

Is CONSENSUS GOOD FOR GROUPS?

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Diversity

A Species Deep Diversity

Hollywood Does Community

Confronting Institutional Racism

The Art and Ethics of Visitor Programs

Religion, Disability, Affordability, and More

Summer 2012 • Issue #155

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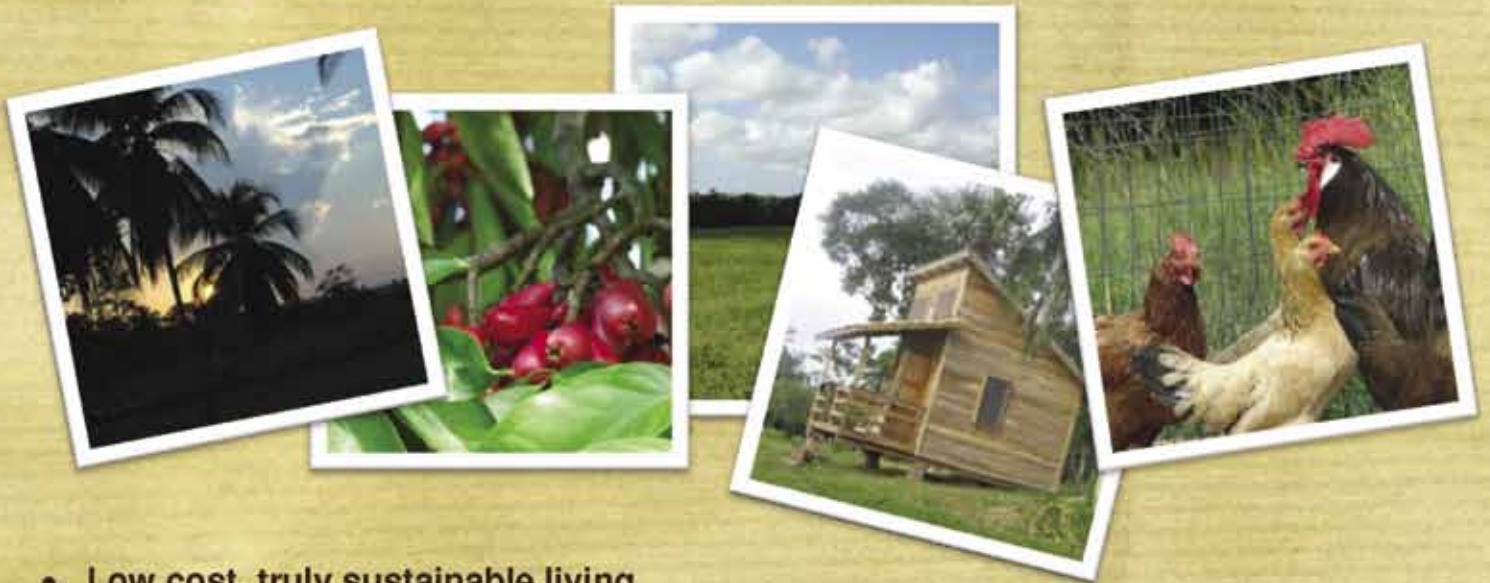
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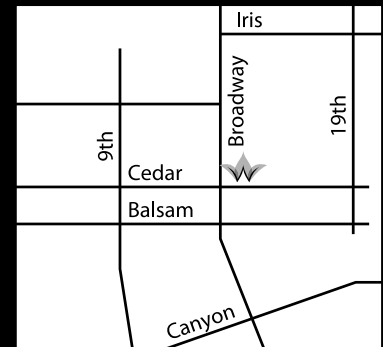
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Life in Cooperative Culture

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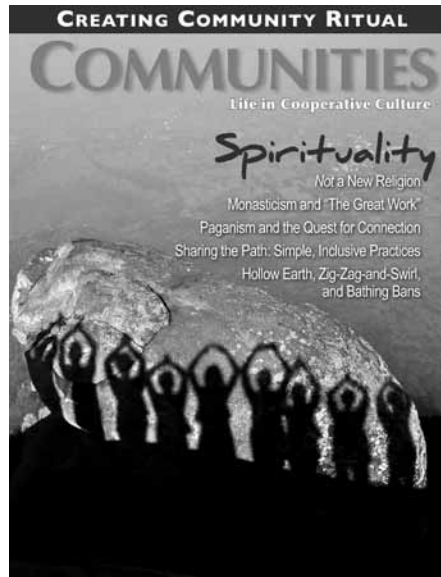
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LETTERS



Reaching Out

Reaching out to—and being reached out to *by*—people, can be difficult. I believe that I've gotten better at doing both of those things: still, there's always that sense of vulnerability when I open myself up in those ways. COMMUNITIES magazine, to me, is all about people reaching out to others: it's about taking chances and being open to the joy—and the pain—of being in relationship, and I applaud everyone who has contributed to reporting about the wonderful and diverse ways that people are relating to one another.

I am an inmate of a federal prison. I'm also a sex offender—a Once and Future Sex Offender, according to many people in our society. (Look up all of the behaviors that can result in being labeled a sex offender, and see if you have ever been guilty of doing one of those things. I know that what I did was *bad*. I also know that I won't ever do it again. So I'm a *former* sex offender, thank you very much.) As an incarcerated man I interact daily with men who have (or once had) addiction issues...or they have brain "hardware and/or software" problems that impact their mental health and their behavior. Through medicine, therapy, or by having had the time to reflect on the consequences of their past behaviors and on who they want to "be" when they're back in the world, these men are coping with their problems as best

as they can. But what of the effects of daily confrontations with institutional practices (and a few guardians who enjoy having power over another human being) that seem designed to kill a person's spirit? What of the emotional damage done in being separated from the people who love them? And what of the knowledge that very few people in society are willing to give an ex-con a chance to show that they are more than their past criminal acts?

Your issue on Mental Health (COMMUNITIES #150, Spring 2011) was excellent, and it has prompted me to write this letter. I would like your readers to consider former incarcerated men and women as potential friends, employees, neighbors, and members of their communities. I admit that I'm motivated by self-interests in asking that, but there are hundreds of thousands of ex-cons out there, and many more on the way.

Should intentional communities allow people with known mental health issues into their lives? Should people who have a criminal record be considered as community members? I submit that none of us are perfect—that all of us have problems, have made mistakes: some big, some small; some have been discovered and dealt with by society, and others remain hidden. I ask all of you to consider how you would like to be treated if you had a problem, or if you had made a mistake that had resulted in harm to yourself or others. Would you want the opportunity to ask for help, to ask for understanding, to ask for compassion, to ask to be allowed to demonstrate that you have the potential to behave sanely, responsibly, nonviolently—to be a "good" person? I ask you to consider that your acts of reaching out to those who have been shunned by society—your saying "I believe you have value as a human being...and I will give you the chance to show the good inside of you"—will benefit those you reach out to, as well as yourself and your communities.

Denzial Tittle
Texarkana, Texas

Appreciation

I just wanted to say how much I have loved COMMUNITIES magazine. Also the two films, *Visions of Utopia* (I've bought them more than once, because I've given them as presents), and *A New We*, which just arrived today. All these are truly inspiring.

Unfortunately, my only experience of living in a sort of "intentional community" ended in a very painful way (and, for a complex of reasons, I'm unlikely to find a similar way of living); but that in no way kills the vision and inspiration created by watching the films and reading the articles. All such communities are, naturally, an experiment. We badly need more and more such experiments as our world—socially, politically, and economically—becomes more and more damaged and, in fact, intolerable.

You help spread the vision of a vitally necessary movement. I do hope it spreads more and more widely. Keep up the good work.

Grace Richardson
Evanston, Illinois

The Art of Diversity

As the event coordinator for the FIC's Art of Community conference in California, I find your summer issue theme of diversity brings up a lot of questions for me.

After last year's event we received some feedback about the diversity, or lack thereof, in our program content. I was told that the opening plenary had too many "white men" in it, and also not enough racial or cultural diversity in general in our facilitators. Though it is important to me that we give space in our program to voices that are often marginalized, it doesn't feel comfortable to me to recruit based solely on those qualities.

I've come up feeling a bit unsure of how to include more workshops on issues related to diversity in intentional

communities and how to recruit facilitators of program activities from a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and minority backgrounds. It seems that we attract a lot of folks with similar values and demographic characteristics, yet I know that there are ic's "out there" of great diversity whose presence I would like to encourage, especially for them to share their experiences and perspectives on living in community. I want Art of Community to be a space for a diverse range of voices, and I'd love for the communities represented to be a mix beyond what seems on the surface like a majority of liberal, progressive intentional communities.

Apart from important differences, there are also a great many shared values among communitarians, such as the desire to share resources and live in and create a cooperative culture, at least within any given intentional community. Regardless of our religious or political beliefs, our cultural backgrounds, the color of our skin, our sexual orientation, our gender...we share this belief in community as an essential ingredient in our lives. But creating the time and space for people to come together in celebration of something they share value in does not necessarily mean that all kinds of ic's will be interested in participating, despite a desire to see these values that are common *within* ic's to be a more universal value *amongst* ic's. Towards that end we try to get as much participation from as many communities as we can to share best practices, discuss how we deal with challenges, etc.

One reason I have considered for why there is sometimes little ethnic diversity at communities gatherings is that minority communities often already provide the sense of belonging and connection that many people in the communities movement are seeking. I recognize that within minorities, one's sense of community

might be stronger out of need for feeling safe and secure, and sense of family and belonging is important (not to say that it isn't important to those not in a minority). I never felt that I personally had any obligation to stick close to home or family once I turned 18, whereas perhaps if I were from a family or culture with less opportunity, I might have been more protective and felt it more a necessity to help "take care of my own," so to speak. Perhaps a sense of community in my life would have been much stronger by default, not something I would feel the need to seek out in various ways later in life when I realized it was something I was craving.

Anyway, I can see the topic is interesting and extremely relevant, yet still I am not sure how to make Art of Community both more accessible and more desirable to a diverse range of folks, and create an air of inclusivity beyond what I am already doing. I've received some great ideas, such as promoting the event to community centers in urban areas, making direct contact with ic's who have been less involved in the Communities Movement, and in general expanding our outreach, in addition to getting workshop proposals that address diversity issues. I acknowledge that my background and experiences have not given me much exposure to many of the complex diversity issues in American society, and the (perhaps naïve) idealist in me counters all this with the thought that who we are and where we come from matters far less than those values of community we share, that those differences fade in the face of commonalities—that it is through our shared values we are connected. While that is true in a general sense, it isn't often the reality we live in, and if we are truly going to progress to a more cooperative culture on this planet, figuring out how to bridge the differences that

(continued on p. 73)

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!

COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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.

Advertising Policy

We accept paid advertising in COMMUNITIES because our mission is to provide our readers with helpful and inspiring information—and because advertising revenues help pay the bills.

We handpick our advertisers, selecting only those whose products and services we believe will be helpful to our readers. That said, we are not in a position to verify the accuracy or fairness of statements made in advertisements—unless they are FIC ads—nor in REACH listings, and publication of ads should not be considered an FIC endorsement.

If you experience a problem with an advertisement or listing, we invite you to call this to our attention and we'll look into it. Our first priority in such instances is to make a good-faith attempt to resolve any differences by working directly with the advertiser/listener and complainant. If, as someone raising a concern, you are not willing to attempt this, we cannot promise that any action will be taken.

Tanya Carwyn, Advertising Manager, 7 Hut Terrace, Black Mountain NC 28711; 828-669-0997; ads@ic.org.

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



Much Better, Thanks

A few weeks after my sixth birthday, the November 14, 1955 issue of *Life* magazine was delivered to my family's home in suburban Chicago. It featured a convalescing President Eisenhower, a few weeks after he suffered a massive heart attack. Hand stitched on his bright red nightshirt, right across his heart, were the words, “Much better, thanks.” I recalled that image because it's time for our annual report on the health of this magazine's finances, and Ike's pajamas pretty well sum it up: after a terrible 2010, we're doing much better, and I'm glad you asked.

COMMUNITIES is celebrating its 40th birthday this year, and FIC has been the publisher for exactly half that time. Unfortunately, in two decades of writing these reports we've only twice been able to trumpet an operating surplus. While we've generally been able to shore up magazine shortfalls with a combination of donations and surpluses in other program areas, in 2010 COMMUNITIES lost a whopping \$23,000 and it was just too much red ink. Something had to give. Fortunately, what gave was not the resolve to keep publishing; it was the size of the deficit.

In December 2010 we made a deal with our magazine Production Team (Editor Chris Roth, Art Director Yulia Zarubina, and Advertising Manager Tanya Carwyn) that if they could eliminate half the deficit, the Board would take responsibility for the other half. I'm pleased to report that the Production Team produced, and the magazine has bounced back strongly. While the bottom line is still red—and we still need to keep our collective eyes on the ball—our deficit is in remission, having shrunk in half.

Though earmarked magazine donations were down sharply (only 16 percent of what we garnered the previous year), all other income categories were up in 2011. Advertising jumped 92 percent (bless you, Tanya), sample issues doubled, back issues soared 55 percent, newsstand sales blossomed 23 percent, and subscriptions gained a healthy 14 percent. Overall, income was up 10 percent. While there's still progress to make and we can use gains every bit as robust next year, it was a terrific across-the-board surge in the right direction.

On the other side of the ledger, we held the line on expenses. We squeezed printing costs into 80 percent of what they had been the year before, and even managed to trim three percent off production labor. While promotion costs were up substantially, that's not a major part of our budget and expenses were down nine percent as a whole.

OK, so we've had a good year. How are we going to eliminate the other half of the deficit, and reach the holy grail of a break-even budget? Good question.

We believe our best prospects lie in four areas:

—Subscriptions

We have about 1300 paid subscribers. While we're gaining, we need to do much better. In the last year our Production Team created a four-color promotional postcard for the magazine that we can hand out at events. If you know people or places where these could be put to good use, drop us a line and we'll send you a packet. Email fic@ic.org, tell us how many you want, and we'll zip them out to you. Where might you place them? Think independent bookstores, natural food stores, resource centers, progressive political groups, and public libraries—all places where our would-be readers are likely to be found.

Our target is to grow our paid subscribers to at least 2000. While we know that won't happen in a single year, it's our goal to make incremental progress every 12 months. This year we're aiming for 1500. An additional 200 subscriptions would translate into nearly \$5000 in gross revenues. While there would be expenses associated with printing and mailing 200 extra copies, we'll still come out way ahead.

FIC is a regular participant at a handful of community events every year and we try to take advantage of every one of those face-to-face opportunities to promote this magazine. In addition to the things we'll be doing to bang the drum, we're hoping to enlist you—our current readers—to lend a hand also.

Beyond placing promotional postcards (mentioned above), how about letting your Facebook buddies know about our presence there: www.facebook.com/CommunitiesMagazine. If an article in the current issue really grabs your attention, give a shout out to your friends about it.

Given your interest in cooperative culture (I figure I'm on safe ground here; after all, you're even reading the Publisher's Note), it seems likely that some of your close friends will be interested, too. Consider giving them the gift of community on their next birthday—give them a gift subscription to COMMUNITIES. (And if their birthday is a long way off, get creative: you could surprise them with a subscription on Bastille Day—July 14. Think of it as celebrating the intent to liberate society from the chains of adversarial and hierarchic culture. Long live the Revolution!)

This past winter Tiva Brown of Seattle threw us a lifeline. She took the plunge and became a lifetime subscriber for \$500. If we had a dozen Tivas step forward every year that would slash our operating deficit in half. If you're inspired to do the same, contact McCune in our Virginia office and he'll give you the details: order@ic.org.

—Advertising

Tanya did a terrific job of breathing life into the magazine's advertising last year. So much so that we've expanded her role to include ads for our family of websites as well, which puts her in an excellent position to offer package deals for both media.

That said, there's room to make a good thing better. If you have interest in placing an ad or an idea about who to approach as a possible advertiser, drop Tanya an email and let her know: ads@ic.org.

—Reprints

In the last several months we've been working diligently to overhaul our website so that we can offer electronic copies of COMMUNITIES, including reprints of individual

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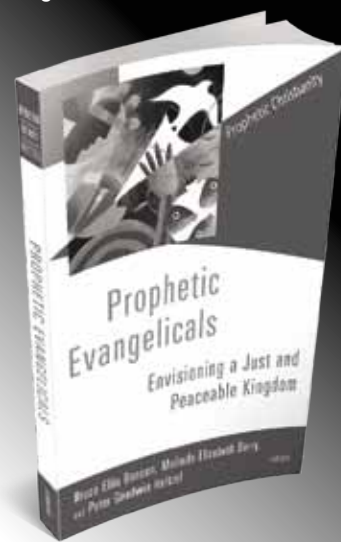
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PUBLISHER’S NOTE BY LAIRD SCHAUB

articles and PDFs of our reprint packets—where salient articles have been collected on a single topic and are offered as a focused bundle. Once we’ve completed work on our website, we’re hoping for a substantial bump in reprint revenues.

—Donations

COMMUNITIES would no longer be in print if it weren’t for a core of dedicated believers who, over the years, have generously used their checkbook to back their heart. Donations was the one magazine income area that stubbed its toe last year, and we’re hoping for a much more nimble performance in 2012. Our target here is \$10,000. It could come in the form of underwriting the costs of a specific issue (that’s devoted to a theme near and dear to the donor’s heart); it could be pre-purchasing a bulk quantity of a certain issue for conducting a promotional campaign; it might be earmarked funds given in support of a specific goal (such as travel costs to bring our Production Team together for the first time in two years, so they can synchronize their gyroscopes); or it could be a pile of unmarked \$20 bills stuffed into a manila envelope with no return address, accompanied by a unsigned note directing us to “Use as you see fit.” Any way it comes across the transom, we promise to make every dollar count.

A year ago, the first sentence of my closing paragraph read, “A year from now, I’m hoping to write about all the success we’ve had in turning things around.” Well, hur-ray. That’s exactly what I’m doing. The rest of that paragraph read, “However, don’t wait to hear it from me—help make it happen! If you’re half as inspired by COMMUNITIES as we are, we invite you to join our collaborative effort to reverse this magazine’s fortunes right now! In the process, we’ll be making a better world just that much more accessible for everyone.” Those words are just as true today as they were last year.

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Laird Schaub is Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and cofounder of Sandhill Farm, an egalitarian 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.

COMMUNITIES Magazine 2011 Financial Statement

Expenses		Income	
Printing	\$16,525	Subscriptions	\$28,097
Office overhead	5,324	Single issues	1,801
Production labor	29,608	Back issues	3,205
Fulfillment	11,151	Distributor sales	5,825
Office expenses		Advertising	6,065
(postage, phone, copying)	29	Royalties	253
Marketing	2,055	Donations	1,420
Total Expenses	64,692	Total Income	52,233
		Net Profit (Loss)	(\$12,459)

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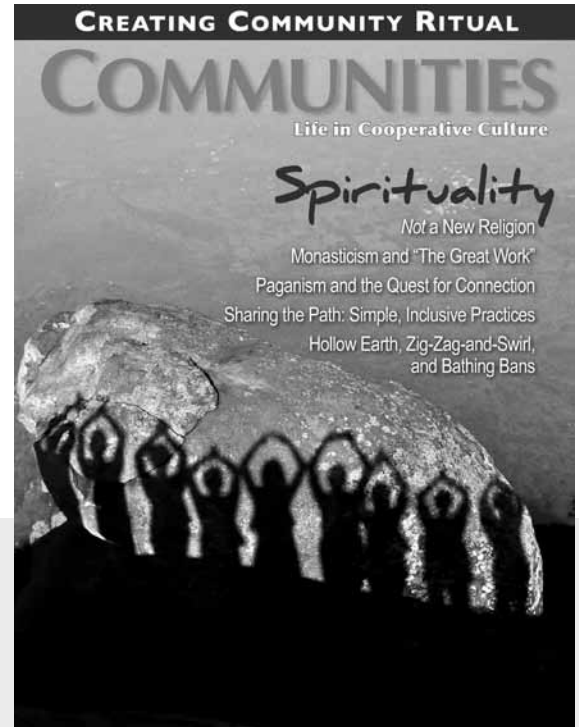
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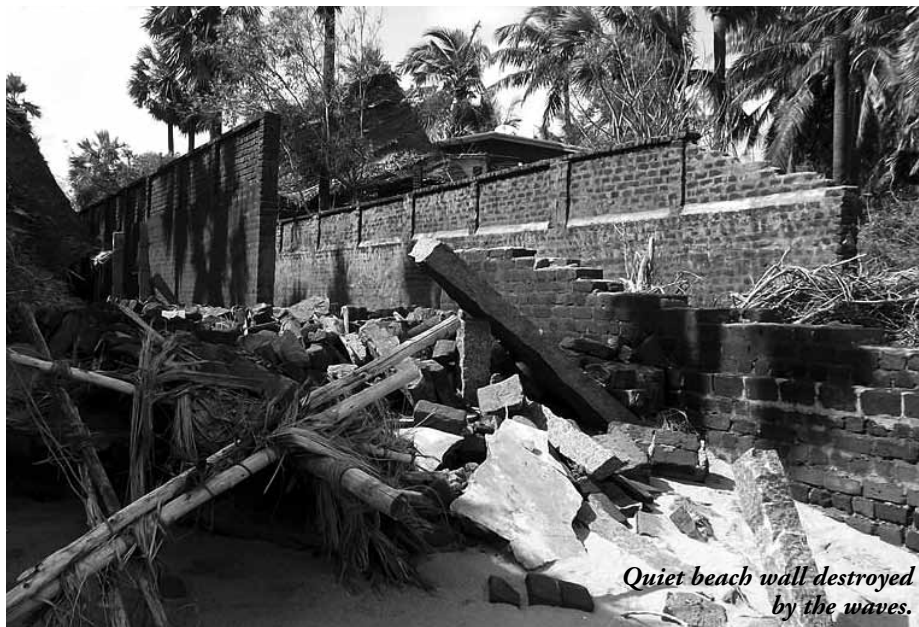
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Living Routes Cyclone Relief Fund

In Support of the Rebuilding Efforts of Auroville Communities



Quiet beach wall destroyed by the waves.



Rest of a keet house in Sadhana Forest.

Photos by Jean Christoph

On December 30, 2011 a severe storm with wind speeds exceeding 135 kmph (84 mph) hit the southeast coast of India. Gale force winds ripped roofs apart. Five-foot waves smashed the Coast of Bengal. Sugarcane, coconut trees, and cotton plants were ripped from the ground.

Cyclone Thane had landed.

When the storm was over, 50 people were dead, according to an estimate by the *The Times of India*. Millions of dollars in property damage left hundreds more without shelter.

In Auroville, a universal city of just under 2,000, the cyclone left a trail of devasta-

tion. Not only did the winds pull down 60 percent of the trees, but many buildings suffered extensive structural damage.

The storm destroyed windmills that pump water from local wells. Over 150 electrical poles came down. Protective fencing was wiped away.

According to *Auroville Today*, the costs for initial and long-term recovery have been far above what the Indian government is able to offer in relief funds:

Our initial estimate for immediate emergency relief is Rs. 50 million (approximately US \$1 million), while the funding requirement for long-term rehabilitation is significantly higher. Funding priorities at this time are to restore Electricity, Water, Security (fencing, etc), Access, and Shelter.

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Find out more:

Auroville's Cleanup:

vimeo.com/35688829

Cyclone Blue: goo.gl/1x2cP

AV Today: goo.gl/5n6rD

Julia Hanley is Director of Marketing for Living Routes, a Massachusetts-based group which offers study-abroad programs in sustainable communities, including Auroville (see www.livingroutes.org).

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR BY CHRIS ROTH

Diversity in Diversity



It may come as no surprise to COMMUNITIES readers that our issue on Diversity is...well, diverse.

Over the course of several months, the contents evolved to encompass a broader rather than narrower take on this theme. While several articles address challenges associated with cultivating racial diversity in community, many of our stories explore other forms of diversity, from different physical abilities to alternative worldviews, religions, and forms of civic engagement.

Perhaps furthest from an expected interpretation of the theme—but also striking at the very core of it—are articles dealing with how groups welcome in new people and how they make decisions. This latter topic, in particular, gets extensive treatment, as we initiate a year-long series on consensus decision making and alternatives to it. If “Busting the Myth that Consensus-with-Unanimity Is Good for Communities” provokes some reactions and conversations, bringing out the diversity that already exists even within established groups, it has done its job.

How groups handle their differences—including what methods they use, and the spirit in which they use them—goes to the essence of our theme. As contributor Tree Bressen (a guest editor of COMMUNITIES’ previous Diversity issue, #90) wrote to me, “One of the ways in which our communities wrestle most with diversity day-to-day

is in handling divergent opinions and ways of engaging with each other. Honestly, that is one of the key places where the rubber currently meets the road in most of our FIC groups, whereas ethnic issues, for example, come up only once in a while, as [most of] our groups are sadly rather homogeneous [ethnically].” In other words, attend a community meeting, and you may see past any superficial sameness into differences much more substantial, and more potentially divisive, than a contrast in skin tone or sexual preference.

Lack of demographic diversity remains an ongoing concern—and, like struggles with decision making and governance, it affects not just intentional communities, but all types of human groups. Some communities do succeed in including more outwardly diverse populations. Yet while most communities I know of aspire to more diversity of this type, in many cases their outreach efforts have met with only minimal success.

Perhaps a key to attracting more people of color and other minority group members to intentional community lies in the confluence of the realities just described: *not* in more vigorous recruitment campaigns, but instead in learning first how to work better with the forms of diversity *already present* within communities.

To put it another way: dealing with differences that are *not* skin deep (sure to exist in almost any group) can make it much easier to deal with differences that mostly *are*. A diverse population is also more likely to be attracted to a group that shows a healthy balance of unity and diversity—rather than to one united mainly in its members’ mutual inability to deal effectively with their own differences.

Please enjoy this issue, and let us know what you think. ☺

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES and is a sometimes-itinerant member of Meadowsong Ecovillage outside Dexter, Oregon. Contact him at editor@ic.org.

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Diversity Issues in Los Angeles Eco-Village

By Lois Arkin

“I just don’t like you,” I said in a very matter of fact voice to Jeanette*, after one particularly difficult meeting, and in front of many of my neighbors, several of whom also did not like her. I felt obligated to show some leadership in the situation. With this one small honest remark, I had intended (however naïvely) to build a bridge. But now Jeanette, who had never been particularly friendly toward me, saw me as her worst enemy.

Truth telling was an important basis for creating community, right? Maybe by getting it out, we could learn to like each other. I thought she and I could agree to disagree: that we could be civil once our mutual dislike was on the table. That we could work together in spite of it. How dumb was that! I was dead wrong! It became a two-year nightmare as Jeanette became the center of a divisive clique in the community.

Of course, the worst part of it was that Jeanette was a woman of color. “Lois as racist” was planted firmly in Jeanette’s mind, and in the minds of many of my community-mates. Years before that, I had serious concerns when Jeanette’s membership was up for consideration, but, as founder, I didn’t want to block at a point where the Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV) community was beginning to empower itself. Unfortunately, my concerns continued to be amplified during succeeding years.

Practicing what I thought was cohesion-producing honesty—let’s get our cards on the table and learn how to work together from there—really backfired.

“Lois as Racist”

There were other reinforcing signals of my “racism.” On a long-past occasion, I had commented to one of my neighbors during a community event at which she was squeezing oranges and was gathering the kids to help her: “Evelyn*, be sure to get the kids to wash their hands.” Years later I heard this story told to me, as an example of my blatant racism, as: “Evelyn, be sure to wash your hands before squeezing the oranges.” Many

of my neighbors had heard that story about me long before I did. Of course, Evelyn was a person of color, thus the reinforcement of the idea of “Lois as racist” since Evelyn-would-not-know-that-she’s-supposed-to-wash-her-hands-before-handling-food-for-others!

But, 10 years later, my comment reminding Evelyn about the importance of the kids’ hand-washing seems racist even to me. Why wouldn’t a 40-year-old woman with four kids know that she’s supposed to remind the kids about hand-washing before handling food?!

I had failed to consider one sweet little note in my life—that I am a person of privilege: white, from an upper middle class background. For me college had been a leisure-time activity, rather than a stepping stone into the middle class. I



Michelle Wong (left) celebrates her 40th birthday with Eco-Village neighbors.

was everything that Jeanette and Evelyn were not. To boot, I controlled a lot of money in my community; I represented “the landlord.” That just added insult to injury. Both Jeanette and Evelyn were consistently late paying their rent, and I had to be the rent collector.

Have I been a perpetrator of personal and “institutional racism”? And what did they mean by that latter phrase, anyway? I asked myself these questions many times during the first decade or so of L.A. Eco-Village, when this phrase came up so frequently.

My vision for L.A. Eco-Village in the mid 1980s—nearly a decade before we were even on the ground—was to create a demonstration neighborhood that was post-racist, post-classist, post-sexist, post-ageist. In my mind, I was the living manifestation of that post-ism society. If we could learn to get along among this diversity, then there was hope for the world. Why were my community-mates frequently accusing me of racism?



Eco-Villager Lara cuts Mardi Gras cake while others eagerly look on.

Institutional Racism

But one day about five years ago, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was innocently standing on the corner of my intensely urban neighborhood at a traffic light—along with a dozen others on various corners of the intersection. No cars were coming. Like hundreds of times before in my three decades of living in this neighborhood, I simply crossed against the red light in the safety of the traffic-free street. But always, especially in recent years, I wondered why no one else ever crossed. They just stood there waiting for inordinately long lights which, much to my chagrin, always favored cars.

In my sense of living post-racist, I had failed to recognize that the people waiting for the light were all persons of color: Latinos, Asians, African Americans. If I got stopped by a police officer, I might get a warning, or maybe a jay-walking ticket. If the others were stopped, they might be searched, hands above head, hand-cuffed, taken off to jail, deported, who knows what else. I saw such activities frequently in my neighborhood, read about such things all the time, and had heard horror stories for years from my community-mates and friends working in the areas of immigration law and human rights, and/or from persons of color who had been so victimized for minor offenses or no offenses at all.

I knew this stuff. I just never related it to my community. Weren't we all beyond that nonsense, I always thought. But we weren't, especially me. We brought the baggage from our mainstream culture—every last one of us—most being raised with some form of overt and/or often covert racism, ageism, sexism, classism.

But in LAEV, it was racism, and especially “institutional racism,” that got the most attention. And now I was beginning to understand what it was. So many of my neighbors who kept using that expression were so much younger, college-educated four to five decades later than me, an educational era—even in high school—where Black History/African-American studies, women's studies, Latino studies, racism in contemporary society were all part of the normal curriculum.

No matter how much I might have been in denial, I was perhaps the most guilty, always being the oldest, even from the beginning of L.A. Eco-Village in 1993 (I was 56 then, am now 75). Those younger folks didn't have to rush off to Wikipedia, like me, every time

some familiar-sounding name came up, not quite placeable by me in the history of race, class, and gender in our society.

Membership Balance

For many years, I was the front-end gatekeeper for those inquiring about membership in the LAEV intentional community. I was very sensitive to our diversity issues in the five areas that I had initially envisioned: ethnicity, gender, generational, household composition, income. Each year, I published a demographic chart and posted it to our community bulletin board to let the LAEV community know how we were doing in these five areas of diversity. Generally, we were pretty much on target in terms of gender, income, and, from my perspective, ethnic diversity, the latter always being the dominating diversity issue in our community. For most years, we weren't doing very well in generational and household composition, since for long stretches, I was the only senior, and there weren't any children.

To tackle the ethnic diversity issue, I thought 50 percent persons of color and 50 percent white was a good balance, since that approximately reflected the census numbers during the past decade in the City of Los Angeles. That is the ratio I was always conscious of as persons expressed interest in membership in our community. Telling white folks that we were a little out of balance, and that they should apply next year, after we had gotten more in balance with persons of color, was highly offensive to some members of the LAEV community, especially when they heard that I had mentioned this to their white friends, even though I would do this in a way that I thought was very sensitive and caring of their desire to become a member. Many folks really wanted to join our community because of its diversity, but these were mostly white folks. So, had they all sailed through our membership process, we'd be pretty out of balance in the ethnicity/race category.

In spite of my thinking that 50-50 was a good balance to maintain, the demographics for persons of color was much

higher in our immediate neighborhood, about 85 to 90 percent—a majority Latino, but substantial numbers of Asians. So, several in the LAEV community strongly felt that 50 percent was much too low for persons of color, since it was not representative of the neighborhood demographics (as distinct from the city's demographics). Others felt we shouldn't pay attention at all to such ratios in any area of diversity, but that we should do a much more intense outreach in communities of color.

I tended to disagree that the 50-50 balance was too low. I felt it was a good move toward more ethnic integration of the neighborhood without the negative gentrification that happened in many other lower-income minority neighborhoods, since we were deeply committed to permanently affordable land and housing for lower-income households.

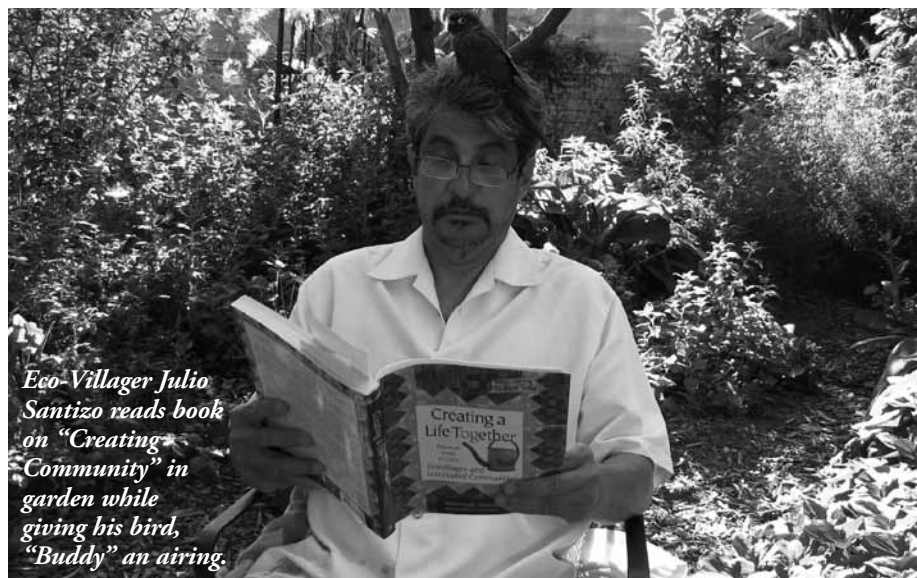
And I certainly did not want the LAEV community to fall victim to some of our earliest errors in judgment, when we accepted several persons of color more for their ethnicity than anything else. The subsequent problems resulting from that bias were divisive, expensive, and destructive to the community.

An example was the Jeanette situation described at the beginning of this article. Eventually Jeanette voluntarily left the community, but with a good deal of financial help from the Cooperative Resources and Services Project (CRSP), LAEV's parent nonprofit.

In another case, we had to evict a member. She was charming, articulate, smart, participatory, and interested in everything we were doing. In our enthusiasm we didn't check her references. It turned out she was a rent-scam artist; she'd rent a place, pay rent for three months, then just stop until she was in court for eviction, at which point the judge would direct her to work it out with the landlord. The landlord would be so happy to get rid of her without forcing her to pay back rent, the case would be dismissed before the eviction went on her record. And on to the next apartment she'd go, with her convincing charms.

Fairness or Bias?

As I witnessed our struggles with these issues, I imagined that if I were a person of color and had the qualities that we seek in membership, I would not be interested in joining the LAEV community since I would have enough similar things to do in my own community. For example, the LAEV community is open to those who can demonstrate over time their commitment to more ecological and cooperative living, preferably are car-free and bicycle-friendly, are proactive advocates for environmental and social justice, enjoy engaging in the community's activities, and can make substantial time commitments to participate in a variety of ways, including weekly dinners,



Eco-Villager Julio Santizo reads book on "Creating a Community" in garden while giving his bird, "Buddy" an airing.



Top to bottom: Some of the women of LAEV (left to right): Aurisha Smolarski-Waters, Yuki Kidokoro, Josey Sarria, Melba Thorn.

Eco-Villager Jimmy Lizama prepares his son Joaquin for bicycle trip.

Eco-Villager Thiago Winterstein (left) gives music lessons to federico and Luna.

Eco-Villager Melba Thorn shows off her vegan chocolate strawberries—a small business she started at LAEV and markets nationally via Native Gardens.

weekly meetings, monthly work parties, committee memberships, public advocacy in our areas of interest, planning and participating in public events, etc. If I were such a person of color, rather than join LAEV, I imagined I would prefer to be in coalition with the organization and others working on similar issues in their own neighborhoods and others who have common purposes in our city, to build organizational friendships across color and ethnicity lines.

When I mentioned this way of thinking to one of my most active neighbors in race and gender issues, who is a grad student in her mid 30s, she expressed some surprise, stating that she knows lots of young people (20- and 30-somethings) of color who would welcome the idea of living in a multi-cultural community. As I thought about that later, I realized that my experiences were quite limited with that generation outside the LAEV community and the young people I meet on our tours, so perhaps she makes a valid point.

On the other hand, would such persons of color be interested and available to participate at the depth that we would want? I will leave it to her and other community members to continue to introduce such persons to the LAEV community, and encourage them to move into our immediate neighborhood whether or not they choose to enter the LAEV membership process.

Of course, diversity in intentional community begins with the membership process. I like to think that I treated every member inquiry in a personal and fair way, answering their front-end ques-

tions, and frequently referring them to other resources if I did not think they would be a good fit for LAEV, though always also directing them to more information about our process, if they chose to pursue it. These personal responses were problematic for other members of the LAEV community who felt that every inquiry should be responded to exactly the same in the interest of fairness. Many of my neighbors also felt that I was acting in a presumptuous manner in thinking that I knew who might be a good fit and who not.

My directness and occasional curt remarks to visitors were sometimes seen as unfriendly and unwelcoming. Word of such remarks would occasionally get back to other members of the LAEV community who were concerned that I was not welcoming when I was informing some of their friends and acquaintances of our consensed-upon policies regarding visiting dogs, smokers, or folks overstaying our midnight curfew on loud social events.

Bienvenidos

Much to my relief, a few years ago, the community formed a Welcoming or Bienvenidos Committee, a primary purpose of which would be to respond to resident inquiries! I felt relief to no longer have to be responsible, and happily shared any of my experience that Bienvenidos committee members might find helpful. I did grow more careful in how I greeted and spoke with visitors, even when they were about to violate our policies. For example, I'd offer to dog-sit with a visiting dog outside on the sidewalk, while their owner visited inside our large building where dogs are not allowed.

Bienvenidos/Membership created a standard form letter to reply to all member inquiries. Within a few years of Bienvenidos taking over this member inquiry function, the deficiencies in our generational and household composition numbers were made up, and our ethnic composition actually went up slightly as well, if one counted those whom we had accepted for extended short stays, if not actual members of the intentional

In years past, although we had the 50-50 balance on ethnicity, we didn't have the strong leadership among persons of color that we have today.

community (which requires a four- to six-month process while not living in our buildings). Where we had only two seniors before, we now have five, all highly participating. Where we had no households with children before, we now have five households with a total of seven kids, six of whom are children of color (and, incidentally, one of whom was born at home in the eco-bathtub made by his father)—again with substantial interest and participation in community activities.

Several persons of color have taken on very pro-active leadership roles, convening committees, joining the boards of our Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust and our Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana Limited Equity Housing Cooperative, staffing our Management, Finance, and Membership Committees. In years past, although we had the 50-50 balance on ethnicity, we didn't have the strong leadership among persons of color that we have today. I believe that this has happened partly because I have stepped out of the way. (Generally, there is some tension between founders and those who come later, and once founders feel secure enough that the community will survive without them, it often becomes easier and easier to just let go. At least this has been so for me.)

Although the Bienvenidos/Membership Committee was directed by our Community Meeting (the weekly meeting that forms the main oversight governing body for the community) to answer all member inquiries with the same form letter, I still feel uncomfortable with this approach. I would like to see some inquiries given more personal treatment, answering questions that may not be answered in our membership process documents, and making further inquiries of the inquirer which may hint at some special qualities or interest that would be very welcome in the community, assuming their other qualities make for a good fit.

The Future

Some of my neighbors feel that we still have a long way to go in working through racism—institutional or personal. “We could do a better job of making space for people who are new,” says one long-time member, “to try to understand others better than we do. We could do a better job of listening to what others think. We could practice more nonviolent communication, learn and practice more how to give and receive personal feedback without directing negative energy toward the other person or being reactive.” We do not yet have an adequate regular

forum or process for giving and receiving personal feedback, an issue that came up in our most recent retreat. I volunteered to work on that issue, to bring a number of process options to the LAEV Community Meeting for consideration.

Hopefully, in the not-so-distant future, we will be practicing such a process of giving and receiving personal feedback regularly. And when we are really good at that, perhaps people of any race, ethnicity, age, gender, class committed to the LAEV vision and values will be able to breathe easy and think, “Ahhh, there's room for me here.” And, hopefully, LAEV members or applicants won't be thinking of themselves as weird for joining such a community, feeling that they don't quite fit in the mainstream of society—because maybe by then, we will be the mainstream, living on a planet that is surviving, and, hopefully, thriving because we learned how to transcend our “isms.” 🌱

**Names have been changed in this article.*

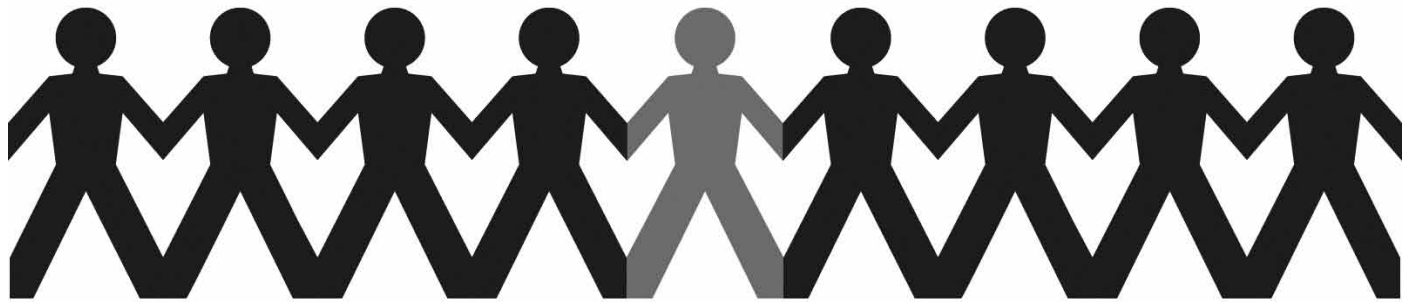
Lois Arkin is the founder and Executive Director of the CRSP Institute for Urban Ecovillages (1980), the initial development organization for the Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV), and cofounder of its successive development organizations, the Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust and the Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana Limited Equity Housing Cooperative. She lives and works in LAEV, is a former FIC board member, and former editor of the “Ecovillage Living” column for COMMUNITIES. She is an Ecovillage Network of the Americas council representative for the Western US and a Board member of the Global Village Institute. Learn more about the Los Angeles Eco-Village at www.laecovillage.org. Lois aspires to be a well-watered vegetable after she is composted in the LAEV courtyard garden, assuming she can get the zoning variance.

Los Angeles Eco-Village

Started in 1993, the 40-member Los Angeles Eco-Village Intentional Community is located in an intensely urban working class neighborhood three miles from downtown L.A. Our vision is to reinvent how we live in the city by effectively integrating the social, economic, and ecological systems of our neighborhood in ways that demonstrate a higher quality of life while reducing our environmental impacts.

Los Angeles Eco-Village Core Values

1. Celebrate and include joy in all our endeavors.
2. Take responsibility for each other and the planet through local environmental and social action.
3. Learn from nature and live ecologically.
4. Build a dynamic community through diversity and cooperation, giving and forgiving.
5. Inspire compassionate, nurturing, and respectful relationships.
6. Create balanced opportunities for individual participation and collective stewardship.



The Paralysis of Racism in Social Change Groups

By Laird Schaub

This article is adapted from “Laird’s Commentary on Community and Consensus” blog entry of November 10, 2011, at communityandconsensus.blogspot.com.

In the last week, I was twice in conversations—with two completely different groups, mind you—about how to navigate tense dynamics where a person with minority race bloodlines encountered resistance to what they were bringing to a predominantly white group, and immediately claimed racism—charging that the group was responding prejudicially to that person because they weren’t white. As both groups were explicitly committed to racial nondiscrimination, this development did not calm things down. The people I talked with were in anguish about how to proceed.

From the minority perspective:

In both of the presenting situations, that person was simultaneously a minority by race (a constant) and a minority in what they are thinking or how they are behaving (which was specific to that moment). It’s not necessarily clear why their idea was not met with enthusiasm. How can that person discern if a particular moment of resistance is about racism, about an unpopular idea, about an uncomfortable behavior, or all of the above? This is not a simple analysis.

From the majority perspective:

Racism is a real and virulent disease. It’s hard to know the full extent that it has infected a given culture (and hard to know when you’re free of it). What’s more, people in privilege are the least likely to be sensitive to the infection. Thus, even when you believe yourself to be consciously clean, it’s probably prudent to retain some residual skepticism—to be open to the possibility that you’ve missed a spot (or two).

In the wider culture, we learn to fight (or manipulate) in order to get our way. One of the reasons people become bullies is because this strategy often works. That is, people will often back down rather than fight back. This is even more true in groups committed to cooperation, as it’s especially odious to be in locked in a confrontational exchange—one of the very things you are trying to leave behind in choosing cooperation over competition. When you add white guilt into the mix, it’s fairly easy to see how effective a charge of racism may be in stalling opposition amidst a group

of whites. It's like shooting everyone with a taser.

Because they're deeply experienced in having their viewpoints discounted or suppressed (racism is a real thing, folks), some minorities learn to do whatever it takes to that get their viewpoints more seriously considered in a majority context. In the context of resistance, they've learned to push harder. While they know they aren't "being nice," they've learned that nice doesn't work. Nice can, in fact, be seen as one more form of white oppression (velvet handcuffs).

Given that minorities are used to whites being in denial about racism, resistance to charges of racism is often seen as *prima facie* evidence that the charge is true—even before anyone has examined the substance of the claim. It gets messy in a blink.

In both of the examples that were given to me (in each instance I was hearing the story from whites, not from a minority person), it appeared that there were ample ways to explain the resistance without relying on racism as an underlying factor.

While that doesn't prove that racism wasn't present, neither was it obvious that it was. When my advice was asked about how to proceed, I had several things to offer about how whites might respond:

- If possible, try to acknowledge that for the minority person the dynamic feels like racism—something they've

undoubtedly become sensitized to. Even better, try to acknowledge how awful this must feel. Try to connect with them emotionally, even if you don't think you're doing that bad thing. **Note:** I'm not pretending this is easy (authentically acknowledging someone else's hurt when you feel wrongly accused); yet this can be especially effective at diffusing tension if you can do it.

- If you can manage it without a charge (coming from a place of curiosity rather than defiance), ask the minority person why they thought that racism was occurring (essentially, "What indicates to you that you're being responded to differently by virtue of race?").

- Take time to look for defensiveness about the charge among the whites, and consider the ways in which that might legitimately be an element in the dynamic, even if you don't think it's the whole story.

- Don't be daunted by the racism claim from articulating what you don't like about what the minority person is saying or doing. It ultimately does no one any favors if you pull your punches and analyze statements or actions from minorities *less* carefully than you would the same things coming from whites (reverse discrimination).

- If things go productively, you can take this further by asking the minority person how whites can disagree with them without triggering claims of racism. You may or may not like the answer, but at least it will be an opening to a more nuanced choreography the next time you're all on the dance floor together. 🐾

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

Resistance to charges of racism is often seen as *prima facie* evidence that the charge is true.

DIVERSITY IN DC

By Sharon Villines

One of the aims of developing cohousing communities is diversity—in age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, household composition, sexual orientation, etc. You name it, most communities want it, or want at least one. Outreach teams feel they have failed if the new members they attract are not different from themselves. Both forming and built communities are proud to say, “We have two of these and one of those, and three more of these are considering joining.” Diversity statistics are cited to convince city councils to approve zoning requests.

A few months after move-in to Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington DC, with our diversity maximized to the extent possible, I realized we had met a diversity standard that none of us had considered. Doris had called together a cookout, one of our first, by announcing fried chicken in the piazza on Sunday at 1 p.m. Everyone who was around brought this and that and a bunch of us settled around a big round table. We were discussing upcoming events which, in DC, often means demonstrations. This one, a very big one, would be at the World Bank the next day.

Always at the center of any protest, Herb was prepared to leave early in the morning to meet protesters at the end of the Metro line, coming from out-of-town to escort them to the protest site. He started talking energetically about other things he would be doing. Anna was delighted because the demonstrations meant she had the day off. She worked at the World Bank and had been ordered for her safety not to come to work. She thanked her new neighbors for her good fortune.

Carol said, “Please, no thanks from me! I have three proposals submitted that I’m waiting to hear back on. I need to know if we have money to go back to Africa or not, and things in India are not so great if I can’t put more into the next phase than we put into the last one. I doubt if any of those offices took all their grant applications home with them on Friday.”

Doris said that she would be off work that day too, but on duty with the Guard. “It’s no vacation for me. I have to report for duty at 4 a.m. and I have no idea when I will be home.”

Everyone laughed and the conversation resumed, discussing the previous World Bank demonstration and the casualties that had resulted. Would this one be the same? Was Herb wor-

ried? The promise from the government was for more National Guard presence and more advance planning. Herb asked Doris if they had actually done anything differently this time and where she would be positioned.

Doris said, “I won’t know all of it until I report for duty because—” Silence.

Everyone looked up.

Doris continued in a controlled voice, “—that would be confidential.”

It took everyone a minute to realize what had happened. Herb apologized, and we changed the subject. It has been a perfectly innocent question on Herb’s part reflecting his serious interest in an event that we were all watching. He had had no intention of playing sleuth with his neighbor.

While the diversity points for that conversation would have been about a 10 on the basis of age, race, marital status, parental status, and a few more things I can’t remember, the ones no one had even considered were military status, activism, and opposition or support for the World Bank and its work. When I told this story on the Cohousing-L list, one person contacted me privately to ask how we can live together: “Do you eat at the same table?”

I receive similar questions when I report that we have a Colonel who leaves and arrives home in her combat universal camouflage pattern uniform or dress blues and for several years had another who “worked for Army Intelligence assigned to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” This is a diversity that would probably be impossible to meet outside of Washington DC.

In all honesty, just like our other diverse residents, they are just like everyone else. The differences are in personality, not age, skin color, background, occupation, or sexual orientation. 🐦

Sharon Villines is an artist and writer and a founding member of Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington DC. In addition to her personal blog, she writes two blogs on sociocracy, “Sociocracy.info” and “A Deeper Democracy” and is a guest blogger for Cohousing USA and the Cohousing Collaborative’s Cohousing Blog. She is also co-author of Orientation to College: A Reader on Becoming an Educated Person and We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy.



THE LIMITS OF DIVERSITY: HOW RELIGION FIGURES IN

By *Tim Miller*

For a long time I've thought that progressive society's near-sacred devotion to the concept of diversity rings a bit hollow. Yes, we're all for diversity, but the devil is in the details. Just what is diversity, and how far do we go with it?

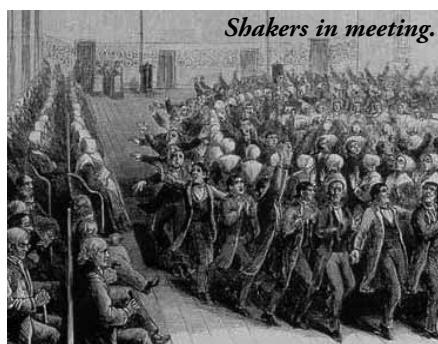
Diversity is often understood mainly as dealing with race, gender, and sexual orientation and preference, which are only three of the many categories in the matrix of human culture. And even within those three categories we really don't encourage truly wide diversity. All too often diversity in regard to race means accepting people of color who act like white people, not hip-hoppers from the 'hood. Gender diversity has to do with women who are upwardly mobile, not stay-at-home moms. As for sexual orientation and matters of sexual preference, we mean gay people who act straight and people whose sexual practices are fairly sedate, not the flagrant queers and the whips-and-chains crowd. Some diversity, yes, but nothing that covers the whole human spectrum.

Intentional communities by and large aren't too interested in increasing their diversity by accepting new members who are flat broke, lacking work skills, and/or generally unpleasant—although people with those attributes are all about us. If diversity really means what it says, it means welcoming a cross-section of society, which means that it includes racists, gun nuts, people who make dangerous lifestyle choices (like crazy driving), and Tea Partiers, not to mention deadbeats and loafers. Those aren't crowds I'd prefer to spend my leisure time with, frankly. I'm all for tolerating a wide range of lifestyles, but not all of them in my back yard.

So I'm a little skeptical of the idea that we're all committed to true diversity, and that applies emphatically to the part of the culture I know best, religion. Many individuals with secular outlooks are not just indifferent to religion but hostile toward it, thinking that believers are at best gullible sheep and at worst raving idiots. That disdain goes the other way as well, as believers often see nonbelievers as not only candidates for eternity in burning hell, but people who would tear down society's essential moral values. Moreover, committed religious people are often hostile toward each other. My group, after all, has the one and only truth of the universe, and anyone else is not just off the bus but an enemy who needs to be destroyed. In this country Catholics have been attacked, and even killed, for their faith, Jews have been ostracized and worse, and a wide variety of Protestants have, at a minimum, had their freedom of religion attacked.

Intentional communities have often suffered that kind of hostility, and in many cases still do. The Shakers endured vile slanders, and the death of their leader, Ann Lee, may have been the result of physical violence she suffered at the hands of her movement's opponents.

One good first step toward encouraging religious diversity would be to quit using the word "cult."



Shakers in meeting.



Torture in the Spanish Inquisition.



Burning of the Ursuline Convent, Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1824.

The founder of the Bishop Hill community in Illinois was murdered by a disaffected resident of the community who didn't really want to live there. More recently, the Morning Star Ranch community in northern California was bulldozed by the public authorities four times. In 1984 the Island Pond community was raided by over 100 Vermont state troopers and social workers on the basis of allegations that the children were being mistreated—allegations that had no evidence to back them up.

Today the worst public religious intolerance is directed at the “cults,” groups that are seen as turning people into zombies, taking everyone's money, corrupting our youth, and engaging in mind control of their poor victims. In short, today they are doing the kinds of things Catholics, Jews, and others were accused of not so terribly long ago.

But such stereotypes have little basis in reality. Let's dissect a few of them, working from a list by an anti-cult activist that was published several years ago:

The group focuses on a living leader, to whom its members appear to be extraordinarily committed. Human groups of every type have living leaders, and religious groups, especially, seek strong commitment from their members. The power structure of the Catholic Church tops out with one living leader who has been declared infallible on matters of faith and morals. (Yes, some members disobey his dictates, but so do members of “cults.”)

The group focuses heavily on recruiting new members. What religion does not seek new members? A hundred million evangelical Protestant Americans make recruitment a top priority and dump untold billions into missionary work.

The group focuses heavily on making money. I've yet to see a religion that didn't want money, and no matter how much they have, they never have enough. Religion is supposed to be about higher things, but it takes money to run an organization, and everyone is looking—hard—for it.

Members who question, doubt, or dissent with the group's beliefs are discouraged or punished. The Spanish Inquisition was run not by some “cult,” but by members of the religion that utterly dominated Europe in its day. Heresy-hunters can be found all over the religious map.

The group uses techniques that numb the mind to suppress doubts about the group and its leader. These include long work routines, denunciation sessions, meditating, chanting, or speaking in tongues. I'm sorry, but if meditation is mind-numbing, millions of our citizens are at risk. Many, many millions speak in tongues. As for hard work, many religious groups (including more than a few communitarian ones) have proposed that “work is worship.” If all of these practices are destructive, then most religions, mainline and otherwise, are destructive.

The group's leaders tell members how they should act, think, and feel. For example, members must get their love life and jobs okayed; leaders may tell them what kinds of clothes to wear, where to live, how to raise their children, etc. Quite a few people give up their own preferences in favor of the values of the group. It's not pathological to subscribe to communitarian ideals.

The leaders manipulate the members into feeling guilty in order to maintain control. Hello! Has anyone here ever run across any religious group that does not guilt-trip people to some degree?

The group expects its members to devote inordinate amounts to time to it. But how much is too much? If devoting your time and money to a cause you believe in is wrong, then most communitarians are in deep trouble.

And so forth. My point here isn't that some of these policies and practices might not be problematic, but that accusing “cults” of being dangerous for using such tactics is turning a blind eye to their nearly universal presence in religious organizations. Why is it that we kick

the underdog but not the well-connected?

One good first step toward encouraging religious diversity would be to quit using the word “cult.” The word once referred to religious rituals; it comes from the same root as “agriculture” and thus reminds us that much of today's religion is rooted in ancient fertility rituals. But “cult,” as it is commonly used today, has lost its descriptive value. It means “bad,” but only in an utterly subjective way. Put another way, its use amounts to a verdict that is rendered before the evidence is heard. It's a form of hate speech, and as such can encourage psychological or physical abuse of people toward whom it is directed.

In the first half of the 19th century it was widely acceptable in polite American society to disdain Catholics, and the climate of prejudice led to anti-Catholic mob violence in some instances. Later in the century it was generally acceptable to shun the newly-arrived Jews who looked different, talked in a strange language (Yiddish), and—gasp!—weren't even Christians! Well into the 20th century it was generally acceptable to consider African Americans inferior to whites, a sort of low-end subspecies of the human race. By mid-century it was still generally acceptable to regard Hispanics as lazy and suited for little but the most toilsome agricultural labor. Into the 1960s it was widely believed that women were not emotionally suited for the serious jobs held by men. In the 1970s it was still widely acceptable to ostracize homosexuals not only for their “unnatural” sexual practices but for their presumed inclination to be child molesters.

Although we haven't achieved perfect toleration of any of those groups, we've come a long way over the last century or two. Still, however, it is generally acceptable in polite society to brand people with religious ideas and practices unlike our own as “cultists,” and with that to take away their freedom of religion. If we value diversity, let's start with religious tolerance. ☺

Tim Miller is a professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas and a historian of intentional communities.

A Species Deep Diversity in the Ecovillage

By Jim Schenk



Jim Schenk

came from a large, dispersed family and I became the one to do much of the coordination for the funeral. The day after the funeral I was tired, and as my family left to go to our homestead I chose to remain in the campground where we were staying, next to the Hoosier National Forest. Following their departure, I decided to take a walk in the forest. After walking a ways, I sat under a beautiful, large Oak tree. As I sat beneath it, I experienced a deep mystical experience of interconnectedness—and also a level of communication with the ecosystem around me that I had never experienced before. I was aware not only of being connected, but also of the ability to communicate. Since that time diversity has taken on a whole new meaning for me, and my idea of community has greatly broadened. Diversity became so much more than the variances in the human community.

While Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage is only minutes from downtown Cincinnati, Ohio, we are blessed by being surrounded by a couple hundred acres of woods and greenspace. Our 80 houses are surrounded by this land.

When we started the ecovillage in 2004, one of our first initiatives was to develop a walking trail through this lush deciduous woods. Much of the woods is “owned” by individual residents, who gave their permission for the trail to run through “their” land. The trail required a good deal of honeysuckle removal (a so-called invasive species in our area), as well as the removal of saplings and other plant life to give us humans a way to go into the wooded area with its deer, raccoons, fox, possums, squirrels, cougars, myriad other animals, plants, rocks, soil, and water. We tried to remember to approach the woods with deep appreciation, to thank the plants for their lives and for their presence in this woods, and to remove only what was needed. Taking these lives offered the opportunity to

The human struggles with diversity—with racism, sexism, religious intolerance, etc.—are serious issues we need to deal with in all of society and within our ecovillages. In the Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage there is a fairly good, balanced female/male interaction in decision making and in involvement. The religious mix is broad, and religious affiliation almost never an issue of any kind. There is openness to involvement of people of all races—though we remain quite white, realizing that the concept of an ecovillage is not a huge issue among non-white populations in our culture. We have a number of African Americans and Latinos in the community, but not because of a commitment to the ecovillage, but because the neighborhood is a good place to live.

However, we probably struggle most with an “ism” that is not much discussed anywhere—one related to the involvement of other species. Other species constitute the largest number of residents in our ecovillage. With a large wooded area surrounding the community we are inundated with other species.

Although human slavery—in which one human “owns” and controls another—still exists in some sectors, it is illegal and totally unacceptable in modern society. However, when it comes to animals and plants, this same relationship is deemed acceptable. Few of us see the “ownership” of plants and animals as enslavement, but that is what it is. In reality, however, the ownership of either other humans or of other species is not a possibility. We can’t own that to which we are intimately related. However, enslavement is a possibility. Although ownership is a figment of our imagination, it has led to excruciating pain for fellow humans and continues to do so in our relationship to plants and animals. To enslave is not to appreciate diversity. Diversity implies a level of equality. We are one of some 10 million species. It is in our acceptance of other species on an equal footing that we can experience the diversity that they offer us. Speciesism will become unacceptable.

Understanding this became a reality for me in 1982 soon after my father died. I

experience the broad spectrum of diversity that this woods offered us.

The time spent building the trail deepened my own connection to this land, this land that houses hundreds of thousands of homes of other species. It also deepened my commitment to preserve the land as a way to protect the diversity that surrounded us. We have taken the opportunity to “purchase” some 39 acres of land surrounding the ecovillage. (One of the things we discovered is that it is easier to raise funds to preserve land than

concept: an urban CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), using people’s backyards. With over 60 subscribing families, the funds for the shares have gone into hiring farmers to coordinate and lead the work in growing the food in 10 backyards and to purchase the seeds for the plants we grow. Just finishing its third year, this effort has provided a truly diverse use for city backyards. It has also brought a diversity of people working together while sharing a high quality and quantity of food. (We are taking steps now to spread this concept throughout Greater Cincinnati, with a dream of hundreds of farmers working within the city.) It is another joining of human, animal, and plant life with a deep respect for the plants and animals that provide our food.

Many residents have a need to connect with our diverse population spiritually. They sense that the sacred resides within the woods, within and among the animals and plants that we have the honor of interrelating to within the ecovillage.

Being aware of all those that live with us and around us greatly enlarges and enhances diversity. It opens up the possibility of real growth through these interactions.

It is difficult, within this society, to keep a deep sense of interconnectedness with all species in all our relationships. We have a long ways to go to incorporate this sense of diversity into all phases of our lives and our ecovillage. However, it remains important. The Earth is not object, but subject. We can

We can deepen our relationships and the depth of love within our communities by reaching out to the others living among us.

for almost anything else. People appear to feel a deep connection to Earth and have an innate desire to preserve it.) In this sense our village is quite large, nestled in among the lives of a whole natural ecosystem.

As we come out of the woods, the experience of diversity surrounds the built environment:

While the majority of the backyards are made up of these wooded areas, there is a great deal of diversity in the remaining yards. We have fairly large backyards, most from a third to one acre, with some smaller and a few significantly larger. There is a deep respect, among a number of human ecovillage members, for the other species that grow in these yards.

Native plants have taken on a significant place. When some members had their native plants cited as noxious weeds, residents of the ecovillage were able to organize to have the city ordinance changed as a way to keep diverse ecosystems surrounding our homes.

Rain gardens have been built in over a dozen yards in order to keep water out of the sewer system and drain it into the land. Native plants also make up a great deal of these gardens.

The ecovillage is modeling a unique

deepen our relationships and the depth of love within our communities by reaching out to the others living among us. In this connectedness we can find that speciesism will fade and will become intolerable. It is in this connectedness that we will find deeper meaning in our relationship to Earth. It is a wonderful place to be. 🐦

Jim Schenk is passionately involved in creating Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage as a local and national model for sustainable living in our urban areas. He also edited the book What Does God Look Like in an Expanding Universe?, an anthology with articles from such authors as Thomas Berry, Miriam Therese MacGillis, Brian Swimme, and Brooke Medicine Eagle, containing their reflections on “Where We Come From,” “Why Are We Here,” and “What Happens After Death.”



Real Diversity Is Internal: The Story of a Mental Minority

By Colin Doyle

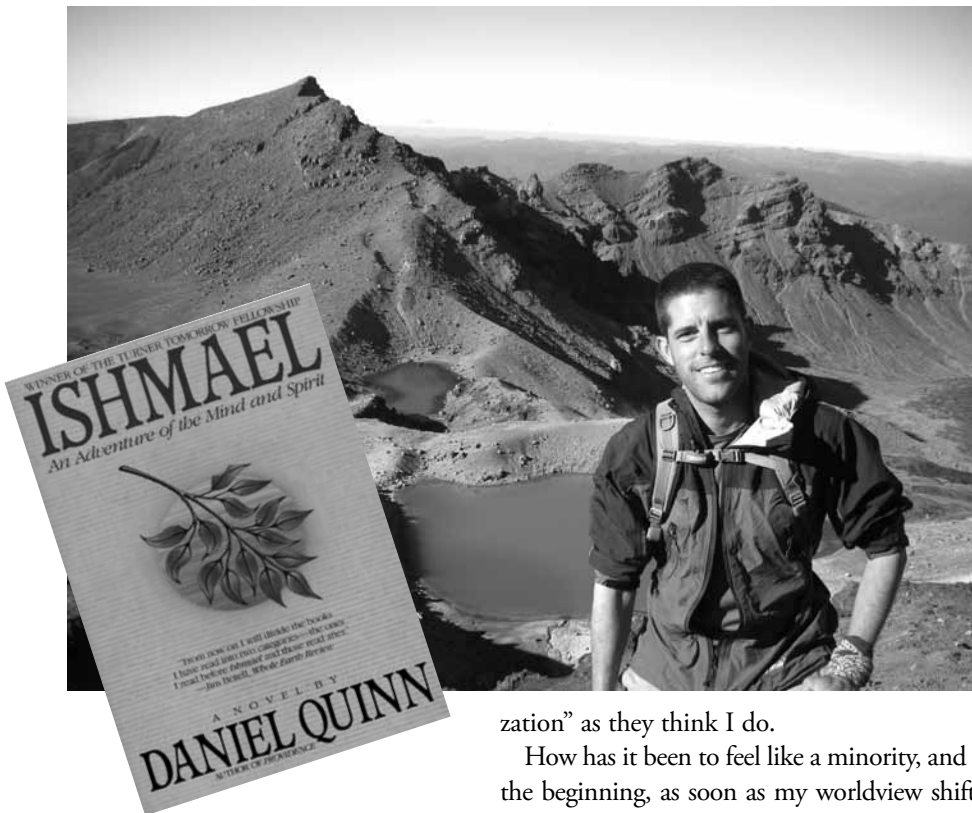
It was fall semester 1998. Apparently I was open to a major change in how I viewed the world. I had grown up in standard America, but hadn't fully accepted its premises and had always been very independent. Then in my biological anthropology class Professor Barbara J. King assigned the novel *Ishmael*. It blew me away (and that is NOT easy to do). As a result of reading this book about the past 10,000 years and then seeing facts I already knew through a new lens, my worldview flipped.

No longer did I think—like virtually everyone I had ever been around—that development and “civilization” and modernization were good things, progressing us from survival to comfort. I now thought the opposite, that the only people on Earth who actually know what they're really doing are the indigenous people who have been living in the same place in stable ways for thousands of years. I now had more respect for a thatched house in the Amazon than a skyscraper in New York. (A few years later I put my money where my worldview is and moved indefinitely to a tiny indigenous village in South America.)

Since reading *Ishmael* for the first time for that college class, I have never looked at the world the same way again. That sounds trite, but it's true. However, I've been surrounded by the cultural outlook I feel I've largely gotten past. America is the land of belief in progress through technological development—and for that matter almost *everywhere* in the world is too, which I've seen from Botswana to Burma, Denmark to Sierra Leone. I see that mentality as naïve, and if I'm right the world is awash in naivete (and it's still spreading).

As a result of this flip in my worldview, I have felt like a mental minority for 13+ years. I come from the most pro-development demographic there is—“upper middle class” white male American—and yet there is a huge difference between me and almost all of them. I don't share as much with the banner-carriers of “civilization” as they think I do.

How has it been to feel like a minority, and in a way that people can't even see? I felt it from the beginning, as soon as my worldview shifted. I developed mild insomnia, troubled from believing I needed to change the whole world. Life got a lot more serious (and I wasn't happy-go-lucky to begin with). I went on mild anti-depressant medication. I extolled *Ishmael* when the opportunity arose and gifted it to people close to me, but I always kind of held back about what I *really* thought (and still do). I tend to avoid conflict, and choosing to reveal the fact that my view of what type of lifestyle works best in the world is as much as 180 degrees different from that of the person I'm talking to takes some boldness, especially when I can easily choose to not mention it, or just shoot around the edges. Neither my skin nor sex nor other outward



appearance pronounces to people my minority status.

The differences have gotten less in recent years. This is partly because I have come to recognize the inherent humanity of all people better, and can sympathize with folks from the Global North (and Global South) as they are misled by their culture to pull us all—plus the rest of the natural world—in the wrong direction. That’s where I came from, and I had to be educated by others to wisen up and see what’s really going on. I’ve also gradually surrounded myself with people who are more my speed than the average, people who question and undercut mainstream culture in various ways, though with long-term goals that are often very different from mine. I’ve got allies, sort of. My independence has actually hurt me on this front, keeping me from throwing in with others transformed by *Ishmael* or similar experiences. Maybe my perspective is biased because I have more similar people around me now, but I think The Curve is catching up some. As it leans toward me, I’m willing to lean back toward it, partly because I’m gradually watering down my standards and partly just for acceptance. But I’m not holding my breath. I expect to be a mental minority for the rest of my life, except perhaps in a residential community of people who are also on the mental margin.

I consider myself a clear example of diversity. I’m not black or gay or poverty-stricken or elderly or in a wheelchair or speak English as a second language or in any demographic category that counts as “minority.” My type transcends all that. And when I think of diversity, I don’t think of these layers. I think of where real differences are—inside a person. There are billions of people from around the world who would add diversity to a photo but who are way more pro-civilization than I am. I think the standard conception of what diversity is is pretty thin—convenient, but thin. Worldview, though, is the underground river that cuts beneath all of the usual categories of diversity; it is the causal factor in a sea of correlative ones. I am an example of this, ostensibly as undiverse as they come and yet able to flip between mental/cultural channels to see through the pro-development world that surrounds me. Real diversity isn’t found on the skin or below the belt, but behind the sternum and between the ears. Real diversity is internal. 🐾

There are billions of people from around the world who would add diversity to a photo but who are way more pro-civilization than I am.

Colin Doyle has been living since late 2010 at Lost Valley Educational Center in Dexter, Oregon (in the residential community now called Meadowsong Ecovillage). He is Lost Valley’s Program Director, in charge of its conference center and its courses on sustainability and personal development topics. He enjoys experiencing different types of life around the world and hiking up big mountains to see vast views.

Poking the Issue

How much diversity is too much? In American culture of the last 15 years, diversity is supposed to be a knee-jerk positive thing, espoused and sought by all, especially universities and the public sector. But is that too simplistic? Communities need to go with what *works*, not merely what looks good in a brochure, and how pragmatic is diversity (of various types) in community? To be successful, intentional communities have to ride a balance, having shared group norms/values/goals (without which everyone spins off in their separate directions), but also having sufficient differences between people so that it’s not a fragile social monoculture. Is that why we’re after diversity—to spread our eggs among many baskets, each different person contributing their own ideas? Or is it because we’d feel bad/conservative/mainstream if we didn’t try to include everyone? Why are we after diversity?

—C.D.



Diversity Begins at Home

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

During the 26 years I lived in my alternative community I continually advocated for diversity. Having been born into a home consisting of German/Danish and Jewish maternal relatives, co-mingled with Native American Irish paternal relatives, as a child I experienced a continually enriching collection of colorful and widely diverse characters in the forms of aunts, uncles, guests, and relatives. I simply loved it.

My father, born in the stifling prejudice of Texas in the early 1900s, forged in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, and crafted in the belly of poverty, amassed a vibrant amalgam of people of all backgrounds and races to our dinner table. We ate with members of the Romani tribe, swapped stories and cultural influences with local Polish, Jewish, African American, Asians, and Greeks. We ate food as varied as chitlins, rouladen, and southern beans and ham. My mother's love and acceptance of hosting and my father's open-hearted embracing of all people built an early environment of acceptance for all races and points of view. My Native American grandmother left me deeply touched by the devastating noose of prejudice. All the men in her family were hung in one day from a tree in the Trans Cedar River in Texas. She found them at the age of seven. In her perception, that deed was a result of deep prejudice towards half-breeds and Native Americans.

All that changed for me when in the early 1970s through 1999 I joined an alternative lifestyle community focused on a back-to-the-land movement intermingled with religion and a paternalistic form of government. Suddenly the world went white. The community consisted totally of Caucasian members. I was a bit uncomfortable but, busy raising children,

I pushed the lack of diversity to the back room of my mind, that attic where memories of childhood are enshrined in old photographs and stored in outdated trunks of memory. But that too changed, when my father donated the first television to the normally media-deprived community.

It was the late 1970s and our children had barely if ever seen a television. A frequent and beloved guest had played in the Rose Bowl in their youth and the ill-begotten television set was allowed into the inner sanctum of our homes only for the 1982 New Year's Day football game. The foreign television set was placed on a temporarily erected pedestal of wonder. Leah, a young child, crept in unbeknownst and thereby witnessed her first African American. She was shocked and upset that someone was of such dark color. Her questions were painful: How had that woman gotten so dark? What could be done for her?

I was mortified and frightened. What type of perverted, albeit organic, world were we raising our children within? I immediately set about to change the environment. I gained legal guardianship of war orphans from Vietnam and South America, one of whom lived with the children for 10 years. With the help of another member we wrote and won a grant to bring inner city kids to live with our children in our community during the summer. I visited a local tribe and obtained permission to bring the children and our large yurts to a pow wow.

Some members of the community were quite upset. Their personal prejudice emerged. However, the largest percentage of the community was open, curious, and welcoming to people, especially children from other cultures. We learned as a community about different food tastes when the inner city children relished and exhausted our supplies of organic beet greens and kale. The colorful pow wow left a deep image of respect for other cultures' deep cultural and family values. At one point our children caressed the hair of their visitors while the visitors stroked the hair of our children. We began to build a world of experience where our children could be open to the reality of diversity.

This eventually led to writing and receiving a grant that sponsored a Festival of Culture in a Seattle inner city park. At the festival children of many ethnic backgrounds performed for each other dances, songs, and cultural music from their backgrounds. Did it influence or alter my children's points of view about diversity? Yes; now as I work towards a Doctorate in Educational Leadership I am in contact with many of the 168 children I helped to educate. Some of their fondest memories are those experiences of cultural exchanges.

What I personally learned is that if a community is lacking in diversity then members of that community need to begin reaching out—including, inviting, and opening themselves to other cultures, religions, and ethnicities. We live in a global world and we owe it to our children and ourselves to begin getting comfortable with diversity. Charity begins at home and so does diversity. 🐦

Ms. Israel is in her third year working towards a Doctorate in Educational Leadership. She studied this past summer at Harvard Graduate School of Education at the Closing the Achievement Gap Institute, was a presenter at the National Indian Education Association 2011 Conference, and is a Washington State approved trainer for early child care providers. She holds a Masters in Education from Antioch Seattle First People's Program.

Diversity at Camphill Soltane

By James Damon, Tai Shinohara, and Bethany Walton

That this article has three authors, rather than one, is of no small note. Indeed, we climbed a minor mountain in this collaborative effort. We all have varying heritages, viewpoints, and writing styles, so instead of cobbling our opinions into one definitive definition of diversity, we each chose to explore different ways in which diversity manifests itself in our community.

The Camphill Soltane Community

Camphill Soltane is one of over 100 communities within the larger Camphill movement stretching across the world. Camphill communities were developed as places that would uphold the inherent dignity and value of those people who are marginalized by society. While this could refer to many populations, most Camphill communities have primarily served those with developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Camphill Soltane, located outside of Philadelphia, is a transitional and residential community which helps young adults with special needs (“students”) discover who they are and find their place in the world. The college-like atmosphere of the Learning For Life program works to foster a joy of learning, along with teaching important life and pre-vocational skills. Soltane also includes a small population of older people with special needs who work as “residents” in a range of on- and off-site workshops. Students and residents with disabilities share their lives with live-in supporters (“coworkers”), who make at least a year-long commitment to living at Soltane—although some have been here for many years. Many coworkers are AmeriCorps members. Hired faculty from the surrounding area lead some of the classes and work areas. Together, students, residents, coworkers and their families, and staff members make up the Camphill Soltane community—90+ people in all.

Diversity of Abilities

In a community, simply having a collection of hobbies, races, or backgrounds is not enough. In order for diversity to really exist and be sustained, it has to be truly supported and differences have to be both honored and respected. Soltane places priority on fostering the growth of everyone who lives here, and people receive real opportunities to grow and achieve what they want out of life.

Here at Soltane this can be particularly challenging because our community members have a wide range of abilities. For their entire lives, our students and residents have been labeled as “retarded,” “special needs,” or “disabled”—all definitions of what they are not (“normal”). This has pushed them to the margins of society. Yet their uniqueness is the very definition of diversity.

This is what makes Camphill Soltane and what we are trying to achieve here

Author Bethany Walton working with student Ted H. in the raised bed vegetable garden.



Photos by Catherine Dodge Smith

so important. Within our community we try to look positively at what our students and residents can do, find out what they want, and then support them in the achievement of that goal. For example, one student, Jeff, absolutely loves to work outside or in any place that will get him a little dirty. While raking leaves or washing a window he'll loudly exclaim to anyone around him, "Gettin' down and dirty!" and simultaneously smudge a little dirt on his jeans. It is because of conversations with Jeff and also simply recognizing what he likes to do that Soltane was able to find him jobs in both a local garden/arboretum and a recycling center. Together with his job coaches, Jeff gets the chance to learn important life and work-related skills while doing something that he enjoys. Rather than fitting him into jobs someone else might want him to do, we've found ways to allow Jeff to express his unique identity through his work.

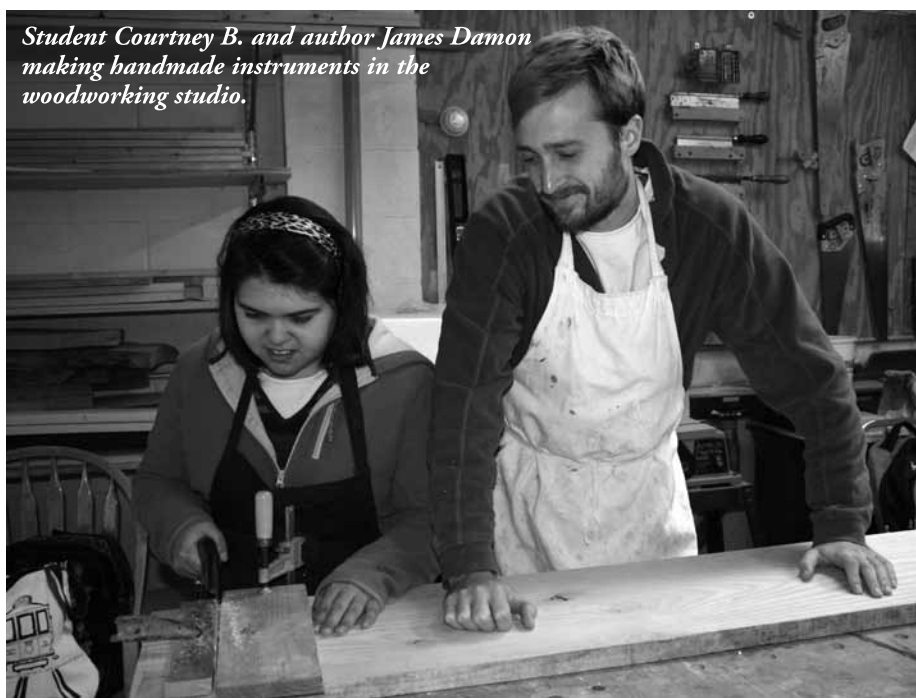
If an atmosphere of respect is present and already cemented within the community, then individual uniqueness will naturally begin to appear and flourish. In this way the community as a whole gives its members the confidence to share who they are. If this precedent is not set, then at least for our students and residents, Soltane would be no different from the rest of society.

However, it is important to note that the diversity of abilities that we have here at Soltane has limits. The community has recognized that there are some people we cannot adequately support, those with dual diagnoses (developmental disabilities along with mental health issues) or severe mental disorders, for example. Thus, recognizing the limits to the kind of diversity that a community can achieve is just as important as being accepting of it.

Lastly, while we encourage our students and residents (and community members in general) to voice concerns and goals related not only to their own lives, but to the community as a whole, not everyone can really articulate or grasp what it means for a community to grow and progress into the future. This is, in a way, a challenge of our own diversity. What Soltane has done well is to foster a feeling of trust that those in charge of Soltane's future will have the best interests of the community and its individual members in mind.

Socioeconomic Diversity

When Soltane was founded in 1988, the first individuals with special needs who joined the community were financed entirely through private pay. Fundraising made up what was needed to run the community above and beyond this tuition. The founding coworkers of Camphill Soltane realized that a private pay set-up would exclude some individuals with disabilities who might wish to join the community, but whose families could not afford that expense. Thus, one of Soltane's earliest fundraising campaigns was to establish an endowment whose purpose would be to make financial aid in the form of scholarships available to individuals based on need; in addition, one donor bequeathed money specifically set aside for scholarships for minority applicants. Then, about two years ago, Soltane began working within the public funding environment so that individuals with special needs who could access money from their state's public welfare system might be able to use those funds at Soltane.



Student Courtney B. and author James Damon making handmade instruments in the woodworking studio.

Today, 55 percent of students and residents are funded entirely by private pay, 23 percent receive scholarship assistance from Soltane, and 28 percent use public funding; some people rely on a combination of these methods to fund their residential or work placements at Soltane. One economically disadvantaged individual is fully funded by a private donor who was inspired by Soltane's approach to inclusive community living many years ago. Together, all of these efforts have given us a more socioeconomically diverse body of students and residents.

Our work is cut out for us here: recent cuts to public funding threaten the financial stability of some families with a member who is disabled, and the value of our endowment shifts with the stock market. But despite the unstable funding environment, the commitment to socioeconomic diversity in our student and resident body remains strong.

Interpersonal Diversity

Another aspect of diversity at Soltane is interpersonal diversity. When actively



Author Tai Shinohara works with student Lenny L. in the Learning for Life program.

We need to recognize that diversity is really just another slice of the pie, and by focusing too much on our differences we negate our similarities and potentially our ability to work well together. If we really wanted to focus on differences we could look at toenails and hairlines, but that would surely get in the way of our overall goal to grow together into being more autonomous individuals with a gift to share with the world. The real point is that diversity is important only insofar as the community recognizes and encourages meaningful differences as ways in which we learn from, and are inspired by, each other. ☺

All three authors are AmeriCorps members and first-year coworkers at Camp Hill Soltane. James Damon is from Philadelphia and enjoys running and volunteering. Taichi Shinohara is from outside of Boston; he is particularly interested in not only specific types of therapies such as Eurythmy or Cognitive Therapy but also how to make community and relationships a therapeutic force. Bethany Walton is from Schuylerville, New York and is passionate about being involved in community work with marginalized populations. You can contact the authors at jdamon, tshinohara, or bwalton@campillsoltane.org.

Diversity is important only insofar as we recognize meaningful differences as ways in which we learn from, and are inspired by, each other.

supported in the community, this leads to opportunities for individual members to express and develop their passions, which in turn creates opportunities for a more enjoyable and full life for other members.

A second-year coworker, Krisztina Kajtar, grew up in France and later moved with her family to Hungary. As a young adult, she had a formative experience with a musical troupe in Hungary, where she gained skills in choreography, set creation/design, group dynamics, and performance. This year at Soltane, Krisztina is offering a musical class which incorporates much of her artistic experience. She is thrilled to see the students and residents having so much fun with music and dance. During a recent moment of rare concentration and focus on the part of all of the musical players, Krisztina experienced an “aha!” moment as she saw how the students and residents were empowered by the opportunity to work together in new ways to create a body of work to share with others. “I am finally doing something that makes sense to me and to the world,” Krisztina says.

Recognizing Diversity in Community

If we encourage and support diversity, then its development and growth within the community will be healthy and will act as a strengthening element.

A Thrivalist Strategy for the Sick and Disabled

By Aurora Levins Morales

A proposal for a 21st century hunter-gatherer economic model for the chronically ill, incorporating ideas from traditional micro-businesses and small women's cooperatives, the local currency movement, transition towns, and other creative ideas.

1: Chiripa Economics

Chiripa is a Spanish word that means a stroke of luck. In the Puerto Rican countryside where I grew up, it meant those little bits of money that dribbled in from odds and ends of jobs or little businesses. In that time and place, women had little direct access to cash. The coffee, banana, and citrus crops were sold by men, and men controlled the money. But many women had tiny businesses generating little income streams: a neighbor gathered daisies from our farm and sold bouquets, several made the cubes of frozen juice called “limbers” and sold them to school children for a penny, others baked cakes, hemmed dresses, sewed school uniforms, made candy, or grew hot peppers to sell to their neighbors.

Chiripa economics is the modern equivalent of hunter-gatherer economies. Hunter-gatherers move through the landscape, taking advantage of whatever happens to be in season, knowing where resources are likely to be found, but drawing from many different sources, and flexible enough to take advantage of unexpected windfalls. Chiripistas are traditionally people who are economically marginalized, lack the capital to start full-sized businesses, or are mothers busy with childrearing and lack the time. Whatever their circumstances, chiripistas make use of a variety of skills to “harvest” small quantities of income from a variety of little ventures.

For people with chronic illnesses and disabilities that keep us out of the job market, the chiripa work style has many advantages. Like traditional chiripistas, we are economically marginalized and lack capital. But because of exhaustion, pain, and the immense amount of attention our self-care requires, we're also short on energy and time, and usually can't maintain full time work. An economic life that has small, separate parts can be more easily adjusted to our fluctuating capacity than a single full or part time job. Chiripa economics also allows us to diversify. We can have several micro-businesses that require different skills and levels of energy, activities that are seasonal, and let us rev up for a short while, then rest, jobs that can be done slowly, at our own pace, products we can make as we're able, without quotas.



2: Collectivizing the Effort

I grew up in a rural Caribbean culture which is much more communally oriented than most of US culture. Privacy and individual achievement were less valued than community involvement. I also grew up in a communist home (the root is the same as communal, common, community) and so I always look for ways to make individual struggles become group projects. Sharing a struggle makes it easier on everyone. Effort and costs can be spread out, and the feeling of solidarity, of being in it together, makes a huge difference to morale.

In 2007 I had a stroke and received rehab both in the US and Cuba. In the US, besides having access to a very limited number of sessions, patients were separated by curtains, each in our own private space. We weren't supposed to know what anyone else's disability or injury was, or what rehab they were doing. The excruciating work of desensitizing my raw nerves and regaining the use of my right side happened in private and it was exhausting and discouraging. In Cuba, everyone worked in one room. We knew all about each other's cases, because the therapists talked openly about what they were doing with each person. We could watch each other's efforts, make eye contact and encourage each other while we worked, and encourage each other when things got hard. My rehab sessions were almost 40 hours a week, but I was much less tired and was in much better spirits. Our individual recovery was still our own responsibility, but it felt like a group project. We were all going to fight to reach our goals together.

US culture heavily promotes the idea of individual achievement and individual success or failure. Although we have a strong history of cooperatives, collectives, intentional communities, barn-raising, and other communal strategies, that tradition has been suppressed. In hard times like the ones we're in now, we're expected to sink or swim on our own, and the societal message is that those who sink just don't have what it takes to live. Collectivizing our economic struggles helps to dispel the myth that poverty is a personal failure. Sharing the stories of our efforts to survive, and pooling our skills and resources to help each other and ourselves, is a consciousness raising process that makes it clear how little our difficulties have to do with our personal qualities.

Oppressive systems always try to make the oppressed think that the reason they're oppressed is that they're defective. One of the great gifts of being a teenager in Chicago during the early second wave feminist movement was getting to be part of a big collective process of women sharing the stories of our lives, comparing notes and reframing what our experiences meant. Because I essentially grew up in feminist consciousness raising groups, I knew that what was hard in my relationships or my school life, how I was treated at work or in the healthcare system, the inequities of heterosexual sex or the dangers of gendered violence, were none of them the result of character flaws, not my fault. I could see that sexism made those things hard. For sick and disabled people, collectivizing our economic struggles can help us stay clear that the level of difficulty in our lives is not the result of personal failure: oppression makes things hard.

Chirpistas often work alone, but sometimes they gather into small cooperatives—to make food, clothing, or crafts, repair bicycles, grow new crops, manufacture wheelchairs, cut hair, raise hens. Cooperatives can get group loans, share tools and the costs of marketing, and members can keep each other company and build

In hard times like the ones we're in now, we're expected to sink or swim on our own, and the societal message is that those who sink just don't have what it takes to live.

something together, ending isolation and boosting morale.

Although it varies based on individual circumstances and local levels of access, many chronically ill people and some disabled people are not physically able to gather in one place in order to work together. For sick people whose energy levels can fluctuate dramatically, managing to all have energy at the same time is close to impossible. In the past, communal survival projects have also depended on being in the same geographic area. In order to be part of an intentional community or a collective business, you usually have to move there. People in our constituency don't have that flexibility. We depend on networks of support in the places where we've settled, have extremely varied environmental needs, and don't have the financial margin to allow us to relocate easily.

The climate of blame, internalized shame about our struggles, discouragement, lack of resources, inability to relocate, diverse and often contradictory physical needs, fluctuating capacity, and sheer exhaustion have all made it hard for the sick and disabled to collectivize. I've spent years trying. But modern communications technology makes it possible to create non-geographic intentional communities, cooperative businesses, and networks of support.¹ Modern technology could allow us to build cooperative chiripa-based ventures, working from our own beds and desks, but sharing skills, access, money, knowledge, connections, and encouragement.

3: Transition

As we face a growing global crisis of capitalism, an energy crisis with the approaching end of oil reserves, and the escalating environmental crises of climate change, contamination of water, land, and air, and genetic modification of the food supply, with the threat it poses to all plant reproduction (to name the most obvious challenges), many people are coming up with creative ways to prepare for dramatic change. The Transition Town movement, founded in part upon the principles of permaculture, is a grassroots network of communities working to build resilience in response to peak oil, climate destruction, and economic instability.²

Local currencies, some of them developed in connection with Transition Towns, aim to increase the resilience of local economies by encouraging re-localisation of purchasing and food production.³ People can exchange labor outside the dollar economy, restoring value to abilities the marketplace may not value. The Common Good Bank

extends that idea by trying to integrate "a fast-growing mutual credit system with a new type of bank account, so that community-centered decision-making, money-creation, innovation, cooperation, and economic justice can connect seamlessly to the current mainstream economy," creating a transition banking system.⁴

The technical expertise and inventiveness of often right-wing and highly individualistic survivalists, combined with progressive movements around food justice, community-based medicine, and collective housing are giving rise to what I call a "thivalist" movement, whose goal is not just individual and family survival, but collective thriving, in the midst of disastrous circumstances. Principles of permaculture are being applied in many creative ways.



Barter, community and backyard gardens, and other cashless ways of meeting our needs are all making a comeback.

The sick and disabled are especially vulnerable in times of economic crisis. The resources we depend on become unreliable, social programs and public services are cut, infrastructure begins to break down, opportunities for work become more scarce, the health care system less accessible and more costly. Power shortages make everyone's lives harder, but for us, they can be catastrophic, even life-threatening. They can deprive us of necessary medical equipment, leave us housebound and isolated, and make it difficult for us to maintain safe environments. Sick and disabled people need to be part of designing the transition strategies for our communities. We can also begin designing our own shared strategies.

One possibility is to create our own communal currency, based not on geographically local community, but on a shared set of challenges. Local

currencies are a way to keep resources within a community. Instead of being backed by gold reserves or other capital, they're backed by the creativity, skills, and energy of a community of people. Crip currency could help to build resources among the sick and disabled by allowing us to put resources back into supporting each other. We can create value according to our own standards, exchanging skills that the crashing marketplaces doesn't value but that we do.

Many of the local control strategies being developed in geographic communities could also work in a virtual community of chronically ill and disabled people. Paul Glover, the founder of the highly successful Ithaca Hours currency, has written a book about creating health cooperatives and "self-insuring" as a community. Ithaca has one of the few medically integrated free clinics in the country, specifically for the uninsured.⁵ I went to graduate school at a "university without walls," a geographically dispersed graduate school that allowed students to learn at home, and had faculty spread out across the country. What if we created a virtual, geographically dispersed free clinic without walls for uninsured and underinsured chronically ill and disabled people?

With our chiripa collectives, crip currency, and free clinic without walls, we could also encourage the development of thivalist technology and projects especially beneficial to our community. We could become our own spread-out transition town. People interested in exploring these ideas with me can reach me through my web site at www.auroralevinsmorales.com. ☺

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1. for example, Sick and Disabled Queers on Facebook, where an earlier version of this article appeared

2. paraphrased from Wikipedia

3. paraphrased from Wikipedia

4. commongoodfinance.com/about-us

5. paulglover.org/hdbook.html: "Take control of health costs by self-insuring as a community. Explains how to start a local health co-op, based on the author's experience starting the Ithaca Health Alliance."

Many of the local control strategies being developed in geographic communities could also work in a virtual community of chronically ill and disabled people.

Doing the Heavy Lifting on Affordability

By Laird Schaub

Last February I spent a Sunday with Jamaica Plain Cohousing in Boston, Massachusetts, helping them try to untangle a skein of questions about how best to use their Affordability Fund. Over several years the community has gradually capitalized this Fund by siphoning off five percent of Homeowners Association dues. They have now accumulated an impressive amount of money, and they're itching to start putting this money to use—they just want to do it well.

The community is located in a well-established neighborhood with a mixed race and mixed income profile—features that the founding group intentionally sought. The community has a core commitment to being multicultural and multi-generational, and has demonstrated that commitment by setting aside hard cash to finance their dedication to diversity. For my money, this is damn important work.

Early in the day, we were able to establish that folks want to use the Fund in such a way that they'll take into account the impact on the surrounding neighborhood, as well as on the intentional community. They see themselves as a stakeholder in the future of their corner of Jamaica Plain, and want to be vigilant about not inadvertently contributing to gentrification, which could price out the multicultural mix they now enjoy.

We also identified that they'll need to explicitly identify which population segments they want to track in their quest for diversity (while they probably don't care how many seven-footers are in residence, they do care about having a representative ethnic mix; while they can safely ignore how many members have belly button piercings, they desire a mix of families with young children relative to empty nesters). They'll also have to define what it means that an identified target population segment is under-represented as well as how much preference a prospective might get by virtue of wearing that label. In short, it's complicated.

After making a pass at laying out the complete laundry list of questions that the community will have to address before they have a complete affordability package (we were able to name about 20 and I'm certain more will surface as they dig deeper), we rolled up our sleeves and started tackling the strands, one at a time.

Three Ring Circus

The highlight of the day, for me, was the rich complexity that emerged when we looked at the question: "To what extent do we want to emphasize using the Fund to support current residents relative to supporting suitable prospective members

who come from under-represented target populations?"

After hearing from several people on this, some themes emerged:

a) There was a clear preference that more money go to supporting prospective members than to supporting current residents.

b) There was the expectation that prospective members were most likely to need a loan in order to come up with the down payment (which was likely to be five figures), while current residents were more likely to need a short-term loan to cover unexpected expenses or the temporary loss of employment (where loan size was likely to be an order of magnitude lower).

c) There was overwhelming support for the notion that the Fund should be used to make loans, not grants, and that it was to be seen as a bridge, not an artificial leg. Recipients needed to be able to show that they had reasonable prospects for repaying the loan and that there was adequate collateral in the event of default. The group wanted to be able to use the money over and over.

When we were able to tease out this clarity we moved in the direction of establishing percentage guidelines for how the Fund could be used: 50 percent for prospective members; 25 percent for current residents; and 25 percent at the discretion of the Affordability Fund Management Committee (the group that would be receiving applications and making decisions about who would get loans based on the guidance developed by the plenary).

Just when it appeared we were closing in on an agreement, a third idea entered the field: how about using the money to buy a housing unit that the community would permanently own and could rent to low-income folks from one of the targeted populations? Suddenly we had three worms crawling around on the floor instead of two. The conversation started to mushroom instead of converge, and people were starting to get anxious about how we were going to get all of the worms back in the can.

After allowing a certain amount of open discussion—mainly to flesh out the ideas—I asked folks to stand in a line, representing with their feet where they stood (literally) on this matter. We had those wanting to go all in to buy a unit position themselves at one end of the room; those wanting to restrict Fund use to supporting prospectives and/or current residents stood at the other end; those with mixed preferences, or undecided, placed themselves somewhere in the middle. We knew we had a good question because folks were spread out all along

the line, with small clumps at either end. Now what?

Folks at one end argued in favor of the new idea because it was bold, and a surer way (in their eyes) to actually put low-income people into residence in the community. They tried to make the case that the amount of money available in the Fund was too small to make that much difference to prospective buyers.

Going the other way, people liked the idea of helping prospective owners and/or creating a financial safety net for current residents, and they felt that the Fund was too small to be buying units with it—it would only be enough for a down payment and all the rental income would go into debt service, leaving nothing for helping others.

The Magic of Consensus

We reached this point with about 20 minutes left in the day, and it appeared on the surface that the differences were so great that the meeting was headed toward a hung jury—and very meager product after five hours together. Uh oh.

Fortunately, we were in better shape than people could see at first. By listening closely to the undercurrents, we were able to articulate a productive direction:

a) There was broad-based support for seriously considering the community buying a unit and using that to breathe life into the community's affordability commitment.

b) At the same time, there was nowhere near solid support for taking all of the current money in the Fund and devoting it to buying a unit, leaving nothing for supporting the affordability needs of current residents or those of prospectives trying to purchase units.

c) The idea of buying a unit had never been chewed on before in plenary and it stirred up a lot of serious questions (notably about marketing and property manage-

ment). Recognizing that it would take a while to both flesh out and address these questions, it seemed reasonable to uncouple this idea from the Affordability Fund—at least for now.

d) Because the community also had another, significantly larger pot of money in hand (from a Brownfield settlement for remediation of the soil on the property), it seemed much more comfortable to most people to consider the idea of buying a unit in the context of using these funds, about which a conversation was already in the plenary queue.

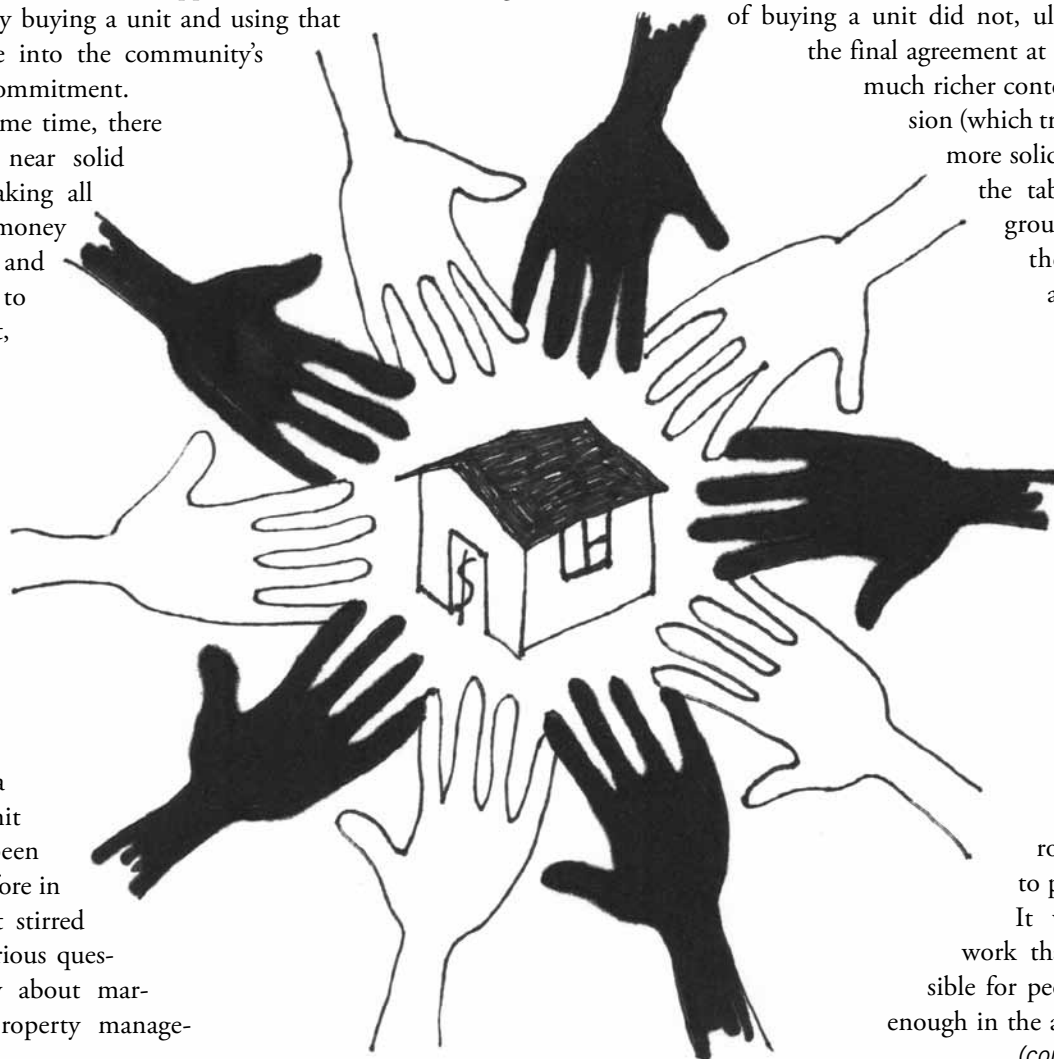
As this summary worked well for folks (that is, everyone felt included), we were able to lay down the idea of using the Fund to buy a unit, with the understanding that it would get serious consideration when the Brownfield money got looked at. Then we were able to approve the suggested percentages for how the Fund would be apportioned between prospectives and current residents.

In the evaluation at the end of the meeting, some members felt we'd spun our wheels in trying to reach the above agreement, pointing out that we had that proposal on the table at 2:45 p.m. yet weren't able to close the deal until 3:45 p.m., after we'd opened up Pandora's Box on the question of buying a unit.

While it was true that the hour devoted to exploring the idea of buying a unit did not, ultimately, change the final agreement at all, it provided a much richer context for that decision

(which translates to much more solid buy in) and set the table for how the group would begin the conversation about how to use the Brownfield money. I thought the hour was well spent and demonstrated the payoff for all the work done in the first half of the meeting to clear the air and lay out a road map for how to proceed.

It was the earlier work that made it possible for people to be brave enough in the afternoon to add
(continued on p. 74)



The Art and Ethics of Visitor Programs

By Blake Cothron

All around the world we're now witnessing an exciting upsurge of interest in intentional communities and alternative living arrangements. This is very promising news for any of us who are proponents of a more conscious, equitable, regenerative, and sane world. Major challenges face the intentional communities movement and any similar projects. The challenge I'd like to highlight now is the integration of new members and volunteers in a holistic, ethical, and meaningful way. We must ask, *what are we in our individual situations doing to provide an ethical, hospitable, meaningful, and fair introductory experience for newcomers in our community?*

How often have we in community witnessed the following scenario: an enthusiastic and good-natured new person is invited into your community who has useful skills, heart, and potential to contribute much to your community, but soon experiences internal challenges, becomes disheartened, and then departs? I've watched this drama unfold too many times (and been the disillusioned new person myself). As facilitators and creators of intentional communities we need to deeply consider why there is such a high turnover rate of potential new members and communitarians. We can start by first exploring a few crucial questions: why do people enthusiastically decide to explore membership in intentional community in the first place? Why do they often leave so soon? How can a visitor program better meet the holistic needs of new people and warmly integrate them into the community?

People choose to pursue intentional community life for many different reasons. Some are looking for a way out of the "rat race," and a simpler, more natural and holistic life. Others choose cooperative living to engage in educational or humanitarian work. Some wish to pursue their spiritual path while living with other seekers and practitioners of their faith. I think most can agree, however, that we basically all choose intentional community for very similar foundational reasons: we want deeper

connections with other people and the Earth, more meaning in what we do, and to live a healthier, simpler, and more regenerative lifestyle. Personally, I chose to first explore community living in 2006 because I believed there had to be a much better way to live than I was experiencing in my struggling and crowded hometown. I craved a more integrated existence, simplicity, deeper relationships, involvement in organic agriculture, and living more in tune with nature.

I think it's important to remember how we all felt when we were first new to community. How did you feel? Were you excited, amazed, maybe a bit bewildered? Were you very open-hearted and generous, or were you quiet and reserved? I was a bit of all of those and also painfully idealistic and naïve. It's important for us to remember that joining a community is usually an enormous step out of the status quo and our privacy-addicted mindsets; it can be a culture shock. We can easily



forget what it's like for a new person to join the group and how much of a dramatic internal shift they often must make to function cooperatively.

Sometimes we just *expect* them to understand what is to us common knowledge: why recycling is important, the virtues of not having a television, or the real dangers of GMO's, for example. We sometimes *expect* new people to *accept* our community lifestyles outright, with little to no time for adjustment. It's important to remember that anyone who is exploring intentional community is in the rare two percent or so of the population and deserves recognition and patience for that fact alone.

We must be real here and recognize that welcoming new people into our communities and farms is no simple task. It takes *much* time and effort to host someone properly, and even more consciousness and energy to create an integrated and holistic experience for them. And of course there are always some people who try, and then find out that community living is just not for them, or who are simply not good matches for the community. Yet the way we go about hosting someone will dramatically affect their experience and the likelihood of any future involvement in our community. What is often overlooked out of perceived practicality is the loving human touch and interaction, as well as practical arrangements like good housing and trying to match compatible people to your project, which makes all the difference.

Many times I traveled to a community as a prospective member or intern and experienced myself and others being treated like the means to a goal, and later on I also caught myself embarrassingly on the other end as well. It's all too easy to view new people, whether interns, apprentices, or prospective members, as energetic, free labor for all of our needy projects, and to treat them in that one-dimensional way. From experiences I had facilitating WWOOF volunteers in a farm community, I realized I had to become more sensitive to the fact that every person is a multi-dimensional being with different needs, desires, proclivities, fears, skills, dreams, and maturity level, and that interacting with them sensitively and respectfully is essential. We need to honor each person's journey and complex needs while treating them in a holistic way.

The first step, before we even *begin* to offer live-in programs in our communities, is to discern *why* we wish to begin a visitor program and how to best meet the needs of the visitors. Are we wanting to temporarily host someone simply to lend us a hand and teach them a skill, such as natural building, or are we offering an opportunity to explore potential membership? These two scenarios necessitate different strategies and arrangements. Depending on the purpose of the visit, we then can make arrangements to meet their basic needs and organize for their guidance from a community member or team.

Beyond this physical, basic level, I am advocating for the creation of a nurturing environment for interacting with a new person based on their multi-dimensional existence, so that they feel sustenance on many levels and both they and the community can better get their needs met. Let's explore some of the factors involved and how this holistic approach can be manifested.

In most successful community endeavors I will attest that effective communication is the foundation, and in general most deep, fulfilling relationships are based on open communication. So it's important to remember that people come to community generally seeking a more meaningful, fulfilling, and connected reality. The modern world is depressingly impersonal, as more computers, machines, and isolation prevent genuine human interaction and communication, even on a basic level. Integrating

intimate, meaningful communication and sharing into a newcomer's stay is therefore vital. Imagine a new person being warmly welcomed over chai and relaxed casual conversation, instead of practical details and "breaking them in" with immediate work projects or orientations. How does the first option feel over the second?

We need to make sure we extend respect and warmth while fostering personal communication with new people. Too often I've seen rural communities operating like little boot camps with new people treated impersonally like "new recruits." The focus is on productivity,

Too often I've seen rural communities operating like little boot camps with new people treated impersonally like "new recruits."

labor, and accomplishing goals, often for the benefit of a desired image or material aim. Personal development, reflection, spirituality, and emotional/artistic expression are curtailed in favor of pushing onward "the glorious mission." This is not a sustainable approach. We need to examine our community situations and *very honestly ask ourselves*, "are we collectively facilitating a sustainable, meaningful, and holistic experience for ourselves as well as newcomers?" Likewise we need to ask, "are our advertisements and outreach material accurate, up-to-date, or even *true*?"

Here's a story to dramatically illustrate this point: several years ago I found online a listing for a dynamic-sounding intentional community, complete with a dedicated group of conscious permaculture pioneers and an incredible organic mini-farm educational center overflowing with abundance and diversity. I was excited and scheduled my visit as an intern. As I pulled into the property backed dramatically by thousands of acres of steep, wild, dark, misty moun-

tains; I was in awe of the beautiful setting. There indeed was an impressive diversity and abundance of fruit orchards and gardens...but what I quickly noticed an absence of was a *community*. The center was operated entirely by one man and his wife.

“Well,” I figured, “this place is so amazing maybe it will still work out somehow.” That evening I was shown my choices of housing. One was a dark, creaky, musty hundred-year old barn outfitted as a sort of dormitory, with lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling and raggedy old blankets and mattresses strewn about. The other option was a small, 8'x 8' unheated shack with gaps between the uninsulated wall boards just big enough to let the freezing March wind and snow blow inside during my first night. The “simple, organic diet” they offered consisted of nearly-spoilt dumpstered food, and the consensus decision making was made between the man and his wife. As *educational* as this center was, I left after about three days, feeling relieved to be gone yet disappointed and somewhat scattered.

It was not the cooperative and holistic community it was advertised as, and now

The act of integrating new people into our communities is a delicate, sacred responsibility.

I was very inconvenienced and hundreds of miles away from home and had to abruptly make new plans. The lesson for me was to not be naïve about trusting that a website is entirely accurate and honest, and to openly ask *a lot* of pertinent questions before making a move to a community. The online description of this community was 10 years old and obviously

needed a lot of revision. Portraying our projects or community as something they are not is simply not ethical. Likewise, it's not ethical or useful to offer new people substandard housing and food or inhumane work and living arrangements, yet it's all too common.

Now ask yourself, how would you feel being asked to eat and live in what is being offered to *your* interns or visitors? The fact that an arrangement is “livable” (sometimes survivable is more accurate) does not make it sustainable or humane. We need to extend our own human needs and desires to newcomers in community, who are vulnerable people as well. Let's be as generous as we can. Create living arrangements which are nice and inviting and foster a sense of privacy, safety, and nurturing. These things go a long way in helping a new person feel welcomed, appreciated, and respected, which will likely lead them to consider staying on longer.

As well as meeting basic physical needs, it's just as important to make an effort to meet the emotional and mental needs of a person. This is why I advocate scheduling a special time, perhaps once a week, to hold a “checking-in” session and ask them how their experience is going. How have they been feeling? What do they like best? What has been challenging? How has their image of the community changed so far? What is inspiring them? What would they change if they could? This could be done in a comfortable private room, over dinner, or in a nice natural setting. Try to facilitate it as a warm, personal exchange, not like a formal interview or going down a list of questions. And, unless necessary to do otherwise, keep their answers private or at least not completely public.

This small, simple exchange, I believe, can make a dramatic impact on a new person's feelings of connection and being cared for, as well as facilitate more internal clarity about their own experience. This will help not only them, but the community also, to have more clarity about how the visit is going and to help balance out any issues and potential problems early on.

Many times, new people will leave a community for very simple and often avoidable reasons. Lack of a private room, lack of vegan diet options, etc. can all be deal-breakers. Many times this can be avoided by clear communication and agreements

beforehand. However, I'd say a majority of people leave community because of *lack of integration into the group*. Communities can become very close-knit or even form cliques that can be difficult or nearly impossible to penetrate, with new people often treated like outsiders. This can be avoided by inviting new folks to community events, meals, and outings. Allow them to introduce themselves in front of everyone and share a bit about themselves. Host an open mic or talent show and encourage them to express their artistic sides. Have fun! If they express interest, facilitate a small personal project for them; perhaps painting the kitchen or planting a fruit tree. This will help them feel a sense of contribution and meaning—innate human needs.

The act of integrating new people into our communities is a delicate, sacred responsibility. We want new people to feel positive about joining our communities. Both parties are taking a risk. They are trusting us to facilitate a good experience for them; to keep them safe and nurtured, and to offer them what we have advertised. We want them in turn to have a positive, dynamic, and educational experience, and contribute to and potentially join our community. We all want to get our needs met by the whole event.

I admit, I'm still an idealist. I do not mean to offend those who offer well-meaning, but still deficient visitor programs. I believe that integrating even one (or more) of these suggestions into your visitor program will dramatically improve the experience of your visitors and lead to better outcomes for everyone involved. In summary, I'd like to highlight these important points:

Be Honest: Make sure any outreach material is accurate, honest, and up-to-date. Be *very clear, honest, and descriptive* about the housing situation, food quality, daily schedule, spirituality or religious focus, privacy, fees, local climate, mission of the community, alcohol/tobacco use, and the communities' basic expectations of visitors. Ambiguity leads to problems, disappointments, and chaos.

Be Fair: Make sure your situation is nurturing and balanced for a *multi-dimensional person*. Share decent housing that is clean, heatable, at least somewhat private, and that feels cozy and safe. If all you have available is sub-par, make that very clear, and post pictures of it. Create their schedule to be livable and not arduous. Allow at least *one full day* per week of off-time for rest and reflection, ideally with no expectations of their attending anything. If you are to charge something, take into account all the labor they will be doing.

Connect: Welcome new people warmly and stay in close communication with them throughout their stay. Get to know them and engage the new person in events and outings. Have a friendly, personal, and private meeting time with them at least once during their stay to check in and connect. Be sensitive

to their needs, varying moods, and desires. People usually join community because they want more connection, meaning, and deeper relationships.

Create space for new people to express themselves and contribute: If they show an interest in a personal project or contribution, try to help them to do it. Keep it small and realistic. Share opportunities for art, music, dance, and recreation.

Be Real: Be open about (at least some of) the challenges and issues facing the community. Be open and real about the mission, focus, and mood of the community, and expect openness from them as well. Learn from each other and be accepting of their enthusiasm and a fresh, new perspective on your community. ☺

Editor's Note: We invite responses from communitarians to the questions and concerns Blake presents in this article. We'd like to present a diversity of perspectives on the issues raised, and you can help with that. Please let us know what you think.

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Busting the Myth that Consensus-with-Unanimity Is Good for Communities

Part I

By Diana Leafé Christian

“Consensus...allows each person complete power over the group.”
—Caroline Estes, *Communities Directory* (FIC, 1991, 1995)

“You’d better watch out! You’d just better *watch out!*”

One community member rose from her chair as she said this, obviously distraught. She had just blocked a proposal in the business meeting of a real community I’ll call “Green Meadow.” The facilitator, after conducting several go-rounds about its legitimacy, declared the block invalid. “The proposal passes,” he said.

The member who blocked seemed stunned. Testing for the legitimacy of a block had happened only once before in their 13 years as a community. Theoretically they had agreed in the beginning to use C.T. Butler’s “Formal Consensus” process. This means the group determines whether a block is valid, based on whether the proposal violates the group’s underlying principles. Unfortunately early members had failed to write down that they had decided this. So, while the community gave lip service to the idea that they used Formal Consensus, many Green Meadow members either didn’t know they had the right to test a block for validity, or knew it but were afraid to try it.

This particular Green Meadow member had threatened to block numerous times over the years, which of course stopped potential proposals from being presented. It also stopped people from calling for consensus on proposals they were considering but knew she was against. And in the previous year—when they finally stopped being afraid to test for consensus when they knew someone objected—this member had gone ahead and blocked several proposals. Many people had privately expressed frustration with her power over the group, partly because of her many years of threatening to block, and also in the past year, because of her actual blocks.

The phrase “*You’d better watch out!*” was still ringing in the room.

“Excuse me, are you making a threat?” someone asked hesitantly. “What should we watch out for?”

“What should you *watch...out...for?*” the Green Meadow member asked. She paused and looked around the circle. “That you all don’t trip over your own *stupidity!*”

Hey...wait a sec. They were using consensus decision making, which is supposed to create more trust, harmony, and good will in a group—all the consensus trainers say so—but instead they had at least one member in high distress and everyone else glued to their seats in stunned silence.

Not only that—for years people had been afraid to even bring up proposals they feared this member would block.

Never again did the group test a block to see if it was valid, regardless of the belief

that they use Formal Consensus. Some Green Meadow members certainly *tried* to test blocks over the next few years. But someone would always say, “But we can’t prove we ever adopted it!” Or, “But we haven’t agreed on what our criteria are!” So anyone who thought a block should be tested for legitimacy didn’t feel enough support and ended up dropping it. Relatively frequent blocking continued.

Those who formerly made proposals stopped making them (and sometimes withdrew from community governance or left altogether). Distrust and conflict increased. Morale plummeted. Twenty-five or 30 people used to come to business meetings. Now they’re lucky to get eight or nine.

Was Green Meadow an example of consensus working well?

“Consensus-with-Unanimity”

“Consensus” as described in the story above refers to what I now call consensus-with-unanimity.

The first part of consensus is the *process*—the intention to hear from everyone in the circle, asking clarifying questions, expressing concerns, and modifying and improving the proposal.

The second part is sometimes called the “decision rule”—the *percentage of agreement* needed to pass a proposal. In many communities it is 100 percent or “unanimity” or “full consent.” Except for anyone standing aside, everyone in the meeting must agree to a proposal—unanimity or full consent—before the proposal can pass. Unanimity or full consent is *one possible way* to decide things after the consensus process.

(This distinction between the process and decision rule was first pointed out by Sam Kaner, et. al. in the book *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, New Society Publishers, 1996.)

In practice, consensus-with-unanimity means essentially that anyone can block a proposal for any reason, and there’s no recourse—such as having criteria for a legitimate block, or requiring people who block proposals to co-create a new proposal with the advocates of the old one. (By the way, I don’t think having criteria for a legitimate block works well for most communities either, as I’ll explain in Part II of this article.)

In my experience, consensus-with-unanimity is what most communitarians mean when they say “consensus,” and most believe it’s the best thing out there.

Other Decision Rules

There are certainly other decision rules groups can use with the consensus process. These include supermajority voting, with 90 percent, 80 percent, 85 percent, 75 percent, etc. agreement needed to pass the proposal, or first trying for unanimity and having a supermajority voting fallback. (Consensus-minus-one and consensus-minus-two are also decision rules. However, I believe they generate the same kinds of problems as consensus-with-unanimity.)

Using other decision rules can work very well. My friend Ronaye Matthew was the developer consultant for three cohousing communities in British Columbia, recommending consensus-with-unanimity to each group. For her fourth project, Creekside Commons Cohousing, she recommended the consensus process with a straight 80 percent supermajority vote as the decision rule.

“Creekside Commons had far less conflict than the other groups in the two years I worked as their developer consultant,” Ronaye told me.

An especially effective decision rule is used in the N Street Cohousing Method, described later in this article (see “*What Works Better Instead*”).

Falling in Love with Consensus

Consensus-with-unanimity was created in the 1600s by the Quakers because of their deeply held values of equality, justice, and fairness, and thus was a reaction against autocratic rule and outright tyranny. They had the insight that anyone who saw problems in a proposal that the group couldn’t see, even after much discussion, should be able to block the proposal in order to protect the group. Leftist activist groups and communitarians in the 1960s and ’70s—also with deeply held values of equality, justice, and fairness—adopted consensus-with-unanimity partly because it seemed so fair and equitable—and thus partly as a reaction against not only autocracy, but also majority-rule voting, because in the latter a proposal can pass even if up to 49 percent of the group is dead-set against it.

Quakers, Leftist activists, and commu-

Blocking continued. Distrust and conflict increased. Morale plummeted. Meeting attendance dwindled.

nitarians all understood that consensus-with-unanimity forces a group to use a participatory process that guarantees inclusion of everyone’s perspectives. It was good for groups. “Consensus creates a cooperative dynamic,” wrote C.T. Butler in his book *On Conflict & Consensus* (Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1987, 1991). Consensus is “a powerful tool for building group unity and strength,” wrote the authors of *Building United Judgment* (Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981).

Consensus-with-unanimity was especially appealing to baby boomers hoping to change the world back in the ’60s and ’70s. It *empowered* us. It was as if special, magical gifts arrived just for our generation. We had sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll. And we had consensus.

No wonder we all fell in love with it!

Appropriate Blocks, Inappropriate Blocks

One of the reasons I believe consensus-with-unanimity does not work well in most communities is that people often misunderstand and misuse the blocking privilege. As you probably know, it is appropriate (and desirable) to block if the proposal clearly violates the community's values, underlying principles, or Mission and Purpose, and one can clearly show why—or to block because implementing the proposal would harm the community in some real, demonstrable way, and the person(s) blocking can clearly show why.

Here are two examples of appropriate blocks from consensus trainer Caroline Estes. The first involves a proposal being appropriately blocked because it violated the group's underlying principles. A member of a peace organization devoted to nonviolence blocked a proposal that their organization throw chicken blood from a slaughterhouse on the wall of a building belonging to a Wall Street investment firm. The idea was to create a visual, dramatic, photo-op way to show that the Wall Street company had "blood on its hands" because of its investments in weapons manufacturers. The person blocking pointed out that passing this proposal would violate the group's basic principle of nonviolence (since defacing the wall with blood would not be a nonviolent action). The person blocking could clearly show how the proposal violated the organization's principles.

In the second example a proposal was blocked because it would cause demonstrable

Only one community I know of that uses consensus-with-unanimity exhibits the kind of trust, cohesiveness, and well-being described in the books.

harm to the group. During the Vietnam War a member of a Quaker congregation in the US blocked a proposal involving civil disobedience—that the congregation send humanitarian aid (first aid supplies, food, etc.) on a chartered boat to North Vietnam, which of course was the country the US was at war with. The idea was to express the Quaker principle of being against all wars, including this war, and to literally help people in North Vietnam. The person blocking pointed out that passing this proposal would harm the Quaker congregation in general, and specifically its parents with small children. They all realized that the US government would consider their sending humanitarian aid to North Vietnam as an act of treason, and probably all members of the congregation would be arrested and jailed. The person who blocked said, essentially, if parents of young children were jailed, who would take care of their children? Again, the person blocking could clearly show how the proposal would harm the group.

I believe inappropriate blocks occur primarily for three reasons. First, because different community members interpret the community's stated purpose in completely different ways, and thus exist in different paradigms about what the community is for. When this happens, some members will be moved from the heart to make proposals to help the community (that they imagine in their minds) move forward towards its goals, and other members, equally moved from the heart, and drawing on all their courage, will block these proposals in order to protect the community (that they imagine in their minds). Nobody's right and nobody's wrong.

A second reason is because a proposal violates the community member's personal values rather than the community's shared values (and they don't realize

this is not a legitimate reason to block). Or, third, they're blocking in order to receive negative group attention from a subconscious desire to satisfy unmet needs to be seen and heard.

When Consensus-with-Unanimity Does Work

"Granted, only a small proportion of groups have the necessary conditions to effectively use...consensus...with unanimity," wrote the Leftist activist authors of *Building United Judgment*. "Such groups are small, cohesive, and cooperative." They add, "If attempted under the wrong circumstances or without a good understanding of the technique, the consensus process can result in confusion, disruption, or unrest in a group."

Most community-based consensus trainers advise groups not to use consensus unless they meet the specific requirements for using it.

"(Consensus is) not appropriate for all situations," cautions consensus trainer Tree Bressen, but works best "for groups that have a shared purpose, explicit values, some level of trust and openness to each other, and enough time to work with material in depth." ("Consensus Basics," website: www.treegroup.info)

My teacher, Caroline Estes, said using consensus required the group to have a shared common purpose, equal access to power, and training in how to use consensus properly.

Tim Hartnett, in his book *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making: the CODM Model for Facilitating Groups to Widespread Agreement* (New Society Publishers, 2010) is even more specific. Besides noting that the smaller and more homogeneous the group, the easier it is to reach agreement when using consensus-with-unanimity, he writes: "participants must trust each other and value their relationships highly...must be trained to participate responsibly...must put the best interests of the group before their own." And they must spend lots of group process time to keep their relationships open, clear, and healthy.

In my experience, relatively few inten-

tional communities meet these requirements.

Some have vague, unwritten ideas about shared values rather than explicit, written-down shared values. Some communities assume they have a shared common purpose but actually have idealistic, theoretical, and vague Mission and Purpose statements that can be interpreted many different ways. Thus they experience confusion and conflict when trying to assess whether or not a proposal is aligned with their (multiply interpretable) shared common purpose. In other communities, designed primarily to be nice places to live where members can buy houses or housing units, people may not necessarily be—or care about being—cohesive and cooperative, or having sufficient trust or openness with one another, or highly valuing their relationships with one another. They just want to live in a nice place with nice neighbors (and to heck with this touchy-feely stuff). And only a handful of communities require all new incoming members to take a consensus training before they get full decision-making rights, including the blocking privilege.

Nevertheless—no matter how often consensus trainers caution against it—communities everywhere often choose consensus-with-unanimity even though they don't have even the most basic requirements in place. They choose it, apparently, because they aren't aware of these cautions or disregard them because consensus-with-unanimity appeals to their aspirations for fairness, equality, and a better world.

I have by now visited and gotten to know over a hundred communities in North America and abroad. Only one I know of that uses consensus-with-unanimity seems to exhibit the kind of trust, cohesiveness, and well-being described in the books. This community has only 11 full members with full decision-making rights, along with shorter-term residents with more limited rights. The community's Mission and Purpose statements are clear and specific. The founders and other full members are successful and effective in their chosen fields, and exhibit, most of the time, a relatively high amount of emotional well-being. They highly value their relationships with each other and are small enough for this to happen naturally. They are a tight and cohesive group.

Threatening to Block and “Premature Proposal Death”

In some communities that use consensus-with-unanimity no one has ever blocked, or blocking has occurred only rarely. Yet the problems of too-frequent blocking or personal blocking are actually there anyway. This is one of the most demoralizing unintended consequences of using consensus-with-unanimity.

This happens when people *threaten* to block a proposal, either directly (“I'd never support that,” or, “I'll block that proposal!”) or indirectly, by indicating disapproval, disdain, or even contempt for a proposal through facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. This can happen even when someone is just voicing an idea that isn't even a proposal yet.

When either of these happens—threatening to block a proposal, or threatening to block an idea that isn't a proposal yet—the community suffers. People drop their ideas or proposals completely. Community members don't get to illuminate the issue through discussion and examination. An idea that could benefit the community, or could shed light on an important issue, is cast aside before it is even considered—dying before it was ever born!

In communities that no longer use consensus-with-unanimity no one has this kind of power over other people's ideas.

Denial and Disconnect

As I observed this over the years I became aware of a vague, foggy disconnect between what I believed were the benefits of consensus-with-unanimity and *what I*

actually experienced. My beliefs didn't match what I was seeing and hearing. I rationalized this by assuming the community *just wasn't practicing consensus correctly.* For many years I've served as a consultant to communities seeking outside help, and six years ago began teaching consensus too. And when communities were having trouble in their meetings with consensus-with-unanimity I—of course!—thought it was just because *they probably weren't doing it right.*

It was much easier to believe what I'd been taught by my elders in the communities movement (who certainly knew more than I did) and in what I wanted to believe, rather than actually believing the evidence of my own senses!

Because, what I have seen over the years—and what many of my colleagues across North America, Europe, and Latin America have *also* seen—is that consensus-with-unanimity does *not* seem to help most communities function better.

In fact, it often seems to make things worse.

In the last few years I've been de-hypnotizing myself from the idea that this form of consensus creates more harmony, cohesiveness, and trust—that it makes groups stronger, happier, and safer from the abuses of power.

I've watched friends and colleagues in other communities who've observed the same things replace unanimity with a different decision rule, or replace consensus altogether with Sociocracy, Holacracy, or a method they created themselves.

I now believe that for many communities consensus-with-unanimity results in unintended consequences: discouragement, low morale, and diminished meeting attendance. I believe it can create a different kind of power abuse than either autocracy or majority-rule voting.

Power-Over...Damn!

Tim Hartnett, a community-based consensus facilitator and trainer, and licensed family therapist, is the first consensus trainer I know of to say publicly that the benefits of using consensus-with-unanimity are often outweighed by its downsides.

"Requiring unanimity," he writes in *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making*, "is usually intended to ensure widespread agreement. When unanimity is blocked by a small number of people, however, the group actually experiences *widespread disagreement* with the result. This widespread disagreement can have very toxic effects on the group dynamic."

He observes that no matter how well and accurately a group practices consensus-with-unanimity, *doing so does not ensure unanimous approval of the final, modified proposal.* And when people block, no matter that we're supposed to assume they have a piece of the truth the rest of us don't see, we still end up with...power-over dynamics.

Tim Hartnett points out that blocking in consensus-with-unanimity is often considered a way to *equally share power* in a group. However, giving people equal rights to control the group's ability to make a decision can actually create problems with equality. "It necessitates that all group members have the ethics and maturity to use this power responsibly," he writes. "This may not be a realistic expectation." (Whew! Somebody actually said this outloud!)

"True equality may be better secured by a system that ensures *that no group member ever has the power to individually control the group,*" he continues. [Emphasis mine.]

"The process allows each person complete power over the group," Caroline Estes cautions. "(When someone blocks) they should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling." ("Consensus Ingredients," *Communities Directory*, FIC, 1991, 1995.)

You can see the effects of this power-over dynamic clearly when committee members have worked long, hard hours on a proposal and then spent more time and energy in a series of whole-group meetings to modify and improve it, and most of the community members are looking forward to implementing it. When it is blocked by one or two

people (for any of the above inappropriate-block reasons) do we feel harmony, trust, and connection? On the contrary, we often feel heartsick, even devastated. And when this kind of blocking happens often—or the threat to block, which usually has the same effect—it can result in even more unhappiness, and increased distrust, low morale, ever-dwindling meeting attendance...and people leaving the community.

Many of us chose consensus-with-unanimity in order to help our community thrive, and because we value fairness, mutual respect, trust, compassion, and equality.

But fairness, mutual respect, trust, compassion, and equality are often *not* what we get. We get conflict instead—and sometimes, gut-wrenching conflict.

This is the “shadow-side” of consensus-with-unanimity that consensus trainers don’t often talk about. Yet Leftist activists and the communities movement *have* come up with a name for this: “Tyranny of the Minority.”

Other Consequences of “Tyranny of the Minority”

Here are some other unintended consequences Tim Hartnett points out. I’ve seen each of these dynamics too.

- **People able to endure more conflict may prevail, creating “decision by endurance.”**

Sometimes community members who can endure high amounts of conflict and for longer periods of time have a greater chance of prevailing over those who can’t bear conflict for long. “OK, I give up! Do whatever you want!” When this happens, it is sometimes the ability to endure conflict, rather than the ability to seek deeper understanding and to collaborate, that determines whether or not and with which modifications a proposal may be passed.

“More obstinate participants may more frequently get their way,” Tim Hartnett writes.

About two-thirds of the people in Green Meadow community—including all the young and most middle-years members—no longer attend community business meetings. Having little stomach for the intensity of the power struggles in their business meetings (which *seem* to be about proposals but may actually be about different underlying paradigms), their voices are not heard at all.

- **Disproportionate power to whoever supports the status quo.**

If most people in a community support a proposal to change one or more long-standing policies—the status quo—they cannot do so until they convince everyone in the group. If one or two people don’t support the proposal (no matter that everyone else wants it) the original policies will remain. This gives exceptional power to anyone who does not want anything to change. At Green Meadow, most people yearn to replace consensus-with-unanimity with a decision-making process that works better, but the consistent blockers are against it. Thus they have more power than anyone else.

“This differential burden,” Tim Hartnett observes, “is contrary to the principle of equality.”

- **The community may stagnate, unable to change or evolve.**

When a community experiences conflict because people can’t agree, there may be little chance of passing new proposals or revising outdated agreements, as noted above. Thus whatever the group has already put in place—the status quo—may remain in effect for years beyond its actual effectiveness for the group. As at Green Meadow, the group may be locked into their original choices for years to come.

- **Power struggles may drive out some of the group’s most responsible, effective members.**

When people with high levels of personal effectiveness, initiative, and leadership

Consensus-with-unanimity gives exceptional power to anyone who does not want anything to change.

make proposals in a community they often expect and require a timely response. If there are underlying paradigm-differences in the community, or people block for personal reasons, or for subconscious bids for group attention, these natural leaders may end up spending a lot of time in whole-group meetings processing people's reluctance or anxieties, or having long discussions outside of meetings. This kind of high-initiative person usually prefers situations in which their contributions are more easily understood, appreciated, and approved in a timely manner so they can get on with the project. When their proposed initiatives are slowed or stopped—and when this happens repeatedly—they are often too discouraged and frustrated to stay, so take their talents elsewhere.

Green Meadow used to have a relatively high number of young men with abundant creativity, initiative, and drive who founded cottage industries to provide income for themselves and jobs for other members, or created agricultural enterprises to provide organic food onsite, or both. They struggled for years making proposals which had widespread community appreciation and support, but which were blocked nevertheless. For these, and for other, more immediate reasons, most have now left.

What Works Better Instead—Three Collaborative, Win-Win Methods

What can communities do?

They can use the consensus process itself but replace unanimity with a completely different decision rule, such as the *N Street Consensus Method*. This method, developed by Kevin Wolf, co-founder of N Street Cohousing in Davis, California, combines the usual consensus process with a decision-rule method that respects the viewpoints and intentions of both the advocates of a proposal and those who may block it. Briefly, here's how it works. Community members first seek consensus-with-unanimity. However, if one or more people block the proposal, the blocking persons organize a series of solution-oriented meetings with one or two proposal advocates to create a *new* proposal that addresses the same issues as the original proposal. The new proposal goes to the next meeting, where it probably will pass. If

a new proposal is not created, the original proposal comes to the next meeting for a 75 percent supermajority vote, and it will probably pass. In 25 years at N Street Cohousing this process has happened only twice, with two solution-oriented meetings each—that is, only four of these small meetings total in 25 years.

Or, communities can replace consensus-with-unanimity with another method altogether, such as Sociocracy or

Holacracy. *Sociocracy*, developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s, and *Holacracy*, developed in the US in the early 2000s, are each whole-systems governance methods which include a decision-making process. (The N Street Method is a decision-making process only.)

In both Sociocracy and Holacracy everyone has a voice in modifying and approving proposals and everyone's consent is required to pass a proposal. However, unlike in consensus, decisions can be changed easily, which means there is far less pressure to make a "perfect" decision. In both Sociocracy and Holacracy decisions need only be "good enough for now" and can easily be changed again with experience or new information. This seems to liberate energy, optimism, creativity, and freedom to try new things. Both Sociocracy and Holacracy work best for communities that have a clear common purpose or aim.

In Sociocracy and Holacracy decisions need only be “good enough for now” and can easily be changed with experience or new information.

While Sociocracy, Holacracy, and the N Street Method each have a collaborative, win/win decision-making process, they do not allow the kinds of power-over dynamics that can occur with consensus-with-unanimity. Communities that use these methods don't tend to have the unintended consequences that can occur when using consensus-with-unanimity. Rather, these methods tend to generate a sense of connection, trust, and well-being in the group.

Future articles in this series will describe each of these methods in more detail.

And What About Green Meadow Community?

I actually have hope for Green Meadow community. The longer their challenges continue—and especially each time a proposal is blocked that most others want—the more community-wide demoralization intensifies. Fortunately, this “fed-up” energy motivates action, and now enough community members (not just the “early adopters” who saw these problems years ago) seriously want change.

Increasing numbers of Green Meadow members are curious about other decision rules besides unanimity, as well as about other governance systems. Some are discussing radical change. For example, some are talking about using a 75 percent supermajority vote as their decision rule. Others suggest a new process for business meetings in which people would nominate themselves and be approved by most others before they could participate. Still others imagine coalescing into a loose federation of sub-committees, each with its own purpose, budget, and governance process, with a whole-community “federal” government tasked only to maintain common infrastructure and pay property taxes, etc.

And some, inspired by the Declaration of Independence—which affirms that governments can only exist by the consent of the governed—are talking about withdrawing their consent that the frequent blockers continue to have governing power over everyone else. They're considering a proposal that the frequent blocking members step out of the governance process entirely.

Several members recently presented the case to Green Meadow's steering committee that to remain healthy, intentional communities, like love relationships, must periodically “die” and be reborn. To many, Green Meadow seems to be simultaneously in the process of dying...and of being reborn—in new and far healthier ways. 🐦

Diana Leafé Christian, author of the books Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, is publisher of Ecovillages, a free online newsletter about ecovillages worldwide (EcovillageNews.org), and a columnist for Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) (gen.ecovillage.org). She is a trainer in GEN's Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) program, and speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops internationally. See www.DianaLeaféChristian.org.

Coming in Future Issues...

Topics in Part II of this article (in issue #156) will include: (1) Why, in my opinion, having criteria for a legitimate block and a way to test blocks against it, as several consensus trainers advise, doesn't seem to work well for most communities either. (2) More on underlying dynamics of inappropriate blocks, too-frequent blocks, and threats to block. (3) Why some idealists believe consensus-with-unanimity will work well if only people would try harder or evolve spiritually, or that the promised harmony, cohesiveness, and trust would manifest if only everyone spent more time exploring the nuances of people's different feelings about their opinions—and why baby boomers especially believe this. (4) How communities—including communities with chronic blockers, or chronic threateners-to-block—can replace consensus-with-unanimity with other, more effective methods.

Future articles in the series will describe the “N Street Consensus Method” in more detail, the “Four Decision Options/Choose Your Committee Members” method of Ecovillage Sieben Linden, Systemic Consensus, Tim Hartnett's “Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making” method, Sociocracy, and Holacracy (and why I think Sociocracy and Holacracy work especially well in intentional communities). —D.L.C.

Resources

Consensus:

- C.T. Butler's Formal Consensus process; website includes free, downloadable copy of C.T.'s book, *On Conflict and Consensus*: www.consensus.net
- *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, Sam Kaner, et. al. (New Society Publishers, 1996): www.newsociety.com
- *Building United Judgment* (Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981, now published by FIC): www.ic.org/bookshelf
- Caroline Estes, Alpha Institute: members.pioneer.net/~alpha/presenters
- Tree Bressen: www.treegroup.info
- *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making*, Tim Hartnett (New Society Publishers, 2011): consensusbook.com

N Street Consensus Method:

- “Is Consensus Right for Your Group? Part I,” in *Ecovillages* newsletter: www.ecovillagenewsletter.org (click “Articles Alphabetically” to find it)

Sociocracy:

- *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy, A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods*, by John Buck and Sharon Villines (2007): www.sociocracy.info
- SocioNet online discussion: www.socionet.us
- Governance Alive, author and consultant John Buck: www.governancealive.com

Holacracy:

- *Holacracy One*: www.holacracy.org

“Busting the Myth”: How Consensus *Can* Work

By Laird Schaub

Diana brings up a number of points about consensus, and I agree with many of them. With others though, I have a contrasting view.

Essential Ingredients for Consensus to Work

I agree that common values, training in the process, and commitment to relationships are all important for groups to succeed with consensus. I further agree that most groups naively agree to use consensus without knowing what they’re doing and often they don’t commit to training. While it creates considerable work for consultants, I’d rather they invested in deep training up front.

Diana implies that it’s not easy to do consensus well and I agree with that. In my view, probably the single biggest impediment to groups succeeding with consensus is the lack of understanding that it requires a commitment to culture change: from the adversarial and competitive culture that characterizes the mainstream society—the one most of us were raised in—to the cooperative culture that we want instead. Merely agreeing that this is what we intend and having good intentions is not enough. It takes serious work to achieve this. While I think that that work is well worth the effort, it’s not trivial.

Note that the challenge of creating cooperative culture will exist independently of what decision rule a group chooses. I believe consensus is a superior way to foster cooperative culture because groups need to make a good faith effort to incorporate the views of outliers. If you switch to a decision rule where outliers can be managed (essentially by outvoting them), you trade the anguish of dealing with a stubborn minority for the disgruntlement that follows from split votes.

While I think it’s up to each cooperative group to make its own choice about what decision-making process to use—with options other than consensus on the menu—I have a substantially different analysis than Diana about how to interpret the pitfalls she describes in her article.

If it’s important, as I suggest, to commit to culture change, there are some consequences to take into account. For one thing, it’s prudent to be careful about membership selection. With each member prospect, ask yourself whether this person is



someone you believe has enough overlap in values and sufficient social skills that you feel confident you'll be able to work through disagreements with them. If you have doubts, tread carefully. If you think that a commitment to having a diverse population translates into having no standards for membership, you are sowing the whirlwind.

When a group is newly formed, and learning to use its process well (whether that process is consensus or something else that's new to the group), high quality facilitation can make a night-and-day difference. Skilled facilitators understand the process well and have the ability to redirect the group when things get hard (because of complexity, volatility, or both), reminding everyone of their commitment to respond cooperatively when the group slips off the rails in the heat of the moment. As the group gets more skilled in the process, the need for high quality facilitation will diminish, because the group will self-correct more, relying less on neutral guidance to see it through the rough patches.

In a group committed to creating cooperative culture, everyone has an active role. On any given topic, each member will either be a stakeholder or they won't be. If you are, then you'll want to be active in order to see that your input is fully expressed and because you care a lot about the outcome. If you aren't a stakeholder, then you're well positioned to safeguard the container in which the conversation happens. You can pay more attention to the quality of the engagement (how well people are hearing one another and able to bridge between positions) than the outcome.

Blocking Dynamics

I have a different sense than Diana about both the quantity and the quality of blocking in intentional communities. In my experience (I've worked with around 75 different groups as a process consultant over a 25-year career), most consensus groups rarely experience blocks, and when they do, few groups permit them solely for personal concerns. That said, there are two aspects of blocking dynamics that Diana mentions that I agree are common and deserve attention: a) people stopping a proposal because their interpretation of group values differs significantly from that of the proposer; and b) people threatening to block and thereby quashing consideration of the proposal.

Let's look at those one at a time. Diana labeled the first one as an inappropriate block. I demur. In a healthy consensus group, a majority of plenary time should be devoted to examining how best to apply group values to the issue at hand. While a group may be solid in committing to being Green, it's impossible at the outset to

anticipate all the shades that Green can come in and to determine whether all are acceptable. Expecting a group to devote serious time to theoretical conversations about how to weigh one value in relation to another is unrealistic. A more practical approach is to wait until someone proposes to buy solar panels before discussing how the group's commitment to the ecology (being Green) is in dynamic tension with the group's commitment to having a balanced budget (being not in the red). It's not that there is a "right" answer to these value questions; it's that

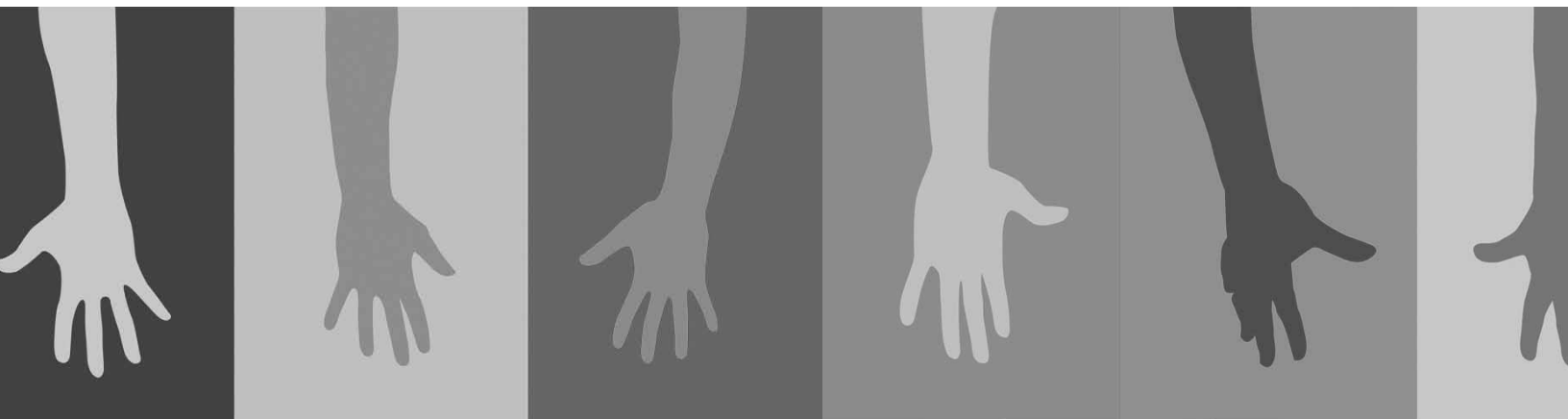
Consensus requires a commitment to culture change: from an adversarial and competitive culture to the cooperative culture we want instead.

you can't reasonably sink your teeth into them until specific issues showcase the ambiguity.

To be sure, issues can surface that reveal rifts in the group that may not be bridgeable. Not everyone is meant to live together and certain issues may expose a chasm of differences that is sufficiently broad that it will splinter the group. Before leaping to that conclusion, however, I'd test to see if the group could leap across the chasm.

Groups develop depth and nuance about what their common values mean over the course of their history, and I've





never seen a group whose common values appeared fully dressed and mature at the outset, springing like Athena from Zeus' forehead. In saying this, I am not trying to sidestep the very real anguish Diana described in groups that become paralyzed by philosophical disjuncts that appear too great to span in how members interpret key common values. I just don't agree that the answer is a different decision rule.

The fundamental challenge of cooperative groups is how to disagree about non-trivial matters and have that experience bring the group closer together. When it *really* matters, do we regress back to our deep conditioning and resort to power plays, manipulation, cajoling, back room deals, crying, parliamentary maneuvering, pouting, or just plain old shouting? Or do we respond with curiosity about how others came to weigh things differently, and arrive at a different conclusion? Can we learn to hear people disagree and not feel threatened, trusting that we need all of the input out in the open before we can assemble the best response?

The thrust of Diana's suggestion is that groups mostly don't know how to handle that dynamic well (I agree with her on this) and when it plays out with a disgruntled and perhaps fearful, small minority, it will tend to go better if you have a process that allows the group to move forward anyway—that the benefit of not being hamstrung by a few outweighs the risk that you may move too quickly and miss a key insight that the minority is attempting to articulate.

I agree with Diana that there should be a test for validating a block—to see whether it meets the standard (that the group has established ahead of time) for what are legitimate grounds for a block. If the block fails the test, then the group can invalidate it. While this can be a heavy thing to do (as Diana eloquently described), I think it should be possible, with the process by which a block will be examined for legitimacy having been spelled out before you're there. (You don't know what hell is until you try to make up the process *after* you're already in the delicate situation where you're hoping to apply it.)

The second dynamic is the threat of a block. I agree that many groups struggle with this, and I appreciate how disruptive this can be. If the group perceives that a person is serious about blocking a proposal then it may never be tested for agreement (why bother if it's only going to be blocked?) and the person with blocking energy can retreat behind the claim that they rarely if ever block. While that may be technically true, they've unquestionably brought blocking energy into the consideration and this can be a real headache.

Rather than defanging the blocker, I have a different idea. I think N Street (as

Diana describes their process) is headed in the right direction in that they expect the blocker to be actively involved in working to resolve concerns and come up with modifications that might suit everyone. While I have reservations about their method,* I like that it recognizes that the individual's right to block is

Can we learn to hear people disagree and not feel threatened, trusting that we need all of the input out in the open before we can assemble the best response?

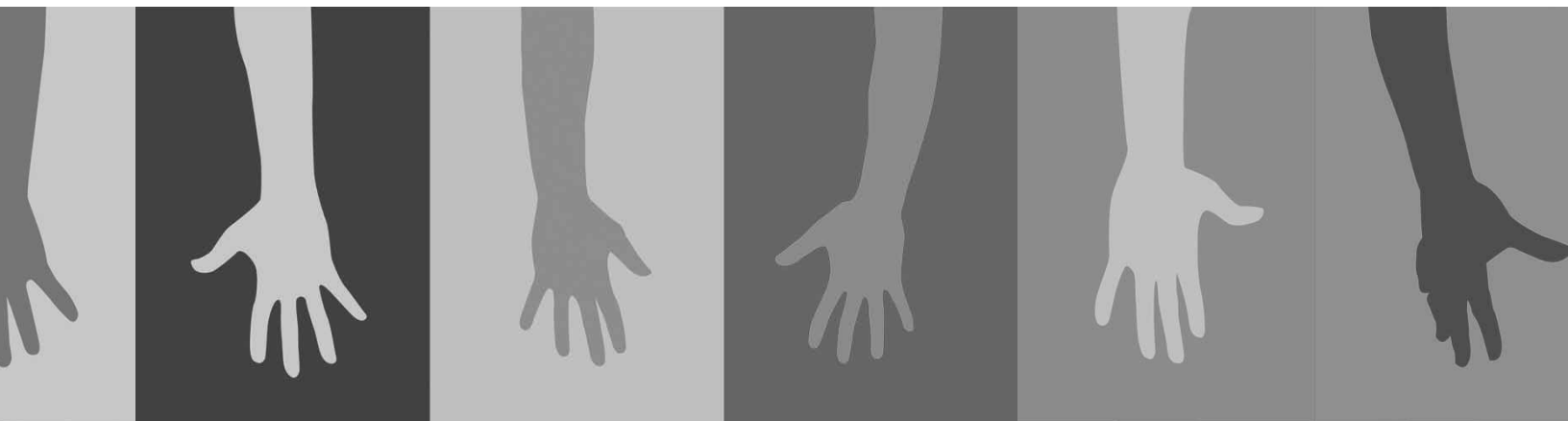
paired with the responsibility to take into account the views of others and to put personal energy into attempting to close the gap.

Applying that same principle a bit earlier in the deliberation (blocks should occur only at the last minute, when you're testing for agreement; not in the discussion phase), if someone reported that they objected to what was on the table to the point of blocking (if it got that far), I would walk through a sequence like this with that person:

—Make sure I understood the basis for the objection, to the point where *the objector* reported feeling satisfied that they'd been heard.

—Establish how the objection was (or wasn't) linked to common values, or the health of the group.

—Make sure the individual under-



stood what others were saying.

—Labor with the objector—as well as everyone else in the group—in a collaborative search for ideas about how to address the issue effectively without leaving anyone behind.

I agree with Diana that it's not a good sign if a strongly voiced concern is allowed to simply kill a proposal, and I urge groups to expect objectors to have their oar in the water just as much as everyone else in an effort to pull the ship into a safe harbor once you've encountered rough water.

The key to doing this well is establishing a compassionate and thoughtful container, as devoid as possible from pressure and frustration. I'm not saying this is easy—especially when the stakes are high—but if you want a solution that everyone can stand behind, then you're probably going to need to work at the heart level as well as the head level. This tends to be a *very* different animal than the typical meeting culture that we've brought with us from the mainstream society. In my experience, no process does the job of rising to the challenge of melding thought and feelings better than consensus, providing only that you've created the right container.

Commitment to Relationship

Another way of expressing this is that cooperative groups hold the view that *how* you do things can matter as much as *what* you do. This tends to be a markedly different calculus than exists in the mainstream culture, where much more attention is given to the end than the

means. While Diana seemed to argue that most members of intentional communities don't care *that* much about relationships—especially if groups have more than a dozen members—I don't agree with her. I think most people living in communities care a great deal about relationships. In fact, the hunger for more relationship in one's life is one of the key reasons most people are drawn to community living.

However, *wanting* more relationship is not enough to guarantee that you'll get it. Living closely with others and trying to make decisions and solve problems as a group of peers, it's inevitable that conflict and emotional distress will emerge at times. Working with conflict effectively means working with feelings. If a group struggles with that (and most do) the tendency is to back off and expect less. I can understand the line of reasoning that suggests if consensus means you're more likely to encounter conflict and you don't handle that moment well, then it makes sense to try something different. I just don't agree that this indicates that a change in the decision rule is called for. I think what needs to change is how you handle conflict.

Diana implies that there's less conflict and disharmony in groups that don't use consensus. To the extent that this claim is true (and I'm highly skeptical of it), I suspect that it's more about learning to settle for members being less involved in one another's lives. While I think it's up to the membership of each group to define how much it intends for members to lead intertwined lives, I am saddened by the choice to accept less when you'd rather have more.

The promise of community is that it can be a wellspring for getting more out of your life without ever leaving your home to get it. As a consensus consultant, whatever success I've enjoyed is directly related to working with people who want their groups to function well and are willing to put their own life force into the attempt. I find it far more inspiring to offer hope for getting both better decisions and better relationships than advising folks to downsize their dreams. 🐦

Laird Schaub is Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and cofounder of Sandhill Farm, a consensus-run egalitarian 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.

* While I support N Street's determination to expect blockers to get involved in a good faith effort to resolve concerns, I have uneasiness with their approach in two regards. First, it puts the onus on the blocker to initiate the conversation to address the concerns. Not all people with principled concerns will have the process savvy, gumption, or energy to take the lead on this, and it sets the bar too high. I'm afraid that it will lead to people deciding not to voice their blocking concerns because it's overwhelming to contemplate what they'll be obliged to do if their block is honored. Second, if the group can override a block with a 75 percent supermajority vote at the next meeting, it puts all the pressure on the blocker to change the hearts and minds of others—in essence, the majority has already won. This is a very different atmosphere than what you'd have under consensus, where there is no agreement until all the principled objections have been resolved.



“Busting the Myth”: Some Questions

By Ma'ikwe Schaub Ludwig

As I understand that others have been invited to respond as well, I'm going to limit my comments to a particular aspect of Diana's article: the opening sequence where she describes a scenario that contributes to her conclusion that consensus isn't the best option for most communities. Compelling stories are a great way to bring attention to potential problems; where it gets interesting is when we have different takes on what to do in the moment of the presenting situation. My conclusions are not the same as Diana's.

The scenario Diana describes is a complex one. You have a group committed to consensus and a member asserting their right to block. You have a general description that indicates hostility within the group. And you have a dynamic described where the blocker is challenged on their affect, and “acting out” behavior, with not a lot of attempt to connect with the person struggling. What is a process consultant to do?

The first thing I'd do is back up. I'd want to know more about the group, exhibiting a primary consensus tool of curiosity when things go awry. Here are the questions I'd ask:

- What is this group's commitment to conflict resolution?
- What is the group's commitment to training?
- If this is a pattern, when did it start, and what has happened in the interim that makes this now feel like a very uphill battle?

Let's take them one at a time.

1) What is this group's commitment to conflict resolution?

Consensus makes conflict resolution non-optional. It is simply intolerable to be in major conflict with someone with whom you have to cultivate deep listening on a regular basis. One of the gifts of consensus is that it makes us deal with our stuff. If members are blowing up at each other, threatening each other, etc., I'd say the more immediate problem isn't how you make decisions, it is how you resolve tensions. Conflict can seem worse in consensus groups not because consensus is flawed but because the stakes are higher and the need for real conflict resolution is more in your face. You simply can't blow each other off as readily: it's against the rules we've agreed on collectively.

While I'm not going to say consensus is for everyone, I am going to say that things

being hard doesn't mean giving up is the right answer. Conflict in a consensus-based group is a lot like a cultural healing crisis in natural healing: you've applied a remedy to the illness and as it starts working, things can get dramatic and intense for a while, and it looks for a time like the remedy is making things worse rather than better. It's like a detox period. If the group can get through this period and stick with it, what you get on the other side is a significant gain in how you relate as fellow human beings. For people interested in cultural change, this is the real, juicy stuff.

2) What is the group's commitment to training?

I generally say that while I'm an advocate of consensus, I don't think that it is possible to do it while running default patterns we all carry from the wider culture. Reworking patterns on a personal level can require personal growth, spiritual work, therapy, etc. Reworking them on a group level requires training. Often, groups are too proud to get trained. We think we are pioneers (and of course we are), we have a commitment to self-sufficiency (which is a great thing), we are too busy for our own good (welcome to modern American life), or we are suffering from simple ego (who among us isn't). And so we don't get trained. And then the fireworks start.

I wondered as I read this opening sequence if maybe the group in question hadn't fallen into one of these traps.

The most critical thing a group learns in good consensus training isn't mechanics (which I'd say systems like sociocracy and N Street's approach address) but about the spirit of consensus: understanding that we each have a piece of the truth. Bridging between these pieces of the truth to find what is best for the group is a lot more central to having functional consensus than any particular procedure you might use.

3) If this is a pattern, when did it start, and what has happened in the interim that makes this now feel like a very uphill battle?

When I hear a story like this, I always want to understand the context. It sounds awful, right? Some characters sound completely irrational, while others come across as guardian heroes upholding a community virtue of some sort. But I think this is rarely the whole truth, and the stories we tell almost always capture as much about the person telling the tale as they do about the nature of the problems the group is facing. (I don't just mean Diana in this article; I mean all of us.) I'd assume that this group of people got on trajectories a long time ago that have landed them where they are, and also assume that getting back to a stable, respectful environment is going to take some serious backing away from current positions.

Once a group has gotten to this painful place, changing the mechanics of their specific consensus process, or even scrapping consensus completely, isn't going to fix it. You'll have the patterns in place no matter how you decide to move forward. The work at this point is facing down the patterns and recommitting to relationship. I'd advise this group to not head directly for the exit, but first attend to relationship.

At its heart, consensus is about getting the full picture and being able to hold others' perspectives as important, and other people as worthy of care and consideration. Rather than playing up the drama of a moment and drawing conclusions based on that moment, I'd want to understand how the moment was arrived at. 🐦

Ma'ikwe Schaub Ludwig has lived in intentional community for 16 years, and is currently a member of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in Rutledge, Missouri, where she has organized its five-week Ecovillage Design Education course starting in 2012. She is former manager of FIC's Community Bookshelf and author of Passion as Big as a Planet, which looks at the relationship between self-awareness and effective earth activism. Ma'ikwe teaches facilitation and consensus with her husband, Laird Schaub, and offers workshops on starting communities, leadership, and spiritual activism.



Busting the Myth, or Changing the Terms?

By Tree Bressen

In the opening story of “Busting the Myth,” the facilitator at Green Meadow tests a block for legitimacy. When the block is found invalid, then the proposal goes through and is adopted. Here’s the curious thing: Diana says this group had tried that only once before and never did it again. When i read this, i wanted to know: Why not?

Let’s leave aside for a moment the questions of consensus process and decision rules. As a community consultant, i often hear from groups who are struggling with a perceived problem member, someone who acts out in a way that others find abusive or over the line. Someone from the committee who’s been assigned to find a way out calls me on the phone and tells me their tale of woe. I duly sympathize (hey, i’ve been there too, i know how hard it is). And then, after they hopefully feel heard by me, i ask: “So when this person does these problematic behaviors, how does the rest of the group respond?” The answer is inevitably some type of conflict avoidance...which generally makes it clear that the community is co-creating the problem.

Want that person to behave differently? Give a different response.

The response i’ve seen succeed most in shifting these dynamics is both compassionate and direct. It takes multiple members offering honest feedback, so don’t give up when the first try does not have a perceived effect, as you are laying the groundwork for later shift. Your group needs to back each other up on this, standing up for the kind of community you want to live in, and refusing to allow yourselves to be bullied or intimidated.

If the more sensitive or vocal people who tend to step forward first get blown off by the problem member, then other people need to engage. Often the most successful interventions are by more middle-of-the-road members, perhaps a few people who are typically a bit quieter, well-respected, or hold some eldering energy in the group. Unfortunately,

many groups allow their fear of being a lynch mob to divide them—and lose good members in the process—before arriving at unity on this and eventually taking appropriate action.

Returning to Diana’s concerns regarding consensus practice, i agree that for groups who are struggling with dysfunctional consensus process, the biggest culprit is usually inappropriate blocking. This problem is pervasive enough that it gives consensus overall a bad rep. That’s unfortunate, because the heart of the process is not about blocking, it’s about listening to each other well and finding the best path forward together. Nonetheless, given that we come from a culture glorifying individualism instead of teaching us to collaborate well, it’s



essential that every consensus system include a way to rein in inappropriate blocks. Blocking potentially gives tremendous power to one or a few individuals, and the only way for that to function successfully is with a check and balance.

I advocate for doing this through the cultivation of both culture and procedures. The culture piece is conveyed, for example, through the shared mantra, “If you’ve blocked consensus half a dozen times for all the groups you’ve been a member of, you’ve used up your lifetime quota.” If you provide a good orientation to the decision-making process for all incoming members (including how a constructive culture is fostered at meetings), the results will pay you back a hundredfold.

The procedural piece can take a variety of forms, depending on the system. Diana cites at least three examples: the Formal Consensus method of asking a group whether a block is legitimate, N Street’s requirement that blockers convene meetings to work out an alternative, and the institution of a supermajority voting fallback. Although there are plenty of earlier examples, Quakers are thought of by many as originators of consensus practice and have been quite influential. What many people don’t realize is that Quakers also give their facilitators the power to overrule any block perceived as inappropriate, even if it comes from two or three members (see, for example, Pacific Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice* book).

Rather than giving unanimity or consensus without recourse its own name as Diana does, I simply assume that in order for consensus to function well there must be a robust response to bad blocks. When the cohousing movement started in the 1990s, in order to access conventional lending their communities put supermajority fallbacks into

their bylaws to satisfy bankers. As a consensus practitioner I worried about this at first: with a voting option in place, would these groups still do the patient work of sorting through differences to arrive at genuine consensus? More than a decade later, experience has shown me that cohousing groups work just as much as other groups at coming to decisions everyone can support or at least live with, and their voting fallbacks are typically invoked only rarely in the course of years. Nonetheless, they are there if needed.

I agree with Diana that consensus-based groups can also have other problems, like stagnation, power struggles, decision by endurance, and premature proposal death. I’m not sure those problems are necessarily worse in consensus groups than groups with other decision rules (goodness knows we see enough bad examples in society of poor decision-making process regardless of whether majority vote, consensus, or some other system is used). But let’s acknowledge that these are real concerns, and pledge to make improvement.

Healthy groups build a spirit and culture that honors new ideas and alternatives rather than shooting them down. Power struggles and other differences can benefit from being acknowledged and skillfully worked with. Agendas should be created mindfully and time limits honored sufficiently so that people can give thoughtful consideration to the issue at hand. And when groups tell me they are struggling with meeting attendance, I have a standard answer: If you want people to show up at meetings, then talk about things that matter and talk about them well. 🐦

**The response that succeeds most
in shifting “problem member”
blocking dynamics is both
compassionate and direct.**

Tree Bressen is a group process consultant based in Eugene, Oregon, who works with intentional communities and other organizations on how to have meetings that are lively, productive, and connecting. Her website, www.treegroup.info, offers extensive free resources on consensus, facilitation, and more. (Tree uses a lower-case “i” in her writing as an expression of egalitarian values.)

The Lighter Side of Community: A Communitarian Appreciates *Wanderlust*

By Chris Roth

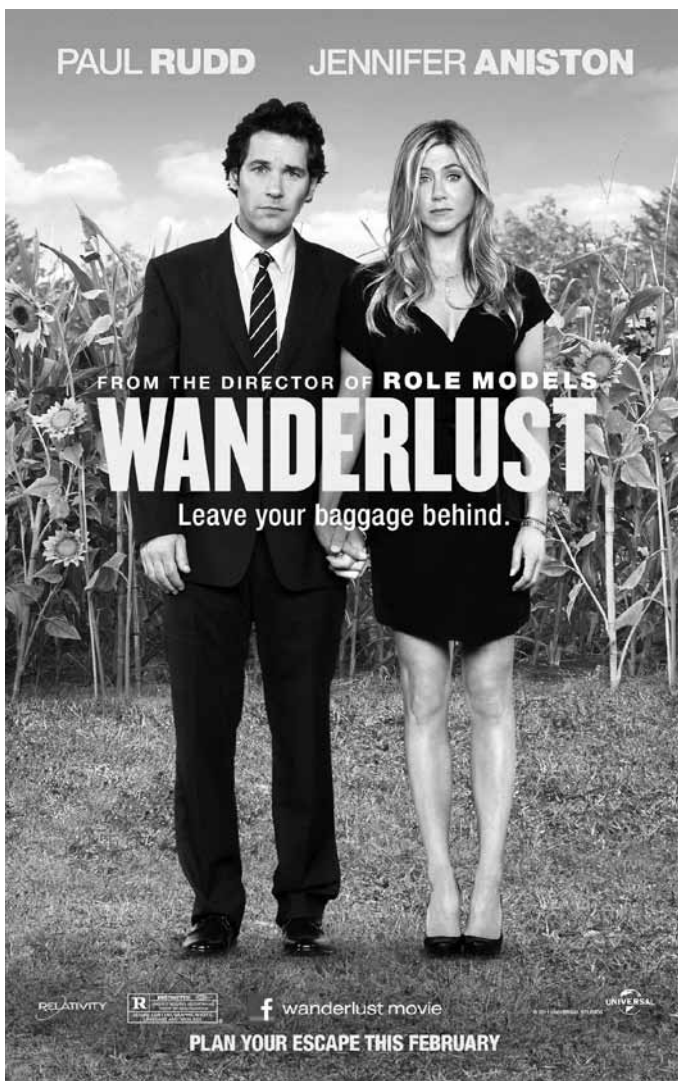
Disclaimer: the following article about the film Wanderlust contains multiple “plot spoilers.” We don’t think it will spoil the experience of watching the movie, since the plot is hardly its most important aspect—but you are forewarned.

My former community had a ritual we called “The Lighter Side.” Usually done as part of a personal-growth workshop, it consisted of a series of skits we created—planned in advance, improvised on the spot, or a combination thereof—to make fun of ourselves and the dynam-

ics of either the workshop or of our lives in community. Often in response to particular incidents, we exaggerated what had happened for comic effect, relieving tensions that might still linger (embarrassment, disappointment, the awkwardness of miscommunication, etc.) and allowing us to laugh at ourselves. The Lighter Side helped us take ourselves less seriously, while also letting us share insights and uniting us in loving self-parody and laughter. Occasionally, a skit would “go south,” resulting in hard feelings that would then need resolution—but when done in its intended spirit of self-parody rather than mockery, The Lighter Side eased far more tensions than it created.

When I heard about a Hollywood movie depicting the adventures of a couple from New York in a fictional intentional community in Georgia, I was wondering what the ratio of loving parody to mockery would be. I’m happy to report that the filmmakers have made a movie in the true spirit of “The Lighter Side,” fond rather than cruel in its send-up of community life. I am trusting that moviegoers who do *not* have experience in intentional community will also appreciate the spirit in which it is made, rather than taking its contents literally.

For a movie containing well more than its share of crude sexual humor (parents and the very sensitive, beware), and some obligatory stereotypes, *Wanderlust* also contains some of the most nuanced, savvy humor about intentional community living I’ve seen. What *I Heart Huckabees* did for both grassroots environmental activism and New Age psychology/science/mysticism, *Wanderlust* does for at least some segments of the intentional communities movement. It is *not* a fair representation of intentional community living; it has little in common with the wave of informative documentaries that started with *Visions of Utopia* and continues with *A New We*, *Seeking the Good Life in America*, and the forthcoming *Within Reach*—other than the fact that, increasingly, that genre is also becoming entertaining, provoking laughter as well as expanded worldviews. But *Wanderlust* *is* an elaborate parody full of what are almost “inside jokes” (though accessible to anyone with experience in the movement), at least some of whose creators appear to have a deep sympathy for community living.



Dueling Realities

The movie traces the journey of a couple, Linda and George, between two worlds—mainstream America and an intentional community called Elysium. Facing hard economic times in New York and with both of their careers in disarray, they enjoy a transformative stay at Elysium’s “bed-and-breakfast” on their way to a disastrous visit with George’s brother Rick, who has offered George a job in his “construction supply” business. When the contents of Rick’s character prove distressingly similar to that of the Porta-Potties he rents to contractors, Linda and George hightail it back to Elysium, and the real fun begins.

These two worlds could hardly be more different. Like his coworkers, George hates his job with a firm in New York—from which they’re all liberated when federal agents investigating financial crimes shut it down. Linda tries to sell her documentary about penguins with testicular cancer (“it’s *An Inconvenient Truth* meets *March of the Penguins*”) to HBO executives who reject it because, although they like to feature violence and heartache, her picture isn’t “sexy” enough. The real estate agent who sells them their “micro-loft” changes her tune about its merits as an investment as soon as they try to sell it back. Once they arrive in Georgia, they find Rick even more insufferable in person than he is via Skype—not only offensive but abusive, flaunting his business success through conspicuous consumption while cheating on his wife and humiliating his employees. Rick’s wife Marisa has a “little bit of a SkyMall problem” and watches multiple TVs all day while on a steady diet of Wellbutrin and margaritas. Rick’s son Tanner is even more rude than Rick is.

In contrast, the colorful cast of characters Linda and George meet at Elysium seem, for the most part, truly happy. They live close to the land and in apparent harmony with one another. They’re eccentric, to be sure: a nudist winemaker/novelist, a guesthouse operator with “verbal diarrhea” prone to gluing sticks to orange peels; a founder who insists on repeating all his co-founder’s names at every opportunity—and they host eccentric guests, including an entire conference of nudist winemakers. While the ex-porn star is sometimes off-putting, for the most part these are friendly, very likeable, happy, healthy people, not only tolerating but appreciating one another’s eccentricities, and appearing much more alive and interesting than the deadened people in Linda’s and George’s former lives.

Culture Creation

Like Linda and George, Eva is a refugee from New York (as are a surprising number of communitarians I’ve met). She doesn’t miss “the stress, the Blackberries, the sleeping pills, the triple latte”—nor do her companions, who spend their days enjoying rural life. George gets initiated into shoveling manure as part of Elysium’s abundant gardening operation, while Linda has the new-to-her, revelatory experience of picking an apple, bagging it, and selling it at the community’s fruit stand. Children (much happier than Rick and Marissa’s hostile son) play with one another and with adults, easily mingling in this



multi-generational community. Yoga, tai-chi, frisbee, meditation, music-making, dancing, and skinny-dipping co-exist with building sheds, hauling haybales, digging garden beds, harvesting and cooking for the group, and tending the fruit stand.

Cooperation is the currency of choice. One of the group’s first acts after Linda and George arrive is to right their car (upended when George attempts to escape in reverse gear from the sight of the eager-to-be-helpful winemaker’s genitalia). The group also unites to oppose plans to construct a casino on their land—the result of backroom corporate-political deals, initially promoted by a clueless media until Linda becomes the group’s hero by “exposing” the truth (and more) to the bulldozers and the TV cameras. Their group activism (“the people will be heard!”) inspires the founder to declare, “the revolution has begun!”

Elysium members create their own culture. They’re proud to be free of the electronic communication devices and computers that occupy most people’s lives (in fact, they’re so behind the times that some of the technologies they describe themselves as escaping from have been obsolete for years). The scenes of community life make it clear that they have plenty of entertainment and communication among themselves every day without needing to “plug in” to the mass forms of either of those. While actual intentional communities span a huge range of approaches to this question, a significant portion resemble at least aspects of Elysium in its emphasis on homegrown culture—and some take it even further.

Commune? Boo, Hiss, Chuckle...

The response of one member to Linda and George's description of Elysium as a "commune"—"*Commune? Boo, hiss. We prefer the term *Intentional Community**"—is triply humorous. First, it is a fairly accurate paraphrase (with attitude) of what many communitarians tell those with preconceived notions about communities, and of what the Fellowship for Intentional Community itself states in every issue of COMMUNITIES magazine. Second, while most intentional communities are *not* communes, Elysium most decidedly *is*. Members hold all land and property in common and share income—it's "all for one, one for all." The third, least subtle reason for laughing is that the stereotype of a commune as "a bunch of hippies smoking pot and playing guitar" (the reason Elysium members say they object to that designation) *can* seem

to apply to them, especially to the party scenes, though in reality their lives are filled with much more than that.

Elysium's communal economy—like every communal economy—has both benefits and drawbacks. Rodney immediately gives George his shirt when George says he likes it—the natural thing to do since "we share everything here." In contrast

to other characters in the movie, Elysium members don't let money (or the lack of it) consume their lives, and appear to have found a comfortable way to support themselves in harmony with the land and one another. Their ideology aligns with their practices: Wayne's novel is a political parable about "the flaws of capitalistic society," and Carvin, the founder, insists repeatedly that "money buys nothing—literally nothing."

But one of the communal economy's downsides comes to light when George's car, full of most of the couple's belongings, ends up at the bottom of a lake because Rodney needed to borrow it. The link between non-ownership and lack of responsibility—the failure to take care of others' or the group's things—is a challenge not unique to Elysium, though the unplanned but somehow taken-in-stride car-sinking ("I know, crazy, right?" is Rodney's assessment) offers an extreme example of the phenomenon. The community's sometimes appealing but simultaneously naïve attitude toward money is also reflected later on, when one member considers \$11,000 fair payment for something worth \$10 million (I can't spoil every aspect of the plot).

Most modern intentional communities are far more sophisticated in their approach to money than is Elysium, but the mixture of idealism, vision, and accompanying liabilities of their approach will also strike chords of familiarity for many in the communities movement.

Values, Curds, Turds, and More

Elysium's commitments to nonviolence and to ecological sensitivity, which compare favorably with the aggression and insensitivity displayed in the wider culture (notably at Rick's house), also echo common themes in the movement. Needless to say, *Wanderlust* lampoons them: swatting a fly means George has a "fetish for violence." Clapping is "too aggressive," so Elysium's members rub their fingers together instead when they want to cheer or express approval. (While I haven't seen this particular variation in real life, I have spent time in communities where "twinkling"—moving the upraised fingers rapidly—had replaced clapping.) And in a scene probably familiar to anyone who's lived in a vegetarian or vegan community, new member Linda sneaks off to town for a meat fix, only to find the founder in the same diner, unapologetically scarfing down a wide array of meat products because "you can't live off macrobiotic bean curd shit all your life." Meanwhile, most members are truly devoted to their

George never quite gets used to "doing his business" while others casually talk with him in the bathroom.

veganism and to their homegrown food—celebrating their first victory against the casino developers by breaking out the tomato chutney.

Again like many communitarians, Elysium members are not only more at ease living close to the earth than most mainstream Americans are, but also more comfortable with their own bodies and bodily functions. No one bats an eye at their resident nudist or at the conference-load of his fellow nudist winemakers, nor is skinny-dipping a big deal for anyone. Linda soon gets comfortable peeing outside, but George never quite gets used to “doing his business” while others casually talk with him in the bathroom. (No community I know of assumes that people will be eager to converse while defecating, or will be comfortable doing that within plain sight of others—but neither of those are unheard of in the world of community either.)

We even witness a natural childbirth, whose radiant mother again compares favorably with the testy, pregnant HBO executive lamenting her “swollen belly, hemorrhoids, and second thoughts.” The parents keep the placenta attached, carrying it around in a bowl with them and the baby as they wait for it to fall off naturally. (This is not something I’ve seen personally in community, and definitely not the most common approach, but I’m sure it happens.)

Underneath the “Herb’n” Legend

Wanderlust plays on the stereotype of the “drug-filled commune,” which is where its satire is perhaps least subtle and also least accurate. Cannabis (the best George has ever smoked) is freely available, and at one community ceremony ayahuasca tea is passed around. But notably absent from Elysium are evidence of any alcohol problems, tobacco, “heavier” drugs, or synthetic drugs of any kind (whether illicit, prescription, or over-the-counter). The members seem savvy about drugs and their consequences—one of them blames the founder’s mental confusion and repetitiveness on an earlier, less cautious era (“Thank you, acid,” Rodney says in exasperation as he leaves the table at the launch of yet another recitation of the co-founders’ names).

Although *Wanderlust’s* characterization of pot-friendly Elysium inaccurately represents the majority of intentional communities, the broader picture it paints does hint at the truth: that communities in general may be places not to escape *into* drugs but to escape *from* a drug-addled culture, to liberate oneself from both pharmaceuticals and from the destructive drugs of choice of many non-communitarians. (Rick’s house and even Linda’s and George’s former medicine cabinet undoubtedly contain a far larger array of drugs, most of them much less natural, than does Elysium.) In my own experience in community, I’ve lived with many more people committed to physical, spiritual, and emotional health and well-being through substance-free living (and also through *mostly* substance-free living) than I suspect is typical in the wider culture.

“Doors Are Bullshit”

The movie also exaggerates, to comic effect, the amount of privacy sacrificed when joining a community. Elysium has removed all doors between inside rooms, because “doors close us off from one another.” Flush with the excitement of joining the community, George agrees that “Doors are bullshit.” Later, he has second thoughts, telling Linda that “I can’t have 15 people involved every time we have an argument.” (Again, anyone who has spent any amount of time in



community is likely to have heard similar words from those adjusting to sharing their lives more closely with others.)

In reality, most intentional communities in the 21st century honor members' needs for privacy, and I've never lived in or visited a community that had removed all its doors, but this doesn't negate the underlying truth that community living involves letting down or removing some boundaries and sometimes being "visible" when one does not want to be. The thought of community living often inspires exaggerated fears of loss of privacy—a phenomenon mirrored by the exaggerated loss of *actual* privacy in *Wanderlust*.

Trust, Communication, Respect...and Sex

Related to the loss of privacy and boundaries is Elysium's attitude toward sexual relationships. When one member approaches George to suggest a sexual liaison, he and Linda learn that they've joined a polyamorous community, in which "open sexual boundaries lead to a deeper honesty." In positive contrast to Rick, who has been surreptitiously having affairs for years, the members of Elysium are absolutely honest about whom they are desiring or having as sexual partners. Hesitancy about "free love" is the final impediment to the couple's deciding to stay past their initial two weeks, until Linda relents and agrees that she will embrace that practice too. "As long as there is trust, communication, and respect," she earnestly tells the amazed George, "we can all enjoy each other intimately." (Which raises the question: was the script transcribed directly from recordings made during its writers' visit to a polyamory-friendly intentional community?)

Soon thereafter, George is equally stunned to hear these words from another community-mate: "I just made love to your wife in the next room." But while Elysium members seem to have relaxed into their polyamorous lives with little drama or nervousness—an apparently natural choice, given that "monogamy is sexual slavery"—the new couple seem to believe that they are obliged to participate in order to fit in, and George's over-the-top attempts to psyche himself up for polyamorous sex end up backfiring. Nevertheless, the problems caused by polyamory at Elysium seem to reside mainly within Linda and (mostly) George, not in other community members, and the idea that "when you pick a fight with your body's sexual chi, you

drive it inward, creating disease" ends up seeming plausible.

By depicting a community that has open sexual boundaries, *Wanderlust* may create the mistaken impression that most intentional communities are that way, or that groups that include any polyamory at all are universally polyamorous (whereas in reality, in groups open to this choice, most often monogamists and the celibate coexist with polyamorists). At the same time, *Wanderlust* paints polyamory (at least among established Elysium residents) as more drama-free than it may be in real life.

"Hit Her with Your Truth!"

And at Elysium—as in many intentional communities—intimacy doesn't just mean sex; in fact, it often doesn't mean sex at all. In one memorable scene, a member calls a "truth circle," in which participants are encouraged to "share something true"—reveal something that will help others know them better, or that will help heal or build relationships. So far so good—I have been part of hundreds of such circles over my years in community, and while not every intentional community incorporates this kind of practice, many do, especially those in which members work and live closely together. Such forums often prove extremely helpful in supporting both individual and group well-being and effectiveness.

But immediately, the circle goes comically awry. Linda hasn't yet spoken when she is accused of telling lies and being "full of shit." She wisely defers to another member to start the truth-sharing, but when the attention returns to her and George, the accusations return as well, amped up even more. Circle members interrupt all attempts to speak and prove exceedingly unhelpful with their intrusions: "hit her with your truth!," "this is when the breakthroughs happen!," "don't edit yourself!" Linda and George can barely get a word in edgewise, but when they do speak, they end up bringing out deep issues in their relationship that might not have surfaced



otherwise, which finally calms the eager “assistants” to their process. Linda does gain genuine insight into herself, leading one participant to declare, “Linda, you just met Linda.”

If you have not lived through personal-growth workshops that have occasionally gone awry in similar ways, you may not find this scene nearly as funny as I did. But many communitarians will recognize an exaggerated but hilariously evocative depiction of apparently inappropriate (yet paradoxically often breakthrough-inducing) “truth circle” behavior, on steroids.

The free flow of feelings and words at Elyssium also includes such practices as “primal gesticulating,” in which the individual goes to the woods to shout out things they don’t like (war, clearcuts, pollution, climate change, etc.) in order to release “anxieties, tensions, and fears.” While some communitarians (particularly those in urban settings or cohousing groups) may never have witnessed or practiced anything like this—nor heard initially unidentifiable shouting or wailing from the far end of the property, which turns out to be therapeutic self-expression—a good number of us have. Again, this way of dealing with tensions seems orders of magnitude healthier than, for example, how George’s sister-in-law Marisa attempts to cope with her troubles. And while Elyssium members are blunt in their speech, they are also generally loving—a stark contrast to George’s brother Rick’s verbal cruelty.

The Elephant in the Room

No discussion of *Wanderlust* would be complete without mentioning the “elephant in the room”—the flawed charismatic leader, Seth. The group’s “teacher, guide, guru, coach, shaman,” he himself denies being the leader, professing that “Mother Earth is the only leader we need.” But his central role and status as “alpha male” are obvious, as are some of the methods he uses to enforce his authority—including a voice which fluctuates between natural, relaxed speaking

and an assumed accent with deepened tones (sounding as if it may have come from the British Isles via treks through the Amazon), with which he seems to assert his position and spout quasi-profundities.

Like many leaders (both within communities and in the larger world), Seth is full of contradictions, intensified by his highly visible role. In this supposedly cooperative setting, he turns a spontaneous guitar-playing session into a competition, leaving George and his strummed chords in the dust by launching into virtuosic fingerpicked solos and demanding that George respond in kind. With George sufficiently humiliated, Seth then improvises a sensual love song on a topic (“The Wind”) suggested by Linda, causing most of the women in the group to swoon and edging himself closer to adding one more (guess who?) to his list of sexual partners. He eventually shows the

Circle members interrupt all attempts to speak: “this is when the breakthroughs happen!,” “don’t edit yourself!”

duplicity he’s capable of by planning to abandon his “brothers and sisters” in Georgia in order to start a new life in Miami with the woman he’s decided is his soul mate, aided by a certain \$11,000. “I love you,” he tells the others, “but I love me more.” To their credit, they all abandon him.

Needless to say, human history is replete with examples of flawed or corrupt leaders at every level and in every type of social organization, intentional communities included. Some leaders of both religious and secular communities have abused their power many orders of magnitude more egregiously than Seth does in *Wanderlust*. In the end, Seth actually seems more foolish, self-involved, insecure, and naïve about the world’s realities than actively malevolent.

But Seth does crystallize several dynamics that communitarians may have run into: a charismatic leader claiming that a group is leaderless (or more broadly, a group failing to acknowledge power differentials); an alpha male meeting his sexual needs and desires by asserting dominance within a group; an articulate, visionary person who is in some respects also a fraud; a seemingly wise person who is also unrealistic and misguided; a proponent of cooperation who is actually highly competitive.

Most communities don’t experience the kind of serious power abuses that make some people wary of joining any kind of organized group (Kool Aid, anyone?). But many do go through a variation of the “Seth phase” before maturing, as Elyssium does, into a group more equally sharing power.

From Honeymoon to Transformation

While the movie’s depiction of its subject intentional community is necessarily specific—and therefore couldn’t be universal even if it were literally accurate—its tale of its protagonist couple’s journey may strike near-universal chords of recognition among communitarians of all stripes.

Like many newly-arrived community visitors, Linda and George quickly get over their shock and fall in love with Elyssium. “Who *are* these people?” George asks Linda in wonder. The promise of lives consciously filled with “nature, laughter, friendship, love” soon draws them back, and, welcomed “with open arms and open hearts” as resident members of Elyssium, they feel as if they can “breathe for the first time in years.”

(continued on p. 75)

Becoming Steward To Herbal Diversity

Deep in the wild of nature, every herb has what it needs. It chooses the soil it will thrive in, the spacing it needs, the amount of light required; the weather takes care of the rest. Many seemingly incompatible herbs flourish together and work as a diverse community, sometimes in an extremely small space. This compatibility is evident by the relaxed and vital appearance of natural plantings. Herbs living this way have been found to possess higher concentrations of medicinal and nutritional herb constituents than their cultivated counterparts and are much more resistant to drought, disease, and insects.

When these wild herbs have such advantages, why bother to cultivate them? Bringing the beauty of wild nature as well as the physical medicine and nutrition of herbs closer to me certainly has an allure. However, I am also interested in creating a sanctuary for threatened plant species. When surrounded by permaculture gardens and hedgerows bursting with growth, it's hard to imagine a plant diversity crisis, but the crisis is real. Worldwide it's estimated that one third of all plant species are threatened with extinction. When the impact of climate change is taken into consideration, the figure rises to half of all plants. By cultivating herbs in a wild-style, our gardens can act as a sort of "ark" for plant diversity and remind us that not only animal species are vulnerable to this silent disappearance.

Cultivating a diverse range of medicinal and nutritional herbs is not merely a sentimental notion. It's instinctual wisdom. We have witnessed in the history of agriculture the devastating effects of monocropping. When one or just a few plants are grown and relied on, their resistance to disease diminishes and so the whole source of nutrition is in jeopardy. Recent studies in clinical nutrition have also shown that consuming a variety of food sources—that is, food diversity—is key to good nutrition. This is also evidenced in other studies where modern diseases such as diabetes and food allergies have been found to be largely caused by reduced diversity in raw nutritional ingredients. Using medicinal herbs as food is a very traditional practice and so the cultivation of these herbs makes good nutritional sense as well.

In becoming a steward to not just the land, but also to the medicinal and nutritional herbs that inhabit the land, I have become of necessity what I call a "catch and release" gardener. After observing the natural conditions of the herbs I am concerned about, and discovering the situations they thrive in, I

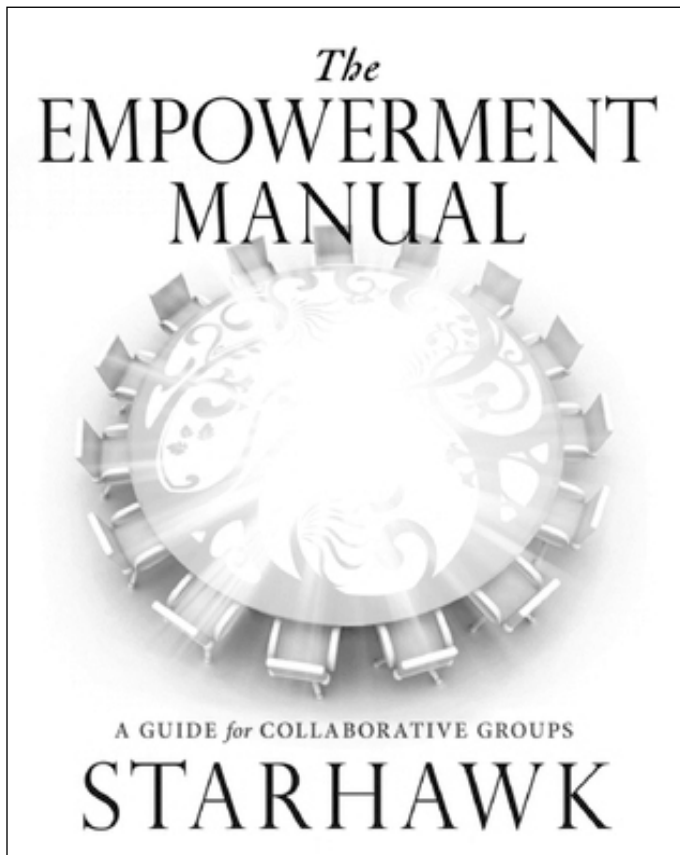
mimic nature by preparing the garden to match these conditions. The most success comes when I choose herbs and locations that are close to perfect in the beginning. It is less stressful, to both human and plant, to improve what we have than to change it completely. When the garden conditions are closely matching the ideals in the wild, I introduce the herbs into the garden to do what only they know how to do. They grow wild, proliferate, interact with other plants, and make medicine.

Most of my work after planting is to observe, gardening with my hands behind my back, merely watching the flowers, stems, and leaves for signs of need. I intervene only when the herbs are in need, since it's under these uncertain conditions that herbs develop their protective chemistry to withstand drought and fight off disease and insects. This protective chemistry creates the medicinal constituents that we want for our herbal remedies, and is what makes them as close to the wild growth as possible.

To understand and interact with herbs in this way—as living beings, not exploitable commodities—causes better herbal remedies, superior healing results, and a gardener who is a part of their garden community. As we begin this new relationship our garden goal becomes allowing the feeling that Nature has nicely gardened near our home, and will reciprocate our occasional care by caring for us in our times of need. ♡

A clinical herbalist for over 24 years, Heather Nic an Fhleisdeir is an apothecary rooted in Eugene, Oregon dispensing at Mrs. Thompson's Herbs, Gifts & Folklore. She is the Head of Faculty at the Academy Of Scottish Herbalism currently located in Oregon, and in distance learning with The Village Herbalist Independent Herbal Study Course. She tends medicinal gardens with her students, continues research, and seeks out knowledge, experience, and inspiration from chemistry, science, old manuscripts, people, the herbs, and the land.





**The Empowerment Manual:
A Guide for Collaborative Groups**

By Starhawk

New Society Press, 2011; Paperback, 288 pages

A “comprehensive manual for groups seeking to organize with shared power and bottom-up leadership to foster vision, trust, accountability, and responsibility,” this book covers such essential topics as understanding group dynamics, facilitating communication and collective decision-making, and dealing effectively with difficult people. It also includes exercises and a facilitator toolbox to help groups establish necessary structures, ground rules, and healthy norms.

Published just before the Occupy movement broke out in the US, *The Empowerment Manual* is valuable to anyone exposed to its remarkable large-group decision-making process used in the General Assemblies. Those gatherings quickly encompassed all the structural and interpersonal/cultural differences of urban America, which are also found in smaller scale in intentional communities and community organizing work.

Starhawk lays out a vision of how collaborative organizations can harness people’s ideals, passions, skills, and knowledge toward many ends—if their members learn to work together effectively.

Starhawk has put in the “10,000 hours” of practice, making her a well-seasoned process facilitator among activist groups and collectives. Her observations ring true with rich insights and practical advice. She highlights issues and methods for working with folks traumatized/sensitized to issues of abuse and misuse of authority, personal and political. Class, race, and hierarchy are well-addressed. She lays out the interconnection between how individuals respond to those they feel in conflict with, and the wider impact these inner and outer conflicts have on others in a group.

From an intentional communities perspective, the book offers insights into how to embody diversity and understanding, as well as practical ways to anticipate and work with personality differences rooted in the comfort or discomfort one has in speaking or in holding or working with positions of power. Many ICs, including cohousing groups, grapple with racial diversity and its roots in class; Starhawk brings a deep understanding of how our upbringings and life choices affect the growth of egalitarian relationships among persons of relative privilege and resourcefulness and those reeling from being marginalized, silenced, or victimized.

One of the book’s strengths is its insider’s view of community organizing in many of the grassroots social change movements from the 1970s to today, from the leaderless consciousness raising of the early women’s movement, to the environmental and economic justice movements of the WTO protests in Seattle and Miami, to indigenous people’s movements—drawing especially from Starhawk’s experience as a central figure in creating and reclaiming pagan spirituality.

I found the weakest part of the book the fictional account of Rootbound, a large cohousing community in the Oakland Hills. We hear stories of an apparently flourishing group of mostly professionals enjoying a good life together. A radical mission-driven collective called The Tree People joins the group, and moves into one of the homes there. (Cohousing is generally owner-occupied and financed collection of homes of smaller than average size, so such collective renting is rare in cohousing.) A variety of conflicts around food, environmental and animal values, and communication styles comes to an explosive head at a party meant to reunite everyone. There’s shouting, shoving, tears, and withdrawal across several households.

The ways conflict gets acted out will be familiar enough, especially to many a young or informally organized community without owner occupants. But I winced a bit at Starhawk’s fictional solution. The perfect expert—a multicultural college professor whose expertise marries indigenous wisdom traditions with organizational psychology—appears on the scene, interested in joining the community. After hearing a couple long-time

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Featured Titles

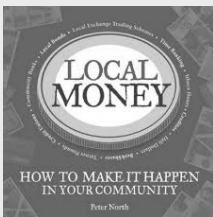
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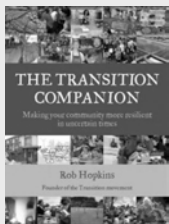
From the Transition Movement, a guide to alternative currencies.



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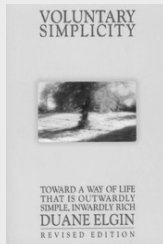
An optimistic look at cooperating instead of competing for the remaining supply of fossil fuels.



The Transition Companion: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times

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320 pages. From the transition town movement, this is a book of tools to use to start working for a sustainable future, wherever you are, right now.



Voluntary Simplicity

second edition, by Duane Elgin. 2010, 210 pages. An inspiring case for creating a life that is less materialistic and

more meaningful.



Community: The Structure of Belonging

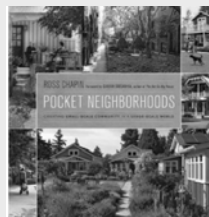
by Peter Block. 2009, 240 pages. An exploration of the nature of community, including how to transition into it, and making physical spaces that will "foster a sense of belonging."



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.



Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small Scale Community in a Large Scale World

by Ross Chapin. 2011, 220 pages. A beautiful, full color guide to making neighborhoods that create community.



The Empowerment Manual

by Starhawk. 2011, 287 pages. A guide for making collaborative groups work.



Depletion and Abundance

by Sharon Astyk. 288 pages, 2008. Great, non-strident guide to the personal in the peak oil transition.



Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy

by Peter Brown and Geoffrey Garver. 2009, 216 pages. Drawing on their background as Quakers, the authors present a clear guide for a global economy not based on infinite growth.



Choosing a Sustainable Future: Ideas and Inspiration from Ithaca, NY

by Liz Walker. 2010, 273 pages. Stories of what is possible and what it is like to choose a low impact lifestyle.



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HOSPITALITY IN HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA. Fellow Pilgrims and Travelers involved with Intentional Communities and/or who are on a spiritual path, needing a rest-stop along the way may call Dave at (323) 460-4071. I am a massage therapist, Spiritual Director and Teacher with over 30 years of Community Living with emphasis on Houses of Hospitality in the US, Canada and Peru.

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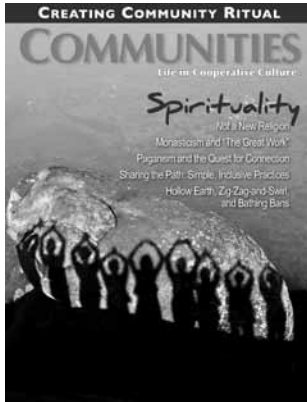
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Social Permaculture; Sociocracy; Attending to Zone Zero; The Farm; The Sharing Gardens; WWOOFing; Changeaculture; Prairie Hugelkultur; Permaculture Stole My Community; The Growing Edge; eCOOLvillages; Nature's Friends; Future of Water; Ecological Community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

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#149 Elders

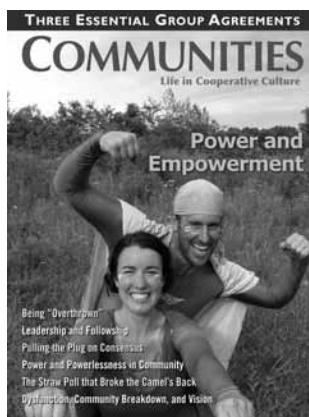
It Takes a Community to Grow an Elder; Elderhood, In and Out of Community; Becoming Elders; A Legacy of Beauty; Remembering Jane Owen; Snapshots of Elders; Aging in Community; Green Houses; Perspectives from Sao Paolo; The Making of Senior Cohousing; Reinventing Retirement; And I Listen (Winter '10)

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#155

PEOPLE LOOKING

ANYONE OUT THERE STILL OPPOSED TO COMPUTERS? Also, still interested in intentional community living. To discuss either or both write: Link, 21 Old Profile Rd Marlow, NM 03456

This ad comes from a prisoner; COMMUNITIES has not investigated the details of or reasons for their incarceration:

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PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEB SITES

COHOUSING.ORG, the Cohousing Website, is filled with core resources for cohousing community – a thriving segment of the intentional communities movement. The site includes the Cohousing Directory, info on National Cohousing Conferences, Classified Ads, and FREE publications including Cohousing Articles, online Cohousing Books, In-the-News, Just-for-Fun, and much more. Its presented by Coho/US, the Cohousing Association of the United States - please visit us at cohousing.org.

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LETTERS

(continued from p. 5)

divide us and erase those lines of separation should be a high priority, even if the lines aren't obvious. Equally important—we can also celebrate the fact that this is a diverse movement, made up of different kinds of people; those differences are also a good thing, and we have much to learn from/teach each other!

These issues are very important to me and my event team, and as I struggle with these questions I would love to hear from readers who might have feedback or suggestions about ways to address/increase diversity at Art of Community gatherings. Feel free to contact me at sooz@ic.org.

Susan Frank
Pine, Arizona

Aging Canadian Activists Need to Create Together

Hello:

I believe we need to age in community but I cannot find a place to live in Canada. I read articles and hear the philosophy but can't find the practical AND AFFORDABLE opportunity yet in Canada.

I cannot afford to buy into the cohousing opportunities that arise in Canada. I do not have \$300,000 or more to put into a living unit in cohousing. I am not interested in paying to live in an Ecovillage and the ones I've seen do not have affordable housing opportunities to lease or rent. I am not interested in living in a teepee or sharing a house with little kids running around.

I have not found cooperative housing for lower income people. We have inadequate amounts of subsidized housing for people who meet government criteria for "disabled" or "poor." Our government stopped funding cooperatives during the 1980s. The folks with

a few assets above the cut-off line don't qualify for any type of government subsidized housing.

I am 55, wanting to live in my own tiny home or well insulated apartment on shared land, with a shared car, with a common kitchen and laundry. I want to grow some of the organic food I wish to eat into old age. I've been a community leader in the organic and heritage seed movements since the mid 1980s and know how to live "green" and lean. I want to live where my 1980s organic philosophy of living simply, sharing resources, eating organically, buying in bulk, sharing a car and being a community, environmental, and social activist is my lifestyle and life. I haven't fit into "society" and won't as I age.

I hear of people moving to India where they can buy an apartment for \$10,000 for a life lease, spend \$300/month for food and living costs and that's affordable. I know people are leaving Canada to live in third world countries where the \$ stretches further. But why should older people who have worked their lives, perhaps at \$20/hour jobs or less, have to move out of Canada to age? Each person has a diversity of skills that need to be recognized and valued as a part of their contribution to the community's society because the outside society doesn't see poorer older people, especially women on their own. These skills are social capital that needs to be invested, shared with the younger crowd, and reinvested in society.

So we need to find the people with money who are "green" and want to invest in social capital enhancement. We need these developers to buy the land and offer an opportunity for 55 plus people to buy into the community affordably. I think we need to create senior cohousing that's for the low and lower income crowd.

And I cannot envision being put into

government senior facilities; there are too many of us to house and care for, and I likely won't see an old age pension when I turn 65 in 10 years. We can either start to create the way we want to age as a group or wait to be fed processed foods in public old-age dormitories and poor houses.

I am pleased to connect with others who wish to move forward into action and connection to address this housing issue. 🐦

Sharon L. Rempel
slrempe@shaw.ca
www.grassrootsolutions.com
Victoria BC, Canada

RESOURCES FOR DISMANTLING RACISM

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www.toolsforchange.org

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond:

www.pisab.org

Tim Wise:

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Dismantling Racism:

www.dismantlingracism.org

*Thanks to Rebecca Lane,
Executive Director of the
Cohousing Association of the
United States, for this list.*

Communal Studies Association

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Founded in 1975, the Communal Studies Association publishes *Communal Societies*, a journal covering many aspects of historical and contemporary communal societies with articles and book reviews written by academics, communitarians and preservationists.

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DOING THE HEAVY LIFTING ON AFFORDABILITY

(continued from p. 37)

complications to the conversation and still have confidence that we could find our way through the thicket of divergent ideas and the thorniness of dear-to-the-heart opinions. And it was the authenticity and completeness of the conversation that will sustain the community through the messy days of implementation ahead.

To me, this was a terrific demonstration of the magic of consensus, where a group becomes fluid and creative once it's done sufficient spadework to pull the fangs on unresolved tensions and creates a container of safety and caring sufficient for participants to bring forward whatever they have to contribute on the topic at hand and to trust that no one will be blown off. I never get tired of seeing the magic unfold.

• • •

Here is a community doing brave and important work, pushing past the relative ease of their immediate lives to insist that their community be a building block of a just and sustainable future. Wow. What a great way to spend a Sunday. 🐦

Laird Schaub is Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and cofounder of Sandhill Farm, an egalitarian 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. This column is adapted from his blog entry of February 14, 2012.

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THE LIGHTER SIDE OF COMMUNITY: A COMMUNITARIAN APPRECIATES *WANDERLUST*

(continued from p. 63)

(The one slight letdown in this initial honeymoon period occurs when they discover that their accommodations as new members will be significantly less luxurious than they were as guests—another pattern that may ring bells in several communities.)

Then another common pattern emerges. Linda grows into life in the community—feeling “alive every day,” playing with the children, and eventually becoming the hero of the group with her inspired protest at the casino ground-breaking—but George has more and more doubts. Linda proclaims, “I really feel like this is my home...for the first time in my life, I feel like I have a purpose.” George, on the other hand, misses “meat, air conditioning, and being able to close the bathroom door.”

In real-life communities, too, equal levels of enthusiasm for community living between partners can sometimes seem like the exception rather than the rule—with possible outcomes being separation, both partners staying, or both leaving (often, with one having serious regrets). In *Wanderlust*, George and Linda finally do see eye to eye about their priorities, and, true to their philosophy and general good nature, the community members cheer the couple’s commitment to each other even though it doesn’t include staying at Elysium.

Community as Catalyst

Linda and George start their adventure as a frazzled New York couple with little sense of control over their lives and with little time or opportunity for non-harried communication, self-expression, or self-examination. Elysium catalyzes their personal growth and transforms their lives in ways they could never have imagined—and they return the favor not only by helping precipitate positive changes at Elysium but by empowering former community-mates and themselves through the new business they establish when they return to New York. By the end of *Wanderlust*, far from melting down, Elysium has emerged from its casino land-deal trials stronger than ever, more egalitarian, and with a more positive “media image” to boot.

This kind of story may seem like the stuff of Hollywood movies—but I’ve personally witnessed similar transformations both within intentional communities and within those who spend time in them. Even years later, communities often receive letters of appreciation from those who see their lives forever changed for the better by experiences there.

This doesn’t mean that intentional community—or any one style of community—is for everyone, indefinitely. *Wanderlust* highlights some of the reasons why a place like Elysium will not work, long-term, for people like George. But it also affirms community living as a legitimate choice—one that may be a lot more fun (and full of more material for loving parody) than the disconnected, unhappy lives of many modern people. At the very least, it asks its viewers to shake up their assumptions, and maybe explore a little—even if only to find that the community best for each of us is whatever we can create in our own lives, once we’ve learned what we need to learn in order to create it. 🐦

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES, currently lives at Meadowsong Ecovillage outside Dexter, Oregon, and has spent most of his adult life in community of one form or another. Contact him at editor@ic.org.

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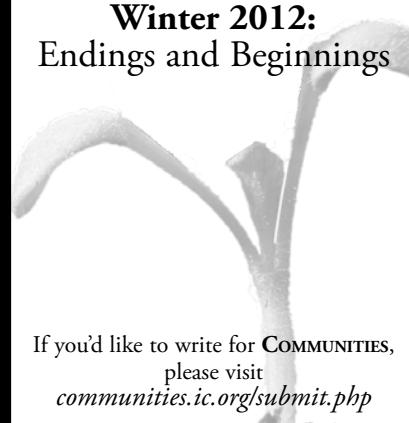


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REVIEW THE EMPOWERMENT MANUAL: A GUIDE FOR COLLABORATIVE GROUPS

(continued from p. 65)

residents express their distress, she introduces the healing Talisman of Healthy Community and offers to facilitate and coach several long sessions with members for free. Even more amazingly for a mature community, the members accept her offer without any discussion.

Set aside the idea that this example reflects the typical cohousing community or long-time cooperative community, and the knowledgeable reader will be more satisfied.

The Talisman of Healthy Community—a conceptual framework around which the whole book is organized—will be appealing especially to folks seeking a holistic interpersonal model of heart-centered wisdom. But I believe it misses an important area of growth for groups: build a long-term capacity to govern themselves while managing finances effectively. A truly holistic approach would fully include the material world of money, economics, and everyday needs as well as the free choice of lifestyle and “higher order” values. By neglecting the economic aspect of sustainability, I fear the framework may undercut the movement toward a more just, cooperative, and green society, since we cannot transform what we don’t pay attention to. Starhawk does have a short two-page section on money, but I think this could have been its own chapter at least.

However, this book’s strengths greatly outweigh its weaknesses. *The Empowerment Manual* is well worth having to gain insight and practical advice into the world of political collective activist organizing, from a first-hand insider and wise witness. ☺

Betsy Morris is a member of Berkeley Cohousing and FIC Board Member.

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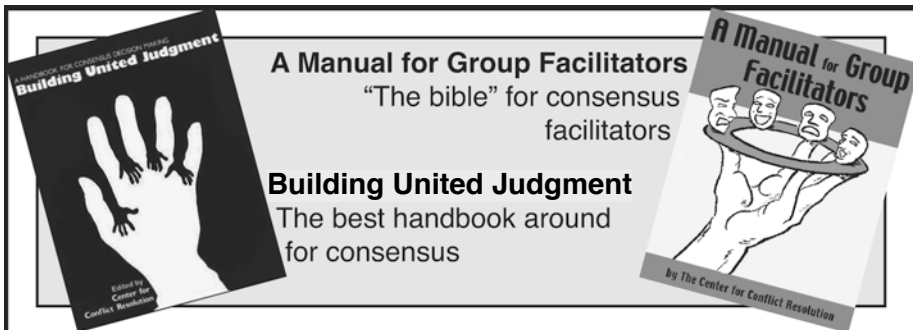


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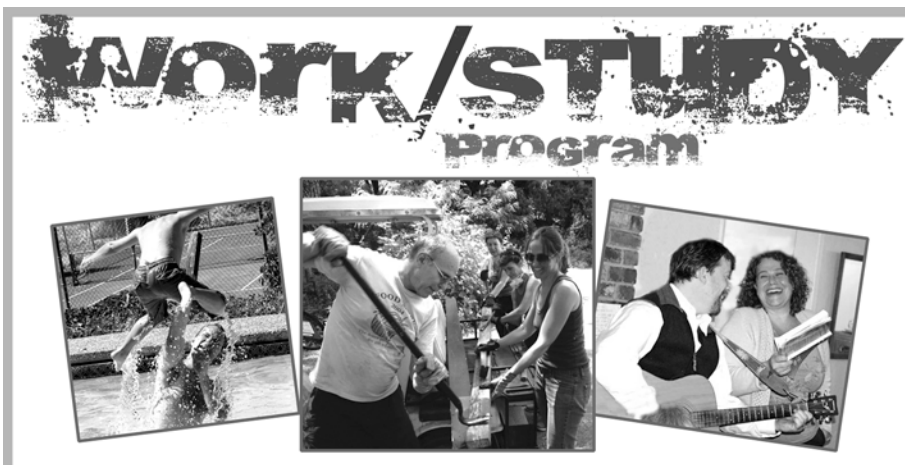
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ART OF COMMUNITY 2012

(continued from p. 80)

differences may not easily stand out. Despite the energy and activity brewing in most intentional communities, not all communities, nor all communitarians, are equal participants in the communities movement. It is naïve to believe that the presenters, workshop leaders, and public faces of this movement are able speak for the myriad voices that comprise the whole, or can encapsulate for everyone the experience of what it means to “live in community.”

Our work as organizers is to create a platform where *all* voices can be heard. With that in mind, and in the spirit of community, we intend for the post-conference days to be an opportunity to include some of the voices that are not so commonly heard from in a public forum. This movement belongs to all of us—come join us this September and together we will raise our voices and look ahead to a bright future where *community* is strong in everyone’s life.

We hope to see *and* hear you in September! ☺

Art of Community: People, Place, and Purpose, will be held Sept. 21-23, with additional programming Sept. 24-25, in Occidental, California. Registration is now open: www.artofcmt.com, 313-444-CMTY (2689), events@ic.org.

Molly Reed and Susan Frank coordinate (and write on behalf of) the Fellowship for Intentional Community’s Events Team.



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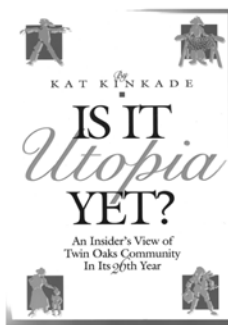
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Art of Community 2012

Last September 250 people representing five countries and 20 US states congregated in the redwoods north of San Francisco to discuss the significance of community in our lives. The event was *Art of Community: Creating Sustainable Culture Through Cooperation*, a conference organized by the Fellowship for Intentional Community which addressed, among other topics, how the communities movement contributes to sustainable, cooperative culture via economic and social sustainability. The profile of event attendees included community veterans connecting with old friends and looking to strengthen cooperative skills, individuals eager to start or join an intentional community, and newcomers to the communities movement—folks who share the values of building a more cooperative and sustainable culture. People enjoyed it so much, we are doing it again this fall, same time, same place.

As event organizers, we have spent the last six months processing the feedback we received about last year's event and brainstorming about how we can improve upon it this year (and occasionally getting carried away with wild schemes and grand visions for Art of Community 2012!). Our main challenge is finding ways to enhance the chances that weekend connections produce something more enduring than a workshop high—identifying allies, inspiring projects, and addressing community challenges in ways that won't fade. Bearing these objectives in mind, we are inviting folks back to Occidental, California, September 21-23, 2012. The theme is *People, Place, Purpose*, and these three threads will be interwoven throughout program content, workshops, and presentations.

The *People* thread will include activities which deal with good group process and dynamics, cooperative skill building, and decision-making models. There will be designated time to meet representatives of communities from around the country and to share with others what you're seeking.

Place will be explored through offerings on ecological sustainability, local economics, understanding of and connection to our physical environment. We'll offer examples of cooperative ownership and introduce you to cooperative networks and intentional communities where you live.

Purpose will involve networking sessions, focusing on regional organizing and the vast scope of the North American Communities Movement.

For newcomers, this year's Art of Community offers a wealth of opportunities for building skills of cooperation and learning about what it means to "live in community," wherever you are. For seasoned communarians, you will have the space to offer your pearls of wisdom to newbies as well as find out how others living in community have weathered the same challenges you may be now facing. Casual and facilitated networking sessions will be available to help each other plan and strategize for growing the communities movement and strengthening collaborative connections.

Our featured presenter this year is Mark Lakeman of City Repair in Portland, Oregon. Mark will share stories about his experiences and involvement in strengthening neighborhoods and developing a sense of community via projects that bolster personal connections to Place. Through his leadership in Communitecture, Inc., and The City Repair Project, Mark has been instrumental in the development of dozens of participatory design projects and organizations across the United States and Canada. Within Portland, City

Repair Project has worked for over 15 years to transform the city in accordance with a locally cultivated vision of creativity, community, and sustainability.

Inspiring people to purposefully engage in place-making is central to the vision for Art of Community this year. We aim to create a space where the vast array of communities representatives and community-minded folks, each with unique visions and unique missions, can connect around and celebrate the overarching commonalities that we describe as the Communities Movement. To address this issue, we are posing the question "What does it mean to call a shared concept of living with intention for community a *movement*?" Contained within the idea of a movement are the principles of action and direction, thus we are asking, what kind of actions are we taking, and in what direction are we moving?

In seeking answers to these questions, we plan to offer additional programming days following the main event (which ends Sunday afternoon). We are hoping to address the tension between living in community and being a full participant in a wider world, by considering new ways to bring the achievements of life in community to a broader, fuller audience. Let's inject more strength into this movement—while some are inspired to try community to get away from it all, we're interested in the opposite, looking at community as a way to get *into* it all, as a base of operations for effecting social change.

Addressing diversity is an issue that we struggle with as event organizers. Though the intentional community landscape includes high diversity—both of groups and of individuals within those groups—when we gather together those

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