

Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Four

By Diana Leafe Christian



Challenging behaviors, whether displaying arrogance on the outside but feeling victimized on the inside (overt version), or acting victimized on the outside but being arrogant inside (covert version), can wreak havoc in a community's well-being.

Guernica, Pablo Picasso

After years of interacting with Olive in my community, I finally realized I was *afraid* of her. At first I didn't identify this as fear, even though I tended to cringe when she spoke in meetings or tensed up whenever we'd interact. And after she'd treat me with contempt I often felt weak and shaky. Yep, this was fear all right!

Olive's Challenging Behaviors

Olive (not her real name, and she passed away a few years ago) was a member of my community I described in the first article in this series. She was often hostile and demanding in our meetings. At the same time she often presented herself as being perpetually offended, harmed, or attacked by others. She was often controlling, and as noted in the first article, demanded "obedience" from her work exchangers. She appeared to exhibit the "covert," "fragile," "vulnerable" version of these behaviors, which mental health professionals call "narcissistic behaviors," associated with people whose outward persona appears insecure and victimized, yet quietly resentful and menacing, and who seem to harbor grandiosity, superiority, entitlement on the inside. (See chart, "'Especially Challenging' Attitudes and Behaviors," p. 49.)

Olive tended to target certain other community members, just as Eldred targeted Joseph, described in the third article in the series (Fall 2022 issue), and Dwight targeted Charlie, in the first article (Winter 2021 issue). The people Olive went after were usually young men who were smart, impatient, "go getters," and sometimes older men and women with special expertise, such as in legal-financial matters, or those who made proposals to help our community achieve its goals. Olive targeted me too, but the reason, I later learned, was because I once pointed out her behaviors and their effects on others directly *to* her, and in front of other people. It turns out this is one of the most counter-productive things we can say to a person with these behaviors—especially *publicly*.

However, Olive didn't act in these ways all the time. She had skills and qualities many in our community appreciated. She was a respected teacher of environmental sustainability, and so effective that she was beloved by her students, many of whom were younger community members. She was especially fond of young women whom she mentored: the more they appreciated and revered her expertise, the more nurturing she was. She became one of our best meeting facilitators; when she facilitated meetings she was professional and neutral even about topics she had strong opinions about. There was much to admire about Olive and many people did, although they were also aware of her other side.

Previous articles described especially challenging behaviors of these types, and also several ways to set limits and boundaries. (See gen-us.net/DLC for past installments.) This article suggests setting boundaries in another way, making all communications with the person public, and engaging outside healing help—for

ourselves—in order to grow inner strength and emotional resilience to better understand and withstand these behaviors.

“Don’t Engage”—Removing Ourselves from the Person’s Presence

We can protect ourselves by no longer engaging much with the person acting in these ways, thus removing ourselves from their direct line of fire. This can seem like an anti-community attitude, but can be a life-saver in restoring emotional safety and peace of mind.

Dr. Ramani Durvasula, in her book on narcissistic behaviors, *Don’t You Know Who I Am?*, suggests that we not engage with the person whenever possible. She calls this “creating a psychological distance that feels safe. . . . Through distance and stepping back and setting boundaries and taking care of yourself,” she writes, “you can move forward.” And as Dr. Durvasula and Adelyn Birch, author of *Boundaries*, both advise, it is best for the person setting the boundaries to *tell* the other person they are doing this.

The Quiet (or “Chicken”) Way to Set Boundaries

I knew nothing about these behaviors back in the days when I was one of Olive’s targets, and certainly didn’t know anything about setting boundaries. But after years of feeling scared and yet feeling obligated to interact regularly with Olive as my fellow community member, I finally woke up.

“*Wait* a minute, I realized. “*This* isn’t right.”

It occurred to me that I could choose to *stop* setting myself up for this, after a particularly painful series of interactions in a committee. Although I loved our committee and had worked in it for years, after Olive joined it our meetings became painful—with me feeling weak and shaky after each committee email and after our meetings. I certainly should have resigned from the committee and retained my dignity. But I soldiered on until the meeting where Olive booted me out of the group, backed up by bringing a mutual friend to help her do it (whom I thought of as my close friend and ally too—*Ouch!*). The other two committee members—older, quiet, non-assertive people—didn’t agree with Olive or back her up, but, sitting there in stunned silence, didn’t help me either. Fuming impotently, I stumbled out of the room, bumping into things, a most ungraceful, undignified exit. My ultimate “learning moment,” you might say.

At this point I finally realized I needed to limit my interactions with Olive, and stop engaging with her altogether. I could do this rather easily because ours is a large, village-scale community and she and I lived in different neighborhoods. But the “Quiet Way” to set boundaries I came up with didn’t involve sending a courteous but clear email to tell Olive what behaviors I would no longer allow in my presence, and what I’d do if she did them. I would have shown higher integrity if I’d communicated those things! But I was way too scared to say anything to Olive directly, even on email. So I just quietly got out of her way. I made sure we didn’t meet often anymore and didn’t see each other directly either.

I no longer participated in the smaller work parties or small social gatherings when Olive would be present. I sat at a different table during meals, in a location where she wouldn’t see me. I never sat directly across from her in business meetings, but sat a few seats away with three or four people between us so we’d have no eye contact. If we’d happen to meet in passing, I’d acknowledge her by nodding and saying hello, but didn’t engage in conversation. If we needed to talk about any community business on email I was polite, brief, and to the point. I deleted her emailed implications or provocations; if she did this in person I responded mildly and innocuously and moved on. I called this “having a two-percent relationship” with Olive.

I was like the Starship Enterprise with shields up, or a Klingon Bird of Prey in “cloaked” mode.

I didn’t use the Inner Ninja because I’d forgotten I learned it decades earlier. (Described in Part Two, this is a simple physical practice for self-protection. For a handout

on the Inner Ninja technique, email me at diana@ic.org.) The practice only came rushing back later when I was verbally accosted by someone in another community, a story I’ll tell in the next article.

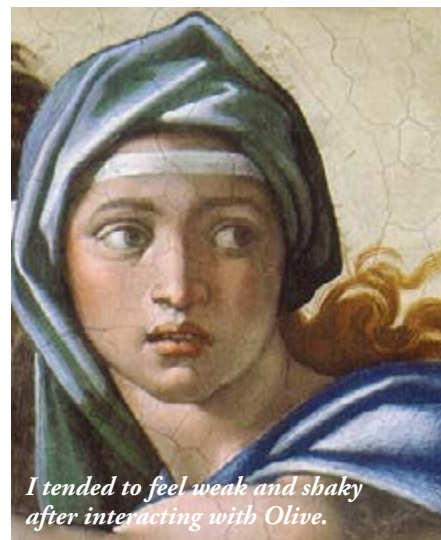
Of course the Quiet Way is the easiest way to set boundaries with someone. It doesn’t require the courage and assertiveness to tell the person which behaviors you don’t want to experience and what you’ll do if the person keeps doing them. My two-percent relationship with Olive was taking the easy way out—the “Chicken” Way, you could say.

Nevertheless, distancing myself like this was the best I could do at the time, and I felt *much* better, safe again in my own community. I was no longer cringing or bracing myself. My solar plexus didn’t shake anymore.

But Why Should I Leave?

Well, with Dr. Durvasula and other psychologists and mental health experts advising us to distance ourselves and not engage with those who exhibit these behaviors, it’s natural to ask why should *we*, not the person who behaves this way, leave a committee we love, or not participate in work parties or attend the small gatherings when they’ll be there?

Yep.
This was fear
all right!



The Delphic Sibyl, Michaelangelo, Sistine Chapel

I copied all our emails to people Herman liked.



Austin Distel

“Make it public” means making sure your communications with the person are also seen, heard, or read by others.

While we can feel significantly more peace of mind in our own community if we avoid people with these behavior patterns, doing this certainly goes against the grain for most of us. Staying out of the person’s way or leaving a committee we love can feel as if we’re not only out of integrity and “running away” but it’s also unfair. *They* should leave the committee; we shouldn’t have to!

I agree. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Yet we need to ask ourselves which is the less painful choice: continuing to be targeted with hurtful and even abusive behaviors or not participating in some community activities. My advice: leave the committee or team and don’t attend small work parties or social gatherings when the person will be present, and bide your time. Continue participating in larger community meetings and bigger social events and larger work parties where you won’t be in close contact with them, and perhaps even create a “two-percent relationship” of your own. People join and leave committees all the time in community; when the person leaves a committee or team, consider joining it again and continue the good work of helping your community.

What About a *Small* Community?

How can we avoid someone if we’re a group with just a few members, or just a few households, or if we live in one shared group household? This is a considerably more difficult situation, of course, because how can we gracefully not engage with or avoid someone if we share the same kitchen, participate in a work day in the garden, or pass each other in the hall? And what about sharing a meal with the person when we’re all at the same table?

I believe we have the same choices in a small community, although it’s *much* more difficult. To the degree we can, and if possible, in ways that are not rude or obvious—not “shunning” the person or giving the silent treatment—we can try to find graceful ways to not be in the same space, and create our own version of a “two-percent relationship.” And if possible, consider using the Inner Ninja technique to protect ourselves from the effects of the person’s hurtful comments, or resentful or hostile energy directed at us.

But even doing all this may not work if we’re in a small enough group, and/or if the person’s behaviors and energies seem more powerful and penetrating than our own inner strength and emotional resilience. To be blunt, this situation, especially in a small community, can make our life a living hell. In a small community *especially* we need to ask ourselves which is less painful: continuing to experience hurtful, even abusive behaviors on a daily basis, or leaving the group altogether. I’ve known decent, good-hearted, emotionally well people who choose to leave their community because someone like this was targeting them.

Sometimes the *only* thing we can do when this happens is to get the hell out of Dodge.

Making Abuse Public

Another step we can take is to make “public” all our communications and interactions with people behaving in these ways. Abuse and bullying are often done in secret. Doing these things when no one can witness them helps an abuser get away with it. Making abuse public means meeting with the person only in the presence of others; putting their phone calls on speaker phone so others in the room can hear; sharing any email exchanges with them with friends in the community, and always letting the person know we’re doing this.

Dr. Durvasula recommends this in dealing with bosses or co-workers with these behaviors, and it applies to fellow community members as well. “Avoid meeting with (them) alone,” she cautions. These people “often prefer phone conversations and one-on-one meetings, because they work better for bullying,” she writes. “Ask to have someone else present at meetings whenever possible.”

I did this with a fellow community member I’ll call Herman who would send me what became known in our community as “Herman’s nasty emails.” This happened when we were trying to create a new community business. Herman was delayed in finishing the technical aspects of the business, and by then I had to go out of town. I was still managing the project by email while I was away, but Herman assumed I’d abandoned it and left him holding the ball. So he started sending abusive emails maligning my character. I didn’t know much about these challenging behaviors then. I stumbled onto the idea to make his emails public by chance. I picked the three women Herman most admired in our community, and after getting their permission, told him from then on I would always copy these friends in all our email correspondence.

Herman continued sending nasty emails for a while, but after he finally realized people he admired were also reading his emails, he sent only neutral, businesslike ones from then on.

A member of a cohousing community I met recently had a similar experience. He told me that when a woman in his community started sending him critical, abusive emails, he told her he would share her emails with the whole community, and he did. The woman stopped the critical emails! An unexpected benefit was when they later worked together on a community project, the woman behaved much more courteously toward him than she ever had before. Apparently “outing” her abuse to the whole group not only stopped the woman’s mean-spirited emails but induced her to behave more cooperatively in person as well.

This really works!

“Get Therapy!”

Eek! I'd just geared up all the courage I had one morning on the deck of our house to ask one of the scariest, most intimidating housemates I ever had to please not speak to me in such an angry, demeaning way. It was hard to stammer out. I'd practically whispered it; I was so scared my throat had choked up. It wasn't exactly setting limits and boundaries, but it was the best I could do.

“Get therapy!” she hissed!

I'd never stood up to her before. This tall imposing woman with jet black hair—whom I'll call Andraste, the ancient British raven goddess of war and blood—was imperious and anxious. She, my mother, and I were trying to start a small community on a nine-acre property in North Carolina. She scared us, and was off-putting to our new friends and neighbors.

I immediately knew what “Get therapy!” meant. If I was too weak to deal with her righteous anger at, as she saw it, my always making mistakes, I should get therapy, become more competent, and develop a spine! Instead of feeling insulted by this as you'd imagine, I thought, “Oh. Right. I *forgot* about therapy. I could get some help.”

How could I forget therapy? I had benefited from various therapies most of my adult life, especially the unusual metaphysical/spiritual methods. In all the months Andraste and I'd been locked into what felt like a death-grip power struggle, I'd forgotten all about it. So rather than being insulted I was jolted out of feeling stuck and remembered that outside healing help still existed and I could get some.

The Trauma Bond, Up Close and Personal

Andraste exhibited many of the behaviors described in these articles: self-centeredness, a sense of superiority, an ever-present irritation that burst easily into rage, a willingness to insult and berate others, and an apparent lack of interest in other people's well-being. She often didn't speak in a normal voice, but screeched. We were a forming community of only three, so her abuse was a daily, in-my-face occurrence. Why she was so furious at me so often, and could barely contain her rage, was because well...everything about me. My very existence seemed to provoke her.

We'd started out as friends who liked each other immediately, as if we'd known each other all our lives. We went on a cross-country tour to visit communities and look for a small property where we could create a community. We had a great time, simpatico comrades. But things soon changed. Our relationship was very much like a love relationship with a partner that starts out great and quickly goes sour, but without the sex and romance. And all the typical dynamics of a love relationship with a narcissistic partner were there. There are books and dozens of videos about when someone in a relationship with a narcissist slowly loses their confidence and sense of self. In working with Andraste in our small community project I rather quickly became an irritatingly incompetent and irresponsible easily cowed child; she was the responsible, hyper-competent, easily annoyed, clearly superior adult.

Two odd things happened. First, everything she said about me became true, even if it was exaggerated or hadn't seemed true originally. Her opinions of me pierced like a laser; I became what she thought of me. Second, I inexplicably *turned into her*. She screeched; I screeched back. She was insulting and abusive; I was insulting and abusive. What was happening?

After studying these behaviors years later I learned this is *exactly* what happens in what's called a “trauma-bond” relationship with a narcissistic partner. The two start out well, but soon the person with these behaviors begins turning the screws, while their target slowly loses their confidence, their sense of well-being, then their ability to function normally. They often *mirror the same behaviors* as their abuser. They lose their emotional resilience; their life force drains away. They become a shell of their former selves. Their health crumbles. They can't sleep. Their old friends barely recognize them.

That morning on the deck Andraste's angry rebuke changed my life. One of our neighbors, a therapist named Diane, specialized in EFT therapy (Emotional Freedom Technique), also known as the “tapping” method. I made an appointment with her

for that afternoon.

EFT is known for being unusually fast therapy, as it doesn't take many sessions to make a difference. I walked into her therapy office that afternoon a shell of my former self, and walked out feeling slightly better and standing a bit taller.

After the third session about a week later I felt so much better I could suddenly see that, obviously, we needed to stop trying to create a new community; we should finish construction, sell the property, and move on.

After a few more sessions, I had the courage to tell Andraste I thought we should do this. She was shocked at first, but soon also saw this is what we should do.

And with more EFT sessions I felt empowered enough to start finishing construction. Before that I'd felt so paralyzed I didn't have the energy or confidence to do anything but my day job—too emotionally stuck to pick up a hammer or a spatula. But now, with a caulking gun and grim determination I finished caulking the bathroom sink. We had many small construction jobs to complete in our project and I was on it. While Andraste worked on getting the project's finances ready for the property sale, I caulked, spread sheet-

She was the scariest woman I'd ever met!



One of the best things we can do, in my experience, is get outside healing help to build emotional resilience and safety.

Youssef Naddam

rock mud, stained widow trim, and painted room after room.

I got outside healing help. The worm had turned.

Getting Outside Healing Help (for Ourselves)

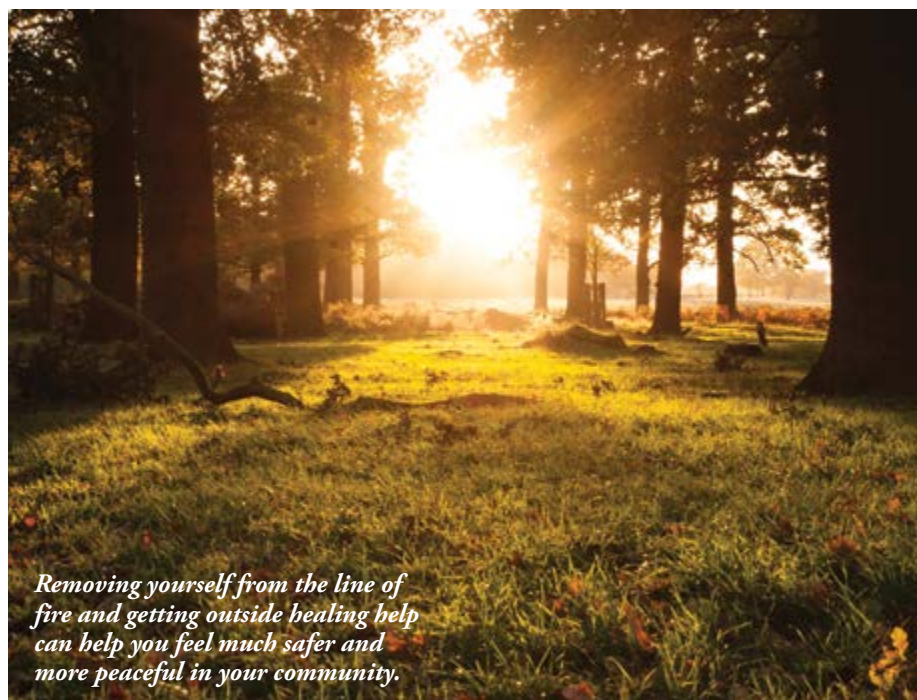
Mental health professionals and others who work with people affected by narcissists, like those cited in these articles—Dr. Ramani Durvasula, author of *Don't You Know Who I Am?*, Dr. Craig Malkin, author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, and Adelyn Birch, author of *Boundaries*—all recommend that people affected by these behaviors get therapy to generate inner strength and emotional resilience in order to better withstand the effects of these behaviors. We can't change the people who do them, but we can certainly strengthen ourselves! (See "Book Reviews and Suggested Resources," gen-us.net/DLC.)

I call this "getting outside healing help" because psychotherapists point out that when early trauma occurs in childhood it comes from the behaviors of other people—their trauma comes from *outside* the child. So as an adult they cannot heal the trauma by themselves, on their own. It came into them from the outside, psychotherapists say, and responds well to help that also comes in from the outside, hence "outside" healing help.

Thanks to Andraste, and thanks to Diane (and to The Universe for setting it up!), I realized I needed a lot more spiritual-emotional healing work if I wanted to live a fulfilled, effective life. Diane's EFT therapy helped me become at least emotionally well enough to continue living there, finish the construction, and help get our property sold. And it got me at least emotionally well enough to be accepted a few years later as a Provisional Member in my community.

I've found the following methods to be especially helpful in helping people change their difficult inner patterns and their outside circumstances:

- Psychotherapists specializing in helping people in relationships with narcissistic partners, parents, bosses, or coworkers
- Psychotherapists specializing in trauma-healing methods
- David Berceci's Trauma Healing Exercises (TRE)
- Nonviolent Communication trainers who specialize in NVC's empathy processes for specific traumas
- Psychotherapists who offer Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)—the "back and forth eye-movement" technique
- Psychotherapists who offer Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)
- Homeopaths



Removing yourself from the line of fire and getting outside healing help can help you feel much safer and more peaceful in your community.

Benjamin Davies

• Shamans and shamanic counselors and what's called "soul retrieval" (entering altered states themselves to remove traumas directly from their clients' psyche)

• Clairvoyant healers who specialize in this work

Because I've experienced all these methods I feel confident recommending them. For me, the typical "talk therapy" I tried first didn't change anything except thinning my wallet. I didn't want to wait months or years for results; I wanted clearly observable improvement in my inner world and my life circumstances—the best Bang for my Transformation Buck! And these rather unusual methods seemed to do that.

I continued getting outside healing help after I joined my community, including with a fellow community member, a retired psychiatrist who worked with homeopathic remedies. In recent years I've benefited by working with a clairvoyant healer who works like a shaman; she seems to be able to remove old, stuck traumas right out of a person's psyche. Several of my community friends have worked with her too, with good results. (Email diana@ic.org for her contact information.) I've really needed all this outside healing help. Instead of trudging through life in a gray fog of wretchedness and misery and consistently attracting abuse, I now attract warm, supportive friends and most of the time feel cheerful, upbeat, and grateful.

Why Should I Get Therapy? They Should Get It!

Certainly, they should. But of course they won't. And even if they did, it wouldn't change much, or change anything, according to Dr. Durvasula, Dr. Malkin, and other psychologists who specialize in working with people negatively affected by people with these challenging behaviors. And when someone who exhibits them is forced to get therapy, as when a couple contemplating divorce seeks therapy as a last resort, or when a narcissist law-breaker is ordered by a Court to get therapy, they cannot usually seem to change. Sometimes, Dr. Durvasula says, with long and exceptionally patient therapy, the person can learn to simulate—not genuinely feel but *simulate*—more empathetic, thoughtful,

respectful behaviors with others. But as soon as they feel threatened again (and they feel threatened often, and by simple things like someone not agreeing with them or not obeying them), they tend to immediately revert to their old ways. They can't keep up what for them is the arduous work of pretending empathy and behaving thoughtfully. They were too traumatized at too early an age, so their attempts to simulate what seems like normal behavior are too exhausting to keep up.

And Olive?

As I limited my interactions with Olive, over the months and then years, I felt safer and more peaceful, which allowed me to gain a new perspective. When she made hostile comments in meetings, I no longer felt dread and aversion, but experienced an inner sense of understanding. I thought I knew what she was feeling and why she was behaving that way; I knew I'd sometimes felt the same way and had behaved the same way myself. My shaky anxiety became empathy and compassion. One reason I could now feel this way was that I kept getting outside healing help. The other reason was my space away from Olive. Because of this psychic space I now saw Olive's behaviors as her attempts to feel safe enough to keep going in life, to keep fear and misery at bay. I understood this so well! I could now feel kindness and compassion for Olive. I wished her well.

Several years later she was dying from a painful illness and of course my community rallied around her to offer every kind of help. I wanted to help too, if I could do this and still keep my distance. I knew Olive read novels to distract herself from pain, so I asked if she liked historical fiction by women authors, and she did. So I loaned her stack after stack of books. Her friends would pick them up from my mudroom and take them down the road to her house. Olive would read the books and send them back with her friends, who'd drop them off in my mudroom and pick up a new stack. I was able to help Olive in her last weeks with this small act of caring and support. I was grateful I now had the emotional space to be capable of this, even in this small book-sharing way.

"Especially Challenging" Attitudes and Behaviors

More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
 Entitlement
 Impaired empathy
 Lying; exaggerating accomplishments
 Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts
 Grandiosity
 Craving attention
 Criticizing others
 Mocking or jeering at others
 Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others
 Bullying others

Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
 Relishing vengeance
 Manipulating others; using people
 Hypersensitivity to criticism
 Projecting their behaviors and attitudes onto others
 "Gaslighting" others (telling someone what they directly observed didn't actually happen)
 Envy others; resenting others
 Limited self-awareness
 "Grooming" newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality

-DLC

Recognizing Challenging Behaviors

Mental health professionals call people who do these behaviors *narcissists* and *narcissistic*, but I suggest we don't use those terms, and instead just focus on the behaviors themselves. But recognizing them can be complex. Most people with these behaviors exhibit only some but not all of them—their particular cluster of the behaviors. Each person's cluster of behaviors differs from the cluster of behaviors in others. Moreover, the behaviors of any one person can be different at different times. And the behaviors can come and go. And these folks can target some people but not others.

So our task is not to recognize various negative attitudes and behaviors that many of us fall into sometimes, but to recognize certain *patterns of behavior* that are consistent though perhaps intermittent, may be aimed at some but not others, and which persist over time.

-DLC

Coming Up

The next article will focus on several ways small groups of community friends can help each other feel supported and empowered, and perhaps also induce the person to have less negative impact in meetings and stop targeting them, as well as the unusual advice of Dr. Craig Malkin on inducing more cooperation from people with these behaviors. The last article will focus on what the community as a whole can do. Please stay tuned! 🐦

Diana Leaf Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, an especially effective self-governance and decision-making method. She lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. See www.DianaLeafChristian.org.