An African proverb says: “If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” How does this proverb apply to the Shakers?

The old African proverb “If you want to go quickly go alone, if you want to go far go together” not only applies to our country as a whole but also applies to the relatively unknown Christian sect, the Shakers. In a remarkably short amount of time, our country has out-achieved most of the countries of the world, and as one looks deeper into American culture, the Shakers are a perfect example of the American work ethic that has brought us to where we are today. Just as there is no “I” in team, there is no “I” in Shaker.

The Harvard Settlement was the second Shaker community established in the United States and the first in Massachusetts. Ann Lee, who moved to Harvard from England in 1774, with several of her family members, headed the community. Mother Ann was tough and hard working. She believed strongly in the power of prayer; she taught her followers that the reason one shakes during prayer is because the Holy Spirit is purging sins from the body. This is how the Shakers got their name. They were a sect infused with a sense of the divine, utterly dedicated to living a sacred life. Their fierce kinship with God made it possible for them to see a radiant light-a halo of sorts-around
Ann Lee, which is how she acquired her title “mother.” The Shakers believed that Mother Ann Lee was a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, a belief which gave her a god-like influence over her community.

Mother Ann had a way with people and was a charismatic speaker. She recruited people to the Shaker community from a variety of places, including a number of religious dissenters who abandoned the Protestant Church of Harvard and lived from 1769 to 1781 in what we now refer to in Harvard as the Square House. Mother Ann visited this group and quickly brought them into the folds of the Shakers, thereby strategically growing the Shaker population. Mother Ann gradually cemented Shaker influence over the region and established a community of Shakers over the decade. In the National Park Service’s description of the Harvard Shaker Trail they stated “Laboring together, the members of the Families effectively reworked the landscape to the community's advantage. Digging drainage canals where necessary, the Shakers succeeded in turning the surrounding marshlands into productive, arable land, suitable for agriculture. Not only did they modify the flatlands, the Shakers altered the nearby hills as well.” In *Gleanings From Old Shaker Journals*, compiled by Clara Endicott Sears, a member of the Shaker community, Abigail Babbitt, in 1823, said of her people

...In spite of many difficulties, the Shakers were transforming the tract of land hidden in the forests. The clearings they made were being turned into fertile meadows, and little by little they planted crops and orchards, and dug out the rocks and stones from the wastelands and built walls with them. They worked with a joyful enthusiasm, following out to the letter one of the strictest rules of the Shaker religion, “Hands to work, and hearts to God”....

The Shakers did not just work hard, they worked intelligently and efficiently. They were a creative, industrious, and inventive group of people. There are lots of
rumors of their inventions, but because of their humility many of them they did not file patents and take credit for their work. Things such as the flat broom and packaging seeds, as well as a machine to wash clothes are among items reportedly created by the Shakers. The Shakers toiled to reshape the world around them as they attempted to create a "heaven on earth" here in Harvard. In many ways the Israelites of the 1950’s resembled them when they attempted to irrigate the desert, coaxing green to grow from sand. In *The Shakers*, by Amy Stechler and Ken Burns, it is explained that the Shakers felt that the only reward necessary for their labor was the favor of God.

Work was the currency of their service. If the world was to be redeemed and restored to God, the Shakers would accomplish it by the dedicated labor of their hands. They believed that God dwelt in the details of their work and in the quality of their craftsmanship…. Their villages were meticulously constructed and maintained, their workshops were world renowned for reliable goods, and their gardens provided amply for their own needs, with plenty to spare for the poor.

Most people are only aware of the Shakers because of their very dramatic and demonstrative form of worship, their craftsmanship or for their notably sparse artistic style, but the Shakers were much more. They were a very progressive group, and their pioneering ideals were a hundred years before their time. They welcomed women as equals, and they denounced slavery which was common practice in their era. They took in orphans, and never judged people based on their ancestry. Their harmonious communal lifestyle not only embodied what we sometimes see in the American work ethic today, it also helped to transform American’s ideals by introducing early forms of tolerance and equality.

The few last surviving Shakers live in Maine and are quite elderly. While their vow of celibacy was a factor in their population demise, it may also be that their strengths
contributed to their downfall. They held themselves to such a high standard that the average American could not keep up and thus the sect, as the centuries rolled on, thinned to what is today; a rarity in a world that too often values materialism over worship, and goods over God. We should remember the Shakers for their utter integrity, humility, and their fierce faith. We should look to them to remind ourselves of all that is possible in collaboration, especially as we, in this country, move more and more towards competition and capitalism, both of which stress the isolated “I” rather than the blessed “we.” The Shakers stand for all that is possible when people of good faith come together, whether to produce beautiful furniture, a simple picture, or a green and fertile garden in what was once a watery wasteland. When we remember the Shakers, we recall the power of the collective, human beings woven one unto the other, in a tapestry through time.


Garrett, Clarke. *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World.*


Sears, Clara Endicott. *Gleanings from Old Shaker Journals.* Westport, CT:
