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COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

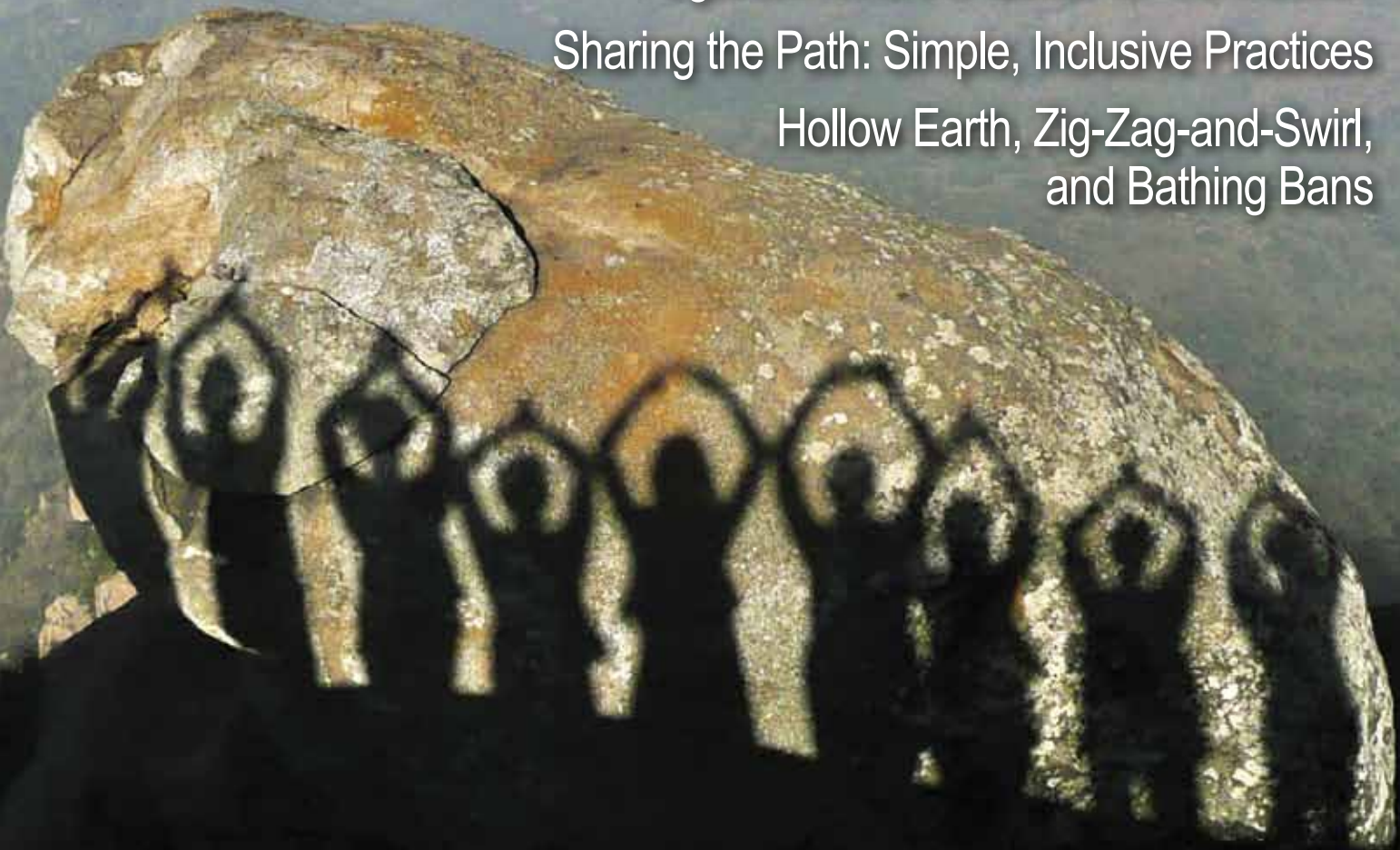
Spirituality
Not a New Religion

Monasticism and "The Great Work"

Paganism and the Quest for Connection

Sharing the Path: Simple, Inclusive Practices

Hollow Earth, Zig-Zag-and-Swirl,
and Bathing Bans



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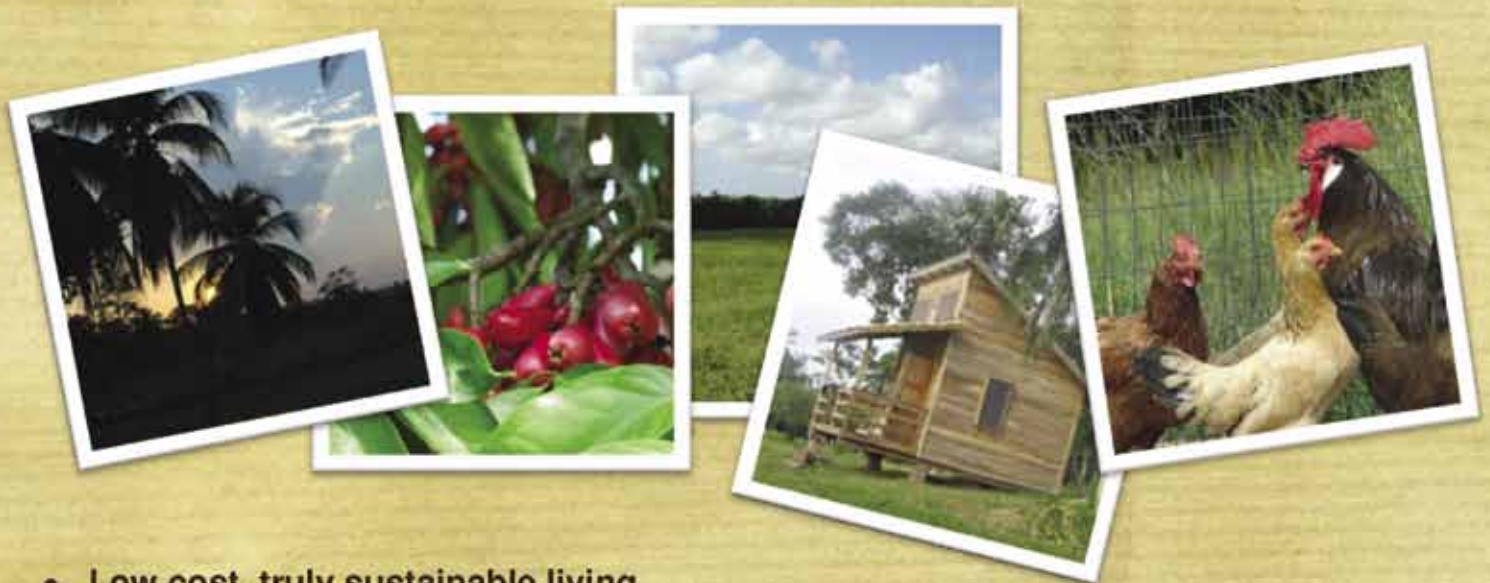
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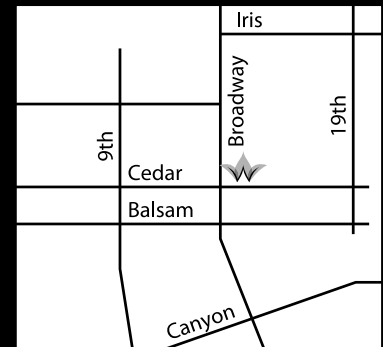
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Spirituality

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Starhawk

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Daniel Greenberg

In the Spring of 2010 a group of Living Routes students traveled from Auroville to Tiruvannamalai and made a pilgrimage walk around and up Arunachula Mountain, which is considered by many Hindus to be the body of the God Shiva. We started our hike up around 4 a.m. and reached the summit around dawn, when this photo was taken.

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LETTERS



Permaculture at the Monastery

Roy, a fellow monk, kindly shares with us his subscription to COMMUNITIES. I have now had two issues in my hands, and am very grateful for the magazine. I have read the “Permaculture” issue (#153) nearly cover to cover.

I am in charge of grounds stewardship here at Holy Cross Monastery and with other brothers I am in discernment to dream up a long-term development plan for our 23 acres that will increase the fertility of our land materially, socially, and spiritually. Once we are a bit more articulate as to what it could be, we will start a community-wide discernment to make sure we have a plan we are all able and happy to live with.

I am also keeping an eye on the Transition Movement which seems to be starting in Kingston, the nearby city.

All this to say, the magazine is to the point for my interests. Thank you.

Br. Bernard Delcourt, OHC
West Park, New York
monasteryroad.blogspot.com

Permaculture Problems and Solutions

Re. your issue #153 theme, I’ve identified four problems in Permaculture in need of integrated solutions:

Problem 1: No job programs from classes and trainings

One consistent global concern for the Permaculture movement is the lack of paying work. Using volunteers is not sustainable. Are there any transitional paths to employment programs for your trainings? Are there any job stats to share?

Solution 1: Schools, private organizations, and solo instructors must lead the way to create a minimum-wage opportunity for their graduates. This is a huge disconnect for hundreds of Permaculture Design Course grads without means to practice or even survive in their localities. One could even ask the elites themselves to lead this strategic plan.

Problem 2: Need for integration and support of Occupy, the Transition Town movement, and Permaculture

Solution 2: Consider the following ideas:

1. Permaculture could benefit from Occupy’s aggressive campaigning tactics.
2. Permaculture can teach Design with Nature strategies to Transition and Occupy.
3. Transition can teach Permaculture and Occupy how to vision and build local community.
4. Transition can teach Permaculture and Occupy about energy-saving tools and strategies.
5. Permaculture could help build an Occupy camp.
6. As we support each other, rapid growth and change are possible as are new stories, rituals, and heroes.

Problem 3: Lack of promotion and celebration, especially in the “old” business sector

Ironically schools, private organizations, and solo instructors are great at self-promotion!

Solution 3: We need to better utilize the existing business channels to make the Permaculture case, including the chamber of commerce, the service clubs (e.g. Lions, Elks), and the local churches. There are demo sites on corporate lands and desperately needed partnerships just around the corner.

Problem 4: Our endless love-hate Permaculture relationship with things spiritual

“Hi Willi. I do not teach metaphysics and the unproven sciences. I leave spirituality to everyone’s own choice. This is a conversation I do not want to have.”
Geoff Lawton

“I am concerned that you would not approve of my thoroughly Bible-based worldview.” Natasha Turner

(Source: www.permacultureglobal.com/messages)

Solution 4: Left unsolved, this issue will likely destroy the Permaculture movement. Let’s create a set of global symbols, rituals, and stories that we can all celebrate together. Find a middle ground before we fragmentize.

Willi Paul
sacredpermaculture.net

We welcome reader feedback on the articles in each issue, as well as letters of more general interest. Please send your comments to editor@ic.org or COMMUNITIES, 81868 Lost Valley Ln, Dexter OR 97431. Your letters may be edited or shortened. Thank you!

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COMMUNITIES is a forum for exploring intentional communities, cooperative living, and ways our readers can bring a sense of community into their daily lives. Contributors include people who live or have lived in community, and anyone with insights relevant to cooperative living or shared projects.

Through fact, fiction, and opinion, we offer fresh ideas about how to live and work cooperatively, how to solve problems peacefully, and how individual lives can be enhanced by living purposefully with others. We seek contributions that profile community living and why people choose it, descriptions of what's difficult and what works well, news about existing and forming communities, or articles that illuminate community experiences—past and present—offering insights into mainstream cultural issues. We also seek articles about cooperative ventures of all sorts—in workplaces, in neighborhoods, among people sharing common interests—and about “creating community where you are.”

We do not intend to promote one kind of group over another, and take no official position on a community's economic structure, political agenda, spiritual beliefs, environmental issues, or decision-making style. As long as submitted articles are related thematically to community living and/or cooperation, we will consider them for publication. However, we do not publish articles that 1) advocate violent practices, or 2) advocate that a community interfere with its members' right to leave.

Our aim is to be as balanced in our reporting as possible, and whenever we print an article critical of a particular community, we invite that community to respond with its own perspective.

Submissions Policy

To submit an article, please first request Writers' Guidelines: COMMUNITIES, RR 1 Box 156, Rutledge MO 63563-9720; 660-883-5545; editor@ic.org. To obtain Photo Guidelines, email: layout@ic.org. Both are also available online at communities.ic.org.

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What is an “Intentional Community”?

An “intentional community” is a group of people who have chosen to live or work together in pursuit of a common ideal or vision. Most, though not all, share land or housing. Intentional communities come in all shapes and sizes, and display amazing diversity in their common values, which may be social, economic, spiritual, political, and/or ecological. Some are rural; some urban. Some live all in a single residence; some in separate households. Some raise children; some don't. Some are secular, some are spiritually based; others are both. For all their variety, though, the communities featured in our magazine hold a common commitment to living cooperatively, to solving problems nonviolently, and to sharing their experiences with others.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE BY LAIRD SCHAUB



Giving Up the Gjetost Seeing I, Eye to Eye

Back in November my three-year-old granddaughter, Taivyn, came down with a bad intestinal infection caused by *Clostridium difficile* (colloquially known as C diff), which attacked her opportunistically following a pediatrician-prescribed course of antibiotics to knock out a persistent respiratory problem. She spent 16 days in intensive care before a new round of antibiotics gained the upper hand and she was able to return home—just in time for Thanksgiving. It was a scary time.

When I shared the story of her battle in my blog (see the Nov 16, 2011 entry), I got an upwelling of support, including this heartfelt piece from Larry Rider, who lives in the Ananda Community in Lynnwood, Washington:

My sympathies go to you and Taivyn, and her parents. But I couldn't help noticing that your blog made no mention of any alternative healing techniques for Taivyn. It sounds as though you accept the level of reality of the bacterial infection. I hope I am not taking too much of a liberty to remind you that energy is the reality behind matter, and that strengthening the energy body, the aura, is a prime tool in healing. Healing prayers, from a distance, can help a lot to do this. If you visualize Taivyn as well and strong, and healthy, and project that image to her, on a soul level she will receive it. If you have any connection with God, with spirit, with a universal force, that omnipresent spirit of which we are all manifestations can connect you and convey your will for helping her to heal.

Forgive me if I am overstepping any bounds, but I have seen the effectiveness of healing prayers, and God's healing power, so many times that I cannot refrain from making

this suggestion. The most common form of healing prayers that I do is to visualize the person as healthy, say a mental prayer such as "Divine Mother, you are omnipresent, you are in Taivyn. Manifest your healing presence in her body, mind, and soul." Then rub the hands together, filling them with energy, then hold the hands up, palms outward, visualize sending that energy to Taivyn, chanting Om three times.

I thanked him. I believe strongly in energy and the power of positive thinking. While this doesn't translate for me into a belief in God, I have a profound respect for what can be accomplished with focus and good jujū. I believe in magic and mystery. I believe that there is more going on among us than can be explained by chemistry and psychology.

I thereby benefited from Larry's kind regards for me, even as he encouraged me to focus my healing regards on Taivyn. The economics of love is the reverse of money—it multiplies as you give it away, and diminishes as you hoard it.

Six days later, Larry continued his ministry with this reflection on a blog that I wrote about loneliness:

I don't know if this will be something you can relate to, but I want to share with you my take on your blog. I think your loneliness, like many people's, comes from seeing your self as the Doer. You certainly are introspective, but I do not sense that you have an inner connection with a higher power. You seem like you are alone in your ego, as are many others.

Though I do not know how to do this, I want to share what I feel is the joy of having a relationship with God, with a higher consciousness, in relation to which the healthy, strong, productive, and motivated ego is but a child. I am also seen as someone who accomplishes a lot, and many of my friends are too, but we practice the art of being channels of this higher power, of God as the Doer. This frees the ego. Of course, it humbles the ego too, but if you can let go of the thought that you are doing all this, and give the credit to God, to your higher self that is not limited to your body and your ego, but is the Higher Self, it frees you both from loneliness and from personal responsibility for mistakes. It makes everything a service to God. If you love God, as I do, then you want to serve him (or her—divine Mother is an equally valid concept).

How does one find this relationship? That is the eternal question to which I would love to know the answer. I work with those who have a relationship with God, and who want to deepen it. I personally believe that this is the very goal of life. Having it, everything becomes more fun.

Certainly your serviceful attitude and desire to help other people, which are manifestations of this divine Spirit, show that you are moving in the right direction, and I applaud you for this.

While I was raised a lukewarm Lutheran (if you listen to Garrison Keillor, there may not be any other kind), religion was not a central focus in my family and I drifted away rather quietly after being confirmed on the Palm Sunday I was 13.

My spiritual exploration has been far more diffused than Larry's and my pathway has been far less well lit. Still, I've been making progress (I think). Mind you, I don't know that Larry's wrong in any aspect of his advice; I just don't know *in my soul* that he's right, either.


Instead, what I have come to rely upon as a spiritual guidepost is the alignment of my service work and my personal growth work. I figure if the good I do in the world simultaneously supplies me with a steady stream of insights into who I am and how I can improve, how can it be any better than that? Whether this passes for divine inspiration is a question too profound for me to address; I just know that I'm at peace with this journey.



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE BY LAIRD SCHAUB

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Larry spoke about the traps of the ego, and I can understand the appeal of a belief in God as an antidote for loneliness. I think we all long to be understood and fully seen. A significant portion of my personal growth work is ego management, and not confusing a beneficial desire to be of service with an unhealthy desire to be celebrated for my facility as a facilitator and instructor. Since both occur on the same stage, this requires constant vigilance.

As a process teacher, one of the mantras I try to impress upon people learning facilitation is to remember: it's not about you. However, both as a practitioner and as an instructor, I worry that a portion of my motivation to do this work may come from a desire to be the hero, to bask repeatedly in the adulation of groups and students who are amazed at how I can pull a rabbit out of a hat—such as an 11-hour articulation of the way through a dense thicket of issues bristling with the thorns of emotional distress where all seems hopelessly tangled. This is a dangerous drug, and one that is most readily available in the exact situations where I have been most of service. Sigh.

The fact that this operates mostly on the subconscious level is not a solace. Rather, it's a warning that I can never be sure if this demon has been wholly contained. I am called upon, as part of my spiritual work, to constantly keep an eye on I.

When I do my best work as a facilitator and trainer, I approach a state of selflessness. I become a conduit where events and information flow around me and through me, yet nothing sticks to me. I am interactive; not reactive. When I am fully in laminar flow, the work consumes no energy. I can engage for an entire weekend at an elevated state of awareness and feel buoyant and refreshed at the end. While most people consider me to be unusually wired (which is just an anagram for "weird"), such is my main spiritual path.

Show Me the Whey

I've always marveled at the incredible array of cheeses in the world—which, like beer and spiritual inquiry, is something that has been developed by nearly all cultures. One of the most distinctive cheeses is a Norwegian offering: gjetost. It's nutty in color and flavor, with a smooth texture and the sweetness of concentrated lactose. It's made by boiling down the whey—the liquid residue after the curds have been separated from congealed milk in regular cheese manufacture. Though it's ordinarily viewed as a byproduct (pigs thrive on it), some clever Scandinavian had the insight to cook it down and see what happened—voila, gjetost! It's the second coming of cheese.

I like to think that the Laird I am today is the product of having been boiled down by thousands of hours of meetings, concentrating the cooperative essence. At my best, I am not cheesy (though there are times when my writing is). Rather, I am a midwife, attempting to deliver one healthy, productive meeting after another. Over time—no matter how complicated the delivery—the baby will grow and the memory of my contribution will fade, which is as it should be.

While I like to think that I have important messages, in the end, I am just a delivery boy.



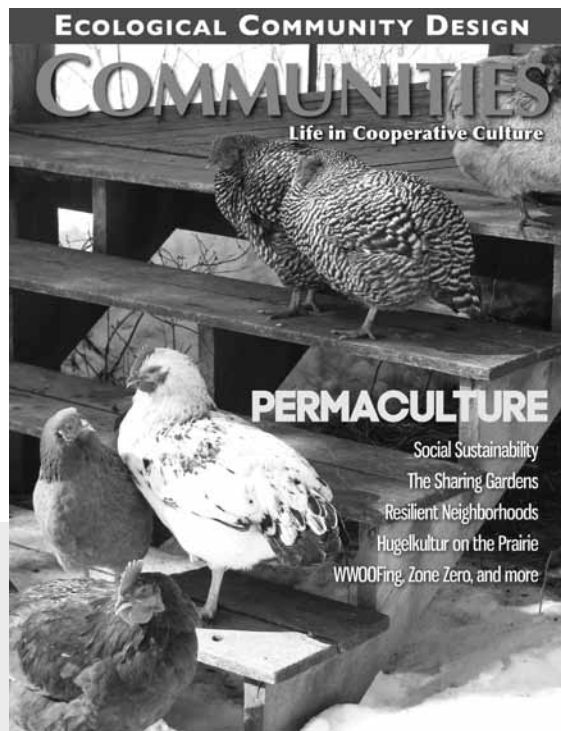
Laird Schaub is Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and cofounder of Sandhill Farm, an FEC community in Missouri, where he lives. He is also a facilitation trainer and process consultant, and he authors a blog that can be read at communityandconsensus.blogspot.com.

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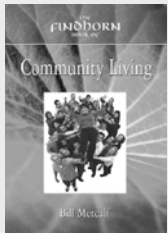
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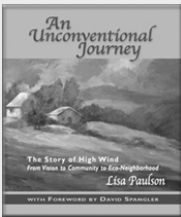
Community Bookshelf



Findhorn Book of Community Living

by William Metcalf. 2004, 128 pages. Words of wisdom from one of the most famous

spiritual communities.



An Unconventional Journey

by Lisa Paulson. 2010, 184 pages.

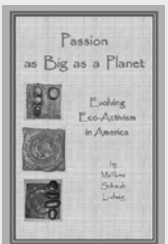
The story of the birth and reinvention of a Findhorn-inspired community in Wisconsin.



Zen of Groups

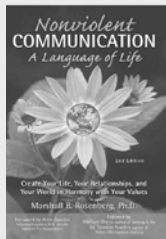
by Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey & Bill Taylor. 1995, 196 pages. Great group dynamics advice plus encouragement for

personal inquiry and growing into our roles as social change agents.



Passion as Big as a Planet

by Ma'ikwe Schaub Ludwig. 2007, 232 pages. A spiritual seekers' guide to earth activism.



Nonviolent Communication

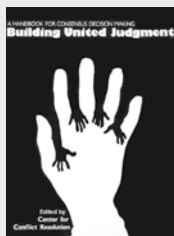
by Marshall Rosenberg. 2000, 211 pages. The classic guide to better communication and better relationships.



Seeking the Good Life

DVD, by Joy Truskowski. 62 minutes, 2011.

One woman's journey to find her community home; the most accessible community search video we carry.



Building United Judgment, A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making

edited by Center for Conflict Resolution, published by FIC.

1981, 124 pages. Still the best basic intro to consensus.



A New We

DVD. 120 minutes, 2010. Profiles of sustainability-focused communities in Europe. Great addition to your community video collection.



Fire, Salt, and Peace: Intentional Christian Communities Alive in North America

by David Janzen.

1996, 207 pages. The book to start the search for a Christian intentional community.



Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints On A Finite Earth

by Jim Merkel. 2003, 288 pages.

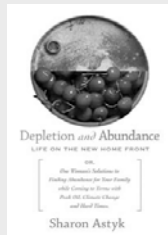
Sustainability, resource justice, and escaping the consumer lifestyle point to changes that add up to a better life.



Communities Directory

2010, 512 pages. New edition of the FIC's guide to finding and connecting with communities, with over

1,000 listings.



Depletion and Abundance

by Sharon Astyk. 2008, 288 pages.

Great, non-strident guide to the personal in the peak oil transition.

store.ic.org

COMMUNITY EVENTS COMING IN 2012

Save the Dates—Register Now

FIC Sponsored and Co-Sponsored Events



FIC Organizational Meeting, April 20-22, Carrboro NC

The Fellowship for Intentional Community will be holding its spring organizational meetings April 20-22, 2012. If you're interested in what FIC is up to, join us for any or all of our three days of meetings.

If you're interested in community networking—or have questions about how to handle challenges your group is facing—this is a terrific opportunity to get together with community veterans, and see where you might fit in. It's also a chance to witness the consensus process as practiced by a group with more than 20 years under its belt. We hope you'll join us for the camaraderie and stimulating conversation!

See fic.ic.org/org_mtgs.php for past event locations, and more details about this event.

For reservations or questions, contact
Jenny Upton • 434-361-1417 • jenny@ic.org



The Farm Communities Conference, May 25-27, Summertown TN

Come to The Farm Community in Summertown TN to set your course for the future, Life In Community! Our fourth conference in partnership with the FIC, this gathering is a unique opportunity to tour Green Homes of all types, see Sustainable Food Production at work, over 80 KW in Solar Installations, learn about Alternative Education, Conflict Resolution, Land Trusts, Midwifery, and so much more.

Meet and learn from FIC representatives Laird Schaub and Harvey Baker and others from communities around the country. We're planning to get down Saturday night with Dead or Alive, The Farm's hot new Grateful Dead cover band. The \$175 per person registration includes camping and all delicious vegetarian meals featuring local and homegrown produce. Bring bikes, instruments, some food to share, an open mind, ideas, and enthusiasm. Rejuvenate your soul! Contact douglas@thefarmcommunity.com.

More information and registration: www.thefarmcommunity.com/conference



National Cohousing Conference, June 13-17, Oakland CA

An FIC co-sponsored event

“Creating Sustainable Neighborhoods; Learning from the Cohousing Experience”

Come learn, share, and perhaps volunteer. The conference features cohousing and community experts. It's a great opportunity to network with dedicated cohousing activists, supporters, and residents from around the world. Presentations and workshops will offer everything from the basics of cohousing, designing and building communities, living in community, group process skill building, opportunities to learn from and share our cohousing experiences, as well as how we can contribute to making cohousing more sustainable and more affordable.

More information and registration: conference.cohousing.org



Ecovillage Education US, June 29-August 5, Rutledge MO

An FIC co-sponsored program

Ecovillage Education is a 5-week trans-disciplinary, experiential program set within one of the US' leading ecovillages. Develop your capacity for creating or enhancing communities and projects using social, economic and ecological sustainability lessons learned in the worlds' most sustainable communities.

This course is for:

- students • sustainability leaders • educators • community leaders • intentional communities • Transition towns ...and your life!

More information and registration: ecovillageeducation.us

Creating Community Ritual

By Starhawk

A community needs a spiritual heart. When we face discouragement, loss, and grief, we need condolence and a way to renew our vision. When we are wounded, we need a place to heal. And when we complete a challenging task or win through to a cherished goal, we need a way to share our joy.

When we come together in spirit, we set aside day-to-day problems and meet the full spectrum of who we are: body, mind, energy, emotions, and soul. We connect back the core values that motivate us. We renew our vital energies and recover our sense of hope. We remember the sacred, not in the sense of what we bow down to, but of what we hold most important, what we cherish beyond our own comfort, convenience, or profit, what we stand for.

Communities that form around a religious or spiritual leader or who inherit an intact tradition have a clear blueprint for how to honor the spirit. But what about communities who include people of many different faiths, or none at all? Political activists who are wary of anything too woo-woo? Atheists who take issue with any form of belief?

For many decades I've been creating rituals in widely varying settings. My own tradition is Paganism—earth-based spirituality that honors the sacred in nature and in human beings. More specifically, it's the Reclaiming tradition of Wicca or Witchcraft, the remnant and revival of the pre-Christian healing traditions and Goddess religions of Europe and the Middle East. Reclaiming brings our spirituality and our personal growth

and healing together with engaged activism. Over the years, we've done many rituals to hearten activists, or even in the midst of a protest. I've also taught in a Catholic college and created rituals together with nuns, priests, and ministers. I've created rituals for the land among my neighbors in the coastal hills of western Sonoma County, California. While I love the rituals that are specific to our own tradition, I've grown to appreciate the special quality of rituals that incorporate multiple faiths and perspectives,

Ritual can serve many purposes. It can connect us more deeply to place, to the cycles of the seasons and the demands of our own soil and climate. It can mark the passages of our lives and help us make the transition into a new phase. It can succor us in grief and loss. It provides chance for artists, musicians, poets, and dancers to share their gifts, and for everyone to discover some facet of their own creativity. It can link us in the pure joy of celebration.

Our land in Sonoma County gets the highest amount of rainfall in California, but also has one of the longest dry seasons. It's wet in winter, bone-dry in summer, and the combination creates a huge fire danger during the dry season. For many years now, a few of us gather each summer as the land begins to dry. We create a simple ceremony, bringing together branches from our favorite trees, tying them together into a simple charm, a triangle bound by a circle. We each speak about the tree we chose, and what we love about it. We hang the charm up high near the fire house with prayers for the safety of our land. In winter, after the rains come back,



Starhawk leads meditation at Wisteria Summer Solstice Gathering, 2009.

Wisteria Community, Ohio

we take down the charm, offer prayers of gratitude, and cut it in pieces to burn in our wood stoves to protect our homes. The ritual came to us out of the particular rhythms and needs of our land and place, and gives us a way to honor the land and one another.

Near Melbourne, Australia, a community named CERES has restored a polluted section of Merrie Creek and built an ecological education and arts center. One day, while holding a program, they heard a thud at the window. They went out and found a small kingfisher had flown into the glass. They were both thrilled—because that species had been thought extinct in the area—and saddened as the bird lay still. But after a few moments, it fluttered its wings, opened its eyes and flew off.

Now every year they commemorate the day with a Return of the Sacred Kingfisher festival and ritual. Children make costumes and put on plays. Old students return, and supporters of their programs come out for performances and processions and a celebratory feast. The festival links the community together and ties it firmly to its own history, allowing it to relive that happy moment when the success of their restoration efforts became evident.

A young girl has reached the age of her first menstruation. The women dress in red and take her up to the top of a high hill overlooking the city. They tie her hand together with her mother's hand, and they run as far as the mother can run. When she tires, the women cut them apart and the daughter runs on alone.

Then they all return to the girl's home, sit in a circle, and tell her tales of their own first menstruation. They share funny stories, sad stories, raunchy tales, nuggets of advice. As each woman speaks, her own story becomes woven into the fabric of women's history. They end by joining the men and boys who have prepared a feast of red foods. The young girl learns that the whole community, women and men both, can celebrate the sacredness of her body and its women's cycles and honor her growing maturity.

Ritual can help us through life's passages. In our book *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Tradition* I and my co-authors Anne Hill and Diane Baker share many stories of simple rituals we and others have created to help our children in their maturation. Fertility rituals allow the community to bless a woman's or couple's decision to conceive a child. Rituals surrounding a birth welcome a new child to the world and help the parents adjust to their new roles. My housemates Sabine and Mark created a ritual for their baby Leonie Lotus to mark the moment when she began to eat solid food. The ceremony allowed them to let go of her early infancy and to welcome her first move into independence. Anne Hill created a ritual for her son Bowen to help him move from toddlerhood into being a big kid. Most traditional cultures use ritual to help children move into puberty and adulthood. And, of course, marriage rituals celebrate a couple's love for one another and allow the community to witness and support their commitment.

When we face life's harder passages, ritual is deeply important. When we approach death, ritual can help us let go and allow our community to express their love. When someone close to us dies, ritual can help us move through our grief. When we honor the ancestors or our beloved dead in ceremony, when we build altars or shrines, speak their names or remember their contributions, we are saying that they are important to us, that their memory remains alive.

Ritual can also be a way to prepare for danger or difficult challenges. Before one big protest against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meeting in Washington DC in April, 2000, a group of us from our Pagan Cluster of activists offered

a ritual to help people face the upcoming blockade with confidence and courage. We wound dozens of balls of yarn together, drew people into a circle and, tossing the yarn back and forth, wove a web of connection. When we cut the web apart, we each tied a thread around our wrists to help us stay connected. We took the remaining yarn into the streets with us the next day and wove a web around our intersection, which became a

Ritual is most powerful when it works on multiple levels: the cosmic, the community, and the personal.

soft blockade that kept us from being run into by the motorcycle police.

Ritual in community can serve to connect and unite, but it can also be divisive if enthusiasts try to inflict it on the reluctant. How do we introduce a spiritual connection to those who might be uncomfortable or wary?

First, be aware that ritual can have its dangers. When we create ritual anew, we are sometimes tempted to borrow from other cultures or traditions. If we do, we should be careful to do so respectfully.

Ritual at its worst can also be dull, pompous, or full of clichés. Inflicting stultifying ritual on an unwilling group will not build connections. But by understanding some simple ground rules, we can create powerful and empowering rituals.

Never force ritual on anyone. Offer it, but leave people room to opt out without paying a heavy social penalty. If the ritual works, people will share their enthusiasm and the reluctant ritual avoiders may be attracted to the next one.

Be careful about borrowing from cultures that are not your own. We live in a multicultural world, and we may find ourselves drawn to myths and symbols that do not come from our direct ancestors. Each tradition has its own deep wisdom and we have a lot to learn from one

another. But when we take over the symbols or practices of another tradition without permission, acknowledgment, training, or commitment to the real-life struggles of the people, we are in effect appropriating their culture as others have already appropriated indigenous lands and labor.

Yet indigenous cultures have much to teach us as we strive to regain an ecological balance. How can we learn respectfully?

Long ago, meditating on this question, I asked the ancestors what they thought. They said, “We don’t really care who your ancestors were. We care what you’re doing for the children.” Learn about and support the real-life struggles of the people whose traditions you admire. Commit to their survival and the continuance of their culture. Give back. Don’t claim authority in a tradition you haven’t been trained in, ask permission, and give credit where it is due. Foster a better world for the next generations, and you will be acting in integrity.

Community ritual works best when many people contribute their creativity. One person might sing a solo; another might lead a guided meditation, a third might lead the group in dance. Sharing the roles and the leadership allows everyone to shine and keeps the ritual varied and interesting.

A ritual that works moves us emotionally. It speaks to our Younger Self through the language of the senses, using color, smells, tastes, actions, rhythm, music, poetry, and dance to make us all participants, s/heros of our own stories.

In planning ritual, we begin with a need. What might this ritual help us do? Honor the change of seasons or celebrate the harvest? Offer healing to a friend or celebrate a life passage? Release conflict in our community and draw in new inspiration?

Ritual is most powerful when it works on multiple levels: the cosmic, the community, and the personal, giving us each a stake in the outcome. When we celebrate the harvest from our gardens, we can also celebrate the ways we have grown in our personal lives and the harvest of wisdom and lessons learned.

Need gives rise to intention—our statement what the ritual will do. A powerful intention embodies a challenge or change. “Our intention was to have a Spring Equinox Ritual” is weak. “Our intention is to bid farewell to winter and welcome the spring” is better, but a stronger formulation that brings in all three levels might be “To let our blocks melt away with the snow, and plant the seeds of what we want to grow in ourselves and our community.”

Keep the intention short: no more than one or two lines. Intentions that ramble on for paragraphs are not clear enough to provide the thread for a ritual.

Once the intention is clear, find actions that express it. Make them vivid, colorful, sensory. For that spring ritual, we might pass around ice cubes for people to hold as they meditate on what they want to release. They will feel the burning cold melt into dripping water that might fall on a bowl of rich earth, where they could plant seeds to represent what they want to grow in their lives. Use images that speak to us all—like the seed—rather than obscure deity names or cultic symbols.

A powerful ritual is like a three-act play. The first act creates sacred space—in Reclaiming

we do this by grounding, creating a circle, invoking the elements and the sacred. The second act is the heart of the ritual—the actions embodying the intention, with an arc of rising energy that builds to a climax of dancing, chanting, and toning. The third act is the cool down period, when we ground the power and give thanks to all that we’ve called in. We may share food and drink, or speak from the heart on some subject, or sing, or sit together in silence.

The rituals you create may take a different form, but thinking about the three act structure can help create an effective arc for the energy—a period to set the stage, another to face the challenge and build energy to a peak, and a phase of resolution, thanksgiving, and transition back to ordinary life.

There are many other, simple ways to share spirit in community. Sitting in circle, speaking from the heart, building shrines and altars, setting aside time for silence or to be together in nature can all serve to connect us more deeply.

We can find multiple ways to share with one another the treasures of the spirit, to forge deep connections of heart and soul, to engage our creativity, love, and compassion, to forge the deep connections of heart and soul that can strengthen our work together and enrich our common lives. 🌿

Starhawk is an author, activist and permaculture teacher who has lived and worked in community for more than 40 years. Her books include The Spiral Dance, The Fifth Sacred Thing, and The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups. Her website is www.starhawk.org.

Resources

Starhawk has written or co-written many books on ritual:

The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess (HarperSanFrancisco) is the classic introduction to Goddess-centered Paganism.

Truth of Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery (HarperSanFrancisco) employs ritual to undo the inner wounds of patriarchy.

The Pagan Book of Living and Dying (HarperSanFrancisco), co-written with M. Macha Nightmare, contains rituals, philosophy, and liturgy for the end of life.

Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Tradition (Bantam), co-written with Anne Hill and Diane Baker, contains rites of passage, seasonal rituals, and stories to share with children.

The Twelve Wild Swans, (HarperSanFrancisco), co-written with Hillary Valentine, is a spiritual training manual for creating both inner and outer-directed rituals.

The Earth Path: Grounding Our Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature (HarperSanFrancisco).

Starhawk’s newest book *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (New Society Publishers) explores group structure and dynamics for communities and collectives.

Regaining Our Sense of Oneness through Localization

By *Helena Norberg-Hodge*

A central theme in most spiritual traditions is oneness—a sense of the inextricable interdependence of all life. Most religions speak of our connection with others and the larger cosmos, encouraging us to cultivate an expanded sense of self. From Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk: “To be’ is to inter-be. We cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing.” From Black Elk, Lakota Holy man: “The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes from within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers.”

I have personally experienced the profound influence of these teachings in Ladakh or “Little Tibet,” where I have spent much of my time over the last 35 years. There, I experienced first-hand how Buddhism influenced every aspect of traditional life. The Ladakhis possessed an irrepressible joie de vivre. It was impossible to spend any time at all in Ladakh without being won over by their contagious laughter. Of course they had sorrows and problems, and they felt sad when faced with illness or death. Yet the Ladakhis seemed to possess an extended, inclusive sense of self. They did not retreat behind boundaries of fear and self-protection; in fact, they seemed to be totally lacking in what we would call pride. This didn’t mean a lack of self-respect. On the contrary, their self-respect was so deep-rooted as to be unquestioned.

Over the years I came to realise that the Ladakhis’ joy and dignity was not due to their spiritual beliefs alone, but arose from a subtle and complex interplay between shared community bonds, local economic interactions, and religious practice. Strong communities were built upon economic ties that fostered a daily experience of interdependence. This, in turn, provided a healthy foundation for individuals to grow and be nurtured, to feel that they belonged—to a people, a culture, and their place on earth. This expanded sense of self was further nourished and reinforced by their spiritual beliefs and practices.

In modern consumer society, our connections to each other and to the rest of

nature have been largely severed. Almost all our interactions are mediated by large bureaucracies or businesses. In this way, we become dependent on institutions rather than one another. For example, the majority of us are separated from the source of our food by many middle men and hundreds, if not thousands, of miles.

The language of connection has even been co-opted by proponents of economic globalization. For instance, the current slogan of a prominent multinational telecommunications corporation: “We’re better, connected.” Now, connecting with loved ones means talking on your mobile phone; feeling part of a community is having a profile on Facebook; we don’t need to know our neighbours because now we live in a “global village.” Sadly, reliance on technologies to connect with others can actually create a sense of separation.

It is this same separation that is behind many of our biggest environmental problems. Our daily lives seem to depend more on a man-made world—the economy, electric power, cars, high-tech medicine—than the natural life support systems of the planet. As we become more separated from the natural world, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to know the effects of our actions on nature or on other people. The ever-expanding scope and scale of the global economy obscures the consequences of our actions: in effect, our arms have been so lengthened that we no longer see what our hands are doing.



ISEC

John Page

The scale of the modern nation-state has become so large that leaders would be unable to act according to the principles of interdependence, even if they wished to. When political decisions have global consequences, as they do today, it is nearly impossible for leaders to truly appreciate the full effects of their actions. Decisions are instead made according to abstract economic principles—in the name of “progress”—often disregarding the implications for individual members of society and for the rest of the living world.

In Ladakh, despite thousands of years of Buddhist practice and strong communities, the global economy has nearly severed the connections between people and to the natural world. In the mid-1970s, the region was opened up to “economic development” and submerged in an avalanche of imported consumer goods, tourism, westernised schooling, new polluting technologies—including DDT and asbestos—and

Local economies and close-knit communities are essential for raising healthy people—in body and mind.

development propaganda. Within a decade, poverty and pollution were commonplace. Community bonds had been eroded as people competed for scarce jobs in the new money economy, leading eventually to outright violent conflict. Buddhists and Muslims, who had lived together peacefully for generations, were literally killing each other. Despite their strong spiritual foundations, the Ladakhis were not immune to the pressures of the global economy.

For me the main lesson from Ladakh is the fundamental importance of strengthening local economies in order to maintain or rebuild our real community ties and deep connection to the natural world. Now in the West, we are beginning to rediscover the importance of community in helping us to reconnect with each other and other living beings. Local economies and close-knit communities are also essential for raising healthy people—in body and mind. Universally, research confirms that feeling connected to others and to nature is a fundamental human need. Recent childhood development research demonstrates the importance, in the early years of life, of learning about who we are in relation to parents, siblings, and the larger community. These are *real* role models, unlike the artificial stereotypes found in the media. Communities also provide a supportive framework for our spiritual development. However, without the right economic underpinnings these communities are destined to struggle and ultimately break down. Turning away from globalization and toward the local would create the economic foundations necessary to support local communities on a global scale—an “Economics of Happiness.” Through *localization* we could meet our needs, both material and psychological, without compromising the survival of life on earth.

Global collaboration is essential for rebuilding local economies. Sharing experiences with people from other cultures enables us all to make more informed choices of how to construct our communities and economies. Over the last 30 years my organisation, the International Society for Ecology and Culture, has worked with Ladakhi leaders to communicate the on-the-ground realities of life in the West. Our educational campaigns provide Ladakhis with a fuller picture of life in a consumer culture, including the negative sides not shown by the romanticized images in the media. We also demonstrate the numerous positive trends and initiatives that are rebuilding the kind of sustainable culture the Ladakhis have been encouraged to leave behind.

As community-builders, it is vitally important that we reach out to people in devel-

oping countries. As globalized economic development sweeps across the planet, people are made to feel primitive and backward. From schoolbooks to blaring television commercials, the message is that more traditional, indigenous ways of life are inferior. Westerners have an important role to play in countering these messages, by showing how we are seeking to regain the connectedness that they have not yet completely lost.

The trajectory of the global economy is not evolutionary; it is not an inevitable process towards a “more developed” individualistic consciousness. It is, in fact, a direct result of policy choices that have favoured multinational corporations over small business, centralization of power over direct democracy, and the accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the many. We are free to make other choices. To rekindle the sense of oneness encouraged by our spiritual traditions, we would do well to shift direction—towards localised economic systems that foster connection and care, towards an economics of happiness. 🌱



Author and filmmaker Helena Norberg-Hodge is a pioneer of the “new economy” movement. Through writing and public lectures on three continents, she has been promoting an economics of personal, social, and ecological well-being for more than 30 years. Helena’s book, Ancient Futures, together with the film of the same title, has been translated into more than 40 languages, and sold about half a million copies. She is also the producer of the award-winning film, The Economics of Happiness, and the co-author of Bringing the Food Economy Home and From the Ground Up: Rethinking Industrial Agriculture. Helena is director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), a founding member of the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, and a co-founder of both the International Forum on Globalization and the Global Ecovillage Network.



On the Value of Being There

Why Spiritual Communities Matter Now More than Ever

By Margaret Critchlow

“Come home to yourself.” I open the email from a west coast spiritual community that hosts workshops and retreats. A cornucopia of courses and workshops as well as opportunities for retreat and renewal scrolls across my screen. Shall I escape from the city? Part of the magic is that this place is not central to anywhere. “Easy travel” options are suggested, but getting there is more than a spiritual journey. From the nearest urban area a day’s car trip or an airplane ride is involved.

“Calculate your carbon footprint” catches my eye in an email from a friend. Can I justify—even if I can offset—the carbon footprint of such travel, as climate change becomes an ever more urgent issue? In this time of economic instability, should I take the time away from my work? Should I spend the money? Should I put my energy into activism instead of contemplation and education in a spiritual community?

Larger questions underlie this individual dilemma. What is the value of such communities as the second decade of the 21st century begins? Do secular or spiritual centers in cities, holding day-long or weekend commuter workshops, make more remote retreats redundant? What relevance do such retreats have amidst urgent environmental and economic concerns? These are the kinds of questions that intrigue me as an anthropologist who has been studying the interface between spiritual communities and workshop/retreat livelihood for the past five years. This interface defines “holistic centers,” part of a global, holistic movement, seeing all beings, the planet, and universal energy as interconnected and interdependent. (Holism, a concept also important to anthropology, is the idea that any system is greater than the sum of its parts and that the parts make sense only in terms of the whole.)

I have visited nine communities for my research, mainly on the west coast of North America, and attended three Holistic Center Gatherings—annual conferences for managers and staff of communities that offer workshops and retreats. In the best anthropological tradition I have participated in the culture of holistic centers, taking workshops, talking with several hundred people, and learning the local “language.” I’ve done a lot of what we anthropologists call “deep hanging out”: overlooking the ocean from a hot tub, chatting with guests under shady trees, sitting in meetings and in meditation with staff. This has been some of the most enjoyable and deeply rewarding fieldwork of my career. And, I suggest, it has profound significance for understanding the human condition.

That significance comes down to one simple question: What is the value of being **there**? This is not to question the value of being **here**. The power, indeed the necessity, of being fully present in the here and now is indisputable. The precious impermanent beauty of the present moment is all we humans have. But what I have touched is the power of holistic centers to disturb the comfortable “here” of day-to-day life. This is—and there is—no escape. Centers create a “there” in which to be fully present and from which to envision and ground that most precious and elusive goal, a positive future.



Photos courtesy of Margaret Critchlow

Today, centers like the one that sent me the email offer some programs in cities to accommodate busy lives and reach people where they live. In that sense, these centers are “there” for the people who may need them most. But it is also valuable to transport guests to the alternate reality a holistic center offers at the other end of three ferry rides, a drive through the mountains, or just five miles down a freeway to a spot that feels a million miles from nowhere and makes you go “ahhh.”

Holistic centers are precious partly because they are not here. Being there allows you—may even force you—to disconnect from our wirelessly wired lifestyles. Some centers are just too far off the beaten path for cell phone coverage. At others it is patchy; you can get reception if you stand on that rock over there and face north. Maybe. Where cell phones work, centers closely regulate their use. Internet access is similarly unavailable or limited. Managers discuss how permeable their centers should be, trying to find a balance between the needs of guests to stay connected, and the value of silence. They try not to lose track of the point, which is to be there. For the moment, it is not supposed to be business as usual.

Disconnection arises in other positive ways. Disrupting mundane routines and leaving home, even for a few days, can push your boundaries and open you to new possibilities. You may feel you are somewhere between summer camp and a spa. Simple, often shared, accommodations contrast with a lush assortment of therapeutic modalities.

There is an element of culture shock in visiting a center for the first time. You may feel like a stranger coming to town, knowing no one, uneasy with the language, uncertain of the customs. Where to sit when you enter a dining room buzzing with conversations you are not part of may seem as daunting as a Mexican village market. But being present with that unease creates spaces for personal transformation. Community happens fast at holistic centers. By the next day, if you want, you are part of the buzz that the next newcomers experience. Or you are comfortable sharing a meal in silence with a new neighbor.

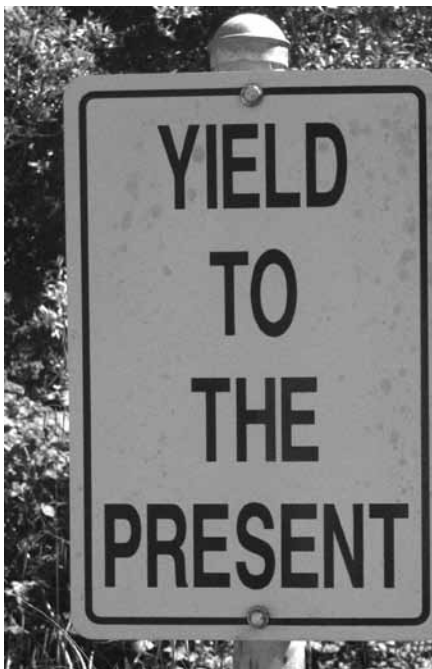
The point is that disconnection creates space and time for connection. Yes, you can meet wonderful, like-minded folks at a day-long workshop in the city. But spending more time together away from home deepens connections and encourages cross-fertilization. At breakfast on day three, you may share insights that would have been impossible at the end of day one. The “parallel play” aspect of centers allows us to be two-year-olds in good ways, learning by seeing what’s going on in another workshop or joining the activity at the next table. You may come to practice restorative yoga, but you stay to learn to identify wild mushrooms. The power of intention is important but so is serendipity and allowing yourself to go sideways.

Centers celebrate the power of place. Humans have always spent time in extraordinary places that nourish the spirit. These are vibrant spaces for rituals of renewal or transformation, spiritual places with an inherent sacredness few before or beyond our “civilization” would dispute. Centers offer the privilege of connecting with such places. They quite literally hold the space, protecting their land from development or resource extraction. Being there may be a chance to dip your toe in an ocean you know has fewer fish, more toxicity, and less salinity than it should. Contemplate all this, and at the same time, experience the wild froth of icy energy with both feet. Being there will change you, and you may be part of the sea change that is needed to heal the planet.

Workshops at holistic centers teach skills essential to more fulfilling and more sustainable living. These skills range from how to deepen contemplative spiritual practice to how to apply permaculture principals to community-building. Imagining positive futures requires all this and more. For activists, the most important skill can be learning to pause. A permaculture workshop may attract you because you can apply its principles to community organizing; but being there will challenge you to just be. How often we are like cranky children who don’t know we need to rest. Renewal can be as simple as allowing yourself to do absolutely nothing.

Several centers have been intentional, spiritual communities for more than 30 years. They quietly embody principles of community living that are exemplars for





the present and models for the future. Leadership, transitions, conflict resolution, child care, food production, income generation, self-sufficiency in many forms: all have arisen, sometimes over and over again, and found various forms of resolution. Lessons learned can enrich present and future communities.

Centers play important roles in helping people slow down, power down, build

Centers play important roles in helping people slow down, power down, build relationships, and nurture resilient communities

relationships, and nurture resilient communities. But what about staying local? Even a positive vision of the future assumes there will be much less fossil fuel. People used to go to hot springs by train or even by horse and carriage. Some holistic centers are built on the sites of former spas. Perhaps soon they will use new forms of transportation that resemble the old? Meanwhile, choosing to visit a center in your region has less carbon karma than flying to one far away. Climate change and energy depletion challenge us all, including holistic centers, to find more sustainable ways of living. The more remote the center, the greater the challenge, yet the more intense is the value in being there. Centers in isolated places have been dealing with sustainability issues all along. From feeding guests with locally grown, organic vegetables to generating electricity from the nearby river, they show us paths for walking the talk of sustainability.

Returning to a center you have visited before is like coming home, but coming home to away-ness. It is a play of sameness and difference. Maybe there is less culture shock and a deeper connection with the place, with being there. There is a chance to acknowledge that you and the center are not the same as you were. Are you both evolving? You may have a greater awareness of how being there contrasts with life on the outside, and how each location needs the other. Without a chance to be **there**, can we fully be **here**? Perhaps. But holistic centers provide places, in their language, “to show up and be yourself.” Being there can help us step back into daily life and make a difference: a difference to ourselves, to those whose lives we touch, and to the world.

The resonance of being there at a holistic center, like the ringing of a Tibetan bowl, lasts far longer than the initial event. Just as, often, it is not during meditation that insight arises but afterwards, the impact of being at a holistic center may not hit you until you are on the ferry home or in the shower a week later. Ideas percolate. You email people you met at the center. You practice what you learned in the yoga workshop. You share thoughts about oceans and mushrooms and things that never crossed your mind before. You make small changes in your daily routine to encourage mindfulness, being **here**, that you learned being **there**. And you take small actions toward a future we can live in and with. As Margaret Mead, the iconic anthropologist, put it, “a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Like repositories of knowledge in the middle ages, or wisdom passed from an old Pacific island navigator to a young paddler, holistic centers and the spiritual communities that support them are essential cultural resources. They nurture small groups of thoughtful people and the positive futures they envision. We need those now more than ever. 🐦

In 2010, Professor Margaret Critchlow retired from Toronto’s York University to enjoy life more fully on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. She can be reached at raincoast.home@gmail.com.

Sharing the Path: Simple and Inclusive Practices for Integrating Spirituality into Groups

By Kai Siedenburg

If you had access to a powerful, universally available source of support that could make your group or community more grounded, connected, inspired, and effective, wouldn't you want to tap into it?

But what if you also knew that many people had suffered negative experiences with various guises of this force—ones that promised truth, peace, or joy, yet delivered crushing boredom, repression, guilt, or worse?

Such is the complex and dramatic backdrop for introducing spirituality into groups. And while it can be tricky to navigate these shores, the rewards from traveling them even a short distance can be great.

This article offers simple, inclusive, and effective practices for integrating spirituality into groups and communities. It is rooted in a very broad understanding of spirituality, expressed well by cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien: "Each person's unique way of connecting with the rest of the universe." The practices highlighted here don't require belief in anything in particular, and they are accessible to people from a wide variety of spiritual and religious traditions, as well as those who wouldn't identify as spiritual. Most can be done in just a few minutes if needed, and can actually save a group time by helping participants to ground, focus, and connect.

These practices are drawn from my experiences with a variety of ongoing groups and reflect the convergence of two major currents in my life...

I've been part of many groups and communities over the past 30 years, and I've been to a LOT of meetings and events—good, bad, and ugly. Most of these involved good people working together to make good things happen, but were not as connecting, inspiring, and powerful as they might have been.

I've also been a dedicated student of diverse spiritual practices over the past 30 years, and I've been to a LOT of workshops and retreats and done countless hours of individual practice. I have experienced the profound gifts that flow from opening to deeper connection with myself and with "the rest of the universe."

I found myself on two major but somewhat parallel quests: for enlivening and effective ways to work with groups, and for ways to deepen my connection with the sacred and express that through my words and deeds. Sometimes these two paths came together, and it was good. But in my professional life and some other settings, there was more separation between them than I wanted.

Like most separation created by humans, it wasn't really necessary, but I maintained it because I didn't want to impose my own ideas on others or alienate anyone. In recent years, however, I've found more inspiration and more tools for bringing these two paths closer together. This is mostly due to many positive experiences with ongoing groups that

are not primarily spiritual in orientation, but that have successfully integrated simple practices to deepen participants' connections with themselves, each other, and the sacred. I have witnessed how these practices have made groups more harmonious, creative, joyful, and successful.

A few brief examples:

- I arrive at a meeting feeling scattered and stressed out, but then quickly drop into a more calm and focused place after the group takes several deep breaths and sits in silence for a few minutes.

- A women's choir blends our voices beautifully and brings a special magic to performances, partly because we take time at the start of each rehearsal to ground ourselves and connect with each other.

- A weekly conference call on cultural mentoring begins with everyone expressing something we are grateful for, which helps us focus on the positive and understand what each other value.

- At the end of a conference, two Hawaiian men stand up and spontaneously offer a powerful traditional canoe chant, shifting the energy in the room dramatically and closing the event on a much more inspiring note.

I hope this article will inspire you to use some of the following practices or to create your own, and that you also will see them bear fruit in your groups and communities.

PRACTICES

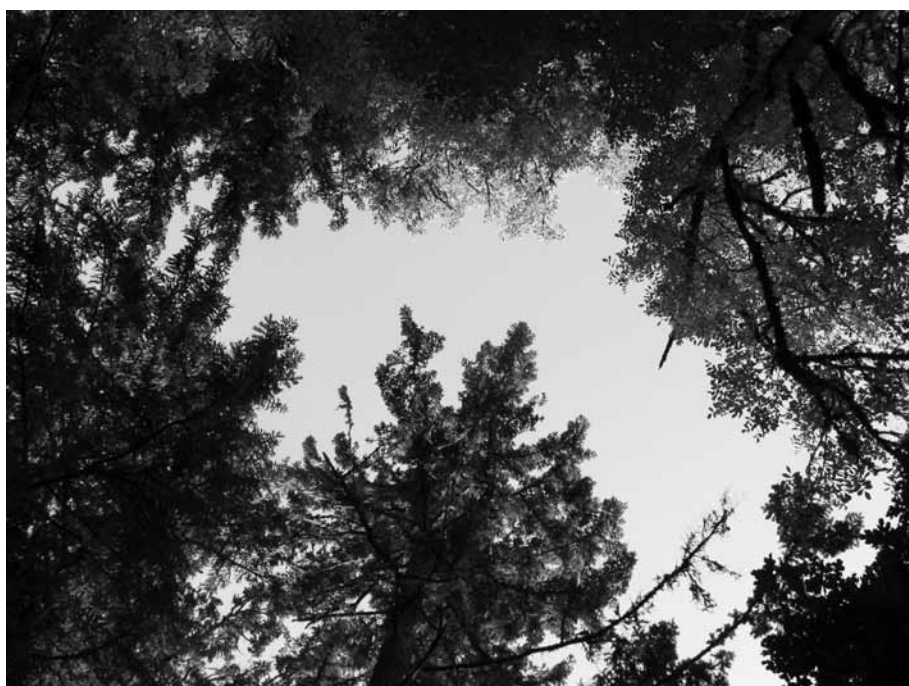
Gratitude

Simple and powerful, gratitude is one of the most universal spiritual practices. It can transform our relationship to our own experiences, other people, and the world around us. As with all the practices, if we allow ourselves to be present, take it in, and feel it deeply, the impact will be greater.

Giving thanks before a meal. This is one of the most common cross-cultural traditions, for good reason. Pausing to feel gratitude for a meal helps us be present for the meal and strengthens our connection with ourselves, each other, and our food. If this thanks-giving includes acknowledging the people, plants, animals, and elements that brought the food to our table, it also deepens our connection with them and the Earth. It can be done silently, by one person or a few volunteers speaking, or by a group speaking a blessing or singing a song together. Holding hands can strengthen the sense of connection if the group is comfortable with this.

Expressing gratitude at the beginning or end of a gathering. This helps us ground and connect with our hearts, and sharing it with others builds relationships. The focus could be related to the group's work, or anything else people feel grateful for. Expressing gratitude can be done by one person, by a few people who feel inspired to share, or by everyone in the group. Simply inviting participants to spend a few moments noticing what they are grateful for and feeling that gratitude (even if they don't speak it) can help start the gathering in a positive way.

Appreciating each other. Do you know anyone who wouldn't like to be



Photos by Chris Roth



appreciated more? Probably not. Expressing appreciation for others builds connection and positive feelings in a group, and helps us notice what we are accomplishing together. It is most effective when the appreciation is heartfelt, specific, and when people feel like they really have been seen and heard. Appreciations can be a regular part of meetings for ongoing groups, and can be done at the beginning, the end, or any time—there’s rarely a bad time to express appreciation!

Cultivating gratitude in challenging times. It’s easy to feel grateful when things are going well, but especially valuable to practice gratitude when things are more difficult. One simple method is to generate a list of the things we are grateful for. This helps us shift the way we hold a challenging situation, and sheds a light on the internal and external

resources that can get us through the rough spots. At the same time, it’s important to provide space to honestly acknowledge and address what is difficult.

Silence

Silence is a central pillar of most spiritual traditions. Observing silence helps us center and focus, and allows space for deeper wisdom and guidance to come forth.

Starting or ending with silence. A few minutes of silence can alter the course of a gathering by taking participants to a deeper place. Silence may be more effective when combined with other grounding practices, since the initial transition from busyness into silence may trigger a mad rampage by the “monkey mind.” As experienced meditators know, the practice of sitting with these thoughts and sensations, letting them go, and allowing moments of stillness to emerge is very valuable, even if those moments seem few and far between.

Inviting silent reflection. Taking time for focused, silent reflection on a topic can help participants access greater clarity and wisdom and create a strong foundation for group discussion. The reflections may be written down and shared with others in the group, or held by participants and expressed later if they feel inspired.

Allowing space between speakers. Pausing between speakers or topics helps people integrate information and experiences more fully, and allows us to respond from a deeper place. It also creates opportunities for those who need a little more time to formulate their thoughts to participate more fully. I’ve observed many

occasions when someone who sat quietly through most of a meeting offered a very valuable contribution after some space was allowed or they were invited to speak.

Grounding

Grounding practices allow us to connect with ourselves and with others, release some of our mental and emotional “baggage,” and become more present and focused.

One of the most universal spiritual practices, gratitude can transform our relationship to our own experiences, other people, and the world around us.

They are especially valuable when we are tired, stressed, or scattered.

Connecting with our bodies. Taking a few deep breaths and releasing them with a sigh or a sound helps us arrive in our bodies and the present moment, and doing this in unison helps the group connect. Stretching or shaking our bodies or tuning into different areas of the body through a simple “body scan” also can help us ground. A wide variety of simple exercises can be found in various healing traditions.

Connecting with our environment.

Using our senses to tune into our physical surroundings also can ground us, especially if we are in a beautiful room or outdoor setting. This process can be lightly guided by inviting people to notice things like the warmth of the sun on their faces, the sound of wind in the trees, or beautiful flowers in the meeting space.

Expressing gratitude or allowing silence, as described above, also can be used as grounding practices.

Setting intentions clarifies what we want to create, focuses our efforts, and draws guidance and support.

Intentions

Setting intentions clarifies what we want to create, focuses our efforts, and draws guidance and support. It provides a compass point and invites wind into the sails.

Clarifying individual intentions. Connecting with our intentions helps us focus our role in the group. This could include the skills and qualities we wish to contribute, how we hope to benefit, or hopes for what the group might accomplish together. These intentions can be held individually or shared with others.

Affirming the group's intentions. Holding shared intentions with a group and reaffirming them helps to inspire and align participants. The group may want to do this on a regular basis, perhaps even at each meeting. It can be done quickly, or by taking more time to hold the intentions and imagine them being realized. It's important to clarify which intentions are supported by the whole group, and this may need to be revisited periodically.

Earth Connection

Whether we notice it or not, we humans are innately connected with the Earth and receive many gifts from it every day. Honoring this connection is part of daily life in many traditional cultures but mostly absent from modern cultures. Still, we all have the power to reconnect with the Earth to ground, balance, and inspire ourselves, and to align our actions with the vast intelligence and resilience of our living planet.

Coming to our senses. The senses are a powerful gateway for connecting with our environment, but we're often moving too fast to notice. Taking time to drink in the natural beauty around us helps us slow down and connect with ourselves and with the Earth. We also can practice sensing our energetic roots going deep



into the Earth, or feeling the Earth holding and supporting us.

Expressing gratitude. Acknowledging the many gifts we receive from the Earth is a simple way to honor our connection with our amazingly abundant home planet. We can give thanks for the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink or cleanse with, other resources we use, or for rain, trees, birds, microorganisms...the possibilities are endless!

Honoring natural cycles. Seasons, solstices and equinoxes, phases of the moon, and other natural cycles have been an important focus of celebrations and ceremonies for millennia. Simple ways to honor these cycles with a group include enjoying foods that are in season, appreciating a beautiful sunset, sharing something we love about the current season, and reflecting on what the full moon, the winter solstice, or other aspects of natural cycles mean to us.

Music and Arts

Singing, dancing, music, and visual art are essential ingredients of human culture and powerful vehicles for self-expression, teaching, and inspiration. The arts can evoke deep feelings, lift our spirits, and remind us who we are. Sharing music and art in a group can call forth more creativity and wisdom and connect us with each other and something greater than ourselves.

Working with beauty. Having beautiful, inspiring art or images in the meeting space changes how we relate to the space and each other. This can include art co-created with nature: a bouquet of flowers, a basket of produce, or artistic arrangements of leaves or stones. Lighting candles also provides beauty and helps create a sacred, magical space.

Starting with art or music. Sharing a song, a poem, or other inspiring words during a gathering helps us be present and open our hearts, and can provide inspiration and food for thought that directly support the group's purpose. Singing a song together can be an uplifting and bonding way to start or end a gathering if a group is comfortable with that.

In general, it's safer and easier for a group to appreciate art or music that others created, or for volunteers in a group to share their own creations. Asking the whole group to participate in making music or art can be wonderful and powerful, but unfortunately it is not a simple and accessible practice for some. While making

music and art is treated as a natural ability in many cultures, in modern consumer culture it is often viewed as something that should be left to the experts, and many people believe they are not good at these things. That doesn't mean arts and music should be avoided in groups, but rather that it's important to make the experience as safe and accessible as possible. Fortunately, it gets easier with practice, often very quickly.

General Guidelines

Start small: It's better to start small and leave people wanting more than to overdo it. Many people have had negative experiences with spiritual events that went on much longer than they wanted. As a group becomes more com-



comfortable with spirituality, it's fine to take more time for it.

Lead by example: Take time to ground yourself before working with a group, especially if you are in a leadership role. If you are clear and grounded, people will be more open to working with you. When introducing these practices to a group, you may want to start by demonstrating them yourself before asking the group to participate directly, for example by giving thanks at the beginning of a gathering.

Speak from the heart: When you come from your heart, you connect and communicate more powerfully, and others are more open to hearing you and more responsive to your requests. You also create space for others to speak from their hearts.

Invite, don't command: While this is good advice in general, it is especially true with spirituality, since people have diverse beliefs and many have had negative experiences with being pressured to participate in religious services. A spirit of invitation can be conveyed through language and non-verbal cues, and by making things optional or getting agreement from a group before introducing a practice.

Honor diverse perspectives: Unless you are in a group that requires people to accept a particular belief system, it's important to acknowledge (both directly and indirectly) that people have varied beliefs and traditions and that this is natural and good. You can do this partly by not assuming any shared beliefs and by avoiding common triggers like the "G-word." Also, do your best to avoid anything that might come across as proselytizing, as well as any attachment to others adopting your beliefs or practices.

Be open to feedback: Demonstrate that you welcome feedback and are willing to listen and respond when you receive it. Especially when you are introducing new elements into a group, you might want to ask directly for feedback. Giving people the option to speak up in the group or approach you individually is helpful.

One caveat: Any spiritual practice, no matter how simple or accessible, has potential to trigger negative reactions in some people. Indeed, almost anything you do with a group, including very common activities like doing check-ins or following an agenda, could provoke some negative reactions because of participants' history and wounding. That is part of why we learn so much from working in groups. At the same time, if you want the group to be effective, it's important to proceed mindfully and build trust and a sense of safety.

The practices described here are just a starting point. If a group is more comfortable with spirituality, there are many other ways to strengthen connections between participants and "the rest of the universe." These include meditation, visualization, ceremony, prayer, and creating shared altars or sacred space.

All of these practices can be powerful and effective—or not. They will be much more effective when they are led by someone who is grounded and connected with their group and when participants embrace the practices with openness, presence, and heart. But fear not, gentle human...perfection is not required! A key purpose of spiritual practice is to help us develop these capacities over time—hence the term "practice."

May this article provide some light and sustenance for your journey. 🐦

A key purpose of spiritual practice is to help us develop these capacities over time—hence the term “practice.”

After 25 years working with nonprofits to promote healthy, just, and sustainable food systems, Kai Siedenburg is taking a sabbatical to explore how she can follow her deepest callings and “be the change” that is needed on the planet at this time. She is grateful to live in a neighborhood village in Santa Cruz, California.

The Spiritual Path

By Douglas Stevenson

From its very inception, The Farm was established as a “spiritual community” and registered with the state of Tennessee as The Farm Church. Stephen Gaskin taught, and the community recognized, that intentional communities founded on spiritual principles were much more likely than others to survive beyond a few years, and there was history to back up that belief. Looking back at intentional communities over the last 200 years in America, those based on political, social, or economic ideals had a life span of around 10 years, while those founded on spiritual principles typically endured 25 years or more.* Now at 40 years, The Farm Community (currently about 200 people on 1750 acres) faces the challenge of passing its core values on to the next generation, a task that will in many ways determine its continuation into the future.

Essential Truths

In the search for greater understanding, Stephen and participants in his Monday Night Class (held weekly in San Francisco in the years preceding The Farm’s founding) began to recognize that all religions share essential truths. The differences emanated from the variations in cultures and their place in time. By working to identify, follow, and apply these moral principles, the group began to move toward a way of life that could express these ideals through day to day actions.

Sacraments

Symbols are very often used to help express religious concepts. Through imprinting and ritual, religious followers are instructed to absorb and adopt allegiance to their faith by acknowledging the sacraments of their church. The sacraments expressed in many religions represent events that took place hundreds or thousands of years ago, kept alive through symbols and ritual.

By seeking a path of direct experience, the Church of The Farm Community recognized the sacraments that are present

in the here and now, important life transitions which have the ability to touch each person and impart to them a sense of the profound.

The Sacrament of Birth

One of the most powerful experiences that impacted the hundreds of people coming in contact with The Farm was that of birth, a practice enshrined in the phrase “Spiritual Midwifery.” Over the last hundred years, much of the western world has had the miracle of birth removed from the realm of direct experience. By the late 1960s and ’70s, shuttered behind the doors of operating rooms in clinical sterile environments, birth was no longer a natural process, but a medical procedure. Fathers were completely removed from one of the most significant, direct life-changing moments one can ever encounter. Drugs made mothers unconscious and unaware of their own personal miracle.

Back in San Francisco, several of the women associated with Monday Night Class had become mothers and were unhappy with how they had been treated while in the hospital. Stories also began to circulate about a few brave women who had chosen to give birth at home. When The Caravan left to travel across the country, among the group were several women, including Stephen’s partner Ina May, who were due to give birth at some time during the journey. Several babies were born in buses along the way and the impact of those experiences was so powerful that it affected not just those present at the birth, but everyone in the group. After arriving in Tennessee, the group acknowledged birth as one of life’s most important sacraments and a cornerstone of The Farm Church.

The Sacrament of Death

One of the babies born on The Caravan did not survive. Soon after arriving in Tennessee, a young man was killed by a lightning strike. These events and others to follow forced the

*Editor’s note: This is Stephen Gaskin’s statement from the early 1970s, not a statistic coming from the FIC, though it likely reflected a comparative (if not a literal) truth at the time. Readers can explore this topic more via www.ic.org, Communal Studies Association materials, and other sources.

community to face the entire circle of life, bringing Farm members into direct contact with another universal sacrament, death.

Death disproportionately visits the very young. The Farm's midwives and a numbers of families were painfully aware that the task of delivering babies was a life and death responsibility. Despite everyone's best efforts and intentions, in those early years a number of babies were lost. The great sorrow those families endured was shared by the community as a whole, and brought into focus the importance of compassion as we accept the responsibility of caring for each other.

Again western society in many ways has built walls separating people from direct experience. The old are placed in nursing homes where they often die alone instead of surrounded by loving family and friends. Excessive medical procedures thwart the course of nature, prolonging life, at times even against the will of the individual or their family.

Care of the Elderly

As a direct action and an alternative to this aspect of western culture, members of The Farm began to bring aging relatives to live with them in the community. While the number of seniors living on The Farm has never been very large, their influence and impact has been extremely significant.

One of the first to come was Uncle Bill, rescued from a nursing home by his niece. The loving warmth of his new extended family brought an exuberant level of joy to his remaining years. Susie was a homeless woman found in a local bus station who was brought to The Farm. Joe Silvers saw Stephen and members of The Farm on a national talk show in the late 1970s. Although already well into their retirement years, he and his wife Helen left their home in Chicago and moved to The Farm. The

money from his social security checks was used to help fulfill Joe's vision of community, purchasing playground equipment and a riding lawn mower so Joe could contribute his time and energy, helping to improve the community's appearance by mowing along the edges of Farm roads.

In the late 1990s Claire came with her husband Stanley when he became bedridden and she was no longer able to care for him alone. Stanley spent his last year living in the home of his daughter (a member of The Farm), her husband, and their three kids. After his passing a cabin was built for Claire so she could live independently. Although in her 80s, in many ways Claire truly blossomed as at no other time in her life. She became a fully participating member of the community, serving as the ticket taker and money collector at virtually every Farm event. Her performances of old standards, decked out in snappy clothes and a sequined red hat, were an inspiration



Men's circle at The Farm Community.

Douglas Stevenson

and a gentle reminder that every person has something to contribute, that life is to

van, and later at The Farm as its members learned how to live together in community, the adherence to truth served as the touchstone for conduct in day to day living. Each

individual was regarded as God's eyes into the world, carrying one piece of the truth as the observer. The power of truth could be utilized to raise the collective intelligence for decision making and resolving differences, rallying each person's input until the truth of the moment could be determined. In practical application this meant that each member expressed their feelings and put into words their observation and viewpoint of the truth.

Along with the growing awareness of the essential truths to be found in world religions came the profound respect for truth itself as a concept and practice.

be enjoyed right to the end.

Each encounter with death produces a period of internal reflection and contemplation. While our contact with this experience does not provide answers, it can cause a person to evaluate the meaning of their life and to consider their past actions and how they will spend the time they have left, the essence of the spiritual path and the true definition of a sacrament.

The Sacrament of Marriage

To counterbalance the loose sexual attitudes of the '60s and '70s, The Farm social code took a shift back toward the center, recognizing and honoring marriage as a sacred bond between two people. The responsibility of bringing children into the world and into a relationship was again recognized as a spiritual pact that had lifelong consequences. To elevate marriage into its proper position as a spiritual sacrament, marriage ceremonies were performed immediately after Sunday Service meditation, the point at which the community would come together in its clearest frame of universal mind.

The Path of Truth

Along with the growing awareness of the essential truths to be found in world religions came the profound respect for truth itself as a concept and practice. The spiritual seeker could hold on to truth as a lamp illuminating the darkness of illusion, leading to greater clarity and ultimate sanity. Truth was seen to represent honesty in all relationships and exchanges.

In Monday Night Class, on The Cara-

In the early years of The Farm, families and single folks would live together in communal households ranging in size from 15 to 40 people. Living in such close proximity to one another day to day meant that you were exposed to each other's actions and habits in a way that doesn't happen when we live separately. For example, the subtle energy exchanges between a husband and wife were no longer hidden away but instead played out on a stage before an audience of observers. The sharp words and subtle intimidation that often take place between spouses are able to proceed unnoticed when expressed behind closed doors. These would become obvious and unacceptable tactics when acted out before fellow house mates.

Work crews provided another opportunity for people to bump up against each other. The hierarchies and pecking orders found in outside work places were replaced by a system in which no one had greater social position than another. All were considered equal. This meant that when a person felt that they were treated unfairly it was within their right to call attention to the exchange and seek redress to their situation.

When unbalanced energy exchanges are able to occur without being acknowledged and corrected, they linger in the subconscious mind. In order to "clear the air," it became each person's duty to bring these actions to light, speaking the truth during what at times could be long sessions to "sort out the vibes." Because each person acknowledged that their presence in the community was to pursue a spiritual path, they were seeking this type of information about themselves in order to bring about personal change...at least in theory.

Each person's ability to hear the information and accept it played out in different ways. It is always easier to see the faults in others than it is to acknowledge them in yourself. When feedback was delivered with love and compassion, coming from known and trusted friends, people could hear and take in what was being said and phenomenal changes could take place in personality. Old habits could be broken. At the same time, when backed into a corner, surrounded and outnumbered by people unhappy with your actions, individuals could throw up walls of defenses, blocking their ability to take in the information and learn about themselves.

What made this work was the belief that each person carried within them a piece of the truth, and that if we took the time to "sort it out" and hear from everyone, the reality of the situation could be determined and the truth could be known. Sort sessions could last for hours and at times all work would stop until the individuals involved could "get straight" with each other. Not every encounter worked out smoothly or came to a positive resolution, but enough did that learning how to mediate difference became a core element of the community's survival.

Life Force Energy

Behind all aspects of The Farm's spiritual belief system is the recognition of life force energy. All living things contain this spark of energy and death can literally be

described as the absence of this same energy. By first acknowledging the presence of life force energy, we can then learn to recognize more subtle aspects of its presence and its effect on everything around us.

Babies and young children are like fountains of energy. The life force is strong, giving them the power needed to grow and develop. As we grow older the power of the life force lessens until it is no longer strong enough to allow the body to heal and renew itself or produce the energy necessary for vital organs to function. When we become ill, our bodies are in a struggle to heal, calling upon our inner life force to overcome the things working against us, be they a virus, bacteria, cancer, or a breakdown or malfunction of our own internal systems.

Defining the Spiritual Path of The Farm Church

With the exuberance and idealism of the early years of The Farm now decades in the past, the membership committee made an attempt in recent years to put the community's beliefs and agreements into words on paper. We had always avoided this in an attempt to steer clear of any elements that could one day solidify into dogma, mindless ritual, and unquestioned beliefs.

Members answered a survey to determine if a majority of them supported the writings. Although it would be virtually impossible to develop wording that would receive complete acceptance by everyone, these beliefs and agreements are now included on the community's introductory brochure. It is interesting to note that for each belief, there is a corresponding agreement that defines how the belief is expressed by the members living in the community.

Beliefs and Agreements of The Farm Community

We live in community, and our reverence for life has always been central to our community ways. Within The Farm Community, people can live together and pursue a spiritual path that includes but is not limited to the following beliefs and agreements:

- We believe that there are non-material planes of being or levels of consciousness that everyone can experience, the highest of these being the spiritual plane. We believe that we are all one, that the material and spiritual are one, and the spirit is identical and one in all of creation.

- We believe that marriage, childbirth, and death are sacraments of our church. We agree that child rearing and care of the elderly is a holy responsibility.

- We believe that being truthful and compassionate is instrumental to living together in peace and as a community. We agree to be honest and compassionate in our relationships with each other.

- We believe in nonviolence and pacifism and are conscientiously opposed to war. We agree to resolve any conflicts or disagreements in a nonviolent manner. We agree to keep no weapons in the community.

- We believe that vegetarianism is the most ecologically sound and humane lifestyle for the planet, but that what a person eats does not dictate their spirituality. We agree that livestock, fish, or fowl will not be raised in the community for slaughter.

- We believe that the abuse of any substance is counterproductive to achieving a high consciousness.

We agree to strive for a high level of consciousness in our daily lives.

- We believe that the earth is sacred.

We agree to be respectful of the forests, fields, streams, and wildlife that are under our care.

We agree that the community is a wildlife sanctuary with no hunting for sport or food.

- We believe that humanity must change to survive.

We agree to participate in that change by accepting feedback about ourselves.

- We believe that we, individually and collectively, create our own life experience.

We agree to accept personal responsibility for our actions.

We believe that we are all one, that the material and spiritual are one, and the spirit is identical and one in all of creation.

- We believe that inner peace is the foundation for world peace.

This statement was written by individuals serving on The Farm's membership committee and based on statements found in "This Season's People" and other Farm historical documents. ☺

Douglas Stevenson has been a member of The Farm Community, Summertown, Tennessee (www.thefarmcommunity.com) since 1973. He hosts a series of events throughout the year, including The Farm Experience Weekends and his fourth Conference on Community and Sustainability in partnership with the FIC, held over Memorial Day Weekend, May 25-27, 2012. For more information, visit www.sustainableliferetreats.com.

Creative Spirituality in American Communities of the Past

By Tim Miller

Spirituality can mean a lot of things. It can involve conventional, mainstream American religion; it can involve noninstitutionalized, personal aspirations; it can mean adherence to utterly unconventional (but deeply felt) religious ideas.

American intentional communities of the past have espoused ideas that were both unconventional and fascinating. Here I would like to share a few of the distinctive ideas of three American communities of the past as an exercise in understanding beliefs far out of the mainstream.

Koreshans and the Hollow Earth

One communal spiritual movement that operated from the late 19th to the mid-20th century was the Koreshan Unity, which, after beginnings elsewhere, settled near Fort Myers, Florida, in the 1890s. Cyrus Teed, a physician, had a dramatic revelatory experience in the winter of 1869-1870 in which he believed he was shown all the secrets of the universe. The most fantastic of those secrets was the disclosure that the earth was hollow and that we live on the inside of it. He began to attract followers and he soon gathered them into a community, located first in upstate New York, then in New York City, and finally in Chicago until an attractive tract of Florida land was offered to the group. Teed, in the meantime, took the name Koresh, Hebrew for Cyrus. The biblical Cyrus was something of a messianic figure, so Koresh was a name that suited someone with unusual spiritual insight. The following continued to grow and reached over 200 in the early 20th century. The believers constructed many buildings and cultivated lush gardens in the subtropical Florida climate.

Teed/Koresh had many critics, as one might expect, and he was determined to prove his hollow-earth theory correct. He and his associates created a “rectilineator,” a straight wooden beam installed parallel to the surface of the ocean; extended far enough, they reasoned, it would hit the water as the interior surface of the hollow earth curved upward. And they claimed that it worked, thereby proving the Koreshan theory.

Teed died in 1908, and the community slowly dwindled afterwards, finally closing with the death of the last member in 1982. The land and buildings now comprise the Koreshan State Park. Whatever one might think of Teed’s ideas, his unusual spiritual community endured, in its various locations, for a century.

Lawsonians and Zig-Zag-and-Swirl

While the Koreshan Unity was entering its slow decline in the 1920s, another visionary arrived on the scene: Alfred W. Lawson, a former professional baseball player and inventor (he claimed to have built the first airplane that could truly be called an airliner), announced that to him had been revealed all the secrets of the universe, universal truths that were somewhat different from those of Teed. Lawson determined that suction and pressure were the forces that governed physical motion, and that penetrability, which meant that one substance could penetrate another, was the foundational law of physics. He also declared that yet another force, zig-zag-and-swirl, further helped explain the

phenomenon of motion. Then there was equaeverpoise, which explained the clustering and declustering of matter. Like Teed, Lawson claimed to have figured everything out. He was not modest, to say the least.

The communal phase of Lawson’s program began in 1943, when he purchased, for a song, the campus of the defunct Des Moines University. Renamed the Des Moines University of Lawsonomy, it became the communal home of some of Lawson’s most dedicated followers. The “university’s” curriculum was eccentric, to say the least; it mainly consisted of the memorization of Lawson’s voluminous writings. The student body appears never

The new faith could prevent the destruction of the human race, Lawson boldly claimed, but only if the world recognized his own messianic role. Few did.

to have been large, but it was quite fully communal. New students were advised to bring nothing with them, because all would be provided and they would work collectively to support themselves.

A system incorporating all universal truths would naturally involve religion, and Lawson obligingly created one. It was most fully developed at the communal campus in Des Moines, where the chapel became the first church to practice Lawsonianism. Seven other local churches, scattered around the United States, followed by the 1950s. Their services were similar to those of typical Protestant churches, except that they did not have prayer. Lawson’s doctrine was that God was impersonal and did not meddle in human affairs, but rather ran the universe

through the fixed laws of nature that Lawson had already identified. Ministers in the local churches read sermons written by Lawson; parishioners sang hymns with familiar tunes but new Lawsonian lyrics. Lawson published a guidebook to the new faith, *Lawsonian Religion*, in 1949, by which time the world had entered the nuclear era. The new faith provided the insights necessary to prevent the destruction of the human race, Lawson boldly claimed, but only if the world recognized his own messianic role. Few did; by then he was in his declining years and could make little new headway.

Keristans, B-FICs, and Kyrallah

And then some have simply invented their own religions. Kerista was founded by John Presmont, who took the name Brother Jud (for Justice under Democracy), in the early 1960s. Initially, and to some degree throughout its history, Kerista was a movement committed to all-out hedonism, with free love and alteration of consciousness abounding. In 1971 Eve Furchgott joined Jud and friends in establishing a Kerista commune in San Francisco, where a bit of structure was introduced to the freewheeling Sybarites. There they developed a sexual philosophy and practice called polyfidelity, a group marriage, as it were, in which partners were freely shared but members pledged to have sex only with others within the B-FIC, Best Friend Identity Cluster, to which they belonged, and on a fixed schedule, which operated rather like the chore wheels in some intentional communities. They also developed a computer consulting business that made communal life comfortable, even prosperous.

Ever rational, the Keristans decided at one point simply to create their own religion. It was a religion by design; it was a democratic religion, in which doctrines were established by vote. Thus came the concept of Kyrallah, the Keristan name for the Divine, an entity that seeks to emancipate all humans from oppression. Scriptures? Sure, religions need scriptures, so the Keristans wrote their own. The Kerista Theological Seminary oversaw the new religion's definition of terms, crafting precise meanings for such concepts as religion, spirituality, metaphysics, ethics, and many more. Furchgott, a talented artist known in the community as Even Eve, gave the religion a graphic representation, creating comics that featured the goddess Kerista, a beautiful woman.

Like Lawson, the Keristans sought a comprehensive theory of everything. And for two decades or so it all worked beautifully—commune, religion, business, polyfidelity. In the early 1990s, however, interpersonal disputes arose, and the commune disbanded. With it went one of the most deliberately constructed religions ever.

Bathing Bans, Free Love, and More

Many other communities have stopped short of inventing entirely new religions, but have interpreted traditional religious teachings in decidedly novel ways. The Vermont Pilgrims, for example, an early 19th-century group led by Isaac Bullard, were Christians who did not find any authorization for bathing in the Bible, and as a result were reportedly dirty, louse-ridden, and diseased. The Children of God, now known as the Family, are otherwise conservative Christians who interpret the biblical law of love to mean that free sexual relationships among consenting adults are permissible. Several religious communities have been so averse to private property that they have deeded their land to God.

So what lesson is to be drawn from these unconventional communal spiritual experiments and many others like them? None, really, except that the world of communal spirituality is boundlessly rich and diverse. Communities have attracted some of the world's foremost minds, and occasionally a few who might be charitably regarded as crackpots. The human spirit goes in a multitude of directions, and community provides a good home for spiritual endeavors of many, many kinds. 🐦

Tim Miller teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas and is a historian of American intentional communities. Among his books are The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America and The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond, both published by Syracuse University Press.



Want to know more?

Here are some websites on these groups:

Koreshan Unity:
etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses/available/etd-04132010-145407/unrestricted/Adams_K_Thesis_2010.pdf

Lawsonians:
www.humanity-benefactor-foundation.4t.com/index.html

Kerista:
www.kerista.com

Vermont Pilgrims:
sidneyrigdon.com/features/pilgrim1.htm

Children of God/The Family:
www.thefamily.org

Deeding land to God (open land):
www.saradavidson.com/articleC3.html

Monasticism, Community, and “The Great Work”

By Nancy Roth



“How,” I asked myself, as I sat at my desk in the guesthouse at Holy Cross Monastery, “did I get mixed up with these guys?” How did I, not only a female but a wife and mother, end up as part of the staff of a male monastic community in the Episcopal Church? And how did such a sociological anomaly as a monastery happen to be perched on a hill on the west bank of the Hudson River in the middle of the 20th century?

Discovering Monastic Community

The answer to my first question is probably “Marie.” Marie was a high school classmate who had come to our suburban New York town temporarily for her third year of high school. We became friends, and she told me about a place in Maryland where the air was fresh, the surroundings were beautiful and quiet, and the people dedicated themselves to prayer and good works. She told me she had been raised, as an orphan, in a children’s convalescent home run by these people: they were jointly her “mothers.”

When she returned to this utopia she described, I decided to visit her. I was met at the train by a woman in black and white who looked as if she had emerged from the margins of an illuminated medieval manuscript. (Marie’s “mothers” turned out, appropriately, to be nuns.) She welcomed me warmly, took me to my destination, showed me the complexities of the guest house, then left me to myself. How quiet it was! I felt as if I had been plunged into a vast ocean of silence. During my days there, I explored the trails of the adjoining state park, helped the nuns peel peaches for shortcake, and joined them for their frequent chapel services which they called the “daily offices.” I began to relax luxuriantly, leaving behind the stresses of SATs, final exams, and high school research papers.

I would return there from time to time. However, in the meantime, I discovered reli-

gious communities closer to home: dotted up and down the Hudson River, across the bridges to Long Island, or north of us in Connecticut or Massachusetts. Today, I continue to find peace and a chance to center myself on my infrequent visits to monastic communities. Buoyed by the warm welcome which is part of their *ethos*, reminded by the regular worship about the values that I aspire to follow, reassured by the natural beauty that surrounds most monastic campuses, I emerge refreshed, ready to face once again my complex and busy life. And, every time I visit, I say a silent “thank you” to Marie.

The attraction I had to this way of life—although I must admit my attraction to the handsome organist who became my husband won out easily—eventually helped draw me to this male community when they were at a transition point. I had been asked to direct an Elderhostel—a continuing education program for seniors—by the seminary from which I had just graduated, and happened to be visiting Holy Cross Monastery soon after I had been told by the seminary that they needed to find a site for the program outside of expensive Manhattan. “Would you like to have an Elderhostel here?” I asked Brother Timothy, the guestmaster, one day. He responded with enthusiasm, and, to make a long and happy story short, there ensued more than a half dozen years of creating curriculum, hiring teachers, and welcoming young-at-heart students from near and far. The monastery’s finances became more stable, and they began to have a reputation as a Destination (with a capital D!) in Elderhostel circles and beyond. As for me, I drew ever closer to the brothers and finally was asked to consider being an oblate, which drew me further into the community. I

was also asked to become their program coordinator, which enabled me not only to draw on the gifts of my many contacts in the area, but to try out some of my own retreat and workshop ideas, which I eventually offered more widely. Indeed, “Thank you again, Marie.”

Monastic History

The answer to the second question I asked myself in the beginning of this article—“How did such an institution as a monastery come to *be* in the first place, and why does it still flourish in our era?”—is to give you a brief overview of the history of monasticism. As our son began exploring secular intentional communities, I was reminded constantly of their historical religious communitarian predecessors. There are many parallels. Today’s intentional communities provide an extended family to people who wish to live a life that is an alternative to the present culture: one that reflects their values, not the values of a consumer society. The birth of western monasticism follows a similar pattern.

Originally, Christians who were serious about following the precepts of their religion had often been persecuted or martyred by the Roman emperors who held sway over their world. Then things changed, at the famous moment when the Emperor Constantine won a battle in which he had prayed in desperation to the Christian God for victory and, in profuse gratitude, decided not only to convert to Christianity himself but also to make it the official religion of all his territory. This was not a good thing, in the eyes of the new religion: the subsequent dilution of religious practice so upset many of the more fervent Christians that they decided to flee to the desert, there to live a life untainted by what they considered the sinfulness of the culture. They were quite something: if you want some religious reading that borders on the surreal, yet is full of practical wisdom, read the “sayings” of these first monastics, called the “desert fathers” (although that is not quite accurate, for there were also some “mothers”). At first, these were one-man or one-woman enterprises, but eventually, under a monk named Pachomius, some of them banded together, and communitarian

monasticism was born.

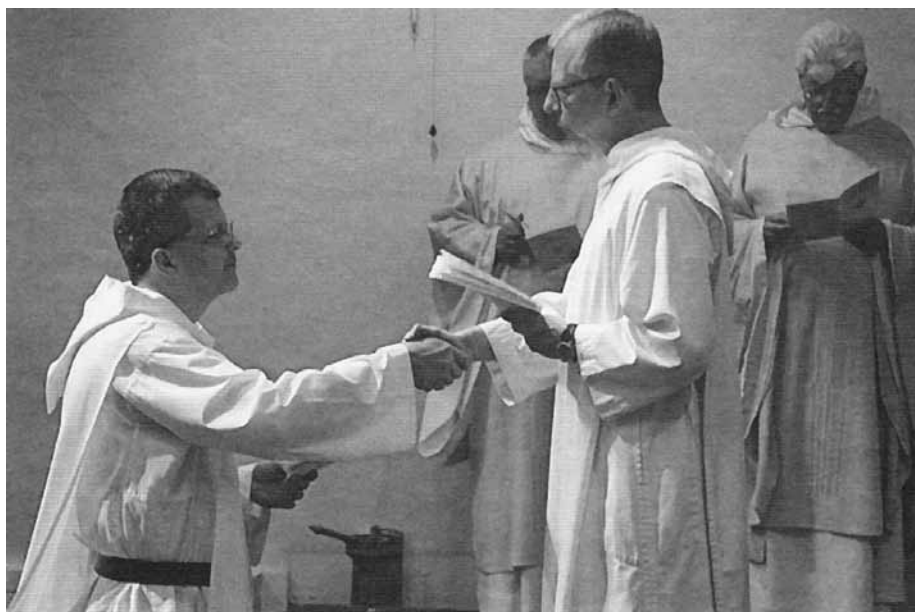
Early monastics made vows, often of “poverty, chastity, and obedience.” In other words, they chose not to own anything as individuals, but to hold their property and goods in common, to choose community life over family life, and to put the good of the community first, rather than their own desires, obeying the prior, or head of the community, who represented the idea that each individual was part of the whole.

As monastic communities proliferated, there were variations in the ways that they were organized. (For further information on both past and present-day monastic life, see a book reviewed in *COMMUNITIES* #146: *Together and Apart*, by Sister Ellen Stephen, OSH.) Often this need for organization would culminate in a “rule”: a written declaration of the ways the monks or nuns were expected to live. Present religious communities also have “rules” and, like the very earliest, usually read a chapter of these early every day. If you ever visit a medieval cathedral and wonder at the architectural beauty of the so-called “chapter house” that is usually adjacent, you can picture the monastics gathered on their uncomfortable stone seats, listening attentively (we would hope) to a chapter, most often from the Rule of St. Benedict, who, of all monastics, is best known for systematizing a “rule” that was both spiritually challenging and practical.

People came first, for example. If a monk were at prayer and there was a knock on the monastery gate, he was to interrupt his prayer and go to open the gate! A visitor was to be treated “as Christ.” This is the reason for the myriad retreat opportunities in religious communities today; like the first hospitals into which some of the early communities grew, all monasteries are to be healing places for those who enter. As someone who has often been welcomed in the various communities in which our son has lived, I have often observed—and very much welcomed—this ideal, put into practice in secular communities as well.

The center of monastery life was what Benedict called the *opus dei*, literally the “work of God,” which took the form of the eight daily “offices” or worship times. There are many ways to connect with that which is beyond us, however we name it—but certainly that same wisdom applies to all who live in community, as well as to everyone else: time needs to be given to nurturing our spirits. Maybe it is through a meditative walk in the woods, or a session of yoga, or chanting in a circle, or sitting in silent meditation. Whatever it is, the *opus dei* is really the *opus* of the human spirit too: an activity that helps us to become more fully human, more fully ourselves in every sense, and more connected to reality. And when we sense that we are not alone in that enterprise, but that we are in this together and there is a “Beyond-ness” to life as well, we are fortunate indeed.

(continued on p. 75)



Photos courtesy of Nancy Roth

Gnostic History Lesson

By Craig Chalquist

There's something poignant about being a member of a spiritual community that no longer exists as such. But then the Gnostics were never very clubby to begin with.

No one knows where the original Gnostics came from. They appeared shortly before the time of Christ, writing and teaching in Samaria, Syria, Alexandria (that most cosmopolitan of ancient cities), and, eventually, in Antioch and Rome. They seem to have been learned (hence the word “gnostic”) syncretists who borrowed from Hebrew, Platonic, and, later, Christian lore to weave their stories of origin and salvation.

As religious study and worship groups formed in the wake of crucified Jesus, the Gnostics organized theirs to rotate the role of priest. Some of these priests were women. Gnostic services included ceremonial work, readings from sacred texts, interpretation of those texts as symbolic rather than factual, collection of charity donations, and some kind of reflective work with dreams.

Gnosis means “knowledge,” but in the pious hands of the Gnostics it meant knowledge derived from direct experience of the Divine. Two thousand years before Transcendentalism, self-help, William James, and C.G. Jung, the Gnostics evolved techniques for connecting consciously with the light of God as it shone from within. The only purpose of clergy and texts was to clarify this light so seldom revered but so freely available to all.

None of this sat well with the worship group calling itself “Straight-Thinking,” or Orthodox (not to be confused with the modern Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches). In letters Irenaeus of Lyons complained to his fellow priests that “Those



Who Know” were subverting religious authority by saying that God spoke to everyone, by valuing inner experience, and by letting women serve as priests. What was needed, he believed, was four standard gospels drawn from the 30 or so in active circulation: four manuals to emphasize the divinity of Jesus and obedience to what became known as the Catholic (“Universal”) Church.

The Gnostics just laughed. Who could take the Resurrection literally? they wondered, and what good would it do for believers for whom Christ had not risen internally? Why think that Eve came from Adam’s rib when women gave birth to men every day? Did the Straight-Thinkers not realize that the infinite God could not be merely male, or that Sophia, Zoe, and Eve herself were Messengers of Light who linked humans to the heavenly Ple-roma (“Abundance”)? Or that blessed Mary Magdalene, companion of Jesus, had received his interior teachings when the male disciples proved contentiously literal-minded?

For harboring such ideas the Gnostics were regarded by the Straight-Thinkers as heretics (from a Greek word meaning “to choose”). The long, contentious legacy of excommunication had begun. When the cynical convert Constantine became emperor of Rome, the Gnostics and their texts were driven literally underground as the heretics were murdered (just as Christians had been by the formerly pagan Romans) and their parchments consigned to jars buried in the desert sands: all that survived of the gospels of Gnosis. The rest were torched by order of the newly official Catholic Church. Of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, a text instructing Gnostics in the interior path of Jesus, only tantalizing fragments remain.

All this took place long ago, of course, but the events remain instructive. Had the Gnostics managed to supplement their intense individualism—that of the archetypal Seeker—with a strong and resilient sense of community, Christianity, and monotheism too, might look very differ-

ent today. Imagine an Eve-centered Genesis, for example—“Adam, arise! and beware of the deep sleep”—or an interior Christianity a thousand years before monasticism.

Had the Gnostics successfully defended their practices, they might have provided a check on what they called hylicism, the disease of materialist literal-mindedness of the sort that hardens symbols and fables into ideology. Instead, when the early church fathers tried to debate, their Gnostic opponents infuriated them by stating a version of, “Your understanding of spiritual reality is incorrect and shallow” and walking away.

Because of recovered Gnostic texts, we know that the early church’s slanders about the flesh- and world-hating Gnostics were mostly inaccurate, especially when heresiologists read the texts with the same literalism they used on their own. Nevertheless, something of the Gnostic refusal to engage fully with a world they believed to be headed for decline provided a hook upon which to hang these persistent projections.

Where the question of spiritual freedom is concerned, everyone with a conscious destiny to fulfill is a Gnostic in need of kinship.

It has often been said by Santayana, Freud, Joyce, and others that failing to learn the lessons of history sets us up to repeat them. After Jung, who was dead set against groups and who hated being called a Gnostic even though he was one par excellence, societies and institutes carried on the teachings of Jung’s Analytical Psychology; but to date their funding has been of the shoestring variety, their presence in academia minimal, and, despite decades of deep analytic work in session, they provide no effective opposition to the regressive, fundamentalist, corporatist forces now reshaping American politics into a vast and punitive theocracy. The Gnostics would have identified these forces as manifestations of Archons, power archetypes also known as the Authorities of Darkness.

Nevertheless, worldly work is not for us, Jungians and other contemplatives and seekers insist just as the original Gnostics had. Inner work is enough in this New Age. Transform the self and you automatically transform the world. The abandoned jars unearthed at Nag Hammadi say otherwise.

For me, a student of ancient Gnostic stories and texts that frequently dance in my dreams, it’s crucial to meet archontic times by defending, not correctness of doctrine, but the right to find one’s own path in spite of borders, bureaucracies, and No Child Left Behind. That defense requires a new type of Gnostic community: open, resilient, adaptive to change, ecologically aware, appreciative of other faiths, local and yet internationally networked. We need each other not only for survival, but for the deepest possible experience of Abundance: “Wherever two are gathered in My name...”

The ancient Gnostics inhabited a specific, exclusive ring of sects around the Mediterranean Sea, but where the question of spiritual freedom is concerned, everyone with a conscious destiny to fulfill is a Gnostic in need of kinship. ☺

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Creating Spiritual Community at the Hermitage

By Christian and Johannes Zinzendorf



Every community starts somewhere and ours started in a barn, the only remaining building on the 64-acre tract when we bought it in 1988. Due to what could charitably be called our limited resources, we could either afford a house and no land or land and no house. The choice was simple though we quickly realized that our drafty barn was no place to spend a winter in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. We ended up huddling around a kerosene stove inside an 11-foot travel trailer we pulled inside the barn, giving personalized meaning to cabin fever.

Still, we soldiered on, knowing our early Moravian brothers and sisters had started their own spiritual community at Bethlehem in the Lehigh Valley in a log structure that combined living quarters for humans and livestock. As we acquired our own sheep, oxen, and goats, they lived below us in the stable. At night we heard them moving around in their stalls. Even their body heat came up through the floor boards and their proximity formed both bond and family.

The land was barren fields at Thanksgiving when we first inhabited the property. With mountains bordering the southern and northern sides of our valley, we were on a wind-swept ridge running down the center of the valley, nakedly exposed to fierce winter winds that howled across the land, often driving snow horizontally. Our Scottish nature even then realized there was an enormous amount of wasted energy here that only many years later would we be able to capture with a wind turbine.

Our mission was clear: we build our vision and brothers will come. After all, we were recreating an 18th-century religious community of single brothers that at its height had nearly 90 men and youth. It took years before we realized that the early settlement, also in the Lehigh Valley, had one thing we did not have: a charismatic leader to whom followers flocked. Actually, we weren't looking for followers as much as equals who shared our vision of an earth-centered spirituality. The only trouble, in addition to having no charisma, was that our spirituality was always in a state of flux. We were criticized for making it up as we went along but actually it was constantly evolving. Instead of "making it up," which implied some kind of random searching for whatever worked, we saw ourselves as a radio telescope, constantly fine tuning the direction of our antenna to pick out faint signals from whatever distant galactic nebula we were receiving them. Or, in another analogy, we were trying to pick out images through a darkened glass. It was there, fully formed, we just couldn't see it clearly.

Still, as the years went by and potential brothers came and went, it is true that our attempts to form a cohesive vision that would attract brothers became increasingly scattered as we became desperate to find some bait that would attract them like



This page, left: Early 1989. We spent the first two winters in the barn, the only building on the property when we bought the land. Right: Building the Gemeinehaus (community house) in 1994 from a building originally constructed in 1758. We moved it 85 miles from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to the Hermitage, where we rebuilt it.

Opposite page, top: We built a well sweep to haul water by the bucketful from the original 30-foot-deep hand-dug well.

Middle: A turkey poult finds a nesting spot on Bessie, one of our first Border Leicester ewes.

Bottom: Taking loose hay into the barn while Star and Bright look on. Recreating 18th century agricultural practices required only labor—lots and lots of labor.

hummingbirds to sugar water. Those years were not among our better efforts as we pandered to whatever we hoped would work in getting brothers to join us. At one point, angels were the hot thing in popular culture, so we called ourselves the “guardian angels of the garden.” We did see ourselves as stewards, but the angel thing was capitalizing on a trend that, as with all our other attempts, failed to generate the hoped-for response, meaning we were still alone.

During these years we moved abandoned log and timber-frame buildings from valley farms to the Hermitage as we created the physical version of our internal vision. At one point our early Moravian brothers and sisters had constructed their own version of New Jerusalem, the heavenly city of Revelation that descended to the new earth. The Moravians called their German community Herrnhag, God’s Grove, and they believed it was ruled by Christ working through our own charismatic founder, Christian Renatus Zinzendorf, leader at that time of the Single Brothers. Our own vision was that of creating a new Eden, pictorially represented in the series of paintings by Quaker painter Edward Hicks called the Peaceable Kingdom in which he showed Pennsylvania founder William Penn signing a treaty with the Delaware Indians, surrounded by images of peaceful coexistence among supposedly natural enemies, the lion laying with the lamb, the child holding a snake.

When the followers of Christian and his father, Moravian leader Nicholas Zinzendorf, came to Pennsylvania in the 1740s, they created cultured Germanic towns in the wilderness where music by Bach as well as the Moravians’ own composers was played while German-trained artists built pipe organs, painted portraits, and constructed enormous stone buildings. It was these buildings that initially attracted us to what we learned were spiritual communities in which the traditional nuclear family was replaced by a communal family whose daily lives

were dedicated to serving Christ. The buildings we admired were basically dormitories where members were separated according to gender, age, and marital status. Actually marriage consisted of the entire community seen as the Bride married to the Divine Bridegroom. Both men and women were married to Christ in this way and the homoerotic implications were obvious to us even if downplayed and vehemently denied by two centuries of church apologists. That didn’t faze us as we knew what those men were really up to in their multi-hour love feasts in which the spiritual and the physical grew together and fused in harmony. That’s what we wanted to recreate and we felt driven to achieve it once again.

This merging of the physical and spiritual was reflected in the daily lives of our early brothers and sisters, just as we wanted it to be reflected in our own lives. That meant our very behaviors had to reflect the inner harmony we were seeking and that we wrote about and sang in our hymns. It was also reflected in the objects of our daily lives just as it had been in the objects of the early Pennsylvania Germans, for whom beauty and utility merged in the shape and form of a spatula, a bed, a building, a book. We insisted on living in a physical world imbued with spiritual beauty where nothing was mundane and every object was a reflection of the divine.

Well, it sounded good but the reality was harder to achieve, especially as we were starting from scratch and basically with almost nothing: no money, few skills, and fewer tools, just boundless enthusiasm, energy and, when all else failed, grim determination. We forged ahead on all fronts, crafts, buildings, agriculture, livestock, printing, developing our spirituality, all with no running water, no electricity, no plumbing, and no help. But we didn’t care. We would do it all because we knew it was only a matter of time before brothers flocked to join us. Boy, were we crazy. What we learned is that when you scream in

Pointing to the plane flying overhead, our neighbor said, “There’s the future. You guys are the past.”

the Mahantongo Valley, no one hears you and, if they do, they don't care. But then, why should they? Not one of these insular Pennsylvania Germans (not Amish, keep in mind; these were more worldly Lutherans and Reform Germans) asked for two gay city slickers to move in among them.



Initially they thought we might be going to subdivide the farm, an idea anathema to farmers who had kept some of the surrounding land in their families for two centuries. In retaliation for that idea, the signs we put up at each end of the property with the community's name, not that of a subdivision as was erroneously supposed, were stolen within days of our putting them up.

The other idea was that we were drug dealers moving here to grow marijuana. To test that idea we were subjected to overhead helicopter flights using infrared cameras looking for the vile weed. The locals were probably disappointed to learn we were clean, at least in that respect. The strange looking crop we were growing was flax, not hemp. We explained that their earliest ancestors on this very land had grown flax for their linen cloth and linseed oil. That interested a few but to the rest it was just another example of our weirdness. For example when we were plowing one day with our oxen, a neighbor stopped by to watch us. At the same time a jet plane was flying overhead with its long vapor trail streaming behind it. Pointing to the plane, he said, “There’s the future. You guys are the past.” And then he drove off. Our neighbors respected the past but weren't controlled by it. Eventually neither were we, and for the same reasons: practicality and ease. But first we had a lot to learn.



Johannes learned just how far removed we were from modern life when he started selling our homemade bread at the local farmers' market. One of the first structures we moved to the property and rebuilt was a 200-year-old brick bake oven from an adjacent farm. Johannes taught himself how to use it and how to bake traditional round loaves of sourdough bread using rye-straw baskets and dough boxes. In a desperate attempt to make money (having been understandably fired from his newspaper job for spending too much time on Hermitage business while on company time) he baked three days a week and sold the resulting breads, cakes, cookies, and pies at market on the fourth day. In a good week he was lucky to net \$100 after paying for his supplies. The problem was one of public perception readily summed up by an elderly gentleman who, every week without fail, would stop at Johannes' stand, stare at his loaves of bread and say, “Those are the ugliest things I've ever seen.” Johannes wasn't fighting customer apathy here as much as customer ignorance. The man's great-grandmother had made loaves just like the ones Johannes was trying to sell but the man was so far removed from his past that he had no idea what he was looking at except to vocally declare he didn't like what he saw.



Top: Johannes feeding our first ox team, Bright and Star, as calves in 1989. They were Austrian Linebacks, developed for pulling, which we found at a farm in Vermont. Middle: We moved a 200-year-old bake oven from an adjacent farm and reconstructed it for our sourdough bread. Bottom: Christian and a goat kid, circa 1990. The logs of the Gemeindehaus are in the background, waiting to be rebuilt.

But not all interactions with our neighbors were bad. One elderly woman brought by a handmade comforter used by her and her husband when they were first married. “It kept us warm and it will keep you warm, too,” she said. And she was right. It was her generation, the one raised before World War II, who understood what we were doing because they, too, had lived without electricity, plumbing, or running water. She and her husband pulled their water by the bucketful from the ancient hand-dug well on their property just as we did from our own. No, what misunderstandings we had came from those of our own generation who could not figure out why we lived the way we did, why we consciously gave up what they viewed as necessities. To us all work was holy so drawing water by the bucket was simply part of our credo and ethic. The only problem was that eventually we were overwhelmed by the accumulating weight of such holiness.

As for expanding the size of our community, we did try. Time and again potential brothers came and left when the reality of our lives did not meet their needs and hopes.

Other times we kicked them off when their reality did not meet our hopes and needs. The resulting continued loneliness wore us down and we constantly had to readjust our vision for the community based on the increasing realization that we could not do it all. While the tools of colonial-era agriculture are few, such as a single-moldboard plow, a scythe, a spiked-tooth harrow, a wooden-wheeled hay wagon, they are labor intensive. Our first spring, Johannes stood with his scythe facing a seven-acre field of hay. He cut a 50-foot swath, wore out, and realized the limitations of labor-intensive farming when there is a lack of labor. Our early brotherhood had dozens of men and youth cutting hay and wheat in the fields while musicians played hymns to spur them on. A potential brother offered to sing hymns while we worked, becoming offended when we explained we could better use his help holding a scythe rather than his accordion.

For that reason we sold the ox team to buy a tractor. We went from bringing in loose hay to baling it. We added technology, rapidly recapitulating generations of agricultural advances to make up for the lack of brothers, the lack of shared labor. Eventually we came to the realization that farmers are born, they're not made, and we were ready to pass that work to a neighboring farmer when he offered to farm the land for us and share the crops. That's the same reason we gradually got rid of our livestock, our beloved cattle, goats, hogs, and sheep, our extended animal family, because we simply could not maintain them any longer.

As men came and went, it was always

just the two of us to do all the work—construction, farming, crafts, animal husbandry—in addition to the daily maintenance of our lives, the cooking, cleaning, washing. After a full day of labor, we had to face making a meal and then finally tumbling late at night into bed, exhausted, too often cranky, angry, frustrated, and we too often took it out on each other to the point where we ended up living apart just to stay together.

As the reality of our aloneness set in over a space of years, our own needs changed. As we finished the master building plan, we started converting cottages once designed for residents and visitors into studios for our own artistic production. Instead of using the property to host gatherings and workshops for the creativity of others, we ended up resenting the time it took to be hosts and started nurturing our own creativity. Our private artistic needs burst forth as the public building phase ended. It turned out that sharing our vision was impossible and never worked out. We were as critical of others as they were of us. It took many years to realize we are not communalists but hermits. We went from being a cloistered brotherhood to a hermitage.

As we have grown older, and now we are into our third decade here, we have sought ways to make life easier, to free us to do the work we want to do, not the work we feel we have to do. That work is basically done. So we have added the technology we once eschewed such as calling the power company to hook us back up where once we called to have the lines taken down. What irony that was. Now we have indoor plumbing and running water and we don't even have to run outside to get it. We can sit in a house, writing at a computer, listening to music while being warmed by propane heat. The days are gone when we had to come home from work and scrounge through the snow for bits and pieces of wet wood to burn. And what a joy that is.

It's late at night. Dogs are on the bed. Outside, two owls form a stereophonic duet, hooting to each other. The dream of brotherhood is dead, replaced with a passion to create beauty and spiritual harmony for as long as we can sustain ourselves independently. After that, we don't know. We can always donate the Hermitage to a local nonprofit organization. Meanwhile the vision of our founder sustains us. He saw New Jerusalem coming to earth and lived in that state of grace until he died in London in 1751 at the age of 25. Many young men must have died in London that year. But only he came back to life in the waters of a spring in Pennsylvania. That merging of the physical and the spiritual, that creation of harmony and wholeness, continues to sustain and guide us. 🐦

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Left: The first four log buildings we constructed. Left to right, the Gemeinehaus, summer house, First House, and outhouse. Right: The Hermitage, with the master plan completed, as it appeared in 2011.

Common Ground in an Uncertain World

By Chris Roth

“**I** hate the White Brotherhood Team!” I could barely believe that I had let these words leave my lips—I was usually much more diplomatic, not given to outbursts—but I could contain my frustration no longer.

Fellow community members looked at me in shock. Gasps and nervous laughter filled the awkward space. It was a breakthrough moment, and it needed to happen—both for my own and, I believe, the group’s sense of spiritual integrity—but that didn’t make it any more comfortable.

Smells Like Team Dispirit

My uncharacteristic outburst had occurred just as we closed our weekly community business meeting. According to tradition, several members had expressed thanks for the help of the White Brotherhood Team, a term referring to spiritual beings that at one point had been very important to a community member who was not present at that circle. Most newcomers to our meetings were puzzled at best, and often disturbed, to hear this term—was this some kind of patriarchal, white supremacist group? Ku Klux Klan? Neo-Nazis? No, apparently the White Brotherhood Team were just spiritual beings who happened to have that name—and they needed to be called by that name in order to be effective.

Inviting them into our circles and thanking them for their presence had become part of our meeting ritual, although not everyone could stomach uttering the words, even after hearing the explanation (which had to be repeated with virtually every new person, as the term provoked a consistent reaction of confusion or revulsion). Some of us were unhappy with this community tradition, but our usually politely phrased expressions of displeasure had

not resulted in any change—nor had a thinly-veiled but good-natured written parody circulated in the community. Most who didn’t like the tradition had finally resigned ourselves to it, finding an uneasy peace by simply not saying the words ourselves.

But the look on the face of a new African American visitor to our circle when she heard those words—the alarm, the fear, the hurt, the sense of betrayal—pushed me over the edge. I didn’t care about being polite anymore, and I couldn’t find it humorous anymore either. I could no longer tolerate the fact that in our quest to include spirituality in our bonds as a community, we were using what to many of us was a meaningless, denigrating term—one that seemed to exclude rather than include others by instantly invoking millennia of racism and sexism, even if that was not its intent. In this case, our



Photos by Chris Roth

group's choice to consciously incorporate a non-shared spiritual belief system into its culture had come at too great a cost. Most of us, in fact, valued spirituality in some form—but our tastes were eclectic, and to us, these words seemed forced, rather than freely chosen, and offensive, not harmless.

This episode did not result in an immediate group decision to ban the utterance of “White Brotherhood Team” at our meetings, but those who liked this terminology finally understood that some of us found it deeply distressing, especially when we witnessed its power to hurt others. Within several months, its use had faded out entirely. To me, its absence did not make us any less connected spiritually as a community—in fact, we seemed more connected, because sensitivity to personal feelings and differences had won out over doctrinaire adherence to a particular approach that separated rather than united us.

A Tale of Three Communities

I've lived for extended periods (ranging from over a year to close to a decade-and-a-half) in three different land-based intentional communities, including the one just described (which we'll return to later). Each had its own approach to spirituality, which I can now see as a progression through a continuum of practices and attitudes—a spectrum which included concerted irreverence, sometimes-disconcerting reverence, and everything in between.

Each situation also manifested that paradoxical truth that, in our individual spiritual journeys, community can be both an impediment (when we devalue our own sensibilities and surrender excessive power to the group) and an essential aid (when we stay true to ourselves while opening up to our unity with others).

In my first long-term intentional community, most residents experienced a strong connection to the land and ecology, which were the focus of most of our activities and shared interests. If we had a spirituality—and the power of our day-to-day relationship with the land tells me that we did—it was rooted in the soil, plants, and animals, in ecology, ecological living, and the cycle of the seasons.

Yet because many group members came from religious traditions that they'd experienced as confining and nature-averse, they tended to reject formalized spirituality. Aside from a yearly Samhain bonfire, residents regarded most rituals of any kind with suspicion, and deemed most spiritual approaches too “woo-woo.” In response to a visiting Biodynamicist who blessed the seeds he sowed, the land manager *cursed* his own seeds. I was not present to witness the results of this side-by-side trial, but legend has it that the cursed seeds outperformed the blessed seeds. On another occasion, seeds deliberately planted on a “black” day on the Biodynamic calendar (one not recommended for any type of gardening activity) outgrew seeds planted on an ideal day.

Our rebellious non-spiritual spirituality invigorated us—but tellingly, the group did experience consistent internal discord, frequent fallings-out, and eventually major conflicts that spawned lawsuits, depositions, and a climactic “day in court.” Had we found comfortable ways to celebrate together our con-



nection to something outside of ourselves, beyond our egos, we *might* have created a more mutually supportive environment and had better luck with interpersonal and group dynamics. We might have felt more “together” and less embroiled in conflict. But on the other hand, a significant number of the people attracted to that group might not have tolerated this imposition of group ritual, and our conflicts might then have erupted over spirituality even before they erupted over power issues and legal matters.

In my next truly land-based intentional community, spirituality found more welcome. We incorporated seasonal rituals, mostly of the pagan variety, and occasional sweat lodges, but most members still shunned conventional religion, along with its trappings and ideologies, seeing it as a usually oppressive force. And in fact conventional religions do hold a large share of the responsibility for stomping out the nature-based spiritualities that preceded them, so rejection of those religions made sense in a community rooted in its relationship with nature.

At the same time, this spiritual approach did at times lend itself to “us/them” thinking, which, while perhaps an accurate assessment on many levels, also distanced us from segments of the population who’d been on different spiritual or religious journeys. Surrounded by religiously conservative neighbors, we were likely stereotyped by them just as we stereotyped the churches they attended. We found many things in common with some of them as well—including a commitment to local place and a willingness to help others in the neighborhood whenever needed—but religious issues may have played a larger role than we imagined in also keeping us separate in fundamental ways.

For better or worse, even in its membership recruitment, our community enjoyed less diversity than it might have. Our spirituality—our life on the land—was one we shared mostly just with one another.

In the third community (where the scenario which opened this article played out), an eclectic spirituality featured much more intentionally and deliberately in our culture. While the words “White Brotherhood Team” represented for some of us the

nadir of this aspect of our lives together, we experienced many positive dimensions to this spiritual intentionality—so many that most of us had decided that it was worth some tradeoffs.

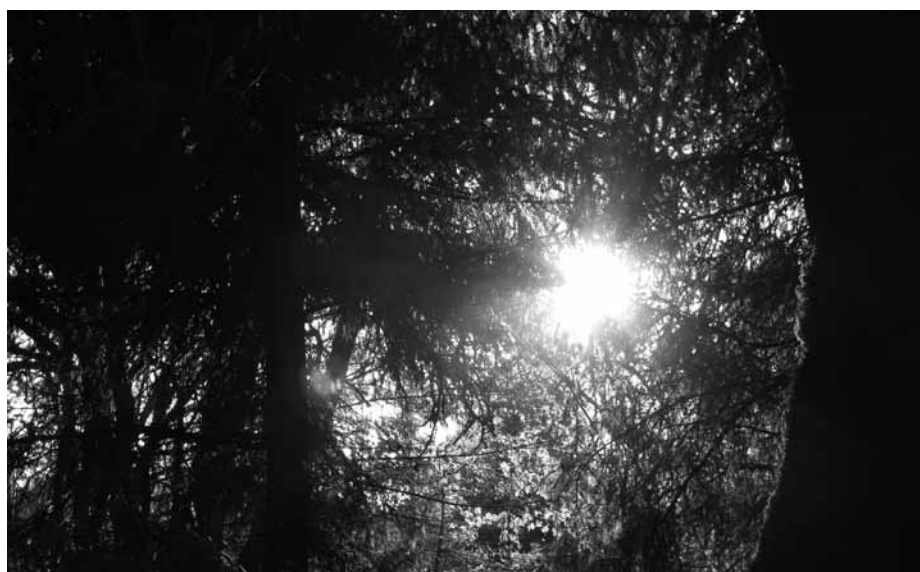
We held at least two two-hour-long meetings every week, opening them by calling in not only ourselves but the spirits of the land and other spiritual helpers of our individual choosing (hence the aforementioned Team), and thanked those same beings at the end of every meeting. We celebrated most solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days, though we also welcomed spiritual celebrations from all

We know that every organic form manifests and then fades. What we don't know is whether we'll feel just as alive when we become compost.

traditions. In this sense we differed from my previous communities—we actively welcomed every spiritual approach and even religion. Religious fundamentalists didn't usually apply to live at our community, nor would everyone have embraced their joining, but being open to diversity and inclusive of many different ways of revering “the One” (or “the Many”) were core community values.

In addition to our conscious connection to the land and welcoming of diverse spiritual traditions, we practiced a spirituality rooted in a desire for deep, honest relationships with one another. We produced and all participated in personal growth workshops that explored the inner human being and our relationships with one another, and for many people this became a spiritual practice. Those ways of relating extended beyond our monthly workshops and even our weekly well-being meetings, affecting our daily interactions in myriad ways.

We didn't experience continuous spiritual enlightenment, and at times, for some of us, the focus on personal and interpersonal issues may have inter-



ferred with a deeper relationship with the land—but in our best moments, we saw no division or conflict between these different dimensions. When our group functioned well, we embodied a kind of ongoing daily spirituality. This spirituality brought many challenges—honesty and vulnerability are generally not easy for those raised in modern culture, and living more simply and sharing can involve unfamiliar discomforts too—but also many rewards, including witnessing its effects on those who visited us. We served as a source of energy and inspiration for many who came to our workshops, who took part in our other programs, or who were touched in some way by our life as a community.



Moving On

All things must pass, and each of the experiences described above has ceased to exist in the form I once knew, passing from living reality into memory. These shared community efforts at embodying spirituality (even when cloaked in rebellious non-spirituality) take on a different hue once the fragility of our individual and group experiences in life becomes more real. Several years of profound change and newly-experienced physical challenges can make anyone (in this case, me) take a lot fewer things for granted. They can also make it more difficult to ignore one's own inner experience, or to set it aside entirely for words and ideas collectively explored in a group. In this state, transcending one's personal world can seem both more desirable—the true path to enlightenment—and more difficult.

My belief in the spirit embodied in the natural world here on earth, and my direct experience of it, has kept me going for nearly five decades, speaking to me when no human words could affect me as powerfully. It has also merged and worked in synchrony with the organic spirit of natural human beings in community with one another, as I've experienced that in various manifestations. When I feel in harmony with it, "Love," "Gratitude," and "God/Goddess" all seem like different ways of saying the same thing—something that is

very real, infusing our lives—something that will last forever.

But confrontations with decline, disappointment, and loss can suggest a different perspective. Physical health, well-being of any kind, communication, even existence itself, are not givens. Though we may at times feel immortal, this current experience on earth will not last for any of us. It could be over in an instant, and once it is, "we" might never experience anything like it again, or even be "ourselves" anymore. Each of us is part of a thin film of living matter on a tiny speck of dust in an unimaginably huge universe, part of a dream that may flow only one direction, into oblivion, rather than in an endless repeat loop or ever-evolving spiral. We do know that every organic form manifests and then fades. What we don't know is whether we'll feel just as alive when we become compost. What will consciousness seem like to us then? In what form will our "spirits" reside? If our DNA persists, do we?

In any case, once awareness of life's apparently transitory nature sets in, words like White Brotherhood Team may evoke nostalgia rather than distaste, even for their formerly staunchest opponents.

Part(y)ing Thoughts

Each of us sharing these words is still part of a teeming "party of life" on planet Earth. The miracle of existence is as miraculous as it ever has been. But the particular party our species is holding can appear to be occurring on the deck of the Titanic. Our own individual mortality aside, current social and ecological conditions can give even the most optimistic among us a "sinking feeling."

We may not be able to save this ship in its current model—nor may we want to—but we can work for the day when our descendants can enjoy the "party of life" on a more seaworthy one. Intentional communities offer clues about how that could happen. They may even help breed the generations that lead humanity to a new age—one in which, perhaps, "spirituality" will not be a distinct word, because instead of being a separate realm, it is daily reality. Wholly integrated lives may be the only ones with survival value over the long haul.

The seeds of that future are already sprouting today, and, like all seeds, they contain many reasons for hope. 🌱

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Finding Fulfillment at Ananda

By Larry Rider

Ananda
Garden showcase.



On the Road in 1979

I awoke in my car in the predawn darkness. It was cold. I looked out the window—it was snowing! For late October, this was unexpected. But I was in the high desert in eastern Nevada, and I didn't care if it was snowing. My heart was full of joy, because today I would arrive at my final destination of a long cross-country trip. I would arrive at Ananda World Brotherhood Village in Nevada City, California.

The year was 1979, and I was 29 years old. My trip had started many days earlier in Maine, where I had left many friends, a comfortable home, and a job I loved, in order to pursue a spiritual dream. I'd been living on a farm in the country, working in the Fedco Warehouse, a cooperatively owned food distribution organization that I had founded with some friends years before. I had loved driving trucks to Boston and New York, loading up with produce and natural foods, unloading at the warehouse in central Maine, and organizing the truck runs to deliver to the hundred or so member co-ops from one end of Maine to the other. The staff consisted of seven of us who worked as a collective, making decisions by consensus, and taking our direction from the association of co-ops throughout the state.

Autobiography of a Yogi

I was happy in my life. I loved Maine, the co-op community, the contra dance community where I was a caller and fiddler, and my many friends. Nonetheless, something was missing in my life. I remember clearly standing in a room in my house and praying to God to help me deepen my spiritual life. Now, I believed, my prayer might be answered. Today I would arrive at Ananda, which I understood was a spiritual community of followers of Paramhansa Yogananda, author of the spiritual classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I had first read this transforming book in college. My heart was thrilled with the many stories of the author, who as a young boy named Mukunda met many great saints in India. The book was filled with so many gems—inspiring stories of men and

women with great love for God, and of God's love for them, of prayers answered, of miracles, and of deeply satisfying explanations of teachings from both the Bible and the Indian scriptures.

I read of deeply meditating yogis, the oneness of all religions despite the outer differences, the true justness of the universe through the laws of karma and reincarnation, and the high purpose of life to merge into the blissful ocean of Cosmic Spirit. The book made the spiritual search seem practical and immediate. But like many people, after a first reading of this powerfully motivating book, I looked elsewhere for a teacher, or a path. Mukunda was a young boy who seemed to be lucky to have come across these great saints. Never mind that the last few chapters quickly summed up his years coming to America and establishing a work in Los Angeles, of all places; Yogananda's humility kept him from drawing attention to himself.

So I looked elsewhere. I tried to go to India to find a guru, but that didn't work out. I read many books. I became a vegetarian. I was convinced that meditation was essential to spiritual growth, and I tried many times to meditate on my own, but I just couldn't.

I Discover Swami Kriyananda

Some years later, fascinated with the ideals of cooperation, I came across another book, *Cooperative Communities: How to Start Them and Why*, by an American author named Swami Kriyananda. He was a disciple of Yogananda and had founded a thriving community in California, based on Yogananda's teachings, called Ananda. People there lived a spiritually dedicated life, supporting each other in daily meditation and in their search for God. I thought how wonderful it would be to visit Ananda someday.

A year or two later a number of changes

were taking place in my life, and I began to think of traveling across the country to visit co-ops and spiritual communities. Then I got a call from my cousin Betsy who said “I am out here in California at a place called Ananda, and I think you should come here—you would love it! And by the way, can you drive my car from Vermont out here for me?” I began to think that this was divine guidance. The final piece of the adventure was paying a visit to my parents in Rhode Island. My mother, a spiritual influence in my life, gave me a copy of a book that Betsy had sent her, *The Path*, by Swami Kriyananda. I read this book every chance I had on the trip, becoming increasingly excited about what Ananda had to offer.

Kriyananda told the story of how he had come to Yogananda in Los Angeles after traveling across the country like me. That was in 1948, when yoga and the teachings of meditation were far less known. But Kriyananda, who was known as J. Donald Walters at the time, had also been on a spiritual search, found *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and took the next bus from New York to Los Angeles. Always a believer that one had to learn life’s lessons for oneself, and finding no one who could teach him what he wanted to know, he was astounded to hear himself say his first words to Yogananda, “I want to be your disciple.” *The Path* tells this story, as well as that of his four years living with Yogananda. His explanations of Yogananda’s teachings, and of the experience of living with a true man of God, had a profound effect on me. I realized how I had underestimated Yogananda, and how I now also wanted to be a student, if not a disciple, of Yogananda. Although Yogananda had left his body in 1952, Swami Kriyananda was very persuasive about the possibility of drawing on Yogananda’s still-living presence and daily guidance which he and countless others had experienced. Kriyananda demonstrated also in his book a true humility, and universal spirit, in wanting nothing for himself but to further Yogananda’s ideals and teachings. This had been his motivation in starting Ananda in 1968. And it thrilled me to hear his stories of the community, and the peaceful spirit there.

First Days at Ananda Community

So I was quite enthusiastic as I headed west through the snow. I drove through the flat and barren Nevada landscape, then up and over the Sierra mountains. I arrived in the mining town of Nevada City, where I met Betsy at the natural foods store and café that Ananda operated. We drove out the 20 miles beyond the Yuba River canyon and I began my adventure in spiritual living.

I enrolled as a work-study student. I learned Yogananda’s basic meditation technique, and soon realized the benefits of the morning and evening periods of sadhana, or spiritual practice, in the temple. Energization exercises and yoga postures were followed by devotional chanting and a 45 minute period of meditation. I loved it, although the meditation was much longer than I had experienced, and I had a lot of trouble calming my mind. But the group energy was a great help. Over the years I have been helped in my spiritual practice more than I can say by the power of the group. United devotions create a powerful magnetism that helps everyone. I feel closer to the Divine Spirit at those times, especially.

Sunday Service is another magnetic gathering. Prayer, devotional chanting, meditation, an affirmation of some positive attitude, are followed by a talk by the minister. Group worship and group meditations are what bind the community together by reaffirming our goal of achieving Self-Realization, and of supporting each other in doing so.

As the weeks unfolded I attended many classes on meditation and principles of right living. I worked on various karma yoga projects, learning skills and meeting new friends. And every day I felt I was growing closer to God, my divine friend, sharing inwardly my daily experiences.

Ananda at that time, in the early ’80s, consisted of an old farm of several hundred acres, now home to a few hundred young people who were enthusiastically building a new life and a new culture. Like thousands of other new communities being born in those days, Ananda struggled with issues of vision and leadership, and of trying to learn to cooperate. Swami Kriyananda had worked hard to earn the funds to buy the property, and was quietly trying to keep the emphasis on living the spiritual life and following Yogananda’s teachings. But he did not insist on this, wanting only to draw those who were in tune with his ideals. Many resisted him, but many more saw in him a deeply inspiring and tireless friend, and by the time I arrived Ananda was firmly set as a community of Yogananda devotees.



Photos courtesy of Larry Rider

The property consisted of rolling forested hills in the foothills of the Sierras, with housing clusters in various valleys, united by winding dirt roads that led to the “downtown” farmhouse with store, mailroom, and barn. Over one ridge was the Expanding Light, the guest facility where visitors stayed and where classes and work-study programs were offered. The programs were an important income source for the community, as well as an opportunity to share the teachings with others. By the time I arrived, 10 years after Ananda’s birth, the apprentice program was the primary doorway through which one learned about the community and the teachings. This entry program helped both individuals and the community decide if residency was the right step. For myself, I liked the people, I liked the teachings, I liked the community, and I wanted to become a member. But I had a lot to learn.

Life at Ananda

In addition to daily meditation, Yogananda also taught the basic arts of living: how to concentrate, the beauty of kindness and cooperation, and how to overcome fear, anger, and jealousy. Swami Kriyananda, who is an excellent speaker, gave weekly classes in these and many other topics for many years. He stressed the importance of living for God alone, and trying to be a channel of the divine to others. Best of all, community life provided a living laboratory to practice these teachings. Again and again I would find interactions at work, at the store, in meetings, and in casual conversation, where people reminded each other of these virtues, or shared personal struggles or victories in developing them. Of course, this can be hard, when those around you are constantly holding up a mirror and encouraging you to be a better person. But there was also much good will, much joy and laughter, and much love for God and each other.

I cannot say enough about how Swami Kriyananda set the tone for all of Ananda. He is now 85 and spreads his time among Ananda communities in America, Italy, and India, but during those years he lived at Ananda Village. I felt uplifted every time I was in his presence. He not only was an articulate and inspiring teacher, he was a marvelous and entertaining host. Frequently he would invite the community to his home for festive occasions. His joy and laughter were infectious. He had positive solutions for every challenge, and brought joy to everything he did. You can hear this in his music. In addition to being a prolific writer, he has also written many songs and instrumental pieces. Ananda choirs sing his “Songs of Divine Joy” at every opportunity. One of my favorites has a lively, joyful melody to such verses as “There’s joy in the heavens, a smile on the mountains, and melody sings everywhere—the flowers are all laughing to welcome the morning, your soul is as free as the air.” Music has a way of bypassing the mind and reaching the heart, and joyful uplifting music both

contributes to and expresses the joy level at Ananda.

Leadership and Decision Making

From the beginning I was interested in the structure of leadership and decision making. Rather than using formal consensus at meetings, Ananda achieved consensus through sensitive leadership and a desire to find superconscious solutions to issues. Meetings started with a prayer that we all be guided to the right course of action. Leaders sought input from everyone, and, like good facilitators, were often able to articulate the decision we were seeking. Ananda’s government has sometimes been referred to as a “dharmocracy,” meaning we want to be ruled by dharma, by what is right. Thus one of the guiding principles of Ananda, “Where there is dharma (right action) there is victory.”

I came to realize that those in positions of leadership were also those who were the most serviceful. They worked as hard as anyone, and wore their authority very lightly. I came to understand that this is the style of leadership modeled by Swami Kriyananda, which he calls supportive leadership. He selected those to be leaders within the community who demonstrated the best attitudes, of service, of humility, of putting the needs of others ahead of their own. In fact, Kriyananda often says that the other guiding principle of Ananda is “People are more important than things.” By this he means that projects and tasks were not as important as the



Big Celebration Day circle.

spiritual well-being of individuals. Many times I saw decisions that were made not on the basis of what would be good for the business or the community, but what would be best for the individual involved. Seeing that we were valued as individuals made many of us want to do more, to try harder. I felt my own loyalty to the community grow as I felt appreciated and respected for who I was.

Another aspect of decision making at Ananda is that as much as possible decisions are made on a grassroots level, by those who are directly involved with them. I was part of several work groups, many with a nominal manager or leader, who asked for input from all of us, and asked us to take responsibility for manifesting our suggestions. This “involved management” allowed each person to rise to their own level of involvement, opening doors of opportunity for creativity. My suggestions for increasing efficiency in the office systems of the publications business led to my becoming office manager. At another time I was the main cook in a community kitchen serving lunches to community residents through



did not like this in myself, that I was letting the situation affect my inner peace. So I prayed for him. I asked God to help him, and to help me to let go of my anger and accept him as he was. The very next day he came up to me, apologized for being behind in his account, and soon thereafter made a large deposit and kept in the black.

Yogananda himself said to Kriyananda when he put him in charge of the monks at his ashram, “Don’t make too many rules. It destroys the Spirit.” So Kriyananda has followed this advice. The only rules at Ananda are “no drugs and no dogs” (they chase deer and disturb meditation). This allows a lot of freedom, which in turn allows some people to take advantage, but overall it makes people want to do the right thing. I have

seen that when people are allowed the freedom to learn and to grow at their own pace, people do in fact respond quite well. Of course, this works because people are consciously trying to grow spiritually, to be better people, to practice their religion, as one saint put it, “in the cold light of day.”

Many resisted Kriyananda, but many more saw in him a deeply inspiring and tireless friend.

the community food store. I made suggestions about the ordering procedures for the store, and eventually was asked to become the manager of the store!

I had an interesting experience as store manager. The store had a charge account system in which residents could keep a balance to charge against, so they didn’t have to carry cash. The idea was that you maintained a positive balance. Inevitably some people got in the hole, some chronically. One person in particular was always in the hole, and was not responding well to my encouragement to him to get his account back into the black. I knew he could do so if he wanted. I became upset with him to the point where I was going out of my way to avoid him. I realized I

New Ananda Communities

By the mid ’80s Swami Kriyananda startled the community by asking a few people to move to Sacramento and to San Francisco to rent group houses and offer classes. He asked us all to support this effort to take our way of life out to the cities to share with others. We all identified Ananda as the one rural property, and could not at first see where this would lead, but over the next few years the wisdom of that expansion became clear. Soon there were thriving Ananda urban communities in Portland and Seattle as well. Starting first as small groups, eventually they all grew to include a large enough group to purchase apartment buildings, start metaphysical bookstores, and create schools. Today these “colonies,” led by married couples, are independent communities of 40 to 100 residents. Not only do they provide an opportunity for many people in those cities to study and practice Yogananda’s teachings, but they provide opportunities for those from Ananda Village to live in the cities, either for employment or, like me, to have greater opportunities in serving the general public. Though independent, these colonies are, by choice, closely aligned with Ananda Village, with people moving often from one to another.

(continued on p. 76)

Spiritual Warriors:

Dharma and discipline cross paths at India's Mahabodhi residential school

By Kiva Bottero and Are Saltveit



“Attention. At ease. Hats off,” a teenage girl shouts orders in her school’s courtyard, which until a moment ago was filled with child’s laughter and innocent play. Children from six to 16 quickly form into neat rows. Silence descends on the courtyard, palpably transforming the energy into that of a military camp. Older students pace back and forth, lightly slapping the heads of those who fall out of sync with the precise order. What were once 400 individuals have quickly converted into a cohesive unit.

Nestled deep in the Indian Himalayas of Ladakh, Mahabodhi is an expansive spiritual community that includes a residential school, home for the aged, monastery, nunnery, and travelers’ guesthouse. Founded by Buddhist monk Ven. Bhikkhu Sanghasena, Mahabodhi provides Buddhist spiritual education to more than 400 poor children from surrounding villages who otherwise wouldn’t have had access to much of an education. The organization’s method of engaged schooling produces students who are spiritually connected, disciplined, and eager to learn.

Vimalachitta, a 15-year-old novice monk, is one of the 400 gathered in the courtyard. He has tentatively chosen the path of a monk, but still has five years to decide before fully committing to the monastic path. “There was an application and selection process for obtaining monkhood when I was nine years old. I passed and got to wear the robes,” he proudly exclaims with a big smile when asked why he chose the monastic life. Though he’s still figuring out what life as a monk is all about, his strong will is evident. Given that the majority of his classmates are not following the monastic path, and as such don’t have as many strict rules to follow, making the choice he did, and sticking to it, isn’t easy.



Konchokdolma, a 10th grade female student, spent six years in a military school before transferring to Mahabodhi. When asked if she wants to become a nun, she replies, “Not yet, sir. I believe pureness of heart and happiness is also obtainable without going into nunhood.” She dreams about having her own travel agency to work with the many tourists that visit Ladakh. Though the two have very different backgrounds, they share an eagerness to learn, abundant joy, and gratitude to Mahabodhi for the opportunities that they’ve been given.



A few boys in the Tibetan language class are laughing and acting out. Other students, particularly the monks and nuns, temper the ruckus with their disciplined attention. Tsering, a native Tibetan teaching this class, shows no sign of asserting his authority. Instead, he allows them their moments of glory while converting the energy into his teaching. He walks confidently around the classroom, counting his fingers forcefully in an effort to explain Tibetan grammar. The classroom becomes alive with engaged students following his lead in a spirit of participation that drowns out the troublemakers.



Dharma and discipline come together in a profound way at Mahabodhi. Students maintain strict extra-curricular schedules that start at 5 AM and include daily meditation—even for children as young as six—housekeeping chores, homework, and exercise. That disciplined structure helps them to meditate and to form strong, concentrated, and flexible minds.

Anu, a student at Mahabodhi’s Institute for the Blind, hangs out in her room after

school to diligently complete her homework. Behind her, three blankets sit neatly folded in an accordion shape at the head of the bed. Two stacks of notebooks are lined up on the dresser beside her and a string of origami lotus flowers surround a hand-drawn Buddha picture on the wall behind. A volunteer dictates her day's homework to her as she punches impressions into a sheet of paper from right to left using her 27 row-by-30 column red plastic slate. Neither her textbook for this civics course nor the texts for many of her other courses are in Braille, so she and the other five blind students rely on others to dictate to them, putting in the extra work necessary to succeed.

The Mahabodhi community gathers on Sundays for their almost weekly puja, a devotional Buddhist service. For some students in the community, puja is their favorite part of the week. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen as regularly as some would like because the community sometimes loses sight of itself as it gets caught up in the busyness of everyday life.

Rows of monks and nuns as young as six sit cross-legged on the floor at the front of the puja hall. Behind them, students from the boys' and girls' hostels are neatly lined up, girls on the right, boys on the left. A few elderly residents sit leaned up against the right wall with some travelers scattered throughout the middle. At the front sits Ven. Bhikkhu Sanghasena, who leads the community through the recitation of the five precepts, the basic moral code for Buddhists that teaches nonviolence, right

“Only universal love and compassion can bring peace, not bombs and guns.”

speech, and advises against stealing, sexual misconduct, and the use of intoxicants. “Only universal love and compassion can bring peace, not bombs and guns,” he says, explaining the importance of adhering to the precepts. “If you violate the last one, you will violate all five,” he ends, stressing the importance of abstaining from intoxicants.

The service proceeds to a short meditation. Even the youngest members of Mahabodhi sit still through the meditation and, more surprisingly, throughout the whole service, which can last as long as four hours. “Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu,” the collective chants as they prostrate themselves three times.

Dechen, a teenage girl from the blind hostel, takes the stage to sing one of her favorite songs, “Temple of the Holy Buddha.” Like most of the songs sung at puja, the theme is spiritual. The meaningful lyrics and strong aura built in the hall create a climate of reverence.

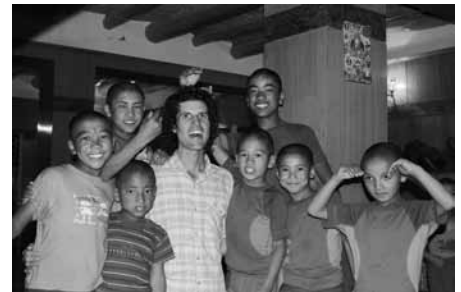
The song embodies what Mahabodhi and its students stand for: a holy home that lies within each of us. The Mahabodhi community is much more than its various buildings and institutions. With regular meditation, dharma lessons, and pujas, the students at Mahabodhi are not likely to forget the spiritual education they've received after graduating. Their disciplined nature has helped them embody the dharma and their eagerness to learn translates to a willingness to try even what is hard, such as adopting a spiritual practice. By creating spiritually engaged, disciplined, and eager students, Mahabodhi is grooming tomorrow's future spiritual leaders. 🐦

Kiva Bottero works with a collective to publish The Mindful Word journal of engaged living (www.themindfulword.org) and lives in India. Are Saltveit provides co-active coaching services through his organization b-present (www.b-present.no) and writes from his home in Norway.

For more information about Mahabodhi, visit www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org.



Photos by Are Saltveit



Left page, starting from the top: Discipline. Sunday puja. Meditation for the masses. Morning salutation.

This page, starting from the top: Venerable Bikkhu Sanghasena. Kiva and the boys. Students let loose. Engaged students. Authors Kiva Bottero and Are Saltveit.

From 78 to 73 in Community

By Don Gobbett

No, I haven't found the answer to aging and eternal youth, but I have found much that I am thankful for and much spiritual sustenance.

I have been involved with Cennednyss Community since it was formed. In January 1978 I was one of the first 12 members who moved into the two original houses in Summertown, South Australia.

Today four of those original members are still living in the community, which now has five living spaces in four houses on 16 acres. Eleven current residents have been here since the mid 1980s or are children who were born here.

We communally own four properties presently valued at A\$1.8m. We share the ownership of cars (including their registration, insurance, and maintenance) and farm machinery, and maintain the houses. Fruit trees and vegetable gardens are managed and worked collectively, and we are well aware of the changes of the seasons.

We estimate our annual expenditure and decide what percentage of our anticipated gross personal incomes will cover our costs. Currently we pay 18 percent for a budgeted expenditure of approximately A\$100,000.

After 33 years I cannot think of anywhere I would prefer to live. I am now 73 years old. I retired from a university teaching position 16 years ago. I am pleased to be growing older in community.

I have had some health problems. In 2004 I had a triple cardiac bypass and in the last two years, two hip operations, one a replacement and the other to deal with a major infection. In 2006 I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Consequently my ability to contribute to work on the communal property has changed and continues to change.

It is good to be able to work on community projects in my own time as well as to have outside activities and voluntary work. I am affirmed for the secretarial work I do for the community and am also able to do other tasks such as mowing, pruning, gardening, and dealing with firewood.

In this situation I feel really supported, not only by my partner of 50 years, but by everyone in the community. I look forward to our various shared activities. Our weekly communal meal, our Saturday morning working bees, and our monthly meetings are always a delight. It is a pleasure to make deep connections with others and to feel understood and accepted by them. I enjoy hearing of the highs and lows of their lives and feel

supported in my situation.

We have established various patterns over the years. Meeting and working bee facilitation is shared, as are the responsibilities for morning teas and providing a space for weekly potluck communal meals. The latter are usually delicious and include specially prepared food from each household using our own produce if possible.

Our Saturday working bees are so productive. We spend 15 minutes or so agreeing on the priorities for the morning and move off to do the tasks we feel like doing. When we meet for a shared morning tea an hour and half later we are generally thrilled with what has been achieved.

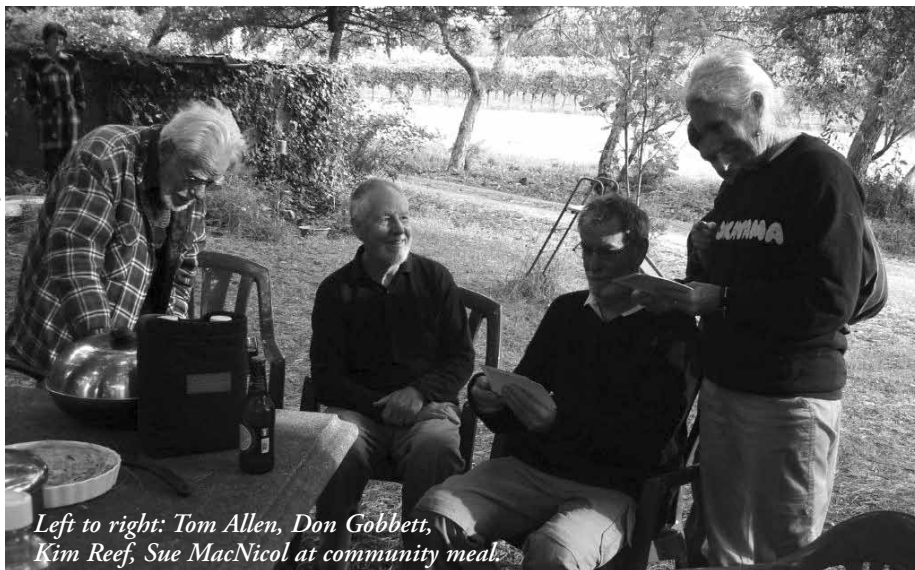
Our monthly meetings begin with "linking"—we share something of what is happening in our lives and reflect on it. This usually involves about a third of our meeting time. Other business reflects the needs of our property, managing a budget, and other activities arising from both individual and shared commitments.

For me spirituality is about connectedness and belonging. I feel a richness in my life that is enhanced by deep connections with other people, with the natural world, and a good balance between the inner and outer aspects of my self.

Moving from '78 to my age of 73 years feels like real progress and spiritual growth. I feel particularly supported and accepted as a member of the community. I can think of no place where I would rather be living. ☺

Don Gobbett's previous writing includes "Guidelines for Cooperative and Communal Living" in Diggers and Dreamers 92/93 and, with his wife Estelle, "From Families to Households in a Rural-Urban Community" in Living Together: Family Patterns and Lifestyles (1979) and "From Mission Field to Potato Patch" in From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality (1995). For more information contact him at donestelle@cycad.id.au.

Photo courtesy of Don Gobbett



Left to right: Tom Allen, Don Gobbett, Kim Reef, Sue MacNicol at community meal.



Inviting God to Dance

By Rebecca Dale

“I keep turning to God / saying dance with me.”

Those words, hand-lettered onto a bit of birch bark, tumbled out of a package from Jaymee, away at college. And an image flashed into my mind of a girl with a dance card, filling every line with the name God (or Krishna, or Life, or Spirit, or...). Actually, I think Jaymee and God have been dancing together for a very long time.

She danced into our community and stayed for the better part of a year. She wanted to experience intentional community and it just so happened we had a room available. But I wondered why someone so young, energetic, and full of idealistic fervor wanted to hang out with a bunch of pokey people old enough to be her parents or grandparents. And I had been wondering why so many other young people have been drawn here in recent years. When I asked Jaymee what they are seeking—or finding—here, she replied, “A sanctuary!”

I don't know what answer I expected, but the theological language surprised me. I know our land is a lovely place where nature is allowed to unfold without too much human interference, and I know our people have good hearts and caring ways. But we don't have a shared spiritual path. In fact, as a group, we don't talk about spiritual things much at all.

When I joined Currents, a rural community in southeastern Ohio, four years ago, the membership was down to five original members, all of whom seemed pretty allergic to religion! They also seemed wary of anything that called itself “spiritual.” And that was fine with me. By then I had developed a rich, inner spiritual life of my own and didn't share it much. Several decades of what I consider religious or spiritual oppression had left a bitter taste in my mouth.

As a child, my spiritual life had been blessedly untroubled. I felt at home with the formal God of our Lutheran liturgy and with the loving Jesus of our Sunday school room. And I was on intimate terms with the Spirit who shone through the natural world of our farm's fields and woods, and whom I felt in my own growing being. My parents taught us moral principles but never made God into a bogeyman. I think I had what might be called a natural religion with a bent toward nature mysticism.

That changed as I grew older and grew away from home. I started encountering people who told me I was “unsaved,” or just “didn't have it” (whatever “it” was!). One woman told me that God had talked to her that morning and had a message for me. Of course it was about some way I needed to change. I thought it strange that God didn't tell me in person.

These people wanted to mediate between God and me. Worse, they wanted to interpret my spiritual experiences and give me “guidance.” I resisted becoming a follower but doubts sometimes crept in. I wondered why people couldn't just be comfortable with their own spiritual lives, sharing their feelings and insights with others as fellow travelers, not as competitors for “more spiritual than thou” status.

A turning point came for me when I discovered the book, *The Findhorn Garden*. It's about the spiritual beginnings of Findhorn Community in Scotland. One of the founders, Eileen Caddy, was a spiritually sensitive person who frequently heard the voice of God within, wrote down what she heard, and through those spiritual leadings a most remarkable and influential community was born.

Although this book sparked my interest in intentional communities, the most valuable gift it gave me was the assurance that my own spiritual experience is real, and is all I need. For Eileen shared these words that God said to her in reference to this universal Presence: “Do you not realize that you have within you all wisdom, all knowledge, all understanding? You do not have to seek it without, but you have to take time to be still and to go deep within to find it. Many souls...prefer to live on someone else's wisdom and knowledge instead of receiving it direct from the source themselves.”

Clearly, there are special souls like Eileen who are exquisitely attuned to the spiritual realm and have highly developed spiritual practices, just as there are musicians who hear nuances of sound, and artists who see light and color that the rest of us do not. I'm glad when they find ways to share these with us so all our lives are enriched. But I see now that my own experience is also valid, beautiful, and not to be discounted.

(continued on p. 77)



Circles of Community: Paganism and the Quest for Connection

By Elizabeth Barrette

considered these things to be community resources, managed by the people who rented or owned them. They weren't quite communal property, but things we could share to make each other's lives easier.

We didn't think a whole lot about it. That was just what people did in a family or a community; they shared whatever they had. It was one of the community ethics that I picked up from my family while I was growing up. Some other folks had it from their families. Others learned it from the group, in college. However, we did tend to think of ourselves along the lines of a tribe, given the background of Paganism as a religious movement. So that also influenced our interactions.

I've also attended a number of Pagan festivals. These create a sort of intermittent community. The effect gets especially strong where the same site hosts events for all eight solar sabbats around the year and/or offers other frequent activities such as lunar esbats or "Year and a Day" classes for spiritual seekers. This tends to attract many of the same attendees. You can have several hundred people gathered for a weekend, many of whom know each other from previous events and will gang up for camping or chores. Space is often limited, so people have to figure out ways of managing traffic and sleeping space, adult vs. juvenile activities, quiet times vs. drum circles, and how to get along with each other.

Pagan festivals rely heavily on volunteerism to get things done. They often have a work requirement (or option) as do many intentional communities. This lowers expenses, encourages interaction, and enables attendees to learn new skills. It also gets people thinking about time and skills—not just money—as valuable community resources. Much of what I know about ritual design came from volunteering to help create rituals at events, and from observing rituals that other people created. It's a great way to learn what to do...and what not to do.

During such an event, people revel in the sense of community. Many Pagans are solitary by chance, not by choice, because they can't find any like-minded people near where they live. But they like the sense of homecoming; in fact, a common greeting at some festivals is "Welcome home." (It's especially attractive to people whose natal families have ousted them for being Pagan—

I've been Pagan pretty much all my life, and I discovered the wider Pagan movement in late high school. Over the years, I've encountered various examples of intentional community, many of them related to Pagan culture. I've also noticed that many people come to Paganism with a desire to form close connections. I think that spirituality in general, and Paganism in particular, can lead to people banding together into communities.

In college, some of my friends shared a large house that we called Illinois Street House, center of a loose community of Pagan and Pagan-friendly folks. It had enough space to host parties, rituals, holiday celebrations, and other activities. On nights when I had a late class, my friends let me sleep on the couch so that

I wouldn't have to drive home for an hour in the dark. Conversely, I had a car, so I often drove friends to appointments and grocery stores.

Why? They had the house, so they shared the space. I had the car, so I shared the transportation. We consid-

sadly, not a rare occurrence.) Conversely, some Pagans choose to be solitary rather than join a coven or other group, but may enjoy attending festivals on occasion to spend time with other Pagans. Covens may attend festivals together to display a group presence.

Any of this can awaken a desire to live in community. It appeals most to people who are inclined toward a gregarious lifestyle or who want to make spirituality a major part of their lives. That works, because some intentional communities are Pagan-friendly and have a coven going, though it varies over time which ones do. Especially useful is the common ground where people living in community, who happen to be Pagan, attend Pagan festivals and can share their knowledge about communal living with other folks at the event.

Here at Fieldhaven, we have a large house and a local coven. So we reprise what we've learned in other venues. We host rituals because we have the space—including indoor rooms, an outdoor ritual meadow with firepit, and crash space for overnight guests. We arrange rites of passage to recognize when people shift from one role in the community to another. We have provided living space to coven members who suddenly found themselves without a place to stay, on a shorter or longer term basis. (For a while there, people were joking about us being “the central Illinois Pagan homeless shelter”!) We also have a Pagan reading library with over 1,000 books. These are ways of supporting the local Pagan community.

Several times a year, we designate “work days” when we gather as many folks as possible to take care of the covenstead. Our nine-foot firepit, which is rimmed with bricks and has a brick pentacle in the bottom, was constructed during one such occasion. Indoor work may include getting a room ready for an upcoming event. So those are examples of how the community gives back.

We teach people not just about Pagan religion, but about Pagan community. Contemporary Paganism descends from a variety of tribal religions, retaining a strong sense of cooperation and kinship. So we share food in potlucks, make and exchange gifts, hand off extra garden produce or craft supplies, design rituals together, mark our changing position in community, try to work through challenges as they occur, and hope to fill the gaps in our lives that modern culture generally leaves unfulfilled. Whether or not we live under the same roof, Pagans often strive to form close community ties.

Humans are social creatures. Most of us prefer to live and worship in groups, given a choice of reasonably functional people with whom to share those things. Even solitaries often appreciate having a community that they can interact with when they choose, without having to join full-time. At this point in time, Paganism tends to express its communal awareness through intermittent events and small covens, occasionally with shared households. Some other religions have a tradition of whole communities, such the Hindu ashram or Jewish kibbutz. Perhaps someday we'll see more and larger Pagan communities in the intentional community movement. 🐦

**Most of us prefer to live and worship
in groups, given a choice of reasonably
functional people with whom to
share those things.**

Elizabeth Barrette writes and edits nonfiction, fiction, and poetry in diverse fields including speculative fiction, alternative spirituality, and community. She ran the Pagan magazine PanGaia for 8 years and writes regularly for the Llewellyn annuals. Recently she has published the article “Crowdfunding: A Communal Business Model” in COMMUNITIES magazine and story “Clouds in the Morning” in Torn World. She supports community spirit and is active in local organizations. Visit her blog The Wordsmith’s Forge (ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com) and coven website Greenhaven: A Pagan Tradition (greenhaventradiation.weebly.com/index.html).

Spirit in the Woods

By Dana Snyder-Grant



Dana Snyder-Grant

Everything in my life feels spiritual these days, at least in the ways I think about spirituality. At work, I counsel women with cancer, and they and I wrestle with the intangible, those existential issues in life—letting go of control, living with loss and uncertainty. Walks in the woods offer a sense of the interconnectedness of all living creatures. A new meditation practice, a class on Everyday Enlightenment, pastoral care, singing: all bring me meaning, hope, and comfort. Then, *COMMUNITIES* magazine sends out a call for articles with a spiritual theme—I can't get away from it!—and I realize it's time to consider the ways cohousing nurtures spiritual growth.

Consensus as a Spiritual Practice

At New View Cohousing in Acton, Massachusetts, where I have lived for 15 years, we have different religious affiliations. Some attend churches that are more or less doctrinal, some attend local synagogues. Others identify themselves as neo-Pagan, agnostic, or atheist. What we share together is the value of care for one another in a community which will strive to work out differences, for we are larger than the sum of our parts. Consensus, a hallmark of cohousing, asks us to consider others' opinions and the good of the entire group. I must look outside myself, letting go of my beliefs and desires, for the community is greater than me. Consensus is a spiritual practice.

I've witnessed New View struggle with a diversity of opinions, whether it's about tree removal, paint color, snow plowing, political signs, or an elevator in the common house. In that process, we are asked to consider others' opinions and know our own. Consensus demands trust in the group and faith in a process that is often out of one's control. Is that not spiritual? Trust demands faith that goes beyond oneself, one's knowing.

It's not always neat. It's messy when feelings are hurt. Your child is shunned by peers. A neighbor hosts a party in the common house but doesn't invite you. Neighbors want to post political signs that you don't support. Community participation is less than you might wish. But trust asks for faith in something larger than you—a process, a spirit, an energy. It's more than even a collection of us.

Roots

I was the youngest of three children, raised in a Reform Jewish household where exposure to ideas and opinions mattered. "You think your thinks and I'll think my thinks," I said at age 10, in the throes of a family argument; it's a phrase my family still remembers.

I know now that thinking my own thinks and letting others think theirs is at the heart of consensus.

In adolescence, my involvement in Jewish youth activities led me to fantasize about becoming a rabbi. By the age of 30 when I met my future husband, Jim, my adolescent wish to become a rabbi had faded. Jim's Episcopalian roots and now Buddhist leanings did not deter, only drew me in. I was a clinical social worker who valued diversity and community. Without a common religious background to provide spiritual support, both Jim and I were primed to be drawn to cohousing in 1990 when we read an article in the Boston Food Co-op newsletter. More than half of us here at New View are in relationships with mixed religious backgrounds. Perhaps cohousing attracts those who follow non-traditional paths and live out uncommon stories. Trust and faith, those qualities of spirit that guide consensus, also support movement "outside the box."

An Illness and a Community

I've needed that trust and faith as I've lived with multiple sclerosis for 30 years. When Jim and I joined New View in 1991, 10 years after my diagnosis, I was still unsure how the MS would progress in me or what of myself I could offer the group. MS was a big deal but it was not a big deal. I had a loving husband and worked part-time as a psychotherapist. After 10 years I had learned to live with the unpredictability of fatigue, double vision, loss of coordination in my hands and strength in my legs. It was just my life. Letting go of control and living with uncertainty were necessary, and they were spiritual. The illness was teaching me that life was precious and that people mattered; cohousing came naturally to me.

Spirit in the Woods I

The story of a struggle that happened when New View was in site development captures the intersection between MS and

my life in community. It's a story I've told before, but I hadn't recognized its spiritual qualities until just recently.

1995

Although our 24 households do not live together yet, we are already a community. We meet every 10 days to raise money, acquire land, hire building professionals, and design our homes. We learn to trust each other in order to reach consensus. We're investing the time, money, and energy that this endeavor requires.

Many of us are committed to caring for the environment, and the land at New View holds special meaning. Our site on Half Moon Hill abuts seven acres of town conservation land with a wide western view, inviting spectacular sunsets of pink and orange. In the coming years, we will nurture it from mud to flowing grass and graceful trees. We will treasure the nearby conservation land, crisscrossed by dog walkers, meanderers, and hikers, in intimate conversation and in silence. It's hard to overlook the interconnectedness of all living creatures here. This natural world is one of serenity, comfort, and meaning—those precious qualities of spirit.

Now, the group is struggling with the design of the woods path, which runs down a significant stretch of our land. I roam the woods with our architect and soon-to-be neighbors, Martha and Kate, trying to resolve the group's continuing conflict over the path's design. I've had MS for 14 years in 1995. This is the first time that our creation in the woods really matters to me. Maybe this little path begins to symbolize hope and my mastery of the MS. Maybe I wonder how far the community is willing to go for me and if it's fair to ask for special attention. I ask for a winding path of reduced grade to attend to the needs of people with disabilities—this means removing trees. Kate wants to honor environmental concerns and save trees, and Martha wishes to respect the privacy of residents, including herself, shielded by the woods.

I'm not sure how we can come to a resolution, but we listen to each other as we walk. "I'd be willing to lose some trees if they are closer to your house than mine," says Mar-

tha. "I might consider a six percent grade, rather than four percent, to save some trees," I return. "As long as we create a resting area where the path is steepest." Our architect tells us this is all doable. So we compromise and do just that. We are indeed larger than the sum of our parts; these woods are greater than all of us.

January 2011

Jim and I have lived here for 15 years, since 1996, when the homes were first built. I am blessed that the MS has been relatively stable during that time. I've had a few flare-ups, where symptoms temporarily get much worse. I've probably entered "secondary-progressive," the stage of MS that no one likes to mention, but which occurs for 90 percent of patients within 25 years. There's a very slow progression in me; I'm still working part-time, and walking, although not as well as I did 20 years ago. My balance is compromised, but I walk our steep road for exercise with my cane and with my fellow cohouser and walking partner, Steve. I help motivate him out of the house on days his back hurts or work tires, while he encourages me to keep at it, even when my legs feel weak and I can't stand up quite straight. There's been something about having a community that knows, supports, and accepts my "gimpiness," which lifts me up. For I imagine that I look as awkward as I feel. But it doesn't really matter here.

Spirit in the Woods II

Some of those precious trees at New View, still heavy with leaves, crash down in the East Coast's late October 2011 snow storm, although the trees by the woods path remain intact. Half our homes lose power. One resident, Dave, spends the afternoon with a chain

We aren't a church or a religious community, and we don't want to be. But our commitment to each other is a continuing spiritual exercise.

saw, removing a disease-resistant, but not storm-protected, elm tree from the road. Others pick up branches, large and small, that have blown down throughout the site. Marcia emails the community, "Thank you all. I cannot do this job because of my back. However, I do have a hot tub and if anyone else needs to use it (especially after all this work) let me know. I love to share it!"

We gather at the common house for an impromptu potluck supper and start to make plans for a more complete storm cleanup. We feel lucky when power is fully restored the next day, aware that many homes in Acton and beyond are still without. It is clear that nature is way bigger than all of us. We invite other Actonians, in need of comfort and warmth, to come to our common house. One visitor, a friend of Kate, sews a stark white Halloween costume with the help of Kate's mother, as they both take shelter in the common house. This Halloween is indeed a time when the connection between all living beings is easily felt.

We aren't a church or a religious community, and we don't want to be. But the commitment to each other is a continuing spiritual exercise that supports all of us in looking beyond our everyday concerns and dramas to the wider world we embody. That's the way we are a spiritual community. ☺

Dana Snyder-Grant is a resident of New View Cohousing in Acton, Massachusetts. She is a writer and clinical social worker, specializing in chronic illness and disability. Dana is the author of Just Like Life, Only More So and Other Stories of Illness (2006), which includes tales of cohousing: justlikelifeonlymoreso.com. She can be reached at danasg@newview.org.

Spirituality and Ecovillage Education

By Daniel Greenberg

“I had no idea how spiritual the program would be. Honestly, if I knew before I went, I probably wouldn’t have gone. But now, looking back, the focus on spirituality is what had the most meaning for me.”

A surprising number of Living Routes alumni have told me something like this while sharing about their experiences on our ecovillage-based programs around the world.¹ Each time, I wonder...

1. What are we supposed to do this information? “Um... There’s something about the program we don’t want to share for fear it may scare you off, but trust me; you’re going to love it!”

2. What do these students even mean by “spiritual”?

3. What does this comment say about the difference between academia and ecovillages as campuses for sustainability education?

“Spirituality” is a commonly misunderstood and dismissed term, especially in public universities where it is often perceived as airy-fairy, new-agey, mumbo-jumbo—the very antithesis of scientific rigor. Even professors with a favorable view of spirituality often believe it is either too personal or too inappropriate a subject to explore with students given their institution’s mandated separation of church and state.

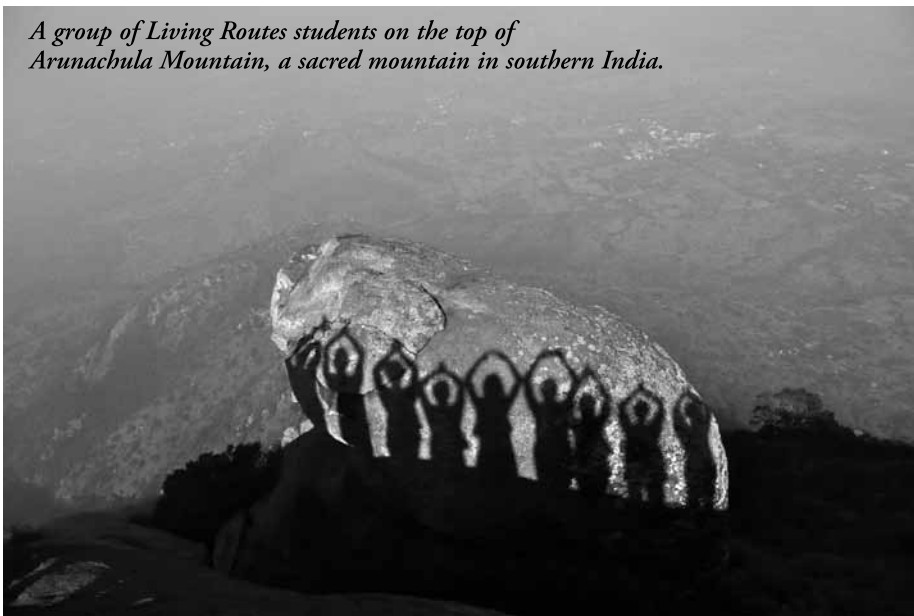
Granted, the word means many things to many people, including new-agers and religious zealots. What spirituality means at Living Routes, and I believe for our students, however, is a holistic, secular worldview divorced from any religious framework. And it’s not just our students. In a recent survey of 1,200 18- to 29-year-olds, 72 percent say they’re “more spiritual than religious.”²

Rather than articulating a relationship with any particular faith system or divine entity, spirituality today seems more often about going beyond our materialistic culture and, as Robert C. Fuller said, “struggling with the issues of how our lives fit into the greater scheme of things.”³ Personally, I define spirituality as the exploration of our inter-beingness⁴ with each other and our world.

Seen in this way, spirituality embodies some of the highest ideals of education (and life!)—creating meaning and developing qualities of responsibility, compassion, and love.

So, I am frequently disappointed that higher education does not embrace a more spiritual perspective. On the contrary, most universities strive to separate our heads from our hearts—and typically only focus on our heads. Consequently, academia tends to support a Newtonian/Cartesian view of the universe as a soulless machine to be manipulated and controlled by humans. This paradigm of the world as “other” inherently discounts our ecological relations and provided the basic rationale for the industrial revolu-

A group of Living Routes students on the top of Arunachula Mountain, a sacred mountain in southern India.



Daniel Greenberg

tion (and most wars). How else could we do what we do to the planet and to other humans?

Fortunately, academia itself is pointing out the fallacy of this worldview. From physics to chemistry, from biology to psychology, if there is anything the past century has taught us, it's that John Muir was right. "When we try to pick anything out by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."⁵ It's time we recognize that humanity is inextricably embedded within and dependent upon a web of relationships that we are not "in control" of.

So, how might ecovillages offer a more spiritual context and campus for sustainability education? Practices such as meditation and various forms of yoga are common features of many ecovillages and Living Routes programs. For example, at the very center of Auroville,⁶ a large international community in south India, sits the Matrimandir—a large meditation sanctuary. This is not a place for religion or dogma. It isn't even a place for groups. It's a place for *individuals* (and students on our semester program in Auroville) to be silent and seek inner peace and wisdom. We also facilitate a 48-hour vision quest on this program to support students to deeply reflect on their relationships with themselves, each other, and the world.

More than these practices, however, it is by immersing in these *learning communities* within *living communities* that students learn to "be the change they wish to see." While none of the ecovillages that host Living Routes programs are explicitly religious, most embrace a holistic, spiritual worldview. In these environments, it is natural to re-examine some basic assumptions about who we think we are in the world. Members (and students) are supported to be "in process" and engaged with big life questions such as...

1. "What do I believe?"
2. "How did I come to believe it?" And, perhaps most importantly,
3. "What are my options?"

Ecovillages are innovating new "options," new "stories" about living in right relationship with each other and the planet. "Trying on" these new ways of being—and belonging—is fundamentally a spiritual and transformative exercise. This is a very difficult concept to convey through course syllabi, yet is what I believe most of our alumni remember as the most profound aspect of their programs. 🌱

This article was adapted from Daniel Greenberg's blog on Sustainability Education, which can be found at blogs.livingroutes.org/sustainabilityeducation/.

Daniel Greenberg has studied and directed community-based educational programs for over 16 years. He visited and corresponded with over 200 US intentional communities for his Ph.D. dissertation on children and education in community, and later spent a year at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland working with children and families there. He is the founder and Executive Director of Living Routes, which develops accredited ecovillage-based education programs that promote sustainable community development. He lives at the Sirius Community in Shutesbury, Massachusetts with his wife Monique and their two daughters, Simone and Pema.

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John Muir was right. "When we try to pick anything out by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

Spirituality and Community Living

By *Clistine Morningstar*

I didn't know what I was getting into when I joined the intentional spiritual community of Global Community Communications Alliance. Yes, I was a spiritual seeker—I always had been since my early childhood when my concept of heaven was a superb flower garden where God (in a dark blue Robin Hood outfit) and Jesus (in a light blue one) went around endlessly watering the plants from little tin watering cans. Later, I realized that I was one of the plants that needed watering, and I sought sustenance from many spiritual avenues.

Shunning orthodoxy, I made my way through teachings of the Theosophical Society, a wonderful Indian Sikh Guru who taught me the Yoga of Inner Sound and Light, Rudolph Steiner, Krishnamurti, and certain angles of the New Age. I gleaned from everywhere but in the end was satisfied with nowhere. At 60 years old and seeking still, my leading wish was to one day “become enlightened.” But I didn't know that I still had a long way to go to understand the underpinnings of true spirituality.

It was at this point that I encountered community—a style of life I had never sought or wanted, but nevertheless was drawn into—and fairly soon I committed myself to becoming a member of Global Community Communications Alliance. It was not a rational decision. It was just that deep down I knew the doors of spiritual destiny were opening for me and I was “meant” to go through them in this way. Shakespeare said, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.” In this case “fortune” for me meant rare spiritual opportunity—so that was that!

What was being taught in this spiritually-based community deeply resonated with me and further expanded my spiritual horizons. And the people were very special. They had a good sense of humor and seemed honorable and kind. They too were seekers but more grounded than many seekers I had encountered. And they somehow seemed to thrive in the hierarchical system that with grace and direction held the community together. To be under authority in this manner however was not initially appealing to me. I had to shelve my prejudice until I realized that those who held the helm were exceptional souls who were totally worthy.

While I was letting time solve this dilemma, I explored my new way of life. Now, here's the wild card! While I was still seeking spirituality in my “Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high” frame of mind, an entirely new aspect of spirituality crept up on me, and it was one that provided a nucleus for all my previous aspirations. It slowly dawned on me that solitary pursuit of enlightenment is like trying to bake a loaf of bread without the yeast. The factor I had been missing was relationship, not just with God, not just with special friends or biological family, but with many other diverse

One has to face one's lower self that constantly has its own agenda.



*I'm weaving my individual God-given pattern in a dance of colored threads with many others.
Springtime Maypole Dance at Avalon Organic Gardens & EcoVillage.*

Perspective has shifted from “get off the wheel of karma” to “seek to serve others.”



Photos courtesy of Global Change Multi-Media

*We all act as catalysts
for one another to grow spiritually.*

human beings of all ages in close day-to-day contact.

How could I have been so blind! One simply cannot be virtuous in a vacuum. When challenged with the need to be increasingly real and transparent from moment to moment with a hundred other people in pursuit of the common good, one has to face one's lower self that constantly has its own agenda. Oh yes, it means facing down one's own limitations and imperfections, often referred to as our “darkness,” in order to come closer to the light—the darkness that can be so neatly hidden from oneself most of the time, and only significantly erupts in the occasional volcano! In the attempt to integrate my life more with that of others and work a common plan, I've discovered many obtuse angles in myself that I wasn't previously aware of. Yes, I've definitely been opinionated, impatient, and too self-absorbed.

My discovery of these shortcomings is due to the fact that at this community we all act as catalysts for one another to grow spiritually in a way we simply couldn't do alone. Our shared goal to genuinely overcome our hidden faults isn't easy to implement, but it's infinitely worthwhile. We come to see that there's nothing we do, think, or feel that can't be raised to growing levels of spirituality. We learn how to give and receive honest (but loving) admonishment more effectively. We see that what holds us back is almost always pride in one guise or another. We make progress, fall down, and pick ourselves up again. We benefit from the wise counsel of our Elders. And we laugh a lot!

So, I've found myself in the “Spiritual Olympics” for the past 17 years. And this has meant constant training sessions in spiritual house-cleaning and sore spiritual muscles! But it's also given me the opportunity to try to “live” all those noble ideals that I'd been giving lip-service to. And through the alchemy of community I've started to convert my dross into small nuggets of gold! Having moved from the world of “me” to the world of “us,” I see the web of life as no longer a theory but a living loom—a loom on which I'm weaving my individual God-given pattern in a dance of colored threads with many others. From this place, perspective has shifted from “get off the wheel of karma” to “seek to serve others.”

Through community living I'm learning better how to walk my talk while embracing a cosmic perspective that includes the fundamentals of all world religions. It's a relief to be able to laugh, weep, grow, and serve together; to aspire to work towards “enlightenment” for the whole world in whatever ways we can bring our gifts to bear.

And so we find ourselves daily committed to outreach to the general public as well as to inreach to the God within us.

It's still that inreach, that personal relationship with God, that is the leading factor in my life, but how much more challenging and rich it's become! I believe that this is one of the great potential benefits of belonging to a community, so long as that community is effectively and benevolently run, and is committed to spiritual growth.

“As above, so below,” has become much clearer to me. God isn't just wandering around up there in His garden watering the flowers in a blue outfit, after all. For if we look deeply enough, He's there behind the eyes of our fellow travelers, looking out at us. As the great Persian poet Hafiz has said: “Everyone is God speaking. Why not be polite and listen to Him?” 🌸

Clistine Morningstar is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London, and for 20 years she researched into movement as a catalyst for personal growth, while teaching dance, movement, and fitness. Her acclaimed book Growing with Dance arose from her Early Childhood teaching at the University of British Columbia. Clistine is now the school coordinator of Early Childhood programs at Global Community Communications Alliance, and is also Music Director of the 50-voice Gabriel of Urantia's Bright and Morning Star Choir there. She is 77 years young!

Ties that Bind

By *Understanding Israel*, M.A. Ed.

*When humans participate in ceremony, they enter a sacred space.
Everything outside of that space shrivels in importance.
All is made new; everything becomes sacred.*
—Sun Bear¹

The author with arm raised and the traveling children's troupe (and friends) she helped form in the community to extend children's experiences outside the community.

Marco Ricca Studio www.marcoriccastudio.com



where we gather to pray, meditate, break unleavened bread, and renew our communal ties. That bedrock binds together a community through a spiritual ceremony that endured the high tides, and grew in the ebb and eddy of our dreams for an alternative community that has evolved and not been destroyed. 🐻

Understanding "Uri" Israel lived for over 26 years in a commune located mostly in the Cascade Mountains. She received her B.A. from Pacific Lutheran University, her M.A. Ed. from Antioch, and is currently working on a Doctorate in Educational Leadership through Argosy University Seattle. She raised many children through legal guardianship and birthed four: Rebecca, Melissa, Strong, and Magic. She is proud of her Jewish and Native American ancestry and active as a storyteller in the Native American community.



Clockwise from upper right: author Understanding Israel; Azar Israel; Bright Israel (AKA Mark Detray); Ringling Brothers child performer; Tito, child aerialist with Ringling Bros. This photo was taken at top of the Seattle Space Needle photo booth where we accompanied children from Ringling Bros. Circus for an excursion outside their arena.

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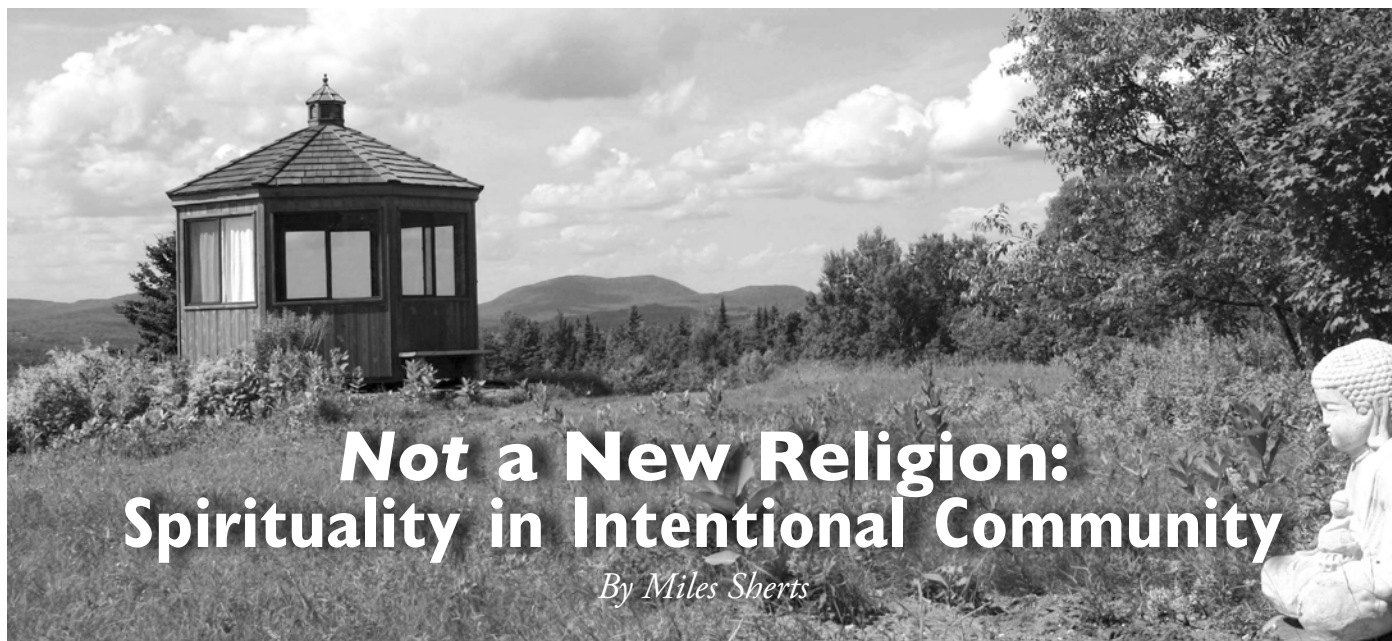
Ceremony defined our spirituality as a community. After a major break up it bound those of us who stayed the course back together. Our community, formed initially in the volatile late 1960s, grew from the root of spirituality blooming in India. Meditation, gurus, and fasting were sweeping America's young, fueled in part by the interest of the Beatles in Eastern religions. Ours was a heady mixture concocted from the King James Bible and mixed with a dollop of that psychedelic era.

We arose before dawn and meditated. Influenced by the back-to-the-earth movement and Native American spirituality, we tooled our own form of religious lifestyle. Symbols, language, a school, posters, a social order arose from a mixture of Judeo-Christian values swirled in the patina of those rebellious days. Out went the faith of our fathers, the life choices of our mothers, and the traditions of our ancestors. In the vacuum we built a new world for our children and ourselves whose underpinnings were our spiritual goals and lifestyle.

Now in the ashes of one world, destroyed through poor financial decisions, failure of leadership, and human weakness, another has emerged. The glue of ceremonies was not destroyed. The elements of the dream persist: granting of virtue names for children, grandchildren, and ourselves, celebrating a very traditional Passover, investing in land-based communities, organic food, and tightly knit family events.

As I searched for a definition of our community as it exists today for my current work towards a doctorate, it became apparent that those who have maintained the ceremony of our Passover and the spirituality of its week of renewal and introspection represent the tree that grew from the root of those early days in communal living and experimentation.

We have weathered many storms. Some have lashed at our foundations, taken down structures of our philosophy, and swept old friends away. Yet each year as we gather in one remote place, to share in a week of unleavened bread and rustic lifestyle, catch up on each other's lives, hold new babies, applaud achievements, and mourn losses, we are laying another brick in the foundation. Today that community is linked through the internet, social networking, cell phones, and energy-efficient vehicles. It derives its spiritual significance through one week together high in a remote, off-the-road venue,



Not a New Religion: Spirituality in Intentional Community

By Miles Sherts

Like many readers of this magazine, I rejected the organized religion that I grew up with because it seemed to only limit and confine me with its rules and moralities. When I became overwhelmed with a need to find meaning and purpose in my life, I went on a quest that took me to a Buddhist monastery in Asia, and there I began to experience the miracle of my own presence. I glimpsed the eternal meaning of life that exists below the clamor of perception, and began to feel at peace with myself.

My new-found spiritual path gave my life definition and freed me from being dependent on other people's expectations and evaluations. However I still longed for community and was hungry to be connected to a group of like-minded people. I didn't seem to fit in with my family or the society that I came from, and I wanted to belong to something again. So, I began to seek out intentional community.

A key difference between spirituality and religion may be that a spiritual path is more individualized and solitary, while a religion often involves being a member of a larger group or organization. Indeed the appeal of religion is that we belong to something and share a common set of values with other members of our faith community. This has been a source of comfort for many people. However, the appeal of religion seems to be fading out in our society, leaving many of us with no strong connection to any group or belief system.

It is no coincidence that as organized religious institutions have lost their following in the past generation or so, more intentional communities have begun to appear. Part of the appeal of living with others is to offer a sense of belonging in a world of disconnected individuals. And defining a community usually requires a common set of beliefs or values.

My experiments in living with other people showed me that the challenge for this new wave of intentional communities, as it is for the new spirituality emerging in our society, is to avoid becoming another religion. We have to find a way to feel connected with other people and part of something larger than ourselves, without reducing this to a formula or set of absolute values.

A residential or spiritual community can be vital to our health and well-being as it relieves the pressure of having to do everything for ourselves and resolves the painful sense of isolation that permeates our culture today. And a key to designing a new form that nurtures our ideals of equality, belonging, and individuality, is finding

ways to nourish and support each person as a unique whole part within the community.

A new kind of spirituality is often part of intentional communities, as many of us are looking for support for our spiritual path outside of the traditional church or other group. And it is important to consider what real support looks like as we experiment with these new forms.

A common core of many spiritual paths is a commitment to a process that helps us to relax and eventually surrender the often forceful grip of our individual ego on ourselves and the world around us. It is an intention to become more conscious and aware of who we are and how our sense of individual self has programmed us for isolation and power struggles with each other.

Taking on the ego can be very challenging and it is wise to seek help in this process. Real support gently and firmly encourages us to face our ego and see through its story of loss and tragedy to recognize a deeper awareness that stands outside of our personal drama. This cannot be accomplished through belief in a set of ideals or by identifying as a member of a group. These common ways that we come together for support often hinder our spiritual growth by merely giving our ego a new identity.

A sure way to detect the false support that often comes with being part of a spiritual community is that there is a pronounced sense of “us and them” between those inside the community and those outside of it. There is also usually an underlying set of hard values or beliefs about what is right and wrong. These are the ways that our ego seeks identification in the world, and they often permeate communities and can undermine the ideals of individual freedom and spiritual awakening that the group may be founded upon.

I have been part of many different communities and spiritual groups for the past 35 years and am sensitive to the subtle ways that we become fundamentalist, despite our best intentions to be free. When a group or community becomes too exclusive or people become too identified with it, I usually lose interest and move on. I can feel the tug of my ego and the temptation to redefine myself in some new form, and also experience part of myself suffocating.

It is essential that we keep this newly forming spirituality true to its intention of freedom. Spiritual freedom is not the ability to do whatever one wants to do. Rather it is fruit of our willingness to discipline and confine our individual ego so that we may see it for what it is and finally release it. For this purpose intentional community, like a committed relationship, is an excellent vehicle for spiritual growth.

In community we rub up against each other’s wounds and get to see the parts of ourselves that need healing. In community we also have access to the care and attention of other people, which can give us the courage to face our wounds and allow light to penetrate our hidden shadows. This makes living closely with other people a path that can assist our personal growth and awakening in a more powerful and constant way than anything we undertake alone.

A healthy spiritual community is one which supports the growth of each individual and recognizes the role that relationships play in accelerating our self-awareness. Instead of set values or beliefs, the community would emphasize communication and conflict resolution skills which enable each person to navigate their relationships more consciously and use opposition as an opportunity for deeper connection.

Being in relationship with other people consciously *is* a spiritual path, and this is perhaps best expressed in the form of intentional community. When we make a commitment to live together, we are committing to work with our individual ego and cultivate our capacity for cooperation instead of competition. This is often hard work and cannot be accomplished by merely adopting the ideals of community, harmony, or peace.

Most of us have unconscious habits of comparing, evaluating, and judging, which strengthen our ego and make it more difficult to get along with others. Fear feeds this habit of measuring everything and everyone according to our idea of what is right. Committing to any kind of relationship means becoming aware of how this process of sorting out the good from the bad isolates us and makes us see other people as adversaries instead of allies.

The work of relationship requires that we challenge our basic assumptions of what is right and wrong and admit that most of the time we do not really know. Being connected with other people often means letting go of what we think things *should* be like, and accepting other people and situations *as they are*. This does not mean that we have to conform to some ideal or standard in order to be accepted. We do not have to give up our individuality in order to belong to a family or community, as many of us assume.

Belonging means that we surrender our instinctual urge to be right and instead focus on *what we need to be happy*. This is a fundamental step in spiritual growth as we leave behind our narrow definition of who we think we are and identify ourselves instead as part of a larger whole. As we gradually get used to the idea that we are part of a community and a world that is much greater than our individual self, we experi-

ence a great sense of relief. Finally our needs for a real sense of security, belonging, and independence are met as we learn how to communicate our feelings and needs to other people in a respectful and collaborative way. 🐦

Miles has studied facilitation, conflict resolution, and communication skills since 1980, and been a professional mediator since 1990. He practiced divorce and family mediation for 10 years in collaboration with the Vermont Family Court, and now works primarily with couples who want to strengthen their relationship. He has taught Conscious Communication skills since 1990 at the Community College of Vermont and other schools, and led numerous private trainings. Miles is the author of Conscious Communication—How to Establish Healthy Relationships and Resolve Conflict Peacefully While Maintaining Independence. He has also practiced a simple Buddhist meditation form known as Insight Meditation since being trained in a Sri Lankan monastery in 1976. He is the founder of Sky Meadow Retreat in Vermont where he lives and leads workshops and retreats in Conscious Communication and Insight Meditation (www.SkyMeadowRetreat.com).



It Takes a Village to Raise a Consciousness!

By Kelly Bryson, MFT

I believe we humans are wolves, not swans. We are naturally pack animals, not dyadic units of humanity. Many of us agree on this. But do we agree that we need each other to grow in consciousness or spiritually? I think we need conscious groups with great communication skills to understand and evolve ourselves as social beings, and therefore as spiritual beings, because as human beings we exist and grow in the context of a social field of consciousness. And I know there are spiritual writings and philosophies that are so rarefied and aloof as to not seem to need a social setting for their expression, but these are not the Super Natural Earthy Spiritualities I am writing about today.

How can we grow spiritual qualities like kindness, generosity, patience, forgiveness, honesty, empathy, compassion, courage, love, outside the context of relationship and a loving, conscious community with great communication skills, a value of transparency, and respect for autonomy? Absolutely essential to this growth is the courage and love it takes to give clear, constructive, clean, love-based, self-referenced, sometimes hard honesty. Rollo May, the great psychologist, wrote that all healing begins with empathy (and I believe connection and trust also), but the real growth and shifts in consciousness come through the power of honesty. Empathy is like the massage, but honesty is the (crack!) chiropractic adjustment. I know that within my heart this great hunger I have for conscious community is also my soul's longing for growth and self-awareness.

I believe we evolve spiritually and psychologically through our relationships. I believe you can grow by sitting alone in a monastery or ashram for 10 years, or for the same amount of growth enter into a deep love relationship or commit to a beloved community for a couple of weeks.

Speaking of commitment: Where does our need to grow connect with our need to contribute and express? Where does social activism meet spiritual development? I believe it is in the context and in the creation of Spiritual Social Community that we feel the profound quality of The Sacred Matrix of Life.

This is the intersection of heaven and earth, the practical and the profound, the sacred and the secular. I need to be a part of and contributing to the birth and growth of my own spiritual community for my own evolution and expression.

In *The Sacred Matrix*, Dieter Duhm writes: "The Sacred Matrix is the original, trans-historical, non-alienated, cosmic, and divine matrix of universal life. According to the plan of Creation for the human being, we are to realize it on earth. It is not a dream, but a deep, deep memory that wells up inside of us when we touch the Sacred, and this memory keeps re-creating our yearning. For the sake of truth we cannot but find and follow the content of this yearning in its entirety, for the yearning

that is recognized and not suppressed or sentimentalized is the signpost that leads us to our sacred home."

This living out of spiritual principles according to the entelechy of what is possible for human community is what so many great spiritual teachers have taught. (An entelechy is a vital force that, for example, allows a spider to know how to spin a web without a *Web-Making for Dummies* book.) The Christian Bible speaks of "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven."

Martin Luther King wrote about creating "beloved community"—a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood and sisterhood would be an actuality in all of social life. In his mind, such a community would be the ideal corporate expression of the Christian faith. Yet so many great organizations and communities, including those King participated in and inspired, have not had all the tools, or Tribal Technologies as I call them, to facilitate the development of a "beloved community" or organization.

After over 25 years of teaching Nonviolent Communication (NVC) for a living, I have truly come to believe "It takes a village (or a network/community/tribe) to raise a consciousness." It has always been easy for me to get people to "catch fire" about NVC, but without a holistic sustainable community to fan the flames, it dies out. I spent 20 of those years teaching thousands

(continued on p. 78)



The Path of Community

By Barbara Stützel



Photos courtesy of Barbara Stützel

Many of my friends are on a spiritual path. They are Buddhists or study shamanism or the like. Sometimes they ask me: which is your path? I tell them that my spiritual path is the one of community. I dedicate myself to exploring the human being.

I've been living in a community with 100 people for 10 years. We share not only our daily life, but also a dream, and all the joys and frustrations along the way leading us towards this dream. The dream is a life in peace and love between human beings and nature. I am sure that many people share this dream. In my community we decided to dedicate our lives to finding a way to get there, and to share our experiences on this way. We have land, houses, our own water, and a conference center which guarantees us income—the fact is that our physical needs are fulfilled. Now the interesting question is: how do we create peace and love?

The dream unites us. In the first phase of living in community that is enough. We share everything; we feel united and love the collective, because it supplies us with all we want. There is always someone to embrace, somebody to share with, someone to inspire us. But soon the urge toward individuation pops up.

Our histories separate us: each person has different experiences and develops his or her values and strategies out of this life experience, wanting to repeat what caused happiness, fleeing from all that was painful in the past. Each person's experiences lead to individual capacities and likes. A living community doesn't deny these differences, but benefits from the various capacities. The more an individual discovers his or her potential and applies them in the community, the better the community functions. Whatever we do then, we do it with enthusiasm and passion.

The danger comes when we start to confuse our experience with reality and our opinion with the truth. Then we insist on our opinion, even though this is only one part of reality. In the last 10 years of collective living I have discovered more and more how different the inner realities are. We hardly ever think of the same thing when we use the same word—each individual has a world of emotions underneath, that we often don't perceive in its depth. To reach this phase of living together is very frus-

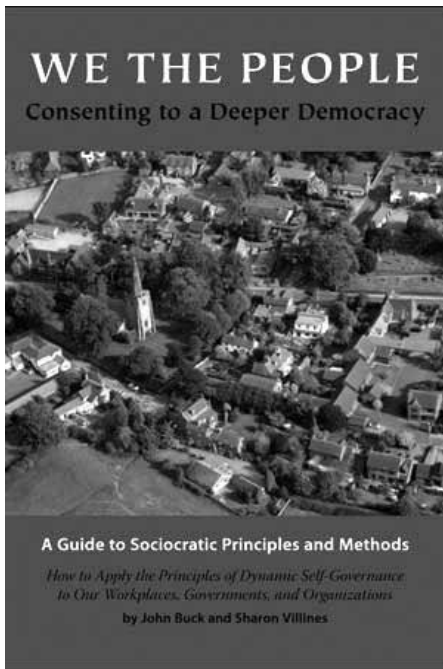
trating. It seems impossible to reach an agreement. Many times this is the point of separation in groups.

The next step is to recognize that everything I believe and live is relative and that other truths exist. Many people experience these moments of listening in depth on special occasions with a friend. In community we go beyond that: we open up to the possibility that there exists a collective intelligence which goes further than what each one knows, and which we discover in spite of all the individual truths. To get there each one has to leave behind his or her history. It is a way to transcend the Ego and listen to the essence of the human being.

Today when I share with my friends from other spiritual paths, I realize that I could call this essence of human being by the name God. The process of opening oneself to real listening is a state of attentive consciousness. This is why I say that my spiritual path is the one of community. 🐦

Born in 1966, psychologist and culture creator Barbara Stützel has lived at ZEGG community for 10 years. She is engaged in linking people and helping them to crystallize real utopias out of their potential. To achieve this she creates cultural events, theatre pieces, and seminars. ZEGG, founded in 1991 near Berlin, Germany, currently has 100 members. See www.zegg.de. Thanks to Agnes Hannack for translation assistance.





We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy

A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods

By John Buck and Sharon Villines

Sociocracy.info, Washington D.C., 2007

I'm excited about the message *We the People* can mean for communitarians and members of other cooperative groups. As a consensus trainer and facilitator, longtime student of decision-making in communities, and community member myself, I believe using Sociocracy, or even just parts of it, could make community governance and decision-making much more effective and fulfilling. (See "*Sociocracy: A Permaculture Approach to Community Evolution*," about the Lost Valley community in Oregon, COMMUNITIES #153, pp. 20-23.)

Sociocracy, also called "Dynamic Governance" or "Dynamic Self-Governance," is both a self-governance and decision-making method. Its decision-making process is similar to consensus in that everyone has a voice in modifying and approving proposals, and it doesn't use majority-rule or supermajority voting like 75 percent or 80 percent voting. And, as with consensus, it will work well only for groups that have a common purpose or aim, and who are trained in the method before they use it.

Sociocracy was developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s by Gerard Endenburg, an engineer who owned an electronics company. He saw that traditional business management methods did not create a harmonious, productive workplace. As an experiment, Endenburg applied the principles of cybernetics—the science of steering and control—to manage his company. The new method did in fact foster a more harmonious, productive workplace. Sociocracy is now used in businesses and nonprofits worldwide. For example, the national Center for Nonviolent Communication uses Sociocracy. Many local and regional chapters of the National Green Building Council use it. The folks protesting in the "Occupy Asheville" movement near where I live use it.

And Sociocracy is now used by a few intentional communities worldwide, including Lost Valley Educational Center in Oregon, as noted above; Champlain Valley Cohousing, Vermont; Legacy Farm Cohousing, New York; Ecovillage at Loudon County, Virginia; Cohabitat Quebec, Canada; and Sydney Coastal Ecovillage, Australia.

The governance aspect of Sociocracy includes an interconnecting stack of semi-autonomous, self-organizing circles, each of which governs a specific area of responsibility within the policies of the higher circle, and executes, measures, and controls its own processes in achieving its goals. Representatives from each circle pass information, needs, and requests between circles. Sociocratic governance also includes a circular, three-step process of planning, implementing the plan, and evaluating the plan, and then revising the plan if needed, implementing it, evaluating it, etc. But for this review I'd like to focus mainly on decision-making and how it differs from consensus.

The Facilitator of a Sociocratic meeting goes around the circle asking each person,

one at a time, whether they give their consent to a proposal. To "give consent" doesn't mean the proposal must be perfect, or that you must love it. It only means you can live with it; that it's "good enough for now." This is not like consensus, in which a decision must be as good as you can make because you'll have to live with it for a long time—since it's so difficult to change a decision made by consensus once you've made it. In Sociocracy you can modify a decision easily, even the next day, if you find that it doesn't work well—your decisions only have to be good enough to try and see how it works out. This is the most significant difference I found between the decision-making aspects of Sociocracy and consensus.

As the Facilitator goes around the circle asking whether people can give their consent, people either say Yes or state a reasonable, logical "paramount objection" to the proposal. When someone has a paramount objection, it means that if the proposal were passed, it would prevent, interfere with, or reduce the person's ability to work productively in their job or role, which itself is linked to the specific purpose or aim of that circle. The group uses any paramount objections that may come up to revise the proposal at the end of the round. The person objecting must show that the objection is reasonable and logical and is about their ability to do their job or role in that circle, and not based on simply a personal preference. When one or more paramount objections are expressed in a round, either the Facilitator alone or the Facilitator and the whole circle revise the proposal to accommodate the issues raised by the objection.

The Facilitator goes around the circle a second time to ask for consent for the now-modified proposal. The Facilitator does this as many times as is necessary, seeking consent from each person. The proposal may be modified as many times as paramount objections are raised. The

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proposal is passed when no more paramount objections are raised to its latest version. Paramount objections are not like blocks in consensus. Rather, they are seen as ways to shine a strong light on the proposal to see where it needs improvement, and then used to improve the proposal.

Like the consensus process, this decision-making method allows everyone to have input into the modification and improvement of the proposal, and in the decision. Unlike the consensus process (as most groups practice it anyway), there is a structured, one-person-at-a-time process for this, and a clear definition of what a paramount objection can be.

Co-author John Buck, an early pioneer in computer-based instruction and former manager in the FAA, studied Sociocracy first-hand for years in The Netherlands and learned Dutch in order to read important literature on the topic not available in English, then translated much of it. Co-author Sharon Villines, a member of Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington, DC, is also a longtime *aficionado* of effective governance.

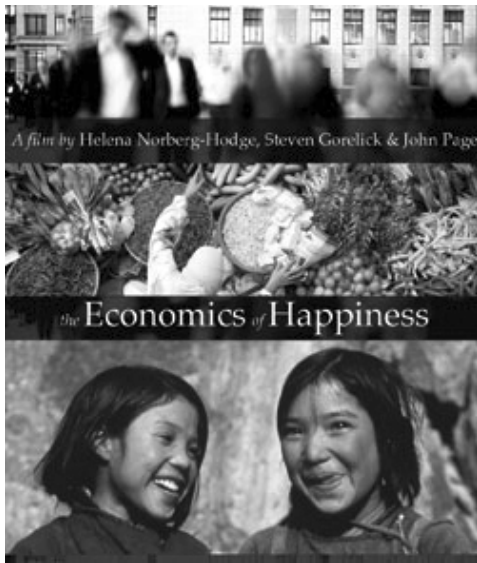
I like how the authors organized the book. They start with the scientific and philosophical ideas that influenced Endenburg and contributed to his development of Sociocracy. Next they describe how Endenburg developed Sociocracy over the years, with more detailed background on the science that supports each of its parts. Then come chapters offering a step-by-step process of how each aspect of Sociocracy works, plus a story about how doing a meeting Sociocracy-style helped a real-life situation in a school for disturbed teenagers. And many appendices at the end (essays by Ward, Boeke, and Endenburg; sample Operating Agreements and Bylaws for a Sociocratic organization; guides for circle meetings, elections, and logbooks, and more), a generous glossary, and a bibliography. The book is resource-rich.

I resisted learning about Sociocracy when I first heard about it, as its adherents always contrasted Sociocracy with improperly practiced consensus, saying how this proved Sociocracy was better. I didn't like this; it didn't seem fair to compare the incorrect practice of one method to the correct practice of another. It was only after reading *We the People*, taking several of John Buck's workshops, and talking to enthusiastic Sociocracy practitioners in intentional communities from Quebec to Sydney that I "got it." I realized, perhaps because Endenburg is an engineer, that the process doesn't actually *let* you practice it improperly. It's designed—*engineered*—to focus the group's self-governance energy through rigorous, structured channels—and this tends to consistently produce creative, fair, and beneficial results for the group.

We the People is an inspiring, empowering resource for anyone interested in an effective governance process and high-energy meetings that meet needs for both emotional satisfaction and effectiveness—and for anyone who'd like to reduce the stress and anxiety that can accompany the consensus process, as it's sometimes practiced, where chronic blocking, or the implied or veiled threat to block, can drain and demoralize a group. 🐦

Diana Leafe Christian is author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community (New Society Publishers, 2003 and 2007), and publisher of Ecovillages, a free online newsletter about ecovillages worldwide: www.EcovillageNews.org. She leads workshops internationally on starting successful new ecovillages and on decision-making in communities. Her column on ecovillages appears on the homepage of Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), and she is former editor of this magazine. Diana lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. For more info. visit www.DianaLeafeChristian.org.

Resources: About the book *We the People*: www.Sociocracy.info
SocioNet—General information and networking about Sociocracy: www.socionet.us
Governance Alive—Co-author John Buck's website: www.governancealive.com



The Economics of Happiness

A film by Helena Norberg-Hodge, Steven Gorelick, and John Page

DVD, 65 minutes, 2011; www.isec.org.uk, www.theeconomicsofhappiness.org.

A worthy follow-up to the International Society for Ecology and Culture's *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, this new film builds on Helena Norberg-Hodge's observations of the collision of traditional Ladakhi and modern western cultures to address broader issues of

globalization. Through clear explanations from articulate voices from six continents (Vandana Shiva, Samdhong Rinpoche, Juliet Schor, Rob Hopkins, and many others), and through real-life examples (many taken from ISEC's "reality tours," bringing local and globalized cultures face to face), this film examines globalization's impacts and suggests an alternative paradigm of *localization*.

The presenters make a convincing case that globalization: 1. makes us unhappy; 2. breeds insecurity; 3. wastes resources; 4. contributes to climate change; 5. destroys livelihoods; 6. increases conflict; 7. is built on hand-outs to big business; and 8. is based on false accounting. Instead, it suggests replacing our conventional economic indicators like Gross National Product with a focus on "Gross National Happiness," and finds that local business and banking, local food, local energy, local identity, and local knowledge are keys to bringing this about. These are not pie-in-the-sky ideas—the film finds examples of every one of these approaches, and shows how they contribute to much happier people and much healthier places to live. Ironically, in the face of globalization, localization has become, and needs to become, a global movement—but one that invests power in local people, who are best equipped to build sustainable societies not dependent on a nonsustainable, exploitive, extractive globalized economy focused on profit rather than people.

Instead of perpetuating an economy dominated by transnational corporations, people all over the world are reviving or creating human-scale, ecologically based local communities. This film not only educates about the often (perhaps deliberately) impenetrable economics of the modern world, but in the process challenges complacency and inspires viewers to act. I recommend it to anyone not willing to resign themselves to an "economics of unhappiness"—because an alternative does exist. ☺

In addition to editing COMMUNITIES, Chris Roth also participates in community locally at Meadowsong Ecovillage/Lost Valley Educational Center; in western Oregon's Willamette Cascade Foothills Network; in the Dexter/Lost Valley Community Association, working to preserve a local butte; and in the Eugene-area permaculture, naturalist, and folk-music communities.



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COMMUNITIES

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#153 Permaculture

Social Permaculture; Sociocracy; Attending to Zone Zero; The Farm; The Sharing Gardens; WWOOFing; Changeaculture; Prairie Hugelkultur; Permaculture Stole My Community!; The Growing Edge; eCOOLvillages; Nature's Friends; Future of Water; Ecological Community Design (Winter '11)



#152 Right Livelihood

Work Less, Simplify More; Crowdfunding; Which Comes First, Community or Career?; The Lenox Place News; Recreational Therapy; The Gift of Compost; The Farm; Wrong Volunteerism; Income Sharing; Redefining Work; Remade in Edinburgh; Buddha Being, Buddha Doing (Fall '11)



#151 Intimacy

A Nomad Ponders Family and the Ecstasy of the Group; Internal Intimacy; Honesty and Intimacy; Bee Intimacy; The Solace of Friends in Community; Intimacy in the Village Setting; Twenty Years of Open Marriage; A Communitarian Conundrum; Love Is the Answer; Fascinating Selfhood (Summer '11)



#150 Mental Health: Challenges and Hope

Gifted, Mad, and Out of Control; Walking Wounded; Nurturing Healthy Minds; Rx for "Mental Illness"; Mental Illness as Spiritual Path; Crazy About Community; Peer Counseling in Community; Shadow Sides of NVC and Co-Counseling; Prescription Facebook; Gould Farm; Camphill Villages (Spring '11)

#149 Elders

It Takes a Community to Grow an Elder; Elderhood, In and Out of Community; Becoming Elders; A Legacy of Beauty; Remembering Jane Owen; Snapshots of Elders; Aging in Community; Green Houses; Perspectives from Sao Paolo; The Making of Senior Cohousing; Reinventing Retirement; And I Listen (Winter '10)

#148 Power and Empowerment

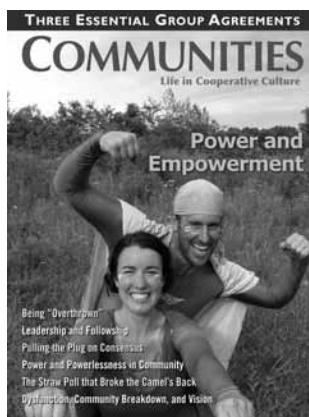
Being "Overthrown"; Balancing Powers; Leadership and Followership; Power and Disempowerment on the Ecobus; Pulling the Plug on Consensus; Dysfunction, Breakdown, and Vision; The Power of Process; Moon Valley; The Straw Poll that Broke the Camel's Back; Call in the Experts? (Fall '10)

#147 Education for Sustainability

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#146 Family

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PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEB SITES

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MONASTICISM, COMMUNITY, AND "THE GREAT WORK"

(continued from p. 33)

Here and Now

It is generally believed that monasticism "saved western civilization." The monastics protected the great literature of the world in their libraries, continued to sing plainchant, and maintained the priceless frescoes and sculpture. But, more than that, they kept the life of the mind alive, so that the *ideas* that form civilization were not lost to the barbarian hordes. As I read *COMMUNITIES*, I think of this history. Although I know many individuals who are advocates for the planet's well-being, it is the communities who demonstrate to the rest of the world what it means to live sustainably, both ecologically and socially. Like the earliest monastics who made the vows of "poverty, chastity, and obedience," present-day individuals have generally had to give up something in order to live in community—the list can include anything from privacy to indoor plumbing! Like St. Pachomius, St. Benedict, and those who gathered around them long ago and, indeed, still follow them, they choose to hold property and/or goods in common, choose community life over life in a nuclear family, and choose to put the good of the community ahead of their own desires. The reward is that the community member is not only a practitioner but also a symbol for others of what Thomas Berry calls the "Great Work" of renewing and rescuing both human society and the planet earth itself. Surely all the saintly predecessors of present-day communities would greet this fact with a mighty "Amen!" ☺

The Rev. Nancy Roth is an ordained Episcopal priest, author of 13 books (including children's hymnals co-authored with her husband, Robert Roth, as well as books on yoga, prayer, spirituality, and ecology), workshop and retreat leader, and environmental and community advocate based in Oberlin, Ohio. Visit her website at www.revnancyroth.org.



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FINDING FULFILLMENT AT ANANDA

(continued from p. 47)

Up to the Present

My own path has led me to many of these urban communities. I was offered a job at the East West Bookshop, started by some Ananda members in Menlo Park, California. After a few years I moved back to Ananda Village, where I got married to a wonderful woman. Eventually we became ministers and served in Ananda communities in Portland, Rhode Island, and Seattle. We play a lot of music, teach a lot of classes, and have a lot of fun sharing with others this wonderful way of life. By putting God first in our lives we have received countless blessings for which we are grateful beyond words. I sometimes think Ananda is like a rising plume of energy, lifting those who come into its magnetism to the extent that they put themselves in tune with it. Is it any wonder I long to share this spiritual adventure with others? I often repeat this affirmation, “I am grateful for my life, exactly as it is. I am thankful for this day; I welcome every hour. Thank you God, Thank you God!” ☺

Larry Rider grew up in Massachusetts and Maine. After working in a food co-op warehouse he moved to Ananda in 1979. He has been an ordained minister and Lightbearer of the Ananda Church of Self-Realization for 17 years. He and his wife have taught classes in meditation, yoga, and various aspects of Yogananda's teachings in 14 states. They have also given many Sunday Services and other devotional ceremonies. They currently live at the Ananda Community of Lynnwood (near Seattle), where Larry is the community manager. Larry sings and plays a variety of instruments with Ananda's music ministry. He is a Tyagi member of the New Renunciate Order, having taken a lifetime vow to seek God. In addition, his interest in intentional communities has led him to join the Board of NICA, the Northwest Intentional Communities Association, where he currently serves as President.

INVITING GOD TO DANCE

(continued from p. 51)

I'm sure my fellow communitarians have their own stories to tell about their early religious and spiritual experiences, and any oppression they might have encountered. We don't talk about it, though. When people show up with spiritual agendas, the old-timers just sort of ignore any attempt to change us, and so do I. I think our polite resistance is really about wanting to claim our own experiences, including doubt or cynicism, and not to "live on someone else's wisdom and knowledge."

But Jaymee is like a spiritual sponge, soaking up wisdom and knowledge wherever she finds it. The difference is that she dances with it, choreographs her own changes, and doesn't seem to let anyone intimidate her. Maybe the reason this community feels like a sanctuary is actually its freedom from religious/spiritual language and teaching, the freedom to go within and listen to that inner voice.

We held a potluck by the pond for Jaymee just before she left for college. Now, the only ritual we practice here is to circle-up before our meals, for announcements, community songs, silly songs, or sometimes just a quiet moment. But this time we turned the circle over to our young friend, and she gave a long, sweet prayer (yikes—did I really say that word?), invoking and appreciating the divine Presence that seems such an intimate part of her life. And there were smiles and tears all around, for this was her Dance with God, a dance into her next stage of Life, and we were privileged to share it. ☺

Rebecca Dale gardens, writes, cooks, listens, organizes stuff, and enjoys the solitude of the woods at her community in Appalachian Ohio. Currents community has grown to 12 adult members and nearly two handfuls of children. They recently celebrated their 30th anniversary on the land.

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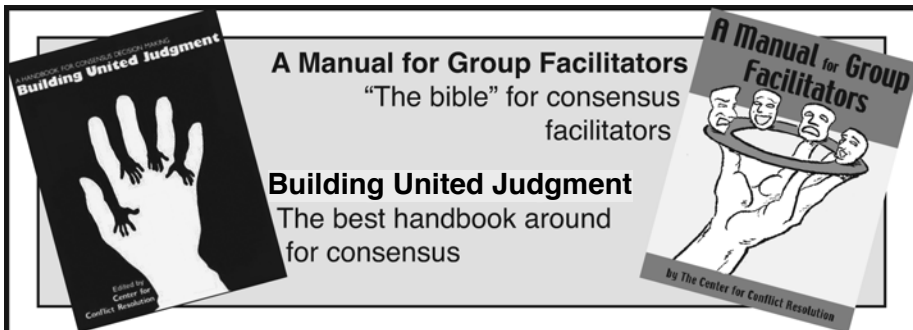


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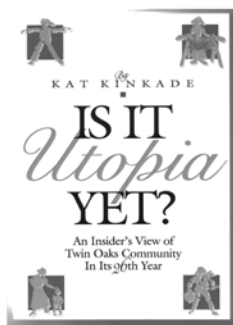
(continued from p. 63)

in San Diego, and today there is barely a flicker of the practice left burning there.

I believe one reason for this is that none of us really had any community-building tools nor much understanding about how to evolve groups into "beloved community."

The new "beloved" community does not yet exist, but is awakening through our hearts, through the quality of connection we make with the real people in our lives. It rises up in our hearts when our compassion for the suffering of the world is touched. This new community is invisible. It shows itself through your eyes, your touch, your words, and your actions. ☺

Kelly Bryson, MFT, writes: "For the past 15 years I have been on an obsessive quest to learn the technologies, skills, and principles needed to create healthy NVC and other kinds of conscious organizations and communities. I am a certified trainer for the Center for Nonviolent Communication and would love to come to your community, or set up a tele-seminar, email you material, or talk on the phone with you. I love to share what I am learning about growing flourishing healthy holistic evolutionary communities founded on the principles of The Sacred Matrix from the Zegg and Tamera Ecovillages in Europe and on bodies of knowledge I developed called Trust Based Relationships (TBR) and Tribal Technologies. Contact me at Kelly Bryson MA, MFT, 831-462-3277, www.LanguageOfCompassion.com, kelly@LanguageOfCompassion.com."



An Insider's View of Twin Oaks Community in its 26th Year
 by Kat Kinkade

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THE CHURCH OF FERMENTATION

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food is from its source, and the more heavily it is processed, the less prana it will contain. When I eat my fermented culinary creations I am ingesting live microorganisms who are predigesting my raw, organically grown produce, and I can feel the wonderful pranic difference in comparison with other foods that I eat.

Lactic-acid fermentation is a win-win in that the results are tasty and they can be prepared with little effort. It is also a way to turn marginal food into something worth raving about. I like that it is a form of food preservation that can be adapted to any quantity you have on hand. You can ferment veggies in a pint jar or in a five-gallon bucket. It is easy to make small batches and fun to get help from kids or friends for preparing larger quantities. The finished products can be stored in a refrigerator for many months and keep the fresh flavor, or they can be stored in a cool spot around the house and flavors will continue to evolve. Preindustrial societies typically ate cultured and fermented foods with nearly every meal. Fermentation enabled them to safely store foods for months or even years without refrigeration. Fermented foods are a great addition to any meal, and I love bringing them to potlucks and sharing them with my friends. Fermentation enhances the flavor and nutritive value of foods, and that's something I think is worth preaching about.

Tips for a good vegetable fermentation experience:

- Ferments with more salt will develop slower and will keep longer. If you are on a low-salt diet you can use less salt and then refrigerate your creations and consume them relatively soon after fermentation occurs.
- To avoid spoilage, keep ferments out of contact with air. This can be done by placing

a weight on top to submerge veggies under brine (salt water solution). Another way is to place an air-lock lid on the jar. As fermentation occurs, air will be forced out of the jar but won't be allowed back in.

- If some funk does grow at the top of your creation, just skim off the top layer and eat what's below. Rest assured that the part that was not in contact with air should be safe to eat.

- Check your ferments relatively often for the first few weeks that fermentation is happening. Sometimes excess liquid may bubble out (put the container on a plate to catch spills), or if a jar lid is on too tight, pressure can build up and should be released periodically.

- Be creative and have fun! 🌱

Kim Scheidt is a founding member of Red Earth Farms community in northeast Missouri. She works at the national headquarters of the Fellowship for Intentional Community.



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Our aim is not only to help each other; we want to help more people discover the advantages of a communal alternative, and to promote the evolution of a more egalitarian world.





Kim Scheidt

The Church of Fermentation

It seems that for a number of people around here (in northeast Missouri's tri-communities), food choices and dietary preference have filled a similar role as belonging to an organized religion. People gather around food, grouping themselves in eating co-ops that share common food values. I've also seen quite a few people defend their personal dietary dogma just as fervently as a fundamentalist Christian might defend their church's views. And there are many sects of diet preferences: gluten-free, low-carb, raw food, 100-mile diet, vegan no-honey, vegan yes-honey, the list goes on. My personal food life cycle has gone something like this: omni-vegetarian-vegan-vegetarian-omni. I'm not usually one to give sermons about dietary preference, but I feel like I've seen the light, I've been saved, born again, whatever cliché you want to use, and I'm going to preach to you about lactic-acid fermentation.

My new-found love relationship with lactic-acid fermentation began this past summer with my desire to preserve batches of garden produce in the simplest way possible. We do not have a refrigerator-freezer and I was not thrilled with the idea of long hours of canning produce over a hot wood fire in the middle of summer. Encouraged by my new neighbor Valerie, who let me taste some of her okra and cucumber fermented pickles, I decided to look into vegetable ferments, a topic that had previously seemed complex and clouded in mystery. I purchased the book *Wild Fermentation* (pub. 2002), and inspired by the wisdom of Sandor Ellix Katz, I began my experimentations.

I started with a somewhat traditional pickle: dilly beans, but these were fermented and alive rather than sealed in jars with vinegar and sterilized in a boiling water bath like those I'd made in years past. Then, after reading recipe after recipe in *Wild*

Fermentation, I came to the realization that basically, with the magic addition of sea salt, I could potentially ferment just about anything. And what's more, not only was this process actually fun and easy, the resulting products are alive and teeming with beneficial microorganisms. According to all that I've read, fermented foods enhance digestion and gut health, boost the immune system, and are higher in vitamins and enzymes than the original raw veggies. Om Shanti.

Now, it's true that things can go awry with vegetable ferments, but as long as there's enough salt and it's kept out of contact with air, it's nearly a guaranteed success. I have a pretty sensitive palate and that first batch of dilly beans I made had a distinct undertone of old socks, but no one else seemed to notice and I got nothing but compliments. I began branching out and found a new love of eggplant pickles—absolutely divine, and okra pickles—slimy yet satisfying. My partner made the comment, “these days you go around saying ‘this tastes good...I wonder what it would taste like rotten.’” Which is actually not true, since the addition of salt means that food ferments rather than rots. There's a distinction. The complex flavors of vegetable ferments are simply delightful to me—like the enjoyment of a fine wine or an aged cheese, two examples of fermented products that are more socially acceptable in this day and age.

I believe in the idea that we get a substantial amount of prana—life force energy—from the foods we eat. Prana is greatest in food that is prepared in a loving environment, naturally brightly colored, nutrient-dense, and derived from plants and animals that were healthy and were recently alive. The farther the

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