DESPERATELY seeking something

By Maxine Hancock
In the long twilight of northern summer evenings, I was often the tagalong little kid included in older kids’ games. I can still remember the terror and excitement of “Run, Sheep, Run,” a game I never did quite understand. There were maps scratched out on the ground and quickly erased, strategies conspiratorially whispered. My older brother or sister would show me where I was to hide, and then would disappear with the final fierce whisper, “And keep quiet.”
Under the dark-leaved lilac hedge, I would crouch low, close
to the damp, musty smell of leaf mold, my heart thudding. I was
afraid—aftaid of the dark,
aid I wouldn’t know where to
run, afraid I wouldn’t know
when I had arrived.

And then, when I heard the
command, “Run, sheep, run!”
bawled out into the darkness, I
would crawl out of my hiding
place and run, hard, in what I
hoped was the right direction.

We were, all of us “sheep,”
looking for something, a place
where we could scream, “Home free.” But I was never
really sure in what direction
that lay, or what we would gain
by getting there.

I get a glimpse of that same
uncertainty as I look at the
faces of people who board
buses or get on elevators with me—all of us going some-
where, intent, motivated. But
often we have little sense of
how we’ll know when we’ve
arrived—or whether, perhaps,
we will spend the rest of our
lives hearing and blindly obey-
ing the command, “Run, sheep,
rurn.” Everyone desperately
seeking—something.

What Makes Us Run?

Understanding what “makes
us run” keeps advertising and
marketing analysts busy. The
study of human motivation has
a very important impact on the
bottom line.

Knowing our motivational
levels is essential if advertisers
are to herd us toward their
products, their services. They
have to persuade us that they
can show us the way to that
effusive “home free” of dimly
defined—and continually
redefined—success and happi-
ness and security.

Most introductory psychol-
ology classes teach A. H.
Maslow’s hierarchy of human
needs—that we go from meet-

ing the basic physiological
needs for food, water, and
clothing, to meeting “safety
needs,” like the need for shelter.

Then we deal with emotional
needs; the need for love and
belonging, and esteem needs—
the need for achievement and
recognition. Beyond that,
according to Maslow, we strive
to meet needs for “self-actual-
ization” and the “desire to
know and understand.”

Consulting psychologist
Dorothy Ryan suggests that
we meet these needs in a man-
ner more like an inward-turn-
ning spiral than a pyramid.

Meeting each set of needs
relates to our ability to meet
other sets of needs.

However we look at it, obvi-
ously there are some basic needs
without which we can’t run in
any direction. The need for food
and water, for warmth and shel-
ter, and the desire to find a mate
underly much of what we do.

Our basic physical and sexual
needs are the same as those ex-
perienced by other animals.

But clearly, to be human is to
want more than just creature
needs met. We experience the
need to belong, the need to have
a feeling of self-worth, the need
for approval.

To meet these needs, we not
only look around at our envi-
ronment, but we look directly to
other people. We often signal
our intangible “love and esteem
needs” by attempting to
demonstrate success in tangible
ways—which is where the mar-
keters score. They can make us
believe that the things we own or
wear, or the list of accomplish-
ments we claim on our resume,
can fulfill these deeper needs.

I remember discovering the
difference between “felt needs”
and “real needs” one day when I
walked out of a bookstore I had
not even meant to enter, with
yet another pile of books to
carry home—where, once again,
I was out of bookshelf space.

As I walked home wondering
why I had such a compulsion to
buy books, I suddenly heard
echoes of scornful laughter
from the kids with whom I
played “Run, Sheep, Run.”
They were older, smarter. Deep
inside, I carried the idea that if I
could get—or buy—enough
knowledge, I would never have
to hear that laughter again, I
would have their respect.

The deep need for esteem
drove my surface need to buy
what symbolized knowledge for
me. And knowing that, I su-
ddenly felt free to deal with the
deep need.

Underneath all our frantic
buying and doing, what we
really seek is to silence the
laughter, gain esteem, assert our
significance. We seek a core of
relatedness, yearning for a love
that affirms and sustains us and
gives our lives meaning.

Our sense of what has to be
at the center of our lives is
personal and relational is so
strong that we often try to put
relationships there. We buy
into the romantic dream. “One
day, a kiss may change your life
forever,” an ad reads, and we
want to believe it.

But we run into a problem.

Human relationships change
and shift. Friendships fade
away—something we realize as
we trim our overgrown
Christmas card lists. The chil-
dren who have filled our homes
with joy and turbulence grow
up and leave us, and our houses
become echoey and tidy. “I
used to think the kids’ beds
would never get made,” a
mother lamented to me, “but
now they stay made.” People
we love die. Or rejection turns
the forever life-changing kiss
into a bitter memory.

Is This All?

And so, even on the best
days when our creature needs
derive self-esteem. We cry out
for a sense that it matters that
we are alive, that the choices we
make do matter, that we do
make a difference.

Twenty years after she had
identified the cry of women, “Is
this all?” as “The Problem That
Has No Name,” Betty Friedan
wrote, “Life lived only for one-
selves does not truly satisfy men
or women. There is a hunger in
Americans today for larger pur-
poses beyond the self.”

Just as we cannot gain feel-
ings of self-worth without
affirming relationships with
other people, so we cannot
sense ultimate significance or
purpose without relating to
Getting to the Deeper Need

As an itinerant rabbi walking the dusty roads of an oppressed, Roman-occupied Palestine, Jesus continually encountered people who were searching for something. They presented Him with their basic physical needs, for food or for healing, and He met those. But He knew that behind those obvious physical needs lay much deeper ones. Just as we do today, they yearned to meet Someone who knew them and loved them wholly yet could give their lives significance.

The historian Luke tells the story of the time Jesus met a fellow Jew who had become wealthy as an economic collaborator with the occupying enemy. Zacchaeus was a contract tax man. He collected all he could through threat and extortion and remitted to the Roman authorities only what immediately, I must stay at your house today.”

Jesus, the much sought-after itinerant teacher, the one around whom crowds gathered, conferred dignity on Zacchaeus by visiting in the home of this social outcast. And Zacchaeus, seeing that Jesus valued him, realized that his worth was as a person was much greater than his net worth. He pledged half of his possessions to the poor and promised to make a four-fold restoration of all that he had taken wrongfully.

Zacchaeus had been lost—lost to his Jewish friends and neighbors by his selfish choices he had made; lost to God by his decision to live in a self-centered way. He had even lost sight of his own value.

But Jesus reinstated the transformed taxman by declaring his significance within his own society. “This man, too, is Don’t just run. Come, follow Me, and we can have a relationship that truly meets your needs.” In knowing and being known by our Creator, we discover a purpose and significance that no acquisitions, no accomplishments, and no human relationships can grant. At the very core of our being, our deepest need is to know and to be known, to be connected in relationship.

Like Zacchaeus, if we will welcome Jesus into our lives, we will find ourselves set free from the “Run, sheep, run” commands of our day. We will know that the turning spiral of our needs has found at last a still point, a center in relationship to the One who gives us life in the first place.

Jesus Christ meets the needs we have been desperately seeking to meet. And at last we can quit running like sheep, because

and run again—not knowing where, not knowing why—or we break free and throw ourselves on the mercy of that Holiness. That seems to be just what He was waiting for all along, because, amazingly, the transcendent, holy God also yearns for a relationship with us.

We know this because at one point in history, God broke into our human experience for the express purpose of telling us He desired a relationship with us and to close the gap, making that relationship possible. God lived here with us—one of us—in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Palestinian Jew, he had to. It had made him wealthy, but “the general attitude of the Jewish population towards [such tax and customs collectors as Zacchaeus] was hostile and contemptuous, and they were regarded as virtual criminals.” With all that he had, Zacchaeus desperately lacked approval and respect.

It’s interesting to see how Jesus introduced Himself to Zacchaeus. The little tax man, wanting desperately to see Jesus, had climbed a tree to look over the heads of the crowd—while staying as invisible as he must have often wished he were, “Zacchaeus,” Jesus said, “come down immediately, I must stay at your house today.”

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