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Week nine: WFL

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Jennie Allen #1

SHEILA: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. I'm excited and challenged, honestly, by our guest today. You know and love her as we do. Jennie Allen, it is just lovely to have you here again.

JENNIE: Thank you for having me! It's so great to be here.

SHEILA: Your book, *Find Your People*: "Building deep community in a lonely world." I have to honestly say I found your book really convicting. Because it made me realize it is easy to just skate through life sometimes and not have deep, intentional friendships. So it made me wonder, what was the genesis for you? Why did you write this book at this time?

JENNIE: Well, you're not alone. In fact, three in five people prior to the pandemic felt lonely and admitted to that. So we can guess that the number is safely higher than that now. So the majority of people feel lonely. I think even those of us that are extroverted and have a wide array of connections and relationships, they don't go very deep, especially after the pandemic. We're still in the middle of it, really, and we're trying to figure out what does it even look like?

The genesis of it was well before any of that. I was traveling internationally, and I noticed something. Whether it was in Europe, Africa, or Haiti, everywhere I went, it felt like the rest of the world was better at connection and community than we are. It was ironic because they had less in many countries than we have, but they were happier. There was a quality of life and a contentedness to them that I envied. There was a light in their eye, and you would see it. I remember specifically being in Rwanda and watching women

walk for water. They would have those big plastic pitchers on their heads, and they would be walking down to get water and walking up, and they would be giggling and laughing. You could almost guess what they were talking about because it felt so familiar with my friends.

But with my friends, we have to plan a week, two weeks in advance, and then we're getting two hours together. They were living day in and day out. Then you go into their little communities and notice there are no doors on their structures. There are fires that they gather around at night after the kids are tucked in in their little huts. They have connections throughout the day. They have a mission; they're surviving together. They need each other to survive.

We barely ask to borrow an egg from a neighbor. I grew up running next door in both directions, depending on who was home and borrowing eggs. I don't know why it was always an egg, but I always borrowed an egg from somebody for my mom because she would be cooking. And now we can Amazon it in two hours.

So I think there is something about noticing that maybe there is something fundamentally broken about the way we're trying to do life. And then you see anxiety on the rise. You see suicidal thoughts on the rise. You see all these things that are so troubling. And when you look under the surface, it's pretty clear that we are more disconnected than we've ever been.

So that worried me. But I also thought there had to be an answer, a way to fight back and live differently.

RANDY: Talk about who your people are because I got tons of friends on Facebook. But in the real world, I have some very close friends, and then I have lots of acquaintances. Is there something missing there?

JENNIE: So the research is fascinating. I love research because it reveals a lot about

human nature. And a lot of times, what you find with research, just like get out of your head, the brain science and all that, well, what you saw was backed up in scripture. Same thing with connection and people. We can handle about 150 relationships that are acquaintances, like your Christmas card list. That's just even barely knowing that they're healthy or not, or that they're alive, how old their kids are; like that's about how many people we can handle. Then you go down a little bit further. You see that a deeper circle; you can handle about 50. That's where you're going to take a casserole to someone if you find out that they have cancer; that's that size circle.

But ultimately, what we all want to know and what most people are craving is our best friends? What about that inner circle? That's the thing we all want. Well, that capacity is about five. Five is what we're after. But we skip the 150 and the 50, trying to find the five. We no longer live in a village. Most of us, even in small towns, live more isolated, so we don't have that 150 and that 50. What I mean by that is it's probably not 150 people your age or doing life exactly like you. It's probably your Sunday School teacher or the person that is your friend at soccer, the friend's parent. This is who that 150 is.

Because we don't see those people as valuable, and we don't interact with them and feel responsible for taking care of them, we are missing the trickle-down, this funnel that I built in the book. We're missing that bottom circle. But we think they should just magically appear. How they've always appeared throughout history and in 80 percent of the world today is through living in the context of those 150.

So my plea in the book is that we've got to rebuild villages into our lives and notice the people God has put in our way and in our lives. One of my dearest friends is a girl that started as my babysitter. She is a college student. Now she works for If Gathering, she's graduated. Well, she is one of my go-to's. Like we talk all the time, we probably talked twice today. I've noticed, gosh, I've actually become good friends with her. And because I wasn't thinking, these best friends have to be my age and my life's age, and I opened my mind to that, it's been such a richer experience in community.

SHEILA: You're very honest in your book, which is one of your trademarks, Jennie. You tend to be very vulnerable. But you talk about an experience you had with your friends in your circle in Austin before moving to Dallas. And a friend who basically stepped back from you for a while. What was that about?

JENNIE: Yeah. This has happened more than once. I guess I'm not alone, and I trust that always when I put all this out there. But certainly, this is extra tender because this is something I want to be great at. I want to speak from a place of expertise, but candidly, I often find myself speaking from a place of hurt and a place of causing a lot of hurts. In that situation, I think what I realized about myself, and I was continually hearing this from people, is, "You don't need me. You don't need me." It's still really vulnerable because I want to be better at that. It is hard to need people. I think it is -- I think maybe it is extra hard for me. I don't know if it is just my personality or what?

SHEILA: No, I totally get that, Jennie. I heard that from my own sister. I shared a bedroom with my sister until she got married. When my life fell apart, and I ended up in a psych hospital, my sister flew over and spent time. She said, "This is the first time in your life that you've ever needed me." I said, "Francis, I always needed you." "Well, you didn't act like it."

JENNIE: I know. I think that was the message I was sending to that friend and others. I had to hear it multiple times from multiple people to realize this was really a struggle in my life. But, I'll be honest, I have really deep friendships now, praise God. I don't think I would have had the nerve to write the book if I hadn't really, really worked on this.

But even still, it is a discipline. It is not in my nature just to -- it feels like venting or complaining sometimes to me, and what I've realized is no, it is letting people in, and it is saying it. So today, I'll just take an example where this has changed my life. I was leading a bunch of leaders on a call. We're about to have a gathering, and a lot of the speakers and the worship leaders were on a call. I was charged to lead this thing, and I'd had a really hard morning. So as I enter the call, I have a lot of anxiety building up about the

call because I'm feeling kind of weak, and I'm feeling very vulnerable. And instead of saying, you know what? This is what we're going to do. It's going to be amazing! I was honest, and I said, "Here is where I'm coming in. I'm not falling apart, but today I am." And just to learn to say --

You know what's amazing? In that call, there were other tears shed. We all prayed together. I had three or four people afterward call or reach out, and we had an amazing conversation and connection. So you realize, vulnerability really does set the stage for what we're craving. We're craving connection but the road to it, at least for me, feels really hard.

RANDY: I hear you. But I think a lot of men, especially, have a real difficulty even relating to that. Because for someone else to need me means that I'm needy. And for me to need -- there is this independence that I think we might put up too high on a pedestal at times in our culture. What do you think?

JENNIE: Yeah!

RANDY: What are we not getting there that God wants us to have?

JENNIE: Well, my experience is when you practice it, vulnerability begets vulnerability. And so the first time you do it, you just think, I'm going to die. This is vulnerable. It's worse than vulnerable; it is awkward. I even still feel awkward when I do it. I assume I appear that way. And I think everyone is watching like, oh, that's painful. Oh, baby girl!

SHEILA: Bless her heart!

JENNIE: Bless her heart! You know what? We either can be independent and put together, or we can have connection. I don't think it is both. I think the loss of the -- you know what's powerful about the world right now is we have just lost it anyway. Everybody is struggling. Everybody is kind of crawling along. So like today on the call,

nobody needed me to show up as a stellar, amazing, strong leader. They actually were texting afterward, going, "Thank you for helping me not feel alone." Like other people were on the verge of tears that day too.

I think that's the common world we find ourselves in. I don't know many people absolutely thriving. Like every day, day in and out, all ages, I don't know many people are just, wow, I've got it all together right now. I think that's the beautiful thing about common suffering is we can come to each other. So I would say to men, try it. It is awkward; there is no way around it. You just try it. And you start with somebody safe. And it might go badly, and that's what we've all got to realize. It might go badly, and this is what I say. That's why it is a book and not a pamphlet. I have to coax everyone. It will go badly, and then you're going to do it again. And it might go badly again, and then you're going to do it again. And on that fifth try, it might build the greatest friends you have ever imagined having. And would it be worth it if it was awkward these many times? I think it is.

SHEILA: What do you -- go ahead.

RANDY: I just need to dovetail on that because you said a word that, especially in ministry, you know this. There is a lot of people I will not open up to. I have my close friends, I do, and I have my wife, thank God. There is a lot of people I'm not opening up to because I don't feel safe. Because I know what has been done in the past to people in ministry, especially, and could happen to me, and has happened to me at a level.

How do we guard ourselves? Do we guard ourselves? Is that wrong?

JENNIE: Absolutely! Absolutely! "Gentle as doves and wise as serpents." We have to be wise and discerning. How I have seen that practiced in my own life is I'll give -- let's picture we have this many cards in our hand, and you put down one and how does that go? And you put down the card that's not shocking, and you see how that goes. So I think that's where this does take time, and it takes trust. And it takes reciprocal neediness; it

takes someone else that needs you back.

So it really is willing to be hurt and willing to try and try again, and not to write it off forever. I think that is what we're tempted to do when we get burned. We put our cards back up, and we hold them right here. This is where the Bible comes in because it's not an option. You read the scriptures; it is a communal book. It is written from a communal God to a communal people. It is not even -- there is no assumption of living alone. There is no assumption of independence. It is a communal people that depend on each other. All the language and words that the scriptures give us are a very high calling that's costly; and that we get in there with each other. We make a mess, and we hurt each other. And we forgive each other, and we admonish each other. And we make each other better. That's how the book was written.

And so, to some degree, it's a calling, and it's what God's called us to. And it does result in such a thriving, wonderful life, but it is messy, and it is hard.

SHEILA: One of the things that I was fascinated to read about was when your family relocated from Austin to Dallas. You're suddenly in a new city. How do you begin the process of intentionally seeking out friends?

JENNIE: It was horrible. To start over! Not everybody, it was horrible, and it was neat because I got to rebuild a life. And so I got to write this from a place of how to build a life. A lot of us are rebuilding a life without a move post-quarantine. So what does it look like? I would say the first thing I did was I looked at scripture. I looked at what I'd seen in the context of other communities because we came from Austin, where we would drive 45 minutes to go to dinner with a friend. We had to plan that a month out; that's a whole babysitter for four hours. That is a thing. And I wasn't going to do that anymore.

So we picked proximity; we were going to live blocks from family. We were going to try to build friendships within five miles. So the goal was five friends, five miles. And so I truly took that village mentality, and I was like, I need this, and I want to run into each

other at the grocery store. I want you to hear about my kid getting in trouble at school without me even telling you. I want them to hear from you and run into you when they're riding their bike across the street without looking both ways. And believe me, that has happened multiple times where I get the phone call going, "You're never going to believe what your kid did!" And I was like, that's the world I want, but I have to build it quickly.

So that took a lot of risks and a lot of work. I would say, to some degree, it starts off as risks and work, and then it quickly becomes a lot of fun. I think that's important to say. This is yes, it is risks, and it is work, but then at some point, it is just --

We got a fire pit in our backyard. That was one of the things we did quickly in our new house. What happened around that fire pit was friends would stop by, and they'd stay forever. It was so bizarre. It was different from a meal because it has an ending and you have to clean up. So we would just sit out there for hours, and we'd play music, and we strung lights. You can get a fire pit for \$49.99 on Amazon. Anyone can do this. If you're in an apartment, you might need a fake one or something; but just having places to gather and inviting people over and keeping it casual, not cleaning up.

One night, I had my robe on, and my friends stopped by. They were dressed for their Christmas card; they had just taken their Christmas card picture. I barely knew them, and I'm in my robe, and they come in to see something, and they sit down, and we stay the whole night. And I'm in my robe the whole night, and they're dressed to the hilt. I was like, that is the picture. It is like come on in and let's do this.

SHEILA: I'm trying to think about our viewer right now who has just come through the whole pandemic and feels more isolated than ever. Doesn't maybe feel safe going to a lot of places. Where do they start?

JENNIE: So one thing I loved about COVID is it tested all of our views on community. We had to be really creative. I think we're always going to have to do that. In our culture, I think it is stacked against us, the way we live here, so we've got to be creative.

I remember being on a walk with my husband, and this was back when even if you're with your husband, I think you had to walk six feet. I mean, this was like the glory days of the pandemic. And so we're walking down the street, and you had to walk on the opposite side of everybody. This yard had six Adirondack plastic chairs from Walmart that were tacky. They were spread in a big wide circle, six feet apart, and there was mosquito spray. This was when it was hot. I just found the image so striking. They were going to meet with the mosquitoes. They didn't care.

I think that's how we've got to view this. Yes, you may have to take really difficult precautions to do this. You might have to think really out of the box, but there are ways to build community around you, even if it's with Zoom. We've learned. I have to say we were going on double dates during the pandemic or during the quarantine with friends, and we would get on, and they'd be sitting there. They'd get their beverage, and we'd get ours, and we would all sit down together and just catch up. We found ways to do it.

What I hope is, when somebody finishes the book, they aren't feeling guilty. No, that is not an emotion you need to feel because we're all in this together -- we're all in this together. Everybody is lonely. And then number two, they're not overwhelmed. One of the things I put throughout the book is we're really, really simple ways to run an errand with a friend or to take a simple thing like borrowing a ladder rather than trying to go get a new one. Why don't we just --

SHEILA: Like we used to do!

JENNIE: Yes! Our neighbor, when they moved in, they wanted to borrow -- no, no. The first day they moved in, their air conditioner went out. We have a weird window unit that we've kept for no reason. Our air conditioner is fine, but we kept it from an old house. And my husband ran over; he was so excited that my friends needed our window unit! And so he gets it out of the attic, and he dusts it off, and he takes it over. And they just talked forever while they set it up. There is something about just asking for help and not

being afraid to borrow something, and letting people into our lives.

SHEILA: Well, I know one thing for sure, there is a yearning already in you to read this book. We will tell you how you can get your own copy of Jenny's book. It's really very challenging, but she walks us through it step by step. That's what Randy and I would love to do. We'd love to walk you through step by step how you can help some people who have some very, very practical real needs at the moment. Would you watch this?

On the mission field

ANNOUNCER: The countries change. The landscape changes. The faces may change. But one thing that does not change is the hopelessness people feel when they have no other choice but to give their families water to drink from unsafe sources.

OPEN CAPTIONS

JOSEPH: We've been drinking this water for five years now, and it has killed my two kids that I treasured so much. Other children are dying in our community.

ANNOUNCER: This expression of despair is too common among the precious people our mission teams visit. People who have never known what it is like to take a drink of fresh, clean water.

OPEN CAPTIONS

MURIKO: This is the water that killed my child. How can my other children have a good life with this water?

ANNOUNCER: Generation after generation has suffered from unsafe drinking water in villages just like Muriko's. Hopelessness pervades the very fabric of her village. But because of love, our mission teams are able to offer hope through prayer and a promise that we will try and do all we can to provide them with fresh water. But the only way we can do that is for those who hear their plight determine to offer them not only hope but

fresh water by helping drill a water well.

TAMMY: Gosh! It would be amazing if one day, we were walking together, and I was carrying clean, clean water for you in a bucket. That would be my hope and my prayer. One day! There is hope. I promise you there is hope.

In the studio

SHEILA: Tammy's absolutely right; there is hope. But there is hope in the midst of what is tremendous despair. My first couple of trips to Africa, going into villages where there is absolutely no clean water source, looking at these hand-dug wells, and looking at the quality of the water that these women, who some of them had walked for miles with these big plastic buckets to draw out of the well and the water was filthy, and there were flies and other animals around.

I remember a mom giving a cup of this water to her child, and it took everything in me to not knock it out of the child's hand because it was obviously so dirty. But then I realized it's all they had. It's so hard to grasp that until you're actually there, which is why we try to take you on these journeys with us, to see that so many of these villages are so remote that that's their only option.

But then, on the second day, going to a village where there is a well that said, given by viewers of LIFE Outreach International. And to see this beautiful, clean water -- it literally is the difference between death and life. And so we want to ask you to help us. We've made a commitment, Randy, this year that we want to drill 350 new wells in over 20 nations. Seems like a lot, but we can do it.

RANDY: We can. And I know we can do it because we've done it before with the help of viewers like you. We have been doing this for years. And Sheila, it's interesting. We're talking about community because I was in Angola, and we went to one well just out in the middle of nowhere where there is nothing out there. You get there, and guess what?

There are people gathered around. A well serves a community.

In fact, the average water well will serve a thousand people for their entire life -- multiple villages will come around. Here's the way it breaks down, just so you know. Because some of you have been helping us, and we're going to ask you to help us again because we're not quite through giving people clean drinking water. Some of you, this might be your first time. This is a great time to jump in because what we're doing is life-giving. As the community of Christ, we're reaching out and saying, in the name of Jesus Christ, we want to show you love -- practical love.

So here's how it breaks down. The average well costs \$4800 to drill. That's just on average as we do these 350 wells around the world. That breaks down to \$144. That gift amount today would, on average, service 30 people for a lifetime. When I say service, I mean life-giving water. I mean no more dying from these waterborne diseases. A gift of \$48 would give water to ten people for life! That's what Water for LIFE is. But it only works when you join us.

I'm asking you to go to the phone right now or go online, make the best gift you can. This works. We've proven it. We're going to prove it again with your help. So please do it today.

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Waterborne illness is a killer that strikes the most vulnerable. For many impoverished families, the death of a child is the tragic result of having no choice but to drink contaminated water. But with your help, they won't have to make this choice ever again. Mission: Water for LIFE provides clean, fresh drinking water for thousands of children and their families, giving them a life free from the fear of death.

With your gift today, you can help drill and establish 350 water wells this year. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five children. A gift of \$48 will help provide for

ten. \$72 will provide for 15. And \$144 will help provide life-giving water for 30 people for a lifetime.

With your gift, we'll send you *Bible Promises For Life*, the ultimate handbook to everything God guarantees you in his word. A powerful resource that will give you the confidence to face life's troubles. With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "I Will Give You Rest" throw. It is a reminder of our Savior's promise of rest to those who trust in His grace and love.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. You may request our new, inspiring bronze sculpture, "Let the Children Come."

Please call, write, or make your gift online.

End of video

On the mission field

RANDY: This is one of the coolest things ever! This well right here can go up to 300 feet. It can get down to where the water is pure and clean because in villages around here and places all around the world just like this, sometimes their only source of water at times of the year is dirty, it's contaminated. When people only have contaminated water, they have no choice but to drink it. There is no substitute for clean drinking water. That's why the Water for LIFE outreach is so critical, so important. We need to put these in more places. They work! This is a success. Will you help us extend the Water for LIFE program? Will you help us drill even more wells so we can give life around the world? And remember, when you give to Water for LIFE, you give water and life!

End of video

In the studio

RANDY: I do hope you're going on online or going to the phones right now. Make the best gift you can. It will absolutely work. And today, with any gift towards Water for LIFE, we'd love to send you Jenny's book. We'd love to give it to them.

SHEILA: Yeah. I really think this is a book that could -- it could start like a mini-revolution. I really think you always write such profound things, Jennie, that make a difference in people's lives, and this is certainly one of them. So thank you very much.

JENNIE: Thank you for having me!

SHEILA: It was awesome. And we look forward to seeing you again on *Life Today*. For Randy, for James, for Betty, for all of us here at *LIFE*, we love you. We'll see you next time!