

You know there's a good storm brewing when your neighbor's trampoline is cartwheeling down the middle of the street. Burbank, Washington, (no, not California) is not known for "good storms," but in May 2006 we were hit with several microbursts.

I had not heard of a microburst until after that storm. This type of weather phenomenon occurs when cold-air columns break through a lower warm-air level and slam into the ground. If you were to walk into your kitchen and drop a jar of spaghetti sauce onto your tile floor, you would understand the dynamic. The shattered jar would affect not only the tile it hit, but also the surrounding area, which would be splattered with glass and sauce too.

After our storm, an insurance adjuster examined the damage to a nearby tree farm. He found the center, where the cold-air columns had come down and where trees were blown back as if a bomb had gone off.

Mercifully, the tree farm is down the road from my neighborhood, but we were hit with massive winds and rain too. As Burbank is a rural area, the storm drains are basically trenches dug around groups of houses. They had filled to overflowing in minutes. Teenage boys with more bravado than sense started driving through the flooded streets until they swamped their engines. Those who were able to recover stopped when trees started falling.

The screaming wind took trees that had grown without any exposure to such high winds and played with them like toys. Giant cottonwoods collapsed all over our little neighborhood.

And then . . . it stopped. The rain and wind stopped as if a switch had been flipped. The sun popped out, and stunned people slowly came out of their homes to examine the damage. I suppose some who are reading this have lived through major tornados or hurricanes and see my little storm as just that—little. But for us, this was *the big one*.

After the initial gaping, we realized we had an issue: we had no power, and all the roads were now blocked with fallen trees. In a city nobody would have had a chainsaw, but in the country we all did. Out came the saws, a supply of gas, and bar oil. We started clearing the streets and driveways. Neighbors we had never talked with started talking as if we were old friends.

In a couple of hours, the streets were cleared. As nobody was hurt, it was like a giant street party with people still wondering at the damage. And then the electricity was restored. People began to retire to their homes and sit themselves in front of their computer and television screens. The vibrant community and conversations held on the street were replaced with the passive reception of videos and shows.

You cannot miss all the talk about “community” in today’s world. The word is thrown around with little thought or definition. Coffee shops, universities, and social media platforms talk about it. Yet real community takes place when people see each other in person and interact with one another. Community is strengthened when people go through a common difficulty—like clearing downed trees together.

Yet our modern world makes developing community a challenge. We are distracted by attractions and often seek solitude rather than engagement. We commute to work alone, hit the garage door opener, and drive inside without even seeing our neighbors. We spend our time in home theaters or watching something on computers or phones.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD?

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, He said, “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16). Has the light of the world become the glow of screens rather than Christ’s people? Our very purpose is to represent Jesus, which means we cannot be hidden under a modern electronic bushel. It’s hard to be an evangelist when you are constantly inside watching TV.

Christian witness is negatively affected by gadgets, but so is our community with fellow Christians. As Christians we have the advantage of having the same Lord and indwelling Spirit. Often we incorrectly assume that this is enough to have fellowship with one another. Yet fellowship still requires work. It demands that we are together and that we get to know one another. Fellowship flourishes when we work together through trials and difficulties. Some may argue that lack of fellowship is

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a problem for megachurches, but I have found that it is a struggle for smaller churches as well. Can you, for example, name all the people in your church? Are some of those attending services still strangers? Let us heed the imperative, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25).

Set aside the latest streaming app and join a small group. Invite a few families over for dinner. My wife and I have a saying, “A good dinner is three hours.” Don’t think of time as a cost, but as an investment into others and a blessing to yourself.

Might I suggest fasting from technology for a week? For some this may not be possible, as your job requires it. That’s fine—drop social media, drop television, and drop internet activity except what is necessary for work. Keep in mind that the harder a week off is for you, the more this screams that you needed it. It’s a good thing to detox from tech.

If you want to take things to another level, involve your kids. Sure, they’ll freak out for a little bit, but you all can do it. Shut down intrusive technology and replace that time with family, visitors, meeting neighbors, taking walks, and talking to one another face-to-face.

It should not take a good storm to tell us that we are neglecting our purpose. The computer is not called to be the light, but Jesus’ people are. We are the witnesses to the world, not Netflix. We are to be “blessers” of fellow followers, but this is only possible if we redeem the time. ■

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