

Tuning Freedom and Responsibility to the Key of Love

by Sara Donna and
the members of Lampa Mountain Community

When *Communities* called for articles about Freedom and Responsibility, my friends and I at Lampa Mountain Community were intrigued. What a great topic! Like everyone in community, each of us has grappled with these two apparently conflicting values. And we have learned a lot about them in our years together.

We are a small, close-knit community. We started out many years ago with a dream: to live together as committed friends, who would explore how good friendship could get. We shared our dream and our friendship with the people we met, and over the years, a few of them took a leap of faith and moved in. All of us have been working on realizing our dream ever since. We've had lots of challenges, gratifying successes, and ah-ha's along the way. And in the process, our understanding of freedom and responsibility has grown and deepened.

This topic inspired us to share some of the experiences we've had over the years, and what we learned from them.



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Taking Others Into Account



Dyana describes an early experience of choosing for relationship and community and learning how her decisions affect others.

I came to the community in its very early days. At the time the group living together was small, only four or five people. I started coming around, getting to know the people, helping with projects, joining them for meals, and cooking for the household now and then. Eventually we talked about me moving in. I felt a strong sense of belonging and acceptance from my new friends and it felt very natural to join them, since I had been spending more and more time there over the past months.

Before that, I had spent three to four weeks each summer working at a summer camp. I was the righthand helper for the person who ran the kitchen there, and was very into the job. Shortly after I moved into the house with my new friends, summer was coming up and it would be time to leave for my summer camp job again. Little did I know that this would become an opportunity to examine my commitments.

Before announcing my plans, I didn't think twice about how my roommates would feel about me being gone for three weeks. A couple of days later David, one of the founding members, took me aside and shared how my surprise decision had felt to the others. He encouraged me to think about my commitment to the summer camp job in light of the commitment I had made to my new household.

It was new for me to consider how other people were affected by my plans and how they felt about them, so the consideration wasn't easy for me. David helped me by suggesting that I think about how I would feel afterwards if I stayed with my plan of going to the summer camp, compared to how I would feel if I cancelled that plan to continue integrating into my new household.

It took me a day or so, and I really dug deep into the consideration. What I saw was the relationships I had formed at the summer camp were not the kind of stable relationships I was looking for. I saw those people for only a few weeks out of the year, and not everyone came back each year. In between camps, we didn't stay in touch. Those relationships were pleasant, but circumstantial. In contrast, I had started important new relationships in the community, that I hoped would turn into a lifelong commitment. And the other community members had the same hopes about me.

I realized that I had a stronger sense of responsibility toward my new household than I did toward my old summer job, and decided not to go back to the camp. That was over thirty years ago and I have never regretted that choice. The relationships I chose to invest in here at the community are so much more fulfilling than the less-committed relationships I had formed with people before then. Living with people I can depend on,

and who depend on me, has helped me continue to grow into a stronger sense of responsibility, one that satisfies my heart's deepest standards.



Growing Out of “Me” into “We”



Eva looks back over her time in community, and reflects on the evolution she's experienced in her sense of responsibility and her own sense of identity.

My sense of responsibility for my friends and the community as a whole grew over time. At the very beginning, I was not expected to assume much responsibility, and I was accommodated in many ways. For example, I contributed in simple ways, working in the garden and in the kitchen. My work hours were shorter than for other members, giving me time for other things that were important for me, like study and meditation. The community supported me, while I was trying to adapt to living in a way that's far more cooperative and intertwined than I was used to, and growing in my sense of responsibility to others.

At those early stages I also needed to adapt to a greater level of discipline than I knew before. I was in my mid-twenties, straight out of college, and didn't have very good work ethics. I was also pretty moody and whimsical, doing what I wanted when I wanted. But I knew that joining a spiritual community would mean more discipline, and I was up for it. Somewhere in my heart I welcomed a more responsible existence, although it was a big effort for me to adapt to it.

Emotional and mental discipline was especially difficult. My friends had to bring it to my attention when I was negative, or in a dark mood. Being responsible for my social contribution meant that I couldn't just be mopey and expect people to be comfortable around me. I had to become aware of the effects of my actions, thoughts, and moods, and take responsibility for what I contribute to the “emotional soup” of community life. That was not easy.

In the midst of embracing that discipline, there were plenty of temptations to let off steam. Sometimes I was given room to do that, and sometimes I wasn't. For example, after I expressed a preference to work by myself, I was not assigned solitary tasks anymore.



was self-destructive in many ways. Those tendencies were gently discouraged. The elder members of the community were very committed to me, and willing to patiently talk me out of those things. In a way they re-parented me, and helped me become a wholesome human being.

Now, fourteen years later, I carry a lot more responsibility here. I'm one of the managers in our business, and everyone relies on me for helping make decisions on most things concerning our lives together. But also, my sense of self, my basic identity, shifted from "me" to "we" for the most part. I don't feel or think of myself as separate anymore. My inspirations and aspirations have a lot more to do with what serves everyone, than what serves "me" as a separate person.

I genuinely want to serve others and contribute to their well-being in everything I do. And I find plenty of inspiration to do so. I generally receive support from the community, even if my inspirations are unusual or far-reaching, or require some funding. I also do my best to listen to my friends' hearts and support the movements of their spirits. There is a lot of genuine beauty and goodness that springs from them all the time, and I love seeing them flourish.

Working alone I had the opportunity to indulge in thinking and being inattentive without anyone noticing. Doing that would just reinforce a habit I needed to break! But when I wanted to go to the ocean and contemplate, or spend time with my friends, or do things that are generally wholesome and joyous, I was always supported.

Looking back at that time, I am grateful for the wisdom in how I was treated. I started out as a loner, and I



Doing What It Takes to Support Each One



Carolyn talks about our shared commitment to support the group AND each member, and tells how her unique individual needs have been accommodated by the community.

Close relationships can be quite the emotional and spiritual challenge. It would be nice to say it's all been smooth sailing since I began living this way of life, but honestly, it's been "life"—with both its ecstatic joys and its painful struggles. And that's resulted in various up's and down's in my participation in this community.

Our community supports itself with a consulting business where most of the community members work. We also live together. And as you can imagine, it can be wonderful and deeply rewarding, and also emotionally challenging, to live and work together all the time. It's not just the interpersonal difficulties that inevitably come up in all human relationships. It's also the self-insight that arises in the mirror of close relationship. What you see about yourself in that mirror may or may not be something you can readily handle. At least not all at once.

I have worked in the community business at various times in the past twenty-five years. And there have been times when I hit the wall in my friendships here, because quite frankly, I was too reactive and not constructive enough to conquer the inner demons that would come up for me in close relationship. During some of the more difficult times, I got to the point where I needed a break. Not a total break—I didn't want to leave the community. This is my home, and my spiritual family, and I am deeply committed to supporting us. But it wasn't working for me to keep working in the community business.

Those points weren't easy transitions. People here needed to stretch to take over the tasks I did at our business, while I found a job in our local area. But my friends could see that I needed a different context to grow in, and wholeheartedly supported my need not to be in "the mirror" all the time.

Each time I worked outside the community, I faced different kinds of relationship challenges than I had faced at home, and I grew in significant ways. I gained a lot of space in those other contexts, and became more capable of close relationship with my friends here at home.

Now I'm back working in the community doing full-time cooking and kitchen management. I'm tremendously more comfortable in my own skin and with the challenges of relationship. And I'm grateful for the flexibility and understanding that helped me become who I am today.



Each of us gives our best to support the group, in our own ways. And whenever one of us needs flexibility from the group, like I did when I needed to work elsewhere, we all do our best to lovingly support their need.



My Way vs. Our Way



Dirk describes the experiences that showed him how much better it is to work on goals together than pursue his inspirations on his own.

Before I joined the community I had very little experience with practical life. I grew up in a city. I was good with computers (and online gaming), but never held a shovel. My first job when I arrived in the community was to dig up a hillside of thistles! I found that I thoroughly enjoyed it. Over the ensuing years I learned a lot of practical skills, and discovered I was pretty good at handling practical stuff.

But even once I felt capable of finishing any project from beginning to end, it turned out there was a lot more for me to learn. I found that even with a lot of skill and experience, I was ineffective, and often created more disturbance than happiness in the community and in myself.

I am a member of our beekeeping team here, and one Saturday I got excited about the project of making a “bee bath”—basically a bowl of water with rocks in it so the bees

have a dry place to stand while sipping water. We had some fist-sized rose quartz rocks a friend had given us, and I found a nice stone bowl that looked perfect for my project. I enthusiastically crushed up the rocks to a good size and found what I thought was a good place to put it. I spent several hours setting it up, and by the end of the afternoon I couldn't wait to show the rest of the team. Unfortunately, they didn't share my excitement....

While my team members could appreciate my creativity, they felt dismayed that they hadn't had any input in how it was designed, where it would be, and how it should be used. They explained that there were a lot of things missing in my design, and it wouldn't work. My heart sank. I saw that I had gotten carried away with my own expression of freedom at the expense of the unitive feeling of our team. And after all my work, the bees still didn't have their bee bath.



This incident affected me deeply. I talked about what happened with elder members in our community, who had learned similar lessons themselves, and helped other community members with this issue over the years. They showed me my reluctance to ask for input; I just wanted to do things my way. They hit the nail on the head. But learning that lesson and then implementing on it wasn't that easy for me.

After several more experiences of causing heartbreak and disturbance through my solitary approach to my projects, I seriously started to apply myself to consulting my friends about my inspirations. I discovered that I thoroughly enjoy the process of getting input from my friends, and that I derive a strong sense of purpose, connection, strength, and energy from knowing that the community supports me in doing something we all feel is worth me investing my energy into. Rather than a nagging feeling of insecurity from not knowing if people will appreciate what I'm doing or if it will work, I experience a solid sense of security that allows me to fully express my intelligence, creativity, and other

proclivities, within what we all feel is the right approach to any given project. In other words, I experience the greatest freedom and happiness when doing things in a unified spirit with the community, rather than being so-called “free” to do whatever I want.

I discovered that the combined experiences, perspectives, and insights from everyone involved create a more intelligent and effective approach to any project than any one individual could achieve alone. This process requires me to take responsibility to not get too attached to my own viewpoints, so I can consider everyone’s input objectively, and be willing to have my understanding or conclusions changed or adjusted. When everyone involved does that, I’ve seen that incredible things happen.



I Learned a New Profession for Love’s Sake



Mati never had professional aspirations. But she changed her mind about that in order to care for her friends.

It’s common for people in our community to take an active role in our community business. When I joined, I wanted to help out and spend time with my new friends in our community culture, so I folded up my massage business and became the company receptionist.

I’ve always been most interested in the social and spiritual aspects of the community and never had any professional aspirations to speak of. Fortunately, the people here have always accepted that about me.

Then during the pandemic, the business lost its bookkeeper. We’ve had to replace bookkeepers before, so I knew what we were up against—a long period of interviewing people, followed by the laborious process of training, all the while never certain that the new person would actually stick. And all those months, my close friends in the administrative team would need to work extra-long hours and weekends to get everything done until the new bookkeeper was finally ready to take over. Argh!

I could not accept the prospect of my friends going through all that again—possibly more than once! If I could do anything to prevent that, I’d absolutely do it! So I started asking myself, could I do that job? I already knew some bookkeeping basics; maybe I could.... To even consider it was an entirely new thought.

When I brought my idea to the admin team and they unanimously approved it, huge relief and happiness washed over us. “Yes, that’s the right thing to do!” We all recognized it would save us so much time and effort. Once I learned the job, we’d be set. I’m committed to our community and certainly not going anywhere, so we won’t have to go through the hardship of having to fill that position ever again! It felt like a great burden was lifted.

Then my training began... The effort it took for me to learn the job was astronomical. I’ve never worked so hard, with that degree of focus, and such long hours in my life. But even when I felt exhausted by the effort, I really felt good about what we were doing, and why.

It took over a year for me to learn the job, the systems, and how to manage priorities. And the process really put me up against my negative tendencies, like being insecure and controlling. It also seriously challenged my ideas about my limitations. As those tendencies came up, they needed to be discussed, honestly faced, and transcended, with the help of my patient friends.

I also needed to discipline myself mentally and emotionally in order to actually accomplish the load and create the relief I intended to provide.

Now a year in, I am so grateful. I deeply appreciate my team for all the things they had to go through to bring me along, for their faith in me, and for welcoming me into the deeper levels of cooperation they share: making decisions together, resolving problems as a team, and developing amazing systems to make the finance tasks all work smoothly and efficiently. The experience of working closely with them has shown me that there is no real separation between the social, spiritual, and professional aspects of our community life.

Now that I’ve gotten over my old sense of limitation and learned my job, I feel I am part of something larger and beautiful. I am much more plugged into the operations of our community and can help envision our future with greater comprehension of what that entails. And I have the deep satisfaction of serving everyone beautifully in our business: clients, employees, my team, and our community at large.

Embracing this larger level of responsibility has given me tremendous respect for everything my hard-working and loving friends have poured into our community business to make it run so beautifully for so long. It makes me very proud to be a part of it.



Sharing the Load: A Much Better Life



Alex tells how the group collaborated to help him redefine his idea of personal responsibility, and create more space and balance in his busy life.

When I joined the community, I had a lot of past experience with construction and maintenance of buildings. That made me, by default, the person everyone looked to for advice and supervision on the community's infrastructure projects. As the resident "expert," people naturally deferred to me. When roofs needed to be replaced, water storage needed to be increased, cold storage needed to be built, fire safety systems needed to be designed and implemented, even when simple furniture-making was needed, for years our small community relied on my expertise.

Maintaining our 80-plus acres, roads, and buildings is a big job, but it isn't my only job or even my main responsibility here. I am a senior consultant in our community business and also a member of our finance team. Those are big responsibilities, too, with harder deadlines.

But my responsibility for our "outside world" weighed on me the most, because of my preference for bearing the load in a solitary manner. It got to the point where I felt anxious almost all the time, making it hard for me to sleep, and hard for me to feel relaxed and present. I was always worried about what I may have forgotten, and everything I hadn't gotten to yet. But I waved off or pushed away the help people offered me. To me, "taking responsibility" meant that I alone needed to determine the best solution, and I alone needed to direct how it should be done.

I was resigned to my high-anxiety lifestyle, but my friends here were keenly aware of how much I was suffering, and the difficulties my anxiety placed on everyone around me. So last year, a couple of them came up with a radical plan to bring my life into more balance. One of them offered to help me list everything that was weighing on me, including all the unspeakable fears and things not yet done. The prospect was scary at first—I was afraid I'd be found wanting, that I'd failed my friends—but it turned out to be tremendously relieving.

Once the list was made, my friends found ways to reallocate many tasks and responsibilities, which the others were all happy to take on. We also formed a committee to oversee property projects, bringing in a couple of people who also have interest and familiarity with our outside world, and who are more expert in teamwork and communication.

Working with the committee to oversee our property projects has greatly improved my world, and the lives of everyone here. I'm no longer driven by an overblown sense of

responsibility and a hyper-focused “git-r-done” mentality. My partners on the committee helped me understand the importance of considering the effects on the others in the community and working out the details with them. I discovered that everybody here is interested in what needs to be done on the property and has a lot of good input to offer. I’m now coordinating better with everyone involved.

In taking on this new level of responsibility to others, I finally feel a wonderful sense of freedom from the self-imposed drudgery of doing everything “my way,” and the happiness of being surrounded by friends who are really pleased with the way things are going.



My Caregiving “Retreat”



When a beloved friend in the community temporarily needed full-time care, Sara volunteered. Little did she realize how life-changing the experience would be.

Last summer my dear friend (and community co-founder) Francine fell and broke her elbow and kneecap. For the first six weeks after the accident I was her primary caregiver, staying close at hand and spending my days (and, in the beginning, my nights as well) caring for her and helping her with the many things she was suddenly unable to do herself. I needed to set my regular life aside, much as I would do if I were going on a spiritual retreat. Little did I know, the experience would prove more valuable than any spiritual retreat I’ve ever taken.

I jumped wholeheartedly into my new duties. I love Francine very much, and I loved taking care of her, and spending most of my time with her. But I soon found out that the pleasure wasn’t entirely mutual. In pain and feeling quite vulnerable after her accident, Francine needed simple, uncomplicated care—and despite my good intentions, she wasn’t getting that from me. Thank goodness for our close and trusting relationship! She was willing to tell me what was bothering her, and she trusted me to make constructive use of it.

She pointed out that I would frequently withdraw into thought, wondering what I should do, instead of simply staying outward and present and seeing what she needed. Also, I tended to get insecure while performing unfamiliar duties—like helping her put on clothes over her bulky bandages, or steering her wheelchair around tight corners—and

then ask her to repeat instructions she had already given. When she directed me I would interrupt her, anticipating what I thought she would say. And when I left her side to clean the kitchen and do other chores, her rest was disturbed by the frequent sounds of me bumping into things or dropping objects through inattention.

Until she told me, I wasn't aware how many of my habitual ways of living interfered with my ability to be simply and fully present. Those lifelong patterns were invisible to me. But the intensity of her need made Francine keenly aware of them; she needed better care than that. And the intensity of my dedication to giving her what she needed motivated me to dig deeply into what she said.

Actually, none of the habits she pointed out were new revelations. I had received similar feedback before. But never before did I take the input so seriously. And never before had I cared enough about my effects on others to do the hard work of changing them.



My interlude as Francine's caregiver was a very growthful experience, challenging me to be more consistently present and attentive than I'd ever tried to be before. I became very intentional about the way I listened, what I considered before I spoke, how I handled physical objects—everything! And I discovered that life gets a lot more interesting when I am

fully present, and deeply considering others and my surroundings at every move. Compared to that, my old way of being was more like sleep-walking through life. I had been missing a lot of what was happening around me, and sidestepping the invigorating challenge that conscious, responsible living is: a coordinated effort of head, heart, and body to take good care of everyone and everything I touch.

I'm very grateful Francine and I had the opportunity to spend so much time together, grateful that I was finally able to give her the excellent care she deserves, and grateful for the many things I learned in the process.



Coupledness in Community



Jay describes the unique challenges of being coupled in community: He feels responsible to give his marriage special time and attention, while also making time to invest in his other friendships.

I have been living in the community for twenty-seven years. Francine, to whom I am now married, was already a member and personal mentor to others in the community when I joined. As one of the founding members, Fran had many years of deeper relationship experience, and she helped me learn to open up more deeply and talk more freely about personal issues. I quickly came to depend on her love and friendship.

Because of the nature of our relationship, the idea of romance never occurred to either of us. Even nine years ago, when I expressed my appreciation and commitment to her in recognition of her longstanding personal commitment to me, it didn't cross my mind. It was just apparent that she needed, and I wanted to give her, a deeper level of friendship and support. Our relationship and our closeness evolved from there. As time passed, we became more deeply involved, and ultimately married in 2016.



Francine and Jay

Being in a coupled relationship in this community presents some interesting challenges. While Francine and I strive to love each other well, giving each other the extra time and special attention that our intimacy needs, we also consistently invest in our other relationships. We know that the more we're able to love our friends, the better able we will be to love each other.

Life since our marriage has been rich. Building and maintaining emotional intimacy with other members while being deeply involved with each other is a balancing act. Experience has shown me that I need to share many things of emotional significance to build and maintain closeness, not only with Fran, but with my other close friends as well.

To me, this all feels like part of the growth curve required to develop emotional maturity, and help me to get to a place of freedom from problematic orientations and

the difficulties they create. I feel my responsibility toward everyone in the community, because we've learned that when any of us has a difficulty with another member, everyone feels it. So, keeping our relationships honest and clean is a gift we give to the whole community. It keeps the emotional context we share warm, viable, and growing.

Before I joined the community, I had begun to see that real love is the answer to most of life's problems, and I deeply felt the need to learn to love more truly and consistently. The honest effort to remain connected with, to love, to understand my wife, my friends, and their needs, has provided an opening for love to flow through, for deep happiness to be. There are plenty of challenges, but even more rewards.

I'm deeply appreciative of the ongoing process that being married is, that living with a group of close friends is, and that trying to give good love and attention from the heart is. And—I'm thankful for the warmth and love that are growing between all of us as we continue on this journey together.



The Bedrock of Our Community



Francine looks back and sees that the considerations of responsibility and freedom in our community have been guided by our commitment to our relationships, to loving each other, and to overcoming whatever stands in the way.

Commitment is the bottom line here; everything has evolved out of our commitment to each other. We started out from the commitment to love and to make the relationships with the people the most important thing—not issues, not topics, not projects, not any of that stuff. But to commit to these human beings, to love them, and to go together on this adventure of living together and seeing how it works. The form the relationships took was not relevant. It didn't matter if people were couples, or if they were single, or if they paired up and then they broke up. Commitment superseded all that.

We discovered that whenever people try to be close to each other, their ego stuff comes out of the closet. We realized that if our egos weren't dealt with, if our selfish tendencies weren't disciplined, we couldn't love and care deeply for each other. And that absolutely requires commitment: the commitment to stick it out so we can work it out. Love, commitment, and the transcendence of ego are the three principles that hold this community together.

Confronting the stuff that gets in the way and actually letting go of it is challenging. The elder members of the community realize that you can't help people change if you don't love them. So we love the people, and through that love help people over the bumps and difficulties of dealing with their egos.

We formed the community by extending love and commitment to everyone who crossed our path. People got to feel loved, and experience the joys and challenges of close relationships. By committing to people, we show them what's possible. And then they get to choose.

People came and went, and the group we now have began coalescing in 1989, starting with Dyana. They came to learn to love, to realize the value of being in a committed group of people, and have that be their main thing. That didn't mean people couldn't do other things. People have their own talents and interests. Over the years our commitment to each other has allowed us to become an incredibly unified group in which individuality is absolutely respected, and we all help each other as individuals. Carolyn's story is an example of that. That flexibility of helping her find her way came from the depth of our commitment to love each other.

That's what won over everybody who's here: They were loved, they felt the commitment, and they saw that life could be good because of what we were doing and how we felt together. In the first year or two after meeting David and Sara, I went through a couple of crises where I almost left. The last time I was considering leaving, I just sat on the front stoop and thought to myself, "These people are truly committed to you. Why would you walk away?" So I made a decision not to. And all the people who are in this community now have made the same decision.



Love's Refrain (a poem)



David, one of our founders, passed away several years ago but remains with us in spirit. Here is a poem he wrote in the earliest days of the community, expressing a vision of friendship that continues to inspire our community.

Friends
whatever blends
the Chord
is You.

Free
are You to be
Love born,
Love true.

Sing
Love's sweet refrain,
sing
until

We
do You remain
have
and will.





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