giftedness, and whether or not we have been able to give it away on behalf of this community, do our hearts condemn us? If our hearts do not condemn us, we can, as John says, have boldness before God, as ones who have loved in truth and action, not only in word and speech. We can expect the barn to be blessed. But if my heart does condemn me on this score, then what am I to do—not out of fear of punishment, or for fear of losing God's love, but because my heart does condemn me—what am I to do? In an real and practical sense, not in word or speech, but action, how can I breathe into this barn, what of myself can I give away to keep it standing?