Chapter One: The Porcupine's Dilemma

“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” Henri Nouwen

1. (p.14) Human beings are not perfect and when you deal with them, you have come to the “as-is” corner of the universe. Not unlike sale items in stores – take these things “as is.” Think about someone in your life who you know best, love most. That person is slightly irregular. There’s a flaw here and if you want a relationship with this person – there’s only one way “as is.” (Temper, possessive spirit, selfish, a cruel tongue, not tell the truth.)

2. We live in a world that tries to tell us that somewhere out there, people are normal. Movie: As Good As It Gets. Helen Hunt is wracked by ambivalence toward Jack Nicholson. He’s kind and generous to her and her sick son, but also obsessive-compulsive and rude. In desperation, Helen finally cries to her mother: “I just want a normal boyfriend!” “Oh,” her mother says in empathy, “everybody wants one of those, but there’s no such thing, dear.”

3. (p.15-16) We are not perfect or totally normal. The Bible tells us this … at least not the way God defines normal. “All we like sheep have gone astray. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

   a. The Bible tells story after story about messed-up people: Cain is jealous of Abel and kills him. Abraham plays favorites between his sons Isaac and Ishmael. King David has Bathsheba’s husband killed.

   b. People in the Bible need Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, etc.

   c. The Bible establishes a deep theological truth: everybody’s weird.

   d. Every one of us – all we like sheep – have habits we cannot control, past deeds we cannot undo, flaws we cannot correct.

4. (p. 17) Because we know in our hearts that we are not normal, we try to hide our weirdness. Every one of us pretends to be healthier and kinder than we really are; all engage in “depravity management.”

5. (p.18) From the time of Adam in the Garden of Eden, sin and hiding have been as inevitable as death and taxes. Some people are pretty good at hiding. But, the weirdness is still there. Get close enough and you’ll see it. Everybody’s normal till you get to know them.
6. (p.18) The longing to connect …

   a. The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul.

   b. Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and air and water are to the human body. (For example: a newborn baby who wants to be held.)

   c. As frustrating as people can be, it's hard to find a good substitute! It's never good for human beings to be alone! People draw energy and life from God, one another, pets, music, nature.

7. (p.19) Old Testament Prophets have a word for this kind of connectedness of all things – **shalom**. Shalom = the webbing together of God, humans, creation, justice, fulfillment and joy.

   a. The world needs this shalom!

   b. You can read about this shalom on pages 19 and 20.

8. (p.19-21) Isolation and withdrawal

   a. People go it alone and work on hobbies or watch TV

   b. People don't always want to risk getting close to others.

   c. Yet, this doesn't work and is never satisfying because identity and purpose are tied intimately to relationships: son, daughter, pastor, friend, neighbor.

   d. We were created by God to draw life and nourishment from one another just the way roots of a tree draw life from the soil.

   e. Community is the place God made us for. Community is the place where God meets us.

9. (p.21-22) The Porcupine’s Dilemma – how to get close without getting hurt …

   a. Read about the porcupine on page 21.

   b. All other animals are celebrated as loveable – not the porcupine.

   c. How to get close without getting hurt is the porcupine’s dilemma and our dilemma, too.

   d. We attach and then withdraw. We find ourselves hurting and being hurt by those we long to be closest to.

10. (p.24-25) The dance of the porcupines. Miracle of miracles – relationships do happen, even for porcupines. They learn to keep their barbs to themselves and dance.
11. Purpose of our study: Imperfect people like you and me can pursue community with other imperfect people.
   
   a. Our task is to create little islands of shalom in a sea of isolation.
   
   b. It's time to pull in your quills and start dancing.

12. Next Week: The Wonder of Oneness