

Beyond the Pale: In the Clutches of Community

Written by Dave Canfield
Saturday, 07 May 2011 13:22



Ever reach out to touch the person next to you during a horror flick? Ever reached out for a complete stranger? I have. It's a funny feeling. That need to assert reality and connect with someone else during those moments we're most uneasy is so natural that sooner or later all of us end up with that little embarrassed smile. It's a reasonably good segue into some thoughts on the nature of cultural community.

I actually live in a large Christian commune. I have for 23 years. You've probably got a million questions having just read that sentence. But the salient thing for this column is that as Christian groups go we're not very homogenous. Ethnicities, social and religious backgrounds and cultural tastes vary widely. After I moved here, I had a lot of my assumptions about everything from culture to politics challenged and thanks to some fellow community members I found myself closer and closer to the horror geek within. I first saw *EVIL DEAD II* here. I became a writer specializing in horror subculture. Our group even underwrote a small horror action film festival I did last year. I screen movies and hold discussions and classes constantly. It's obviously affirming that the place I call home spiritually is also a place I can be open about my love of the horror genre.

Of course I have no problem being open about my love of horror culture at conventions, screenings, etc. I'm surrounded by people who are there for that very reason. And in the last two decades I've gotten to know some warm and wonderful people at those events. People have trusted me to run their booths, made attending conventions economically possible/far more convenient by offering me floors and beds to sleep on, asked me to write for their publications and found time to hang out and just get to know me. The list of kindnesses and good memories is endless. Some of those folks share my Christian beliefs, some don't. In both cases I've been incredibly fortunate to meet and in some cases become close friends with incredible people whom I would trust with my life. In many ways, the horror culture has provided me with a home away from home, another community to be part of, proud of, concerned for.

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Have you found friends like these? Have you found a community?

I don't mean do you want to live communally. Are you part of a community of people that seem to care about you beyond the fact that you are a horror fan?

Culture provides a natural gathering point for people and provides for all sorts of things. It might be a reminder of how great simple celebration of something we love can be. A friend got some much-needed laughs during a sticky divorce by taking in screenings of '80s slasher flicks (No, he wasn't fantasizing about killing his wife.) Another friend has raised tons of money for HIV care by holding events here in the Chicago area.

But to the degree that it becomes primary in our lives, taking up time, resources, or limits the pool of people we choose to hang around, we should be sure it gives back to us, connects us with deeper stuff. Is your involvement in horror culture helping you to have the conversations you need to become the person you want to be? What are you without those conversations? Culture (or a religious community) can be a solid place to retreat to for a little while, take a few deep breaths, find your footing during hard times. But it can also be a place to get lost in, become permanently stunted by.

Where I live there are a lot of wounded people. I've met plenty of those in the horror community as well. Alcoholics, sex addicts, the abused, people with anger issues, incredibly low self-esteem. The list is less important than the realization that these people are often unaware of or actively running away from problems that will follow them wherever they go through life.

The truth is we're all pretty wounded, and we all have a lot of questions. We all wonder why we're here, where we're headed and why we should even give a damn about it much less each other. Thus it seems fair to observe that anything that gathers us together often should, at least in theory, serve the fact that we need each other.

What is the horror culture to you? Is it, in part, a community? A place where people that care about you, can get to know you for who you really are and challenge you? Where you can reach out to others in need?

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Do you have a place like that?

I know that we can only, individually, take so much responsibility for one another. But culture can't personally individually love us. Neither can Blu-ray/DVD or memorabilia collections. Once we've put that new edition of FANGORIA down, been to the event, etc. all we have left are the relationships in our lives. It's up us to build community out of something more sturdy than consumerism.

I'll relate a quick story. A celebrity, who shall remain nameless, got really drunk at this convention I was at. The night before, he'd wound up rolling around on the outer lawn wrestling with security. It was a wonder he wasn't sent packing by the hotel much less the show. This night, he was so blotto he was making hardcore passes at anything with two legs and being egged on by a large crowd of people who, it's probably fair to say, didn't care if he lived or died. They just wanted a show. The friend I was with saw what was going on, and on his own, led the celeb out, got him away from the well-wishers and people sponging drinks. Some might call it enablement, but I know my friend was simply thinking of this guy's dignity (what was left of it anyway).

Take a minute to think about and give thanks for people who share your love of all things ghostly and gory. I mean, the ones who've looked out for you and the ones you see looking out for others. If you can't think of any then ask some hard questions about why and ask them in a mirror. You might just be in a cultural graveyard surrounded by zombies.

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