

TRANSITIONS IN COMMUNITY

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

## Endings and Beginnings

Fear of Change  
Grief and Growth

The Bookends of Community

The Adventure of Starting Over

Cycling toward Sustainable Community

Winter 2012 • Issue #157

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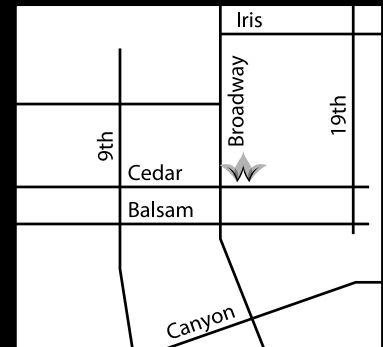
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Amber Jones and her children Terra and River, resident members at Lost Valley Educational Center/Meadowsong Ecovillage in Dexter, Oregon, visit nearby Pleasant Hill Cemetery. Photo by Chris Roth.

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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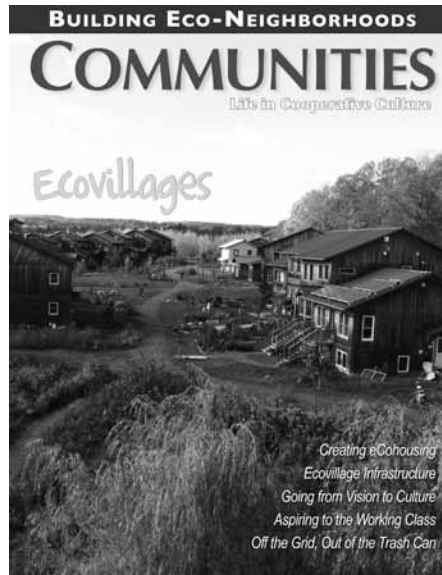
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# LETTERS



## Journalism or Propaganda?

Dear COMMUNITIES Magazine,

Been wondering lately if your magazine is about journalism or propaganda.

What puts me in that mind is the recent thread of responses to Diana Leafe Christian's "Busting the Myth" series, which casts doubt on the efficacy of using consensus in complex residential communities.

These responses, authored by Ma'ikwe Ludwig, Tree Bressen, and Laird Schaub, were so fast in coming, and so fully contradictory in their thinking that they acted to negate the actual article itself. The sense I got from reading those responses is something along the lines of "Consensus works just fine. You just haven't tried the right tools, or you're not trying hard enough, or maybe you need more training, or maybe you just aren't communitarian enough."

This, along with the fact that it's a little suspect that these responses come from the very people who stand to benefit from hanging on to the view that consensus works perfectly (aren't they all consensus facilitators for a living?), made me wonder about the intention of this publication.

Why couldn't the article just stand on its own? Was it too edgy or controversial for your publication? Did it question too closely a central tenet of what the board, editor, publisher believe? Is it too threatening? Are you concerned the read-

ers will be shocked, discouraged, misled?

Why I say all this is that I happen to live at a community similar to Green Meadow, and while I don't agree with everything the author had to say, I heartily appreciate the conversation. I also know many people in other communities who are equally frustrated with a pure consensus process. Most of us feel that we are not getting real solutions or deep answers from those, such as your responders, who are rallying the cause. I believe that if we move too quickly to dismiss, disable, or undermine even the whiff that something could be better, well then we'll never get anything better.

Let us not forget the three stages of truth. 1. It gets ignored, dismissed, or ridiculed. 2. It gets violently opposed. 3. It is accepted as evident.

I would love for the "Busting the Myth" series of articles to stand on its own—because I very much want your magazine to be about journalism and the sharing of ideas. I'd love to see real discussion and creativity come out of the doubt and uncertainty being raised in the series. And if the truth, or a part of the truth, leads those of influence to quake in their boots, maybe that's fine.

**Lee Warren**  
via email

**Editor's Note:** *The responses to Diana's articles were not initiated by the magazine or by the consensus trainers, but in fact were solicited and written specifically at Diana's request. From the very start, she envisioned her article series as a conversation, in which Ma'ikwe, Tree, and Laird then agreed to participate. In her article proposal, she wrote, "I think that if COMMUNITIES ran this series it could stimulate dialogue if not controversy among communities-based consensus trainers, which might have several benefits: illuminating the issues even more through alternate-view or opposite-view articles, sidebars, or letters to the editor; lively reading; and, we'd all hope, more readership."*

*Reactions to the article series (both Diana's pieces and others' responses) have indeed been positive, as evidenced by the letters in issue #156, including Diana's letter of appreciation and reflection on the responses in the previous issue. We will continue to publish divergent viewpoints when they add to the lively conversation this article series has stimulated.*

### Fair-Share Rules Support Diversity

For many good reasons, most intentional communities practice consensus.

If you ever do take a vote, avoid plurality rules and point voting. Both are easy to scam and neither supports diversity.

When only one option can win, use the "Condorcet" rule. It lets all voters help choose a widely-popular and central option.

But whenever possible, use fair-share, multi-winner rules. This is the best way you can support diversity.

For example, consider trying Fair-Share Spending, used by Twin Oaks Community.

Details and free software are available at [accuratedemocracy.com](http://accuratedemocracy.com).

**Rob Loring**

via [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)'s web contact form

### Bunk

I am always amazed by the irony in magazines like yours that proclaim "community" and "diversity"—while, at the same time, sporting articles by and about people that all act, think, and believe the same...and kick themselves if they detect so much as a shred of difference within themselves.

Diversity is not sameness, homogeneity, or political correctness. It is not playing Thought Police or speech censor. It is embracing, even celebrating differences, allowing a wide range of beliefs and lifestyles. It is not vegetarianism and "green" causes, alone. It is vegetarianism, racially

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](mailto:editor@ic.org) or COMMUNITIES, 81868 Lost Valley Ln, Dexter OR 97431. Your letters may be edited or shortened. Thank you!

hypersensitive liberal-leaning ideologies, and "green" causes existing alongside, even embracing, those who eat meat like it's going out of style, drive SUVs, consider themselves conservatives, work for a big oil company, and think Global Warming is the biggest hoax ever perpetrated on the world.

That's true diversity. That's real community. That's compassion and love at its finest.

Case in point: Lois Arkin's article "Diversity Issues in Los Angeles Eco-Village" (COMMUNITIES #155, Summer 2012). Lois seems bent on labeling herself a racist, even singling herself out as "a person of privilege, white, from an upper middle class background." Then, she goes on to make assumptions about crossing (on foot) against the red light at an intersection in "an urban neighborhood." Her assumption: She, being white, could get away with it. But the "Latinos, Asians, African Americans" would likely get handcuffed and thrown to the pavement.

That's bunk. And any thinking person who's not grossly egocentric knows it. I live in Michigan. I've frequently been in Detroit, surely one of the most racially diverse populations on the planet. I see people of color crossing against the light all the time. Not a single cop has thrown

them against the pavement and beat them silly. That's because if it happens at all it happens very, very rarely. How do I know? Because the media loves to play up such things. If it happened, it would be all over YouTube and in the media within minutes of its occurrence.

As the old saying goes, if all you have is a hammer, every problem is a nail. That notion seems to be lost on magazines like Communities, which seems to try to pound everything and everyone into the same round hole—whether or not some of us are "square" to start with.

If you want real diversity and community, drop the racial guilt, the heavy handed push for homogeneity, and the America-isn't-so-great-after-all ideologies...and just let people be people. Love people for who and what they are. Whatever they are. Wherever they are. Whatever they believe. Or don't believe.

Eliminate "us and them"...and then you will see unity like never before. No mind walls = no separation.

But it has to start with a heart full of love and compassion...and a head lacking preconceptions and expectations.

Sincerely,

**Rev. Charama Bhavika**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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1. Outside Country	0	0
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3. Other classes through USPS	0	0
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## 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.

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## What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE BY LAIRD SCHAUB



# Forty Candles and Counting

The theme for this issue is Endings and Beginnings, making it an appropriate occasion to reflect on where we've been and where we're headed. It happens that this issue will appear on newsstands in December 2012, exactly 40 years after COMMUNITIES magazine debuted. A lot has transpired between that beginning and where we are today.

## Those Were the Days

Back in late 1972, Watergate had occurred but had not yet blown up in the Republican administration's collective faces. The inaugural issue of this magazine was released just a month after Nixon had trounced McGovern in the Presidential election, winning 49 states (who could tell at the time how prescient those *Don't Blame Me, I'm from Massachusetts* bumper stickers would be two years later). Gasoline sold for less than 40 cents a gallon and no one had heard of OPEC yet. RCA had just developed the compact disc and quadraphonic eight-track technology was considered the apex of automobile sound systems. The Surgeon General reported that smoking was severely harmful to health (hard to believe there was ever a time when we didn't know that). Electronic mail was first introduced (back then tweeting was something you expected from a cartoon char-



acter). Don McLean confounded music critics by realizing pop chart gold with *American Pie*, a single that lasted long enough (over eight-and-a-half minutes) to rotate the tires on your car.

In 1972 we were nearing the end of what came to be known as the '60s-era surge in intentional communities (which would last until 1975). While interest in creating alternatives to the predominant Father-Knows-Best nuclear family lifestyle with a stay-at-home mom who dressed for dinner was winding down—and wouldn't blossom again until 1990—this magazine plugged along, developing its niche as the chronicler of what was being learned in the trenches about how people could recover from deep conditioning in competition and hierarchy to function well together in cooperative groups.

With a low subscriber base and too little income to pay staff, COMMUNITIES ran out of steam in the late '80s and suspended publication. FIC acquired the publishing rights in 1992, refired the boilers, and brought this magazine back into regular quarterly publication in 1994. Including this issue, FIC has now produced 81 of the magazine's 157 issues, slightly more than half. This year FIC has been at the helm for 20 years—exactly as long as it wasn't the publisher.

## The Road Ahead

To the best of our knowledge there was no mention of FIC in the Mayan calendar, and thus we are not taking the view that we are facing an ending—or at least none of Noahic proportions. The Fellowship sees this publication as an integral part of a multidimensional strategy for delivering the information and inspiration of cooperative living to a public that is increasingly weary of a mainstream society that offers up a steady diet of alienation and discord. (Was anyone uplifted by this year's Presidential debates?)

We are dedicated to the proposition that there has *got* to be a better way—one that transcends the divisiveness of red states and blue states—and FIC makes good on its promise through:

- Maintaining a robust family of websites (anchored by [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)) that attracts an average of 2700 unique visitors every day, serving up an average of seven page requests per visit.
- Offering *Communities Directory*, both as an in-print book (since 1990) and as a free online service with a searchable database (since 2004).
- Delivering a vibrant Events program that has hosted successful Art of Community gatherings each of the last two falls and regularly partners with sister organizations to perk up their events. Visit [www.artofcmtty.com](http://www.artofcmtty.com) for the latest news about what's next.

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**We know that many others would  
be thrilled to receive COMMUNITIES in  
their mailbox—we just haven't gotten  
their attention yet.**

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- Publishing this magazine every quarter, with each issue focused on a topical theme.
- Being on the other end of a keyboard, a phone line, or an envelope to answer burning questions about community living. These inquiries come to us from the press, from researchers, and from communities looking for help with vexing problems. Mostly though, they come from you—people hungry for information about how to manifest more community in their life.

In the coming year we plan to offer for the first time the possibility of buying electronic subscriptions, with the magazine available as a PDF. We'll also offer all back issues and reprint packets as downloadable PDFs. Once this is in place (there's untold hours worth of scanning involved), we will cease offering photocopies of out-of-print back issues (save those trees).

While COMMUNITIES still struggles with a low subscriber base—about 1300 today—we continue to shovel coal in the fire and like our chances to grow that number. We've worked hard to create a good-looking publication with trenchant articles and are proud of what we offer. Whenever we bring a display of magazines to community events we sell the dickens out of back issues, and we know in our hearts that there are at least 5000 people out there who would be thrilled to buy a subscription and receive COMMUNITIES in their mailbox every three months—we just haven't gotten their attention yet.

If you know such a person, be sure to send them our way—or give them a gift subscription! This is easily accomplished online at [www.communities.org](http://www.communities.org).

## Thanks, Tanya

Finally, it turns out that this issue is an ending for Tanya Carwyn. After two-and-a-half years of ably serving as our Ad Manager, she's stepping down. While this development occurred too late for us to have identified her successor before we went to press, it will be a priority for us to enter COMMUNITIES' fifth decade with an able replacement. We wish Tanya well in whatever is next for her.

I can hardly guess what I'll be reporting in 2022, when we'll be trying to cram 50 candles onto our birthday cake—but I hope it will be that we have 100 subscribers for every year of publication. 🍷

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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](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com).*

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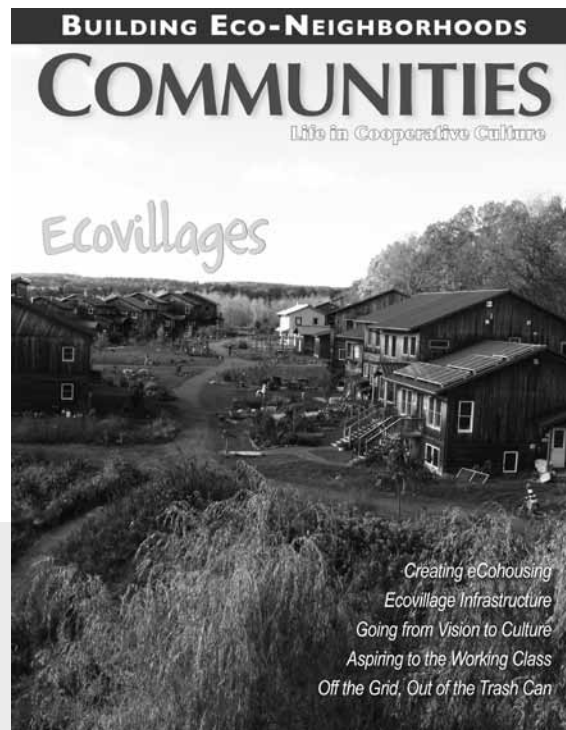
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Chris Roth

# Endings and Beginnings

In setting our 2012 themes, we chose this one because life in community—life in general—is full of endings and beginnings. We planned it for our Winter issue partly because we anticipated that the end of the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012 would put the topic at the forefront of some readers' minds. But this year, extreme weather events and the US elections have given us other reasons to think about the future and what kinds of endings and beginnings it may hold. There have been both discouraging and hopeful signs.

Less than two weeks after Hurricane Sandy, a new study assessing various climate models (looking at a key factor, their ability to measure relative humidity in the subtropics) found that the most accurate ones in that realm are also the ones that predict the highest amounts of global warming: 7 to 8 degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2100. Given the amount of disruption to weather patterns and human life that has already resulted from 1.5 degrees F warming since 1900, this is truly sobering news. It's the kind of news that is impossible to write about dispassionately. Will this be the century of endings, most of them traumatic?

On the other hand, many of the winners of the recent US elections were *not* the ones for whom the most advertising money was spent—suggesting that voters cannot be endlessly propagandized or bought, and that people power, not money power, has a chance of being the most important factor (along with the constraints of our home planet) in shaping the human future. If we can take charge of our collective destiny, we have a much better chance of making the transition into a regenerative future. This November's results offered at least a glimmer of hope that this kind of collective action for the common good can happen widely, not just in the smaller networks and communities we often profile in this magazine.

But admittedly, even by the most optimistic measures, the big picture is daunting. On the small scale, however, hope seems much more available.

On the small scale, it's obvious that each ending leads to a new beginning, that change and transition are the nature of life, and that they're beautiful processes to observe and participate in. Anyone who spends time around young children—or around the younger generations now exploring community and ecological living, who seem so much more advanced, wise, and enlightened than we novice explorers were several decades ago, and who, confronted by seemingly endless bad news, still see the chance to make things better—knows that the future still holds a lot of promise.

We came down to the wire in the production of this issue. Despite a year's lead time, I didn't write my own article until nearly the last minute, after many false starts. Several other potential authors didn't produce their articles at all. This may not have been because we had nothing to say—but because we had too much to say about a topic that was emotionally loaded. This issue's first seven articles (and several others too) all report varying degrees of heartbreak, even as they also talk about the new beginnings accompanying these endings.

Besides the page you're reading, the final element to come together was the cover. Over three days of photo-shooting with Amber, Terra, and River, I realized that just about anything I photographed encapsulated endings and beginnings—especially if an ever-curious baby were in the picture.

We explored flowers, seedpods, mushrooms, clearcuts, grave-stones...and everything we saw gave us a window into the cycles of perpetual change that drive our lives on this planet. Every dried-up stalk held the seeds of its replacement; next to every tree stump was new green growth. Endings and beginnings in community are no different from the cycles found anywhere else in society or the natural world. If we want any chance of being happy, we need to embrace them. ☺

*Chris Roth (editor@ic.org) edits COMMUNITIES.*

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# Crossing over the Threshold:

## Transitioning the Windward Community to the Next Generation

*By Lindsay Hagamen*

*“The past must die in order for the future to have a place to live.”*  
—Joseph Campbell

The cold permeated everything. It was the winter of 2005 and the sun hardly rose above the horizon, enclosing this high plateau, on the eastern side of the Cascadian Wilderness in southern Washington State, in what felt like perpetual darkness. The sheep somehow got fed, and so did the chickens, despite the chilling cold that crept deep into the bones of the few residents who remained. It was a cold that even the warmth of a well-tended wood stove could not melt away. For the chill that permeated Windward that winter was the chill that comes when the last flames of hope begin to flicker, when the land begins to reclaim 30 years of hard-won successes, when what you once were able to convince yourself was courageous, you now simply think is crazy.

During that winter, I was 4,500 miles away in the mountains of the Darien rain forest in Panama, taking a course in sustainable community development and systems thinking. At the ripe age of 20, I thought I had most of the answers. I knew some-

thing was terribly awry in how the vast majority of us lived with each other and with the Earth. I knew I needed to create a small haven of sanity for myself so I could be free to live fully and somehow, maybe, be able to help others do the same. In short, I had no idea what my dreams were getting me into.

What the people who remained at Windward did not know that winter was how painful it would be to let something grow out of what had died. What I didn't realize that winter was how painful it would be to breathe life into something I did not fully understand was dead.

Windward's history, like the history of many intentional communities that have survived in some form through the last four decades, is complex and multi-sided. Windward grew out of the conviction that we needed a working model of a better way to live, freely and sustainably—a desire that sails into the prevailing winds of modern culture, and so requires a strategy akin to tacking, wherein a boat sails a zig-zag course windward,

for no sailing vessel can move directly into the wind.

The piece of this long history that I will focus on here is that critical point of transition that all of life experiences, after a retreat, after a decline, when space is created for something new to incubate, to gestate and eventually come to life. In other words, the fated transition in community when the founders, or what is left of them, pass on what they have created to a new generation of practical idealists who will carry an evolved version of it into the future.



I first came to Windward in the late summer of 2007 as an idealistic college student. What I entered when I arrived was a small group of people, in their 50s or 60s, struggling to run an internship program that was an attempt to attract young blood who could bridge the gap between generations and life experiences to carry Windward forward.

Windward had recently experienced a significant decline in active membership, and the hillside that formed the center of the village homestead was a mere shadow of what must have been, a forest filled with pieces of stories of people I would never meet, fragments of a life, the parts left behind. But quite frankly, I was excited by the void, because I knew that even though the oaks were now the rusted orange of Fall, Windward had just experienced Winter, and I could smell a hint of Spring on the wind.

I returned to Windward in 2009, after finishing my degree, with uncertain hopes of creating a full and abundant life and the immodest desire to build a better world. I had enthusiasm, I had a vision, I had the worldview afforded me by my experiences, including more than my fair share of naïvete about human nature. Though I would have been ashamed to admit it at the time, I was also undoubtedly healing my wounds from surviving in a severely fragmented world.

I found a kindred spirit in Walt, a 60-year-old man with a head full of Einsteinian white hair, the last remaining founder. Somehow I looked past the grayed hair, the tired body, the joint failure, and the bitterness, and saw someone who would fight and love beside me to re-energize Windward, this beautifully complex and revolutionarily simple place I had stumbled across. Despite Walt's repeated expression that Windward needed a "new crew," I continued to see him, and his eloquent expressions of a holistic life, as part of this new crew that would build upon the foundation created by the membership over the last 30 years.

It wasn't until Walt pulled me aside after lunch late in August of 2011 to tell me he was contemplating leaving, contemplating living out his days in some other yet-to-be-determined location, that I fell back down to the hard clay ground. By that time, a handful of people in their 20s and 30s, including myself, had decided to lay down some roots and were, as best as we understood how at the time, making a com-

mitment to stay. But staying was not enough. Walt would not and could not carry Windward forward. He could not revive the Windward of old, nor would he want to. He had done his part, his leg of the race, was weary from the effort and was trying desperately to hand off the baton. But up until that point, part of me refused to acknowledge it was a relay race. Others seemed to be resisting this truth too.

For to acknowledge that this grand adventure of life, and more specifically, creating vibrant community, is a relay race, is to face our own mortality and the cycles of transformation we are entwined in all of the time, and that none of us can escape. Not only must we confront our own decline and eventual death, but also our periods of incubation, learning, and growth that necessarily come before the height of any creative endeavor.

While it is only natural for one generation to move away from center stage as the next generation takes on the lead role, in a close-knit community context this easily translates into a power struggle where the young'ins are not quite ready or prepared to take on the responsibility and the elders are not quite ready to let go of it. But we both know we must. The tragic beauty in it all is that life doesn't stop while we figure it out, while we come to grips with the evolving roles we must play in making our own dreams and life full and real: the animals still need to be fed, the seeds still need to be planted, the dishes still need to be washed, visitors still need to be greeted, the bills still need to be paid, life still needs to be lived.

In this transitional period, emotional tensions are high, productivity goes down, opportunities are lost, mistakes are made, people leave. But those who stick through it get to bear witness to something new coming to life, emerging out of all that which came before to create fertile ground for something new to be born—like the decaying log in the old growth forest that serves as the literal foundation, rich with nutrients, from which a germinated seed can grow into a sapling and then into a tree.

Those years of transition were very difficult, before I and

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**Walt had done his part, his leg of the race, was weary from the effort and was trying desperately to hand off the baton.**

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the rest of the "new crew" understood fully that the responsibility of bringing to life a new version of Windward rested squarely on our shoulders. There were times when each of us contemplated leaving, when the struggle didn't seem worth it. Some people did leave, in part because of the perceived power struggle and lack of direction as the remaining elder stepped

back, but did not really step back, and the new crew stepped forward, but did not really step forward. This period of transformation was not fun, it probably could have been done better, but it was inevitable and necessary.

• • •

Liminal space describes the stage of a transition when a person, group, or entity straddles the threshold, occupying both sides of a boundary. Liminality is commonly referenced in rituals or rites of passage, when the participant has traveled sufficiently away from a former identity, but has yet to fully cross over the threshold and embrace a new identity. Metaphorically, something has died, but has yet to be born anew. The duration of this period varies depending on the individuals and the nature of the transition. For all, it carries with it elements of disorientation and confusion as well as heightened awareness and new perspectives.

Windward, and its people, existed in an intensely liminal space for about a year, maybe two. If you count all the years that had passed since that cold, dark winter of 2005, when the metaphorical death made itself known, the liminal space lasted nearly six years.

Nothing can transform, or evolve, without passing through this threshold. Communities that want to transition past the vision of the founders, aging members who desire to have their efforts have meaning beyond just their own experience, young communitarians who want to build on successes, learn from mistakes, and not keep re-inventing the wheel all must be willing to pass through this liminal period, often wrought with role and identity confusion.

So it is ever more important during this time of vulnerability to maintain the balance between rigidity and flexibility, between community-focused efforts and individual desires. To facilitate a successful rite of passage, like a skilled ritual-maker, communities must honor established structure and customs, such as decision-making

practices, while leaving room to adapt to what is at hand, and encourage cooperative and interdependent values, while also encouraging the pursuit of individual bliss.

At the most basic level, if a community is approaching such a transition, the best that can be done is to be aware of it, anticipate it, and maintain compassion and integrity, patience and perseverance when the time comes.

• • •

At this point, I feel as though I have crossed over the threshold of this liminal space, coming to a place where my role at Windward is once again clear. I'd suggest that Windward as a whole has passed through the threshold as well, even though role confusion rears its head from time to time. While I now have more responsibilities and more to lose, it is how it should be for a 26-year-old, and I have gained back a mentor, adviser, and



Kotomi Yamamura



friend in Walt, someone who for a period of time felt more like an adversary.

Looking back, it was a commitment to a shared purpose and vision, and a willingness to step into unknown parts of myself, that helped me survive those days when I would collapse to the forest floor in tears, wondering why it had to be so hard to live so simply, wondering why I had to fight so hard to be able to love. In other words, it was desire that enabled me to survive the transition, a strong desire for the intangible yet very real promise that community holds.

I now have far greater understanding of the challenge that Walt and many other long-term communitarians face during the attempt to hand over the life's work of many to a younger, necessarily less experienced generation. Initially comes the challenge of attracting young people with a common vision and shared values to something that is fading, if not already faded. We are more easily drawn to health, the vibrant and the lively. Those who want to take on the role of an elder must be willing to help the community hold a steady course long enough for the younger generation to go through the humbling process of learning how great the challenge is and how grand an opportunity it is, during these vulnerable years of growth, to access many years of experience and practice. In the same way, a young sapling is far more likely to succeed if it is grounded in the fertile, life-giving soil created through past cycles.

I can also assure readers that if there is little or no room for the people who will carry the community into the future to make their mark, to be involved in the creative evolution, to play a role in determining the direction the community heads, then the community will not last very long. Those who are capable of maintaining the integrity of the community through time will leave if their efforts are not valued. And those who do not care to be involved in the creative process integral for community survival, and are content to just let others make such decisions, will not be able, on their own, to maintain a dynamic community when the elders are no longer able to. This means that the elders need to step back just as much as the younger generation steps forward. Increasing or decreasing responsibility is best mirrored by similar changes in authority.

Finally, there are mistakes that we in the younger generation need to make for ourselves, and then there are mistakes that are not worth repeating. I know that I have greatly benefited from elders who have done their best to differentiate between the two, to help me avoid the pitfalls while leaving me to learn the lessons that are best learned first-hand. I imagine that others could benefit from such guidance as well. I imagine too that one of the greatest joys that can come from a hard-earned truth is the understanding that someone else, potentially someone whom you are deeply invested in seeing succeed, will benefit from your experience. My generation has, however, been sold many false promises, and we now crave a practical wisdom that is earned only through experience; we can detect from a distance a lack of authenticity. So it is not the infallible self-proclaimed gurus to whom we are attracted, but rather the people wise in their humanly years. 🐦

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**There are mistakes that we in the younger generation need to make for ourselves, and then there are mistakes that are not worth repeating.**

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*Lindsay Hagamen lives, works, loves, and plays on the high plateau that descends off of Mt. Adams in Klickitat, Washington. She is a member of the Windward Line Family, believes we need to get back to the fundamentals in order to truly thrive together, and helps people transition toward the ecosexual life in workshops throughout the Pacific Northwest and on [mylovereearth.org](http://mylovereearth.org).*



# FEAR OF CHANGE IN LONG-TERM INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES AND ECOVILLAGES

*By Coyote Alberto Ruz*

**B**ack in the '70s and early '80s, an expanding wave of alternative communities began sprouting all over the planet, especially in North America, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Europe, and some also in New Zealand and Australia.

Inspired by existing utopian models from the past, thousands of us, children from the '60s, took seriously the motto "Turn on, tune in, and drop out." We left our universities, families, homes, jobs, cities, and suburbia to move mostly out to the country, a few also to inexpensive urban neighborhoods, to pioneer the construction of our collective visions and our personal dreams.

Mostly middle class students, or recently graduated professionals, war deserters, and veterans, we had begun our quest for change on the campus, in the streets, in the parks, participating in sit-ins, festivals, anti-war events, occupations, marches, street actions, and riots. We were part of the planetary counterculture and also from the many different groups, gangs, urban tribes, and social organizations that comprised "The Movement."

## **Building a New Society**

Coming from urban backgrounds, most of us had very high expectations and dreams, but very little experience of how to start the new society we wanted to build. Some of us took to the mountains, others to the forests, a few even to the deserts, the beaches, and old abandoned rural villages, or we moved into old warehouses or degraded buildings in the cities.

Hippie villages in their early stages were full of long meetings, unending circles, merry communal meals, hard physical work, seasonal fairs, rainbow and barter gatherings, Earth festivals, celebration of pagan weddings, births, and harvests. We developed a particular culture of long hair, beards, long colorful dresses, flower crowns, bright-eyed brothers and sisters, naked children running in the fields, open sexual relations, jamming, grass-growing and smoking, some acid dropping, and experimental loose, anarchical organization.

As we began living in our first yurts, old buses, tipis, wooden A-frame houses, and communal buildings, we also had to learn how to deal with our waste; get alternative wind and solar sources of energy for our tools, record players, and illumination; find water springs, dig wells, divert creeks, and create dams; use the local elements to build our dwellings; plant trees and keep gardens; stock wood and fruit jams for the winters. We also learned how to deliver our babies, and as they started growing, we created our first alternative "little schools" to pass on to the coming generation the hard-acquired values that we formulated in our social living experiments, known as "the communes" in the '60s, "intentional communities" in the '70s and '80s, and starting in the '90s, also "ecovillages."

We also developed food and many service co-ops, holistic centers, a parallel economy,

community cultural centers, local radio stations, legal services for unconventional issues, and influence in local government. The concept of Ecotopia began to ring bells in our collective cultures, to better describe the emerging society we were manifesting in different archipelagos of the planet. We were no longer a counterculture, but the basis of a rising alternative culture.

### The Birth of Huehuecoyotl

I took part in all of that process, starting in the late '60s. I found myself part of a nomadic band of rainbow gypsies, first called in India The Hathi Baba's Transit Ashram Commune, and later in California, The Illuminated Elephants. It was only after more than 10 years traveling and gathering experiences from all over the globe that we decided to settle with our old buses on a piece of land in the mountains of central Mexico, that is known today as the Huehuecoyotl Ecovillage.

At the time we dropped out from "The System," we were in our 20s; we had our first batch of children on the road in our early 30s; and settled down in Huehuecoyotl before we reached our 40s. The second batch of babies was born later, in our own kitchens, our rooms, or under the trees of our gardens.

We bought the land collectively, with equal shares of money, and consensed to have equal pieces of the terrain to build our personal or family houses. We also decided that a large part of the land was to remain communal, and in those areas we built the road, the dam, the cisterns, the children's playground (Huehuelandia), and a social and cultural center, El Teatro, with its big kitchen, space for guests, dining room, solar showers, dry latrines, and a small sauna. With time, we also constructed a chicken coop, a recycling center, a communal compost bin, a garden for veggies, and we also planted a large variety of fruit trees, flowers, cactus, medicinal and spiced plants, and a few personal and communal gardens.

In the meantime our elder children became adolescents, and the babies were old enough to go to a school. We decided it was best to set up schooling in the nearby town of Tepoztlan, to expose our kids to other children from the small mestizo village and to their peers from families of other new settlers from the area, locally called tepoztisos.

Although we knew the teenagers were going to need to go to high school to continue their education, in that first decade we were never able to organize ourselves, and thus, our kids began leaving the community, to travel daily to the city of Cuernavaca, almost an hour away from Huehuecoyotl.

### Drifting Apart

Simultaneously the original enthusiasm to share meals, circles, meetings, parties, economies, visions, and decisions, began to fade as well. We, the founders and pioneers, passed our 40s, and as we began reaching our 50s, we developed our own personal projects more and more. After a few collective efforts by some of us to create cooperatives, we abandoned that possibility to engage in the strengthening of our family economies, build larger and larger houses, acquire recent models of cars, and send our children to more expensive private regular schools, where they mixed and mingled with kids from a totally different upbringing. By the time they reached their 15th or 16th birthdays, they not only refused to take part in most of our communal activities, but they also began rejecting their original values and ways, to embrace those from their peers, comparing their families' lifestyles with those of their most privileged "normal" friends.

As we increasingly became "experts" in our different fields, we were offered the possibility of traveling more and more, on our own or with our partners, to participate in



courses, congresses, forums, international events, or to do our jobs in different places. Also, most of us, coming from different national origins, had elder parents elsewhere who needed to be visited more often or taken care of. As a logical consequence, we were often absent and our houses were either rented to people needing a nice, quiet place to spend some time, or simply closed. Thus the village became almost deserted a large part of the year.

At that time also, we could see a radical shift in Huehucoyotl, as we began creating different projects to further our personal growth, developing activities according to our own specific interests. Some of us were more oriented to ecology, others to social issues, a few to commercial, artistic, healing, or spiritual activities. This process inevitably dissolved the strong bonds that held us together as a community the first years of our collective life.

Also, we experienced a considerable rise in our living standards, and some of us fell into the tendency to indulge increasingly in the prevailing mode of consumerism. We could also observe a loss of energy in maintaining good relations with our long-term neighbors, accentuated by the resistance to creating a warm, welcoming community center.

We were also seduced by the virtualization of life with the use and abuse of time spent immersed in computers, video games, cellular phones, satellite TV, films, and all the new electronic devices invented to “facilitate communication”—with the results a clear disintegration of our collective social tissue and the growing trend of individualization. In other words, we brought into the community all the plagues of the system we originally rejected when we created Huehucoyotl.

In spite of that, we, the “elders” from the community, though faced with evident signals of decay, did not react, and instead continued our lives as if we would never get older nor have to face the fact of our mortality. Only when we began reaching our 60s, and our own parents started to die one after the other, did we realize that now the time was running faster, and that we were becoming grandparents as our married

them for rental income). There are no more children or teenagers here, besides (at the time I write this) my grandchildren Nayelli and Ezra Daniel and my elder son Odin with his wife Sadie, herself born at The Farm in Tennessee.

For the last nearly 15 years, we co-owners, long-term residents, or renters of Huehucoyotl have not held more than one, two, or at most three operational meetings every year. The fantastic historical “Fifth World Festivals” that we organized for seven consecutive years in the ’80s and early ’90s are also part of the past. In the last two years I have been here, we had maybe two communal meals for Christmas or New Year, and a few birthday parties, where not all the people living here were welcomed. We continue saying that we make decisions by “consensus-with-unanimity,” as we stipulated in the ’80s, but the reality is that more than half of the co-owners do not participate and are not interested in participating in the process, and the long-term residents and renters are excluded from any real decision making.

In the last decades, nobody has been able to move in or integrate into the small core group that holds the power to make decisions. This group is becoming smaller every year, as some of those who until a few years ago were still optimistic about making changes, and took part in the process, eventually lost interest, left, or (in one case) died.

Because of the local property laws in this part of Mexico, the land cannot be subdivided, and therefore, per our covenants, each one of us co-owners is in possession of our share, but cannot sell it to anybody, but only pass it on to our descendents. So if our children are not interested and we cannot sell our “membership,” the whole continuity of this project is heavily jeopardized. There is thus a big possibility that Huehucoyotl, as an intentional community or an ecovillage, may die with us, its founders.

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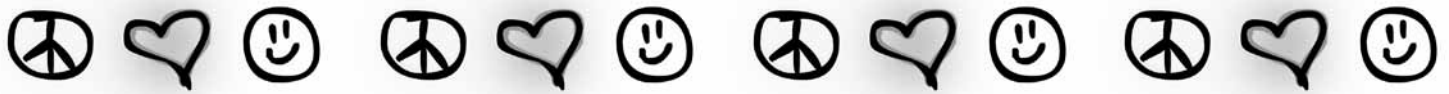
children, some of them now in their mid 30s, took their families to very different corners of the planet.

Some of them became professionals, others decided to develop their natural aptitudes and turned into artists, permaculturists, teachers, businessmen, others continued their studies, but almost none of them showed any serious interest in returning to live in Huehucoyotl.

### End of the Road?

And thus, in 2012, we still find ourselves here, a dozen elderly ex-hippies, pretty successful in our professions, co-owners of this beautiful place, out of the 20 or so that bought the land in the early ’80s (the rest are either trying to sell their shares or keeping





Besides, the common vision which was the glue that first brought us together has faded to the point of almost disappearing. For a large number of the actual co-owners who have a quite successful personal or family economy outside Huehucoyotl, having their residences in this extraordinary place and staying here as long as their health permits have become their primary goals in life. And therefore I believe that, openly or subtly, through the inflexible structure of “consensus-with-unanimity” and because of our land ownership model, it becomes almost impossible for any new ideas, projects, or opinions to change things and open the space once again for more groups, activities, courses, or events to prosper.

### Larger Patterns

This general situation is not exclusive to Huehucoyotl. It is prevalent in most of the alternative settlements that were founded 30 to 40 years ago. It seems to be part of their “natural” process of birth, growth, and decay, as every living form has on this planet. In spite of the idea of “permaculture,” the fact is that nothing alive is permanent, including societies and cultures, and the Earth, the Sun, and the stars themselves.

Personally, I can see this process not only in our intentional communities, but also in certain movements which were not able to incorporate the next generation—including other branches of the social movements from the '80s, such as the Bioregional Movement in North America and the Global Ecovillage Network.

The story of the Rainbow Nation is a little different, because the extremely loose structure of this movement continues to be very attractive to the young generations, ever since the national gatherings were launched in the early '70s. Besides, the Rainbow has spread

all over, and in all continents there are local, bioregional, national, and, once every couple of years, international gatherings in different locations on the planet. Its anarchical structure has not allowed the process to get stagnant, and the newcomers always have the chance to hold the talking stick, share their proposals and visions, and have their voices heard. Nobody “owns” the Rainbow, and therefore, with all its implications, it continues belonging to everyone.

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**I am struggling inside our collective to shake up the comfort and conformism I see prevailing in our community.**

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### Acceptance vs. Vision

This is only my voice, my story, and this is my way of understanding our process right now. It is obviously partial, and some of my peers accuse me of seeing only the empty part of the cup, and not all the many achievements and success stories that are not recorded in this description of our story. I have spent many years, in fact more than three decades, sharing to the four directions, by all means, all the beautiful aspects of communal living, and I have given interviews, participated in innumerable congresses, events, conferences, gatherings, and forums, and written dozens of articles, papers, and even several books, all to promote our lifestyle, very especially talking about the most successful stories in which we have also taken part in all these years.

I have contributed to making Huehucoyotl a living legend wherever I have gone for more than half of my adult life. I continue valuing its achievements highly, but I am very preoccupied with our lack of long-term vision, and with the sense that several of my brothers and sisters are “sitting happily on their laurels,” seeming to disregard the future of our project.

Maybe it is time to let go, detach, forget our original dreams and visions, and accept that with old age, people tend to feel insecure, afraid of changes, suspicious of new ideas, defensive, and even aggressive. After all, that's how our parents acted when we began questioning their lifestyles—until the moment when we were old enough to abandon our nests and take to the road, fearless, naïve, optimistic, rebellious, romantic, utopian, ready to change ourselves, in order to change society and the planet as well.

It is also possible that, once the creators or leaders of a social project have achieved a certain success, their innovative project accomplishes its historical purpose. Perhaps those heroic cultural pioneers should not be expected to continue promoting or allowing changes in their turf, and they should instead just benefit and enjoy the fruits of their long and hard labor.

But in my heart, I really don't want to accept this. And I am not accepting it. I am struggling inside our collective to shake up somehow the comfort and conformism I see prevailing in our community. I want to continue thinking about this place as my and our common-unity. Not as a retreat for aging ex-hippies, but as a cauldron where new ideas, proposals, people, can continue to be part of experimenting for a better world,



for a better humanity. A place where we pioneers can share our experience, and blend it with the strength and innovative force of the new generation. The process of social alchemy cannot and should never be forgotten. I believe we need to let go of our control, and gently pass the stick to the new generation.

### New Hope in the Wind

And in fact, in spite of all I've described above, some of this change may be starting to happen. This year we were able to celebrate our 30th Anniversary with probably the best festival we have ever had, with dozens of artists coming from everywhere to share their gifts with the more than 700 people who arrived on the weekend of the 3rd and 4th of March. Most of them were young, including a good number of our own children and grandchildren, who met here for the first time in many years. And we also succeeded in putting together our first collective book, *Huehucoyotl: Roots in the Wind*, with collaborations from more than 40 people, which will probably be the first book in Spanish with the story of a Latin American intentional community. So, regardless of the somewhat pessimistic picture that I presented in this article, I still hold the hope that things can change, despite the fear that changing provokes in our lives.

We should keep in mind the teachings of some of the wisest people on this planet who cautioned us to think ahead of our lifetime, and "to think and act, taking into consideration always, the coming seven generations."

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**The waves of change are sweeping the world as a social planetary tsunami, at the same time that natural forces are also giving us humans clear signals.**

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### A Global Reemergence

The whole planet is rising again, as it did in 1968. Indignation has found voice in places and historical situations as different as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Greece, Libya, Spain, England, Chile, Bolivia, Mexico, and the Occupy movement in the US. The waves of change are sweeping the world as a social planetary tsunami, at the same time that natural forces are also manifesting themselves, giving us humans clear signals that the global situation we are immersed in cannot continue as it is been happening until now.

New emerging actors are appearing here and there, and this time it is not only the youth saying loudly, "Basta!" (Enough!). This new wave is formed by people of all colors, origins, ages, ideologies, and religious beliefs.

On October 15, 2011, a call for the first global mobilization of "Indignados" took place, and thousands of people all over the world responded. In more than 400 cities, public places such as plazas, parks, streets, and monuments were occupied by activists from the whole range of social organizations, networks, and movements, a true human rainbow, to manifest their demands, protests, and proposals for a different paradigm from the one we have been part of for several decades.

What happens in the Universe always reflects what is happening on the planet and in this, our first global human society. The need for radical changes, changes that go to the root of our problems, is present on all continents, in the countryside as much as in our cities, in our barrios and in our homes, but also in our souls and in our bodies. What is above is below. What is outside is inside too.

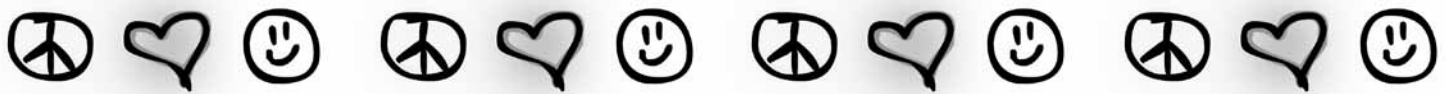
We cannot let fear be the motor of life, nor let fear freeze our hearts and paralyze us in our actions. One of the greatest social activists of this time, Starhawk sent a message late last year: "Why I am going to Freedom Plaza in Washington DC." In short, she says, "My knees are stiff, my hearing is poor, the noise in marches is terrible, I really enjoy staying home with my beloved family, but I won't stay and do nothing when injustice, greed, hypocrisy, the assault on our freedoms is involved."

So, remembering Pete Seeger, and with Starhawk and all those who continue standing up for changes, I also say, "We shall overcome, one day." 🐾

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*Coyote Alberto Ruz is cofounder of Huehucoyotl Ecovillage in Mexico and originator of the international Rainbow Peace Caravan.*

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# A Crucible

*By Understanding Israel*

Through births, deaths, and transformations our community was a crucible for change. As members we created a fiery anvil upon which our lives were hammered out in an effort to transform ourselves into higher beings. Despite our most valiant efforts as a collective we disintegrated, over 30 years later, amidst the flames of accusations, bankruptcy, back room deals, and disillusioned former believers. Yet the bonds of friendships strengthened in the fires of community still endure for many. Our children have now assumed the mantle of community as they work to weave a better community design from the remnants of our dream.

The Love Family, as we came to be known, was formed in the hotbed of the radical late '60s and early '70s and stopped existing as a land-based commune for most in the early part of the 21st century. I say "for most" because a faithful contingent of less than 20 of the community still lives with and follows the founder on a small piece of land in eastern Washington. Down we tumbled from our heyday of hundreds, imploding amidst lawsuits and lawyers.

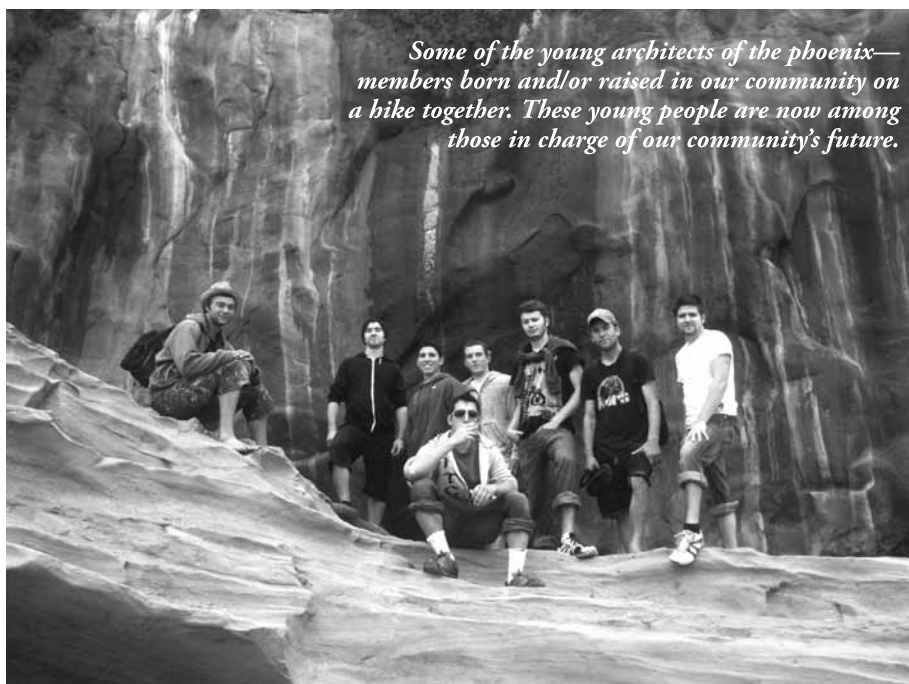
We began in an era of steep social change, and ended for most in a time of technology and global awareness. We were content to bear our children in yurts with no indoor plumbing or electricity; our children and grandchildren navigate technology and depend upon electrical communications. Some members, still bitter after 30 years, refuse to publicly acknowledge any affiliation with our community, which on one hand became infamous and on the other tightly bonded some to each other. Many, like myself, have not given up on the dream of connection, whose base is build upon the foundation of community. For us, the end was a new beginning.

Now collecting minute social security from our erstwhile days of having thrown convention into the fires of our dreams and visions, we live out our days observing children fashioning something new from sections of the fallen edifice we once thought impenetrable. All is not lost, only transforming in the hands of another generation. Our slavish devotion to a leader, creation of a hierarchy, inability to forge social justice for all members, and lives impacted by rural hardships, are not standing the test of time—rightfully so.

Our grandchildren live in separate homes, in separate economies, with no central leader or daily meeting place. Yet many of their parents, children of our dreams, are now united by a desire and drive to create a renewed experience of community. This new community is tied virtually by social media, ceremonies, and social functions. It is not fashioned from psychedelic dreams and social unrest, but molded from experience, insight, and dedication to something higher than social isolation and independence. In the end of one reality there is the rising phoenix of another. 🐦

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*Ms. Israel is working towards a Doctorate in Educational Leadership 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.*



*Some of the young architects of the phoenix—members born and/or raised in our community on a hike together. These young people are now among those in charge of our community's future.*

Resilience or "Zilly" Israel

# The Hermitage Now and To Come

*By Johannes Zinzendorf*

**W**hen does one leave community? For my partner Christian and myself the answer is now, or soon.

We're creators, not maintainers. The master plan we developed in 1989 soon after coming to the land is done, though not without modifications and adaptations along the way. Still, the Hermitage (even the name has changed) is the place we envisioned, more or less. It is "more" in the collections and buildings, and "less" in the people we hoped would inhabit the buildings and use the collections for pattern and inspiration. (For background on the Hermitage, located in central Pennsylvania, see "Creating Spiritual Community at the Hermitage," *COMMUNITIES* #154.)

There is irony here. For example, what we said we would never do, we have done. Never connect to the grid for example. And never turn the place into a museum. But electricity from the grid is powering the computer I'm using to write this, as well as the lights with which I can see the screen while writing this late at night, and the music I'm listening to at this moment. And no museum! No dead museum space filled with items no one would ever use again. That was the fate of so many once-vibrant spiritual communities we have seen and studied, such as Bethlehem, Ephrata, and Harmony in Pennsylvania, or Salem in North Carolina, or any number of Shaker villages. All have become museums with ghost buildings filled with beds no longer slept in, looms at which no one weaves, and potter's wheels at which no one turns pots. No, that will not happen here at Christiansbrunn (our original name), we said. Here, the past will live again and guide us towards the future.

And so it did for years as we plowed with oxen, made candles for light, and brought



*The lily represents  
the Hermitage,  
a living, growing  
union of the  
earth and  
the spirit.*

Johannes and Christian Zinzendorf



old buildings to the property and reused them. Still, all the time our eyes were to the future, creating a community where loving brothers would return to the garden and make it bloom again. To that end, we collected the arts and crafts of the local Pennsylvania Germans among whom we lived, made insular and self-reliant by the surrounding walls of mountains. We sought beauty in everyday objects—in how a blacksmith beat out a spatula on the anvil, in how a table linen was inlaid with decoration, and in how a printed broadside was embellished. These objects brought joy to both maker and owner and so they brought joy to us. Eventually that joy in things was one of the few constants in our lives as it slowly became clear that “community” in our case would never mean more than the two of us.

Gradually even the joy of our animals changed as we moved from livestock to our beloved turkeys, ducks, geese, and chickens until most of them were killed by predators, human and otherwise.

It became clear that the collections would never actually be used for their original purposes let alone as inspiration for new styles by new craft makers. We decided to turn everything into a showcase for the valley’s heritage. After all, there was no place where one could see what made the Mahantongo Valley of central Pennsylvania so unique in its isolated development. Thus began the transformation of the barn into the Mahantongo Heritage Center with its room displays of furniture, clothing, tools, and crafts. And so we have become a museum after all.

Which brings us back to the question of knowing when to leave. As I said at the beginning, Christian and I are not maintainers. Keeping the buildings painted, the windows glazed, and the roofs waterproof are essential but take away time from our creativity. Nor do we know how to address the larger questions of providing the programming in crafts and spirituality or the public relations and social networking that will sustain the Hermitage into the future. Those questions are answered by others, those who keep the place going.

We built New Jerusalem and now we leave it. This happens all the time: Moses saw the Promised Land but it was Aaron who actually led the Hebrews to it. Christ left example and aphorism but Paul and Peter turned them into a church. Our custodian’s house will be inhabited by those who keep the dream alive. It is enough that we created a place where the spirit and earth unite to become one and whole. Our body of hymns declare that work, and the site shows it. Now the holy work continues, just not by us.

It is time to move on. Our Moravian brothers and sisters of the mid-18th century came to this country from Germany to spread the word as they understood it. Now it is time for us to return the favor by returning to Europe, specifically to the Brittany coast of France. This is not because we have anything to tell its inhabitants, but simply to recharge our creativity in new soil by returning to the land of our ancestors. We legally adopted German names to show our kinship with the founder of our brotherhood. Now we are legally adopting the name of our French ancestors, de Colebi and de la Graves.

As we prepare to leave by the end of 2013, our last task is to publish our book on the story of the Hermitage simply because it is a great story. After that, we’re gone. And the dogs come too. 🐾

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**We created a place where the  
spirit and earth unite. Now the work  
continues, just not by us.**

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*Johannes Zinzendorf is cofounder of the Hermitage, a spiritual community of Harmonists in the Mahantongo Valley of central Pennsylvania. The Hermitage’s website is [www.atthehermitage.org](http://www.atthehermitage.org). Johannes may be reached at [BroJoh@yahoo.com](mailto:BroJoh@yahoo.com).*

# The Adventure of Starting Over

By Kim Scheidt

I'm not sure how much I believe in astrology, in the idea that the movements of the celestial bodies out in space impact me on a personal level here on earth. However, my life recently took an unexpected turn and the timing of it just so happened to match up with the summer Mercury retrograde. According to the explanation I found on the internet, "the fiery energy of Leo activates the winds of change to create events and circumstances that blast us into many new directions. We will find that our life has dramatically changed"...yes, that sounds about right.

For the past seven years I've been living a somewhat "pioneering" life of starting an intentional community on raw land with a few other people. Our sub-community of Dandelion originally formed with three people, one of whom, our best social networker, soon decided to pursue another project close by. We remaining two settled down on 12 acres to create a homestead based around the ideas of permaculture and sustainable living. Our intention was always for more members to join up. We went with the philosophy of "if you build it, they will come," something that, in our situation, did not prove to be true. Those right new members just never seemed to come along.

For a while that was okay with me. My partner and I were romantically involved and decided to create a child together. We had neighbors and friends nearby and our larger community regularly met for meetings and weekly potlucks. My social needs were met through my nuclear family relationships and by visiting with friends. However, my desire for a thriving sub-community never dwindled. We continued to host visitors and had a time or two when it really seemed those "right" people had come along. Honestly, after so many years I was at the point where I was ready to give just about anyone who felt aligned with us a try. I so much wanted there to be more people with whom I would share a life, share responsibilities and fun, who would feel a tie to this land and to evolving it into its full potential as a mini-farm and intentional community.

Over time, my partner realized that his personal vision was changing and didn't really include a desire to live so closely with other people. Our relationship grad-



Chad Knepp

ually degraded to being co-parents and not much else. He felt trapped in our situation and overwhelmed, and he didn't see an easy way out. We talked about splitting up our land and each taking half but concluded that we both had hope and a commitment to try to make it work. We did try, but it just didn't work. And a year later we found ourselves back at the realization that something major needs to shift—we are splitting up and dividing our homestead and our land. My ex-partner will be living close-by on his part of the divided land. We have an amicable relationship and will begin sharing care of our daughter half time on a week-by-week basis as soon as his winter housing is complete.

All that is the story of how I find myself in charge of a seven acre homestead. I am now the sole person responsible for continuing the vision, which I am still committed to, of growing my sub-community into a thriving group. Some days I have complete trust that this is the most perfect situation possible—that Dandelion will now be free to become something so much more amazing than it ever could have under the old existing patterns. Many other days I am scared, so scared...of the responsibility, of the potential for “failure,” mostly of the vision of this place being a happy home for me not coming true.

The beauty of this situation is that I have a wonderful foundation on which to build this community, there are already many systems in place, and now there is the potential to tweak it to match my personal ideals. Now when I talk about Dandelion I say we have a strong focus on permaculture, simple living, and **empowering women**. Ending sexism is a key issue for me, and now my community is a spark in the universe doing just that.

I'm still planning to cook and heat using only the sun and firewood, to live lightly on the earth, and to live in alignment with my core values of simplicity and love. I plan to continually improve on the amount of food grown in the high-tunnel hoop-house, the annual garden, and the young orchards. I have my vision of what I would like for this place to become and it is also completely open to the creative inputs of future members. I feel like the first baby-steps of developing this land have been taken. There is warm housing in the winter and many agricultural projects are going strong. However, seven acres is a lot of land and there is so much room to accommodate the creative passions of whoever else ends up living here. I am a strong woman and am capable of maintaining things for the short term. Perhaps I'll get some interns to help out in the spring. I have confidence that the right new members will come along at the right time for everyone involved. Truly.

At no point in my life up to now would I have predicted that I would take on such a project. At many times I can laugh at this and wonder about the avenues down which life decides to lead us. Even after having some time to process it all, I am still kind of scared. But I am confident that this is a move in the right direction. I am growing into my full potential and also have a wonderful support network of friends living nearby who care about me deeply and want me to succeed.

The future is unknown. Every moment is a new beginning. This is a new opportunity for me to soar. 🌱

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**Some days I have complete trust  
that this is the most perfect situation  
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*Kim Scheidt is a member of Dandelion, a sub-community of Red Earth Farms in northeast Missouri. She works part-time for the Fellowship for Intentional Community. She gives loving thanks for her friends at Sandhill Farm and Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage as well as REF.*



Photos by Chris Roth

# Gratitude, Loss, Rebirth, and Community

By Chris Roth

*Among [people], it seems...processes of co-ordination and disintegration follow each other with great regularity, and the index of the co-ordination is the measure of the disintegration which follows....There is no lostness like that which comes [to a person] when a perfect and certain pattern has dissolved.... —John Steinbeck*

*All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.  
—Anatole France*

*If, every day, I dare to remember that I am here on loan, that this house, this hillside, these minutes are all leased to me, not given, I will never despair. Despair is for those who expect to live forever. I no longer do. —Erica Jong*

*What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.*

...

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

—T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” (from “The Four Quartets”)



I lie in bed, contemplating: My existence is a miracle. Your existence is a miracle. Existence itself is the unlikely of dreams.

We might feel separate in our individual lives, but in fact we are all family, fellow travelers on a planet that was once only a possibility and will one day be just a galactic memory, consumed by an aging sun. We inhabit bodies that each have a birth and a death, and we each experience countless endings and beginnings, small and large, throughout our lives. Every one of us is a dance of spirit, part of an interspecies ballet, buffeted before and after by nothing we understand consciously. And while we like to think about the past and the future, all we experience is actually the present, and it's just as real as any present ever was or will be.

We are children not just of our parents, and related not just to one another: we are the remnants of supernovas, stardust reconfigured, alive only because past forms of cosmic manifestation died to create us.

Community isn't just an idea: it's the logical result of the Big Bang. It *is* the Big Bang, continually playing out.

"I" is just my way of participating in all this. It's temporary, like everything anyone has ever experienced, or ever will.

And it's no different from "we."

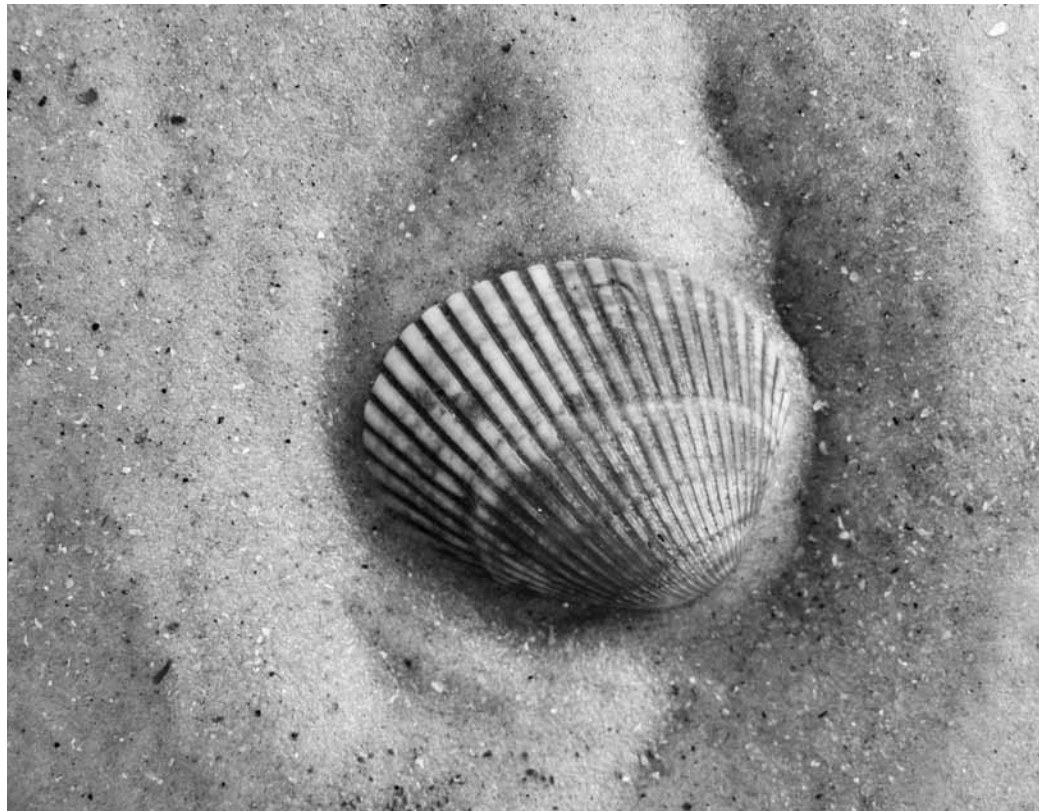
I didn't always think this way. Lots of endings and beginnings had to happen in my life for me to reach this conclusion. My accustomed reality had to shatter in various ways, multiple times, for me to understand how much we all have in common.

Even now, it can be easier to recognize and feel this sense of unity and connection while lying in bed on a beautiful rainy Oregon morning than when stuck in a traffic jam or confronted with a difficult personal interaction. How can I be kin with this person who appears to be mocking me? Or with the new visitors whose pet monkey just bit a community resident and who then, instead of apologizing, became belligerent themselves and had to be escorted off the property? Or, on a larger scale, with people who say and do things that seem entirely out of alignment with my own values and vision for the world?

And yet, we are kin. Below the judgments, below the ways we each play out our pain, we are human beings, manifestations of life. We reflect one another's pain, and we can alleviate it once we see it as our own. Even as we learn hard lessons by hurting and being hurt, we are miracles in our own right. We are each simultaneously "nothing special" and exceedingly special, if we can realize our own natures.

### The Compost of Loss

Gratitude sometimes need to grow in the compost of loss. Often new paths come only when we reach a dead end. Fear, insecurity, judgment/self-judgment, and competitiveness are some of the dead ends down which I've wandered, separating me, at least temporarily, from the full embrace of life. Symptoms have included: grasping for what I seem to lack, rather than recognizing and experiencing abundance...holding onto fantasies that



have expired, rather than seeing the promise of renewal through change...taking health, family, friends, and positive circumstances for granted, and noticing what appears to be “wrong” rather than all that is “right”...holding myself and my situation to impossible standards, feeling never good enough...believing that aging and mortality are illusions, to which I might be immune...or, at other times, seeing mortal life as a trial, and imagining that something better awaits...failing to accept and express the full range of emotions that we each experience, including sadness and tears...not seeing every moment as precious, an opportunity to express love for others and for life.

Community has brought me face to face with all of these symptoms, and also provided many of the experiences of change and loss, endings and beginnings, through which I've grown toward gratitude.

## Personal Transitions

While community-seekers may imagine intentional community as a place to escape from a world that seems to be either changing too rapidly (leaving us and nature in the dust) or stuck in a stultifying status quo (keeping us locked up in boxes), community is anything but that. After three decades in conscious pursuit of “community,” I am convinced that life in community is simply a microcosm of the larger world, in which we cannot escape either inner or outer change. Our job is to learn to navigate these changes gracefully, to accept rather than to resist, to embrace the unfolding of life rather than protest its evanescence.

Over the past three years, I've experienced more intense change and transition than I'd known at nearly any other time in my life. I watched the community I'd lived in for more than a decade appear to dissolve into not even a shadow of its former self—becoming an unhealthy, stress-filled workplace, largely ineffective in its mission, rather than the nurturing, dynamic community and learning center it had once been—and at the same time realized I'd fallen into a rut both in my role there and in my personal life. Population turnover had been complete since my arrival—in fact, many waves of members had come and gone—and the community culture, which I'd appreciated for most of my time there, had ultimately, from my perspective, “gone south.” In search of greener pastures, and feeling the need for radical change in my life (the kind I didn't believe I could achieve by staying put), I left not only my home community but my home bioregion, with no plans to return.

I ended up making important new connections and appreciating my adventures elsewhere (living at two different communities and getting to know two others), but ultimately feeling out of place in my new location and longing for my former home. During my absence, my long-term community had completed its meltdown, nearly folded, and thankfully was resuscitated by some new residents who had more energy to give it than I had by the time I left. They made radical, revolutionary changes that intrigued me and brought the community back much closer to the feeling and values that had drawn me there in the first place more than a decade earlier. I returned to a small group that soon included only one other member who predated my departure. For a while it seemed like a ghost town, but now it only seems that way if I think of all the people who used to live here, instead of all those who do now.

Simultaneous with these changes, and after a couple decades of being in denial of the process of aging, I suddenly found my body refusing to cooperate with my familiar role of being a nearly full-time organic vegetable gardener. As my knee condition worsened, I finally found, much to my displeasure, that I could not garden at all, putting a serious dent into my sense of identity, of relationship to the earth, and of making a meaningful contribution to the world.

## Self, Earth, and Purpose

Up until then, I had often kept myself feeling good by attending to things outside





of myself, rather than attending to myself. Especially when I felt disconnected from others, true self-care took a back seat to accomplishing something “worthwhile.” I saw my body as an instrument to grow food, and found some strange sense of satisfaction in pushing it past its limits in that endeavor. Finally, this approach to life and to my body had to end. Out of its ashes, I’ve come to realize that caring for my body is inseparable from caring for the earth—that I am the earth, not something to be sacrificed upon the altar of the earth. Ironically, it’s taken several decades of sometimes overenthusiastic, addicted, martyrdom-flavored organic gardening to help me see that any truly organic, sustainable way of feeding ourselves requires us to be just as gentle with ourselves as we are with the earth.

I’ve spent much of the last couple years focused on healing a knee problem that not only threw a wrench into my former identity but brought me a whole new perspective on life and my body. At times I experienced chronic pain that became debilitating not only physically but emotionally. Coinciding with so many other elements of my life changing and appearing to dissolve, my failing body gave me a new understanding of “overwhelm”—even of despair. It brought me face to face with feelings of shame, with my own weaknesses, with the isolation I had actually felt, to some degree, all along. And ultimately it allowed me to understand others’ pain as I’d never understood it before.

It made it impossible for me to be “perfect,” to sacrifice myself to some higher cause, to transcend my human nature or even imagine that that was possible. My body’s saying “no” cut through my sense of pride and purpose, shaking me loose from my former patterns of self-neglect and overdependence on work as a way to boost self-esteem. It dissolved my “steadiness” in the face of change and my apparent immunity to uncertainty. It made me realize that we each face challenges, that we are here not to achieve the impossible or fit into some preconceived, ideal role, but to support one another in the messiness of pain, change, loss, and renewal.

It forced me to find compassion for myself, and in the process awakened true compassion (not just duty-driven or loftily conceived compassion) for others. It helped me realize that we are all brothers and sisters—not just because some songs from the 1960s say so, but because it’s true. Love—the authentic expression of love, for ourselves, for others, for our world—is all we can hope to accomplish, and the best and only thing worth accomplishing. It can look many different ways, and it can incorporate our values, our abilities for critical thinking, our special talents, our unique gifts—but underneath, it’s the heartbeat that keeps us going, that keeps our spirits busy being born rather than busy dying.

### **Endings and Beginnings in Community**

Not being tied to a garden over the last couple years has also allowed me to step back, revisit and reflect on the many community experiences I’ve had. Each one has been born from an ending; each one has seemed like a new beginning; and, after many endings and beginnings, each has made way for something new.

Every community experience has begun for me as an idealized dream, then, usually, transformed into something even more rewarding than what I had imagined. Eventually, I, the situation, or both have evolved in ways that no longer make us a good match. By all evidence, this is a common pattern, especially in communities not based on ownership. I have always been free to move on, and in reflection, I’m grateful for the many amazing places I’ve lived (sometimes for long periods), groups I’ve been part of, experiences I’ve had as a result. If change is the nature of life, community is a particularly good way to come face-to-face with that reality.

### **Revisiting the Ecobus**

My first major “new beginning,” and first truly intentional community experience, came after my former identity as an obsessive student no longer lined up with who I

felt I was. Once separated from my family, hometown, and familiar identity when I left for college, I discovered I was strangely unprepared for the personal challenges this caused, and after two years made a radical shift in educational direction by joining a small, ecologically-focused traveling learning community. (For much more about this experience, see “Power and Disempowerment on the Ecobus,” *COMMUNITIES* #148; see also “How Ecology Led Me to Community,” *COMMUNITIES* #143.) This program suffused me not only with a new environmental awareness but also with a determination to pursue a life in harmony with others and the earth. It laid the foundation for most of my pursuits since then.

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## If change is the nature of life, community is a particularly good way to come face-to-face with that reality.

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Until recently, I thought of those years infrequently, usually only when encountering former students from the same program. But this past year I’ve attended two alumni reunions and even revisited the former headquarters of the school. I’ve learned much more about the history of the program, both before and after my attendance. Like the other communities with which I’ve been deeply involved, it’s gone through major upheavals, including challenges that threatened to shut it down entirely (and, in its case, eventually did). And now, from the embers of the old program, a new program is emerging.

I had several experiences this summer which showed me just how much things had changed over the past three decades. The former headquarters now appeared to be a ghost town: a place that had been crawling with guides, students, and activity was virtually abandoned, with a crumbling cabin greeting my arrival. Much more encouraging was my reunion with my former guide, of whom I’d lived in fear (among other things) for my two years in the bus community. Reuniting nearly 30 years later, I discovered that he now felt much more like a peer, a fellow traveler, a true friend, than an authority figure. We talked, laughed, and shared stories for an entire afternoon, reflecting on our past follies and the lessons we’d learned over these many intervening years.

Fortunately, as my visit to its new headquarters also made clear, the revived program reflects the collective evolution in consciousness that our own individual evolutions mirror. The new “Ecobus” is considerably more holistic than the one I rode on.

### Ghost Town or Downtown?

Likewise, I’ve made frequent visits over the past year to another sustainability-focused community with which I was deeply involved for much of a decade. It too has experienced major upheavals and nearly shut down more than once. Many amazing people have lived and worked there for a time, then moved on—sometimes inspired, sometimes frustrated, sometimes both—bringing with them the influence of their time there as they join or create new projects or become members of a wider community. For me, walking on that land can also be like walking through a ghost town—if I simply imagine all the people I’ve known who’ve lived there, or if I visit the parts of the land where remnants of the old, unpermitted dwellings still stand (or lie). Yet the place is vibrant today with new activity, as engaged in its teaching mission as it’s ever been, making real differences in many lives. It has risen from its own ashes again and again.

Many other groups I know have gone through similar things. On visits to other communities, even without knowing all the personal details, I’ve found that the

buildings left behind by former residents speak volumes about the changes a group has been through. When the community is in a “lull,” I can well imagine how it, too, must seem like a ghost town to those who live there, or who once did.

### At Home in Community

And, of course, there’s my home community, already described, which has experienced as many changes and challenges over the years as any of these others (and which also has created many positive “ripple effects” throughout the region and world via former residents and program participants affected by their experiences here). I’m still unsure of how, or how well, I’m adapting to all those changes. I am trying to live in the present—something made easier by how different my life is now than it was during my hard-core gardening phase. In general, I find it much easier to appreciate and be with people than I did when I was always feeling the need to do more, when I was spending so much time trying to justify my existence. I find it a lot easier to experience wonder and love for what is.

I have also shaken up my idea of what “community” means for me, and of who my community is. The residents of my home intentional community are only a small part of my what I experience as my community. I feel closer to many of my long-time friends (some of whom I used to live with in community, some not) and family than I do to most of the people I share this land with now. I spend a lot more time “off campus” than I ever did before, and find it easier to feel at home in many different places and with many different people. I feel open to whatever unfolds organically in my life, including changes that might involve an eventual change of address. This also frees me up to appreciate the many wonderful aspects of this ever-evolving place, whose endings and beginnings mirror the countless endings and beginnings, big and small, to be found everywhere when we look closely.

### Mourning and Acceptance

I want to admit that I have not always



felt this sanguine about or accepting of the changes I've described. I started writing this article several times, each time (until now) abandoning the attempt—sometimes because the writing wasn't flowing, sometimes because it was flowing too well and getting me in touch with challenging emotions. With the help of friends I've reached out to recently, I've worked through many of these feelings (I believe), but in the interest of offering this perspective as well, I'll share here some of what I wrote many weeks ago, after an especially involving, gratifying weekend personal growth workshop co-taught by a former community mate whose departure from my community I still mourned: "Unexpectedly, as I awaken in the middle of the night, I am feeling grief as well as gratitude for the experience I've just had. I'm feeling grief at all the endings I've lived through in community. I'm mourning the death of dreams and of idealism, the dissolving of groups which at one time coalesced and functioned together as if sharing a common heart, the fading of hopes, the weakening of connections, and the hard realities of physical aging. I'm remembering times when I felt fully integrated into a group, when I had no doubts about

who my family-of-affinity was, when I and others believed we could change the world by doing what we were doing together. I'm remembering the many years before my body rebelled, when I could move through my days with ease, without apparent limitation, 'walking my talk' by making physical work on the land my form of prayer. ...

"The last few years have brought me face-to-face with the reality that things do indeed end. Communities melt down, connections dissolve, physical health and capacities decline, relationships weaken or sour. Certainty gives way to ambiguity, clarity to confusion. The stories we are living in change, take unexpected turns that leave us wondering if we even have a role in the next chapter. Our hearts open, fill, and then break in a million different ways—if not all at once, then in bits and pieces. We see that whatever personal or even collective journey we have been on, much of the larger world has not accompanied us—and in fact has been traveling in the opposite direction."

My lamentation continued with a litany of world problems bleak enough that I do not want to inflict it on you (or even on myself again). However, I did arrive at one insight that may be helpful: "I have tended to criticize myself internally for the amount of grief I've felt at the various 'endings' I've experienced. I've seen it as a sign of personal weakness, and therefore often suppressed it rather than exploring it. I've carried it with me even as I tried to push it aside or transcend it. Many times I've felt that it was behind me, only to discover later that it lingered just below the surface. Lately, I've had no choice but to come to terms with it—to acknowledge that it is real, and to attempt to take active steps to make peace with it and see it as 'compost,' a source of fertility and new growth, rather than some kind of toxic waste that needs to be isolated and sealed away, and that I'm ashamed of having generated. If I see it as a natural byproduct of my experience, part of a cycle of endings and beginnings, I can approach it with curiosity rather than aversion, learn its lessons and grow from it."

In other words, in the face of continual transformation and renewal—the essence of life and of community—sometimes acceptance, self-acceptance, and a good cry are what each of us really needs. ~

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*Chris Roth (editor@ic.org) edits COMMUNITIES.*



# Clearing Out to Begin Once Again

By Dianne Brause

It seems as if my life is made up of endless endings and beginnings! Actually, I think this is true for many people I know, and the general trend of the times throughout the planet. In my life in the last seven years I've experienced the following endings: I left my intentional community of 20 years, along with my job and title, my car, my home, my best friends, a region of the country that I loved, and a dream of forever having those things to come home to after traveling the globe. This move was in part due to changes in my home community (see "Elderhood, In and Out of Community," COMMUNITIES #149), and also in part due to the declining health in my elderly parents, who needed tending to as their ability to navigate the normal lifestyle activities became less and less successful. My father passed away two and a half years ago and my mother, four months ago.

A part of my father's willingness to go into assisted care was my commitment to take on the considerable task of sorting through and letting go of the majority of things that my parents had collected throughout the 67 years of their married life in the same home. This meant also coming face to face with the dynamics of a family that was overtly quite successful, well-respected, and universally liked—but also had its normal emotional shadows to be confronted as well. Letting go of those things was a practice in clearing away not only the good and loving memories, but also the symbols which held hurt and pain from past experiences, and now needed to be cleansed in order to clear the way for new beginnings. It was exhausting work for me in many ways, without much of a sense of accomplishment, and in an environment where the comfort of close friends and compassionate associates was scarce.

Finally, after a number of levels of getting rid of stuff collected for decades and clearly needing to be recycled in the most ecological manner possible, I've gotten down to the hardest part: what to do with the items which hold the most sentimental and irreplaceable value in historical and genealogical terms. At pres-



Photos courtesy of Dianne Brause

ent, no one else in the family is “into” such things and I have to make value judgments as to if/when, and whether it will ever matter to anyone in the future. Will the Great-Grandchildren eventually be interested in these things? Is it my duty to keep certain things, just in case? One solution I have just discovered is to scan photographs, legal documents, and precious handwritten letters from one family member to another on the occasion of a birth, sickness, death, or whatever, so that even if the original is destroyed, there will presumably be a copy in some Akashic Record held in the computer cloud.

Letting-goes and endings have never been easy for me. I seem to have a tendency to hang on well past the time when ordinary people would just throw in the towel on projects, relationships, jobs, and commitments. I blame this tendency on my Capricorn nature, which seems to want everything in perfect order, with every *i* dotted and every *t* crossed, before moving on. Clearly, letting go of all the things of my past in a responsible manner has confronted this part of myself.

But slowly, I am learning. While dealing with my family of origin legacy, I have been practicing on my own as well. I have chosen to downsize considerably, so that I have let go of the majority of stuff that I have collected over my lifetime—and now am storing boxes of treasures in the mini-guest rooms that I renovated out of junk rooms—one in Oregon and one in Ohio.

“So, with all this letting go and endings, there must be some new beginnings?” you ask. The answer is “Yes, I have actually had some very exciting new beginnings during this same seven-year period.” (Otherwise, I think I would have gone crazy!) In 2006, I began the first of a dozen or so classes with Wisdom University, which is a newly revised school, offering a multifaceted way of learning on the graduate level for people who are dedicated to the quest for truth on a variety of fronts. For me (with my Sagittarius sun sign), travel, and especially global travel, is a “must” for my



*Opposite page, left: Glenn and Mildred’s official wedding portrait—author’s parents on their wedding day in Indiana (August 29, 1942). Top right: Tim and Dianne’s portrait as toddlers. Bottom right: Glenn and Mildred—“Mom and Dad” at their beloved pond (where their ashes were scattered this summer).*

*This page, top left: Dianne opens the gate. Top right: Traveling to Chartres in France is always a treat. Middle: An Egyptian woman looks at her “sister’s face” on a wall at Tahrir Square just prior to the elections. Bottom left: A fellow Pilgrim and Dianne tour the Pyramids of Saqqara outside Cairo. Bottom right: Author’s favorite spot in Syria, taken from a cave that she slept in above the Silk Route which was originally inhabited in the third century by an Ethiopian Prince turned Christian. It’s now called Deir Mar Mussa Monastery (and was recently attacked by masked gunmen).*



own mental health. Wisdom University offers the best of all worlds: pilgrimages to ancient sites to learn from the best in the field, while actually experiencing the place itself—and getting degree credit for it. So, within the last few years I have been able to study in such places as Chartres Cathedral in France, the Lascaux caves of Southern France, Glastonbury in England, Istanbul and Konya in Turkey, and Assisi in Italy. I have added, on my own, trips to a monastery in Syria, a camel safari in the Sahara with Bedouin guides, walking Abraham’s Path in Jordan and the West Bank of Palestine, and most recently, volunteering for two months at a nonprofit in Bethlehem, with a side trip to Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt (during the recent elections).

For me, new beginnings generally mean the adventure of travel: meeting new people, seeing new cultures, experiencing new religious customs, and waking up each day to new sights and sounds, generally foreign to my everyday American lifestyle. Or the travel that takes me into the lives of those that I love and perhaps haven’t seen for a time—from across the country and around the globe.

Within the US, my new home is now a 2001 VW Pop-Top Camper, which allows me to travel throughout this country at relative minimal expense (in terms of room and board), and I now am describing myself as “happily homeless.” As I write this, I am about to set out for some adventures on the East Coast including becoming an Elder/Mentor for a 15-year-old who was born in my intentional community (and I was then asked to become his spiritual godmother). I will also partake of a training in women’s circle work. From there, I will head to the Midwest for my college reunion, and then more peacemaker training—which I hope to take back to Palestine in coming years. And finally, a trek to the West Coast, to take part in the annual Mevlevi Sufi Whirling Dervish activities, which culminate in Seattle on December 17th, with the Shebi Arus ceremony, which commemorates the passing of Jeleddin Rumi, the poet, in 1273 (and the passing of my father, Glenn Brause, in 2009). It seems like endings and new beginnings are cyclical—in both life and death.

After that, my slate is clear—as if awaiting the birth of the New Age predicted by Mayan and other ancient prophecies around the Winter Solstice of 2012. If nothing special happens, I will continue to create my own new beginnings and continue to strive to move the planetary consciousness away from greed, consumerism, and competition, and toward peace and cooperation. As a communitarian, I attempted to do that locally. Now I will hope to add my energy to this global movement toward a new paradigm where the good of the whole is at least as important as my personal wants, needs, and pleasures. I expect to go back to Palestine and add my energies to solving the dilemma faced by the Israeli and Palestinian people there—and perhaps write my Ph.D. dissertation somewhere along the way! ☺

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*Dianne is hoping to organize her pictures of the Middle East so that she can present them to communities and neighborhood groups upon request and would be happy to visit your community, if she is passing through your area and can take the time to stop. She can be reached via [diannebrause@gmail.com](mailto:diannebrause@gmail.com) or while in America via cell phone at 419-562-6148.*



***Clockwise: Palestinians protesting in Manger Square in Bethlehem in solidarity with 1200 fasting political prisoners. Palestinian village woman whose son is a political prisoner in an Israeli jail and her German Nun buddy! Three lovely Egyptian girls in Tabrir Square. The one on the left had recently given birth to her first child. Israeli soldiers and Palestinian boys meet in the weekly standoff in a farming village south of Bethlehem where 60 percent of their farmland has been blocked from their access due to new Israeli settlements. Our lunch stop in a Bedouin “cave” in Isreal in the North Negev area. The food was delicious and hospitality gracious.***



# The Bookends of Community

*By Elizabeth Barrette*

Endings and beginnings are like bookends: they mark where things start and stop, and thereby hold together everything that lies between them. By making a clear demarcation of these points, we strengthen the boundaries so that things don't just dribble off into nowhere, like books tumbling off the open end of a shelf. These boundaries then give structure to our individual lives and to the communities we create.

## What To Mark

The first consideration is what to mark. Not everyone cares about the same kinds of events. So different people choose different ones as significant. The type of beginnings and endings you recognize will affect the shape of your personal life and the mood of your community.

For example, some people easily start loads of new projects, but rarely finish them—like always reading a bunch of books at the same time. There wouldn't be much point to recognizing the beginnings, except for truly momentous ones. What they need to recognize is the ending, because this encourages progress toward the finished product. Conversely, some people have a hard time getting started—they're readily daunted by a blank page—but they complete almost everything once they do get started. So they need support at the front end.

Most people also like to celebrate life passages such as marriage, childbirth, divorce, and death. These may be beginnings or endings, but often include aspects of both. Then there are important aspects of life that often don't get celebrated—reaching puberty, buying a house, entering or leaving a job, retiring, etc. Community can provide social support for those occasions, too, if you want it to do so.

In community, the things you recognize collectively in some way gain importance from that recognition. Make sure that what you choose to recognize aligns with ideals you uphold

or goals you desire to achieve. These choices help distinguish different communities from each other, making it easier for seekers to find the right place to settle. Many communities mark the beginning and end of major construction projects, when someone joins or leaves the community, the turning of the year, and so forth.

Then there are more distinctive choices. A community interested in activism might open and close support for causes such as a proposed law or a social project. An ecovillage might recognize planting a tree, breaking ground for a new garden, undertaking or completing study of a green building technique, or finishing a compost pile that's ready to be spread. A community focused on health might honor someone for going vegetarian or completing their marathon training, and celebrate the establishment of a new hiking trail or the ceremonial disposal of a distracting television set.

All of this makes a good topic for a community meeting. Get together and talk about your favorite bookends. What beginnings and endings have you celebrated in your personal lives? What events does your current community customarily mark? What things have you seen other people celebrating? What marks have you missed, that you would like to celebrate? What is your community known for? What are some of your major themes and goals? Jot down ideas and see if any of that suggests bookends that you might want to acknowledge in the future.

## How To Mark It

To mark beginnings and endings, you need an application of time and attention. This can be something relatively simple, or more elaborate, as you prefer. Consider the nature of the event at hand; small things require less acknowledgment than big things. Events that repeat or progress may benefit from a minor mark after each phase, and a major one at the ultimate conclusion.

*(continued on p. 74)*

# Honoring Life Transitions

*By Cameron Withey*

After the last boy had spoken into the finally-dwindling fire, there was a pause around our circle. Not a silence, for the nearby ocean that we'd journeyed along for two weeks continued its rhythmic roar, and the evergreens that sheltered the watchful bald eagles shook in the wind. My toes gripping the sand, I looked out beyond the glowing fire and the weathered driftwood we'd arranged around us, through the dark blue light of dusk at the huge rock stacks of Tokeak Point, and was awed and humbled that our ceremony could occur in such a place. The stillness lingered amongst us for a few moments, the seven boys standing and looking more contemplative than I'd yet seen them. Drew needed only to say a few soft words; they knew what to do next. Turning around quietly, they stepped down into the shallow graves we'd dug for them and got into their sleeping bags. There, under a sky full of stars, they would spend the last night of their childhood lives.

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So began the culminating event of a three-week coming of age trip for 13-year-old boys, a journey that took us along nearly all of the wilderness coast of Washington

State. The following morning at dawn, we woke our boys and sent them down a long stretch of misty beach to solo sites we'd picked out for them, and there they sat and fasted for 24 hours, seeking vision, or just feeling homesick for people and things they may have taken somewhat for granted before.

I was an apprentice mentor on the trip, which is put on each summer by a Seattle-based nonprofit called Rite of Passage Journeys (or just "Journeys," as we call it). Journeys offers wilderness-based rite of passage experiences across the lifespan, of which the coming of age trips for boys and girls are our flagship. As I began my apprenticeship I was coming off some study in college of rites of passage, and was excited to be able to participate in a revival of what used to be central components of the traditions of communities around the world: ceremonial, community-witnessed markings of individuals'



Dave Moskowitz

transitions into new stages of life.

Few today have the opportunity to undergo challenging yet supportive, individually-tailored yet socially-embedded, and above all *intentional* rite of passage adventures and ceremonies. Most people in our culture are left to contend with major life passages (such as the endings and beginnings of childhood, young adulthood, true adulthood, and elderhood) largely on their own, or at least without the support of a full community or ceremonial marking of the passage. Journeys has taken on an interesting role in that it serves people and families who aren't living within the context of a tradition or a community that already provides rites of passage.

Journeys has been based at a thriving cohousing community for 25 years, and though a few of our participants come right from that community, most come from elsewhere around the state and even from other countries. This creates a couple of big challenges for us and others who would design and facilitate these kinds of experiences.

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I have a very distinct memory from the second day of the trip. We were all in the van, driving past suburban strip-malls on our way to a ropes course for a day of team-building activities, and a conversation had developed among the youth about fast-food chains: who had which in their hometown, which were their favorites. Soon the conversation expanded to include mall stores, Hollywood movies, and pop musicians. It seemed particularly interesting to them because one of our participants had come all the way from the UK, and some of the boys were poking fun at him for not being aware of some of the same stores that seemed so given and universal to them (though to me there was a surprisingly little difference in what he was familiar with).

In reflecting on that conversation I observe something interesting about the culture of our group and its implications for our intentions with the trip. Because



Emily Pease



Emily Pease

the boys came together from different places, not knowing each other or growing up in the same community—and given the general thrust of contemporary society—the shared cultural touchstones of the group were primarily those of the mass consumer culture. There was little shared language around values, no elders or role models from their local communities that any two of them had in common, and none had seen anyone from their families or communities go through this particular rite of passage experience before. As a group, we were largely starting from scratch. How could we create a sense of intimate community in three weeks, so that the participants felt safe, supported, and inspired enough to “drop in” to the deep places where the personal work we were encouraging them to do happens?

There's a long list of answers. The first day, we had a discussion about the values we wanted to strive to hold to as a community (values which, to put it gently, are not the same as those most encouraged by the dominant consumer culture). At the beginning and end of the trip, the participants met individually with a council of elders who drew out their hopes and fears and reflections on their experience, and throughout the trip we made time for one-on-one mentoring conversations. During down-time we played games, and at night we told stories.

But one of the more basic aspects of the trip brought the participants together by necessity: the practical demands of our extended backpacking trips forced them (and us mentors!) to work together—otherwise they might not get to eat, they might get rained on as they slept, they might get lost. As mentors, our most important job in

this regard was to give them the tools and skills so that by the end, we could step back completely—as we did—and let them direct and organize the group to meet its needs and achieve its itinerary without us.

And maybe the most significant way that a sense of community emerged was through the space we held in our rituals and ceremonies. It began from day one when we held our ceremony of separation, which has become one of the most cherished traditions at Journeys—and is therefore a bit of a secret—but involves an outwardly funny, inwardly moving enactment of the common practice of the “theft” of pubertal children from their parents by same-sex mentors. Every night we held a talking circle, which included a space for anyone to safely speak their heart or mind to the group, and through engaging in that practice, a common language developed that allowed us to more easily discuss and embody the values we’d all agreed upon. There were the ceremonies leading into and out of their solos, which they participated in with open-mindedness and courage. And the night when I was personally most awed: the night we sat around a fire and they each told their story of what’d happened on their solo, a few of them breaking down into tears but still speaking through it with strength and conviction...

So while the talk of McDonald’s persisted over the course of the trip, a new language and a new culture formed around our little tribe as well.

• • •

There is one other big challenge that stands out for me, which is also one of the biggest challenges for the participants themselves: how to sustain the changes that have been set in motion once they return to their lives at home. In traditional rites of passage, the person is witnessed and acknowledged by their whole community for undergoing their transformation, which is usually given some sort of ceremonial finalization, and they are often given a symbolic body-marking or article of clothing to wear to distinguish their new stage in life, much like a wedding ring.

Journeys trips always include a reunion ceremony at the end for parents and families to witness the return of their youth. But while their immediate family has witnessed their transformation, extended family, peers, and others in our participants’ lives likely haven’t—let alone the hordes of relatively anonymous people most of us encounter day-to-day. That, plus the general lack of awareness of rites of passage, and the general soul-suppressing nature of mass culture (especially for teens), can make it especially challenging to sustain the growth and re-direction that participants often want to bring into their lives after our trips.

In response to this, we do all we can, though it’s largely out of our hands. Upon our return to basecamp, we had a two-day parents weekend, which, as a newcomer to the organization, I was frankly blown away by. There was a long reunion ceremony in which the group performed a skit and each participant got up in front of the assembly (including other par-



Emily Pease



ticipants, mentors, parents, families, and community members) and re-introduced themselves as the new person they were and spoke briefly to their experience, what they were bringing back, and what new intentions and responsibilities they were taking on. Later, the participants and their families (including siblings) together made a family crest and covenant. There was then a facilitated negotiation of new privileges and responsibilities that the youth would be taking on. And it went on from there.

But then the participants departed, and though we've kept in touch with many (and to my great pleasure a few have returned for trips I've led this summer), they are back in their own communities and in the wider culture, and we don't get to see the seeds that were planted during their time with us root and flower.

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Those living in and amongst intentional communities are in a great position to support the revival of these powerfully enriching traditions that seem to be vital not only for individuals' growth and maturation but for the health of communities as wholes. In fact, the inspiration for the founding of Journeys 45 years ago came when a group of people with the Chicago-based Institute for Cultural Affairs traveled around the world to investigate the characteristics of the strongest and healthiest communities, and found that the most important factor was the existence of still-vital rites facilitating and marking the transition from childhood to young adulthood.

Part of Journeys' mission is to spread the knowledge of rite of passage design and facilitation so that more and more people have access to these experiences. We hope that one day the organization will become obsolete and that rites of passage will return to being integral parts of community life. Meanwhile, we invite you into our community, as apprentice, guide, parent, or participant on your own adult quest. ☺

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*A native of Seattle, Washington, Cameron Withey has been inspired by the magical old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest his whole life. He is a recent graduate of The Evergreen State College, where he studied eco-psychology and worked as a writing tutor to cultivate authentic student voices. His passions include deepening his perception of and participation in the wonders of the natural world, writing essays and poetry, and learning how to be of more skillful service to his communities.*



Kirt Hodges



# Community for a Minute: Discovering Nature, Self, and Group at Sixth-Grade Camp

By Heather M. Barnes

“I can’t I can’t I can’t!” wails Marisa, tiny for her 12 years. She’s seated in the center of our circle, face pressed into her knees and shaking visibly. Around her, 13 of her classmates ignore her, lying on their backs in silence, waiting it out.

It’s a balmy Thursday night in October, the final evening of camp for these sixth graders from Los Angeles. They’re about to do a solo night walk, the culmination of everything we’ve been working on all week: nature exploration, teambuilding, and personal growth. When Marisa first started quivering they fell effortlessly into the role of supportive team, offering advice and encouragement. But after 15 minutes with no improvement they gave up, reverting to the children that they are and leaving her for me to handle.

It’s what I do. Since 1993, I’ve been facilitating outdoor programs for youth ranging from inner-city organizations, where the chaperones buy boots and jackets for the kids or nobody will, to exclusive private schools that request specific life experiences they want the kids to have, like a shopping list. That makes me chuckle. I can no more dictate which lessons each kid needs to learn than I can make the wildlife obey while they’re here.

For 19 years I’ve watched kids transform from selfish, impatient, sometimes violent young people into thinkers, collaborators, and doers. In this I’ve noticed three hurdles each kid fights and then overcomes. Some may conquer only one or two, others succeed all three, but they’re always in the same order: fear of nature, fear of the group, and fear of self. After a week of community-building, fresh air, and exercise, they’re calm and cheerful, ready to move into the deeper, more profound realms of interpersonal exploration. Instead, camp comes cruelly to an end. The kids are stuffed back into the boxes they worked so hard to escape and return to the environments that put them there. With luck, they’ll retain a few bright pearls of insight and follow them like beacons throughout life.

I’d like to give you a slice of life at sixth-grade camp. For this purpose I’ve created a fictional group of kids. While their names are made up, their characteristics and experiences are those of real people.

## Fear of Nature

Call it West Middle School, your average public school in Los Angeles. Its student population is heavily diverse; family income levels cluster around lower-middle class. The school is situated at the end of one of LAX’s runways; every day they squeegee jet fuel off the windows, and the students are never allowed free time outdoors.

For these kids—and millions like them, regular Americans growing up indoors—the idea of nature comes from books or movies, most of it neutral or disparaging,



Photos courtesy of Heather M. Barnes

some good. Regardless, there's little positive interaction and no free exploration. Richard Louv, in his award-winning book *Last Child in the Woods*, addresses this very issue, discussing the cultural removal of children from nature to the detriment of the children, the adults they will become, and the nature they will be charged with protecting. Indeed, there is a powerful disconnect here, which becomes obvious the minute they exit the bus.

Just before 11 on Monday morning, three buses pull up in front of the camp's dining hall, and we—the outdoor facilitators—greet them. One hundred sixth-graders, plus heaps of clean, shiny baggage, pile out. Some stop and gape silently. Others point and shriek, and the rest vent their nervousness on each other. They're a mere hour from their school, but if the buses dropped them off on Mars instead, they would hardly have been more shocked.

After lunch I meet my group for the week. There's Marisa, a born leader. Stan, shy and overweight, who dreams of seeing a deer. Shelby, the fast-talker who notices more than she lets on. Alejandro, the abused boy who loves lizards. The rest hang back like a Greek chorus, their personalities emerging gradually throughout the week.

Despite the fact that so many kids are experts on a single species, many are disgusted or terrified of nature as a whole. Therefore, my first request to them—please sit down on the ground—is met with horror and disbelief.

At first, nobody moves. Their eyes scour the ground for somewhere “clean” to sit, their skin practically crawling. Every zip in the air becomes a heat-seeking hornet, every smudge of dirt a stinking swamp. You'd think I'd asked them to lie down in the middle of a crime scene. I repeat the request three, four, seven times, earning some hard stares for it, but this is a necessary step. It's impossible to focus on consensus-building when the next passing ant could launch them into the Charleston.

By Monday night, however, each one is happily dusty and they've given up the fight to stay pure. When we recon-

vene Tuesday morning they flop down without a second thought. The rest of the week, they troop through high grass, play “camouflage” at the edges, hunt for fire-building supplies in the woods, and sit beneath trees during journal time. Each day, it gets harder for me to call them back from the sacred places they've found. The lure of the wild is now much stronger than their fear of it.

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**Their eyes scour the ground for somewhere “clean” to sit. Every zip in the air becomes a heat-seeking hornet, every smudge of dirt a stinking swamp.**

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## Fearing the Group

Teambuilding is the art of solving problems—physical, mental, spatial, linear, etc.—by collaborating with others. It's a study of process, not result. Learning to empathize and strategize with others is much harder for kids than it is for adults, and tempers flare quickly.

By Wednesday afternoon, however, our mythical group is still acting like a Monday group: lack of focus, little investment, too many distractions. When they reach an impasse on a river-crossing challenge, discussion quickly dissolves into bickering.

“Hey, put this board on that one—” suggests Marisa, offering a one-by-eight to Eric, who's balanced in the middle of the “river.”

“No, that's stupid!” Eric snarls suddenly. Without warning, he stomps off. “None of this is real anyway. What's the point?”

“*Eric!*” the others protest. “Get that board, it'll drift away!”

“No, it won't,” Eric yells over his shoulder. “It's not *actually* a river.”

I call a water break and we circle up. If they'd been giving it an honest go all this time I'd be sympathetic, but only a handful have been committed to the task. I inform them that they're not going anywhere until I get a little honesty.

Picking at the grass, the kids offer feeble distractions. They'd rather be hanging out in their

bunks, playing games, eating at restaurants. They're hot, tired, and dehydrated. ("Yeah, we know, drink more water.") When this is met with silence from me, the deeper truths begin to emerge. They're afraid of getting lost, or hurt, or stuck someplace. Scared of looking silly or stupid in front of their peers. They don't know what they're doing, who they are, what they want from life. Everyone else has it easier, better, faster. Nobody feels like they belong.

Ninety astonishing minutes later (rather than the standard five-to-10), we emerge from the most intensive debrief session of my career. I feel as drained and reinvigorated as they do.

Two miracles ensue. The kids get up and cross the river in 15 minutes flat, each one pitching in and offering eager ideas.

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**It's one thing for a group to solve a problem together, where the glory is shared equally, but quite another to step back and allow one person to shine.**

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Then, when they're almost done, a black-tailed doe ambles past, halting the process. Everyone except Stan sits down in place and watches. Stan tiptoes toward her, rolling his feet in the Native American style they learned earlier. He stops 10 feet away and they regard one another, boy and deer, for several minutes, until she moves off casually into the woods. Stan returns to us beaming,

tears streaming down his face, but he doesn't seem to notice. The kids leap up and congratulate him on how awesome that was. It's a moment he'll never forget.

It's one thing for a group to solve a problem together, where the glory is shared equally, but quite another to step back and allow one person to shine. Many groups will reach this point by Wednesday afternoon; they just don't usually wait until Wednesday afternoon to do it.

To me, it means they're ready for the high ropes course.

### **Fearing the Self**

A high ropes course is a series of physical obstacles such as swings, balance beam, cargo net, and cables to cross, things which would be easy if done on the ground but can seem impossible 40 feet in the air. The obstacles are fixed between trees, and participants are hooked into safety equipment to prevent them from falling.

The high course is safe, but its true value lies in its perceived danger: how do you react when faced with a challenge that scares the skin off you? Freeze up? Flee? Push on? It's here that many people discover what they're made of and what they do with that.

However, doing the course yourself is only half the challenge. The other—and, arguably, more important—part is offering support from the ground (being emotionally vested in someone else's success). Friends on the ground can call up advice and encouragement or stop you from doing something dangerous, like double-unclipping your safety lines. Remembering that this cheerleading squad is there can be a valuable resource for kids facing a Flea Jump, Giant's Ladder, or a zip line through thin air.

Call me old-school (and in the world of adventure facilitation, I am), but I believe no one should do the high course until they can play both giver and receiver, learning to connect with something outside of themselves. What kind of friend are you? Do you stay with the person up there the whole way or zone out when things get slow? How do you treat the climber who flies through the course as if on wings versus the one who fights back tears 10 feet up the ladder? This, too, is part of the self-awareness that comes into focus at the high course.

Back to Thursday night in the woods.

Fourteen kids, a teacher, and I sit in a comfortable blob at the start of the trail. No one asks what's going to happen next.

The solo night walk wraps everything up neatly like a present. Though safe, it pits each kid's new-found realizations and feelings against their old ones, in the oldest place on Earth: nature.

Thirteen can't wait to go. One is afraid I'll make her go. I have no idea what will happen. Breaking the silence, Eric asks, "Can I go first?"

"No, I wanted to!" Shelby hisses from behind him. "I was trying to get up here to ask!"

"Can I?" Three others chime in. Suddenly there are seven hands waving in my face.

We draw lots and Shelby wins. She strides confidently down the trail, the faint crunching of her boots on gravel fading away. The group is silent, transfixed by both the perfect evening and the triumph of Shelby's walk, despite the fact that they haven't seen her reach the other end yet. There is no doubt in their minds that she will.

Marisa is calm too, watching with plain wonder beside me. Maybe she'll go after all, I muse.

Next is Jason, who marches off so jauntily that I have to remind him to slow down lest he catch up with Shelby and ruin it for both of them.

Eric.

Sammie.

Alejandro.

Eventually, only Marisa and I remain.

"Well?" I say. Her audience is gone. The moment of truth has arrived.

She's quiet. Then: "I can't." Her voice is flat, gravelly. No tears, no drama. This is the truth, then.

"Why not?"

"Because something might be there. Maybe everybody's dead and we don't know it."

"No one is dead."

But no matter how much I want her to share in this triumph, I can't force the experience on her. Maybe she'll face this one later, but right now it's not hers. Sometimes the lesson is for me.

We walk back together and find our group sitting in a circle, unharmed and in barely contained silence. No sooner do Marisa and I sit down than they erupt like a giddy volcano.

"Oh my gosh, that was so cool! I didn't think—"

"I was so scared, I thought I was going to die—"

"I know, I can't believe it, either! We can do anything!"

Marisa sits motionless, a smile frozen on her mouth. She's bravely trying to be happy for them, but the thin smile can't disguise her dawning regret. This, too, is an experience.

Sitting here with my group on their final night of sixth-grade camp, listening to each one in turn relive every nuance of the walk, I catch glimpses of the new people they're becoming. Some broadcast their pride, others glow more quietly. One looks miserable.

I know what opportunities to learn I gave them this week, but as to which bright pearls they've actually secreted away in the pockets of their psyche, I couldn't guess. I'd probably be wrong. 🐾

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*Heather M. Barnes has been teaching and facilitating youth groups since 1993. Currently she works at Howell Nature Center in Howell, Michigan, as an Outdoor Educator and Coordinator of the Heifer Global Village. No one has ever died on any of her programs.*



# Transitioning into the Heart of Community

*By Tara Pettit*

I lie in my bunk, thoughts of the day's events swirling around in my mind. I replay the morning's group devotional, the day-long campus visit, and the wonderful Slovenian specialty stuffed pepper dinner—daily events that were made even more special in the company of my community members and which were emphasized by the laughs, stories, and moments of truth dispersed throughout. I mindfully meander back through the past two months I have spent with my brothers and sisters in community. My brain cannot even wrap itself around all that I have experienced, felt, communicated, seen—the intense emotions that have surged through my body, the skin I have touched, the warmth I have felt from having slept so close to my sisters, the uplifting encouragement and support I have received from my brothers.

And yet, amidst the comfort that my now-familiar bunk bed provides while reminiscing this summer's stay in foreign lands, an even more familiar feeling of sadness begins creeping up on me. It's a feeling that envelops me at about the same time in all my international community projects, when life together is drawing to a close and the reality of going home alone hits me like a brick. Although it's an emotion that is strongly rooted in the separation anxiety I experience, time and time again, after leaving my "summer family," never failing to remind me that the time for saying our goodbyes is drawing near, it has also become an elemental factor in the functioning of the temporary communities I devote my time to and in the larger vision of my life's work.

You see, for me, living in community has always been a transitory experience, in which beginnings and endings are just a part of the dance. Being a part of summer project spiritual work teams requires one to adopt a lifestyle that is transient in nature and which allows for adaptability with regards to not only the changing of community teams and bunk mates, but also the shifting of cultures with various beliefs, ideals, and social norms. Living and working

with these changing community teams over an entire summer—groups that are introduced, meshed, entwined, and split up within a few months' span—becomes somewhat of a whirlwind journey of immediate and intense relationship, emotion, and shared experiences.

My first adventure overseas with the summer work teams was to Ljubljana, Slovenia, a small European country that had never been visited by any summer project team under the parent organization. I was only 19 years old, but bright-eyed, idealistic, and ready to take on the world with my passion for cultural integration and spiritual conversation. I was also excited by the idea of collaborating with other college students in a project based on long-term goals and purposes and that gained lasting, meaningful results. Our

*View of Drežnica (Kobarid), Slovenia.*





mission was to integrate ourselves into the Slovenian lifestyle, survey the cultural and spiritual climate, and engage citizens (particularly college-aged individuals) in spiritual conversation that sought to educate us, as Americans, about the country's religious views in contrast to westernized Christianity. In turn, we also sought to share our spiritual experiences with Slovenian natives in hopes of establishing common cultural ground. Our team self-identified as Christians, but we longed to create bridges with other cultures rather than burn them.

To this day, five years later, I can still recall such vivid detail from my time spent in that beautiful, homey European city, from the smell of my bed sheets to the way I felt walking the town square every morning—deeply content, with peace residing in every bone of my body. Our days were busy, filled with team meetings, appointments with locals, shared meals, training, and community events. We were focused in mission and set our sights on uncovering the mystery that was Slovenian culture and spirituality.

We dedicated ourselves to meeting people through random conversation and building friendships in love and interest. Our purposes unfolded in very organic ways, relational in nature, as we assimilated into the culture, spending our days in busy cafés and engaging locals in deep, thought-provoking conversation about



*Slovenian national costumes.*

life, God, and how they seek happiness. However, no matter how much hard work and purposefulness went into pursuing our cultural outreach goals, it was quite obvious how important tending to our own little community became in relation to each member's overall experience and pursuit of higher, more conscious living.

Our summer work was built upon the community we cultivated within our own group as we strengthened our ties with each other, not only to become more effective in our area outreach, but also to learn how to exist peacefully and intentionally, albeit humanly, as children of God. We found more than friendship in our relationships with one another—something more akin to life partners, as we shared our rooms, laughs, and tears for the summer, creating soul-satisfying memories and substantial principles that would stay with us for a lifetime.

Let's just say that within these short-term summer project communities, life vibrates at a much higher frequency and human experiences are elevated to much greater heights. The temporary and transitional nature of our communities undoubtedly contributed to the speed and intensity with which we dove right into life together; we knew our time was short, but dramatically impacting. There was no holding back for us from the start. While other, more permanent, communities had the time to test the waters of group dynamics, our purposes as a group required us to collide into one another's lives like crashing waves. From our shy hellos to tearful goodbyes,

pretty much everything was shared: European hostel rooms and dinner at the local Thai joint, but especially the exhilarating highs and crushing lows that come with the hard work of pursuing the spirituality of other cultures through building relationships and establishing ourselves as a spiritual resource in the area.

As a whole, we all bore the disappointment one team member experienced from being rejected or ignored, or the heartbreak another experienced from having been attacked. We also communally celebrated the joy of having made a new friend, the excitement from making spiritual connections with others, and the fulfillment of breathing life into another by sharing our life purposes and happiness. As a group we collaboratively experienced inner growth and witnessed the transformation that took place within each of our souls as we grew into a more diverse, more loving, stronger, better people. We fell in love fast and hard, quickly realizing that our shared experiences would bond us and mark us as members of our summer community project for life.

Recognizably, under any circumstance, human relationships are complicated, but they become even messier when all of life's events are amplified in group living. Even in our temporary community, it was obvious that members would have to deal with the inevitable squabbles and disagreements that are simply a product of conflicting human personalities and the occasional claustrophobic feeling after living on top of one another for several weeks. The conflicts are bound to happen with any random mix of people; however, what helped us achieve our equilibrium was our dedication to common goals and values and the realization that regardless of differences, we were embodying the unifying love of Christ. We sought to love what each person brought to the group because it's what makes up the community that we built and are vitally a part of—the community that is distinctly ours. Our capacity for love began with the love we cultivated for each other, which overflowed into our love for the local area we were living in.

Days were not always easy. Sometimes it took special effort just to feel somewhat amiable towards my team members, which made it that much harder to muster the energy for city outreach. While our work was not overly “hard,” it could be energy-zapping and time consuming, requiring dedication and emotional availability in extending oneself to the needs of others. It was a daily practice that we failed in, succeeded in, but nonetheless continued in. Loving is not easy and every single day presented challenges, whether it was the choice to neglect the member who hurt you, lash out at the friend who has been annoying you, or to just drop all preconceived notions and rash assumptions while choosing the path of acceptance and forgiveness. Embarking on a journey in community will present all types of messes and I learned that I could rely on the very people my mental, emotional, and egotistical persona battled against to find my way through the muddiness, to find peace in all the ways we are humanly beautiful.

Our life as a community was short, but the wealth of knowledge and experience gained from each moment spent in those summers followed each of us back to our hometowns and persisted,

growing with every subsequent community endeavor. Each summer transformed us for life. Before the experience of living every waking moment in close quarters and with such a diverse group of people, it's easy to succumb to the mindset that people are far too opinionated and different, full of their own quirks and set in their own ways to mesh into a viable community—that it takes a special breed of people to make intentional community work. But our short-term communities proved that conclusion wrong, after continuously creating and recreating new communities, adapting to new people and new experiences and just when comfort sets in, saying goodbye and doing it all over again with a new group of people.



*Slovenian specialty stuffed peppers.*



After having lived out community, intentionally, with a group of people you've had to learn to trust with your vulnerability, you see how it serves this deep craving for belonging, sharing, and acceptance present to some degree in every human being. This is not to say that everyone is designed to live in as close a community environment as I have experienced for extended periods of time, but that on some level, every person experiences some degree of inner satisfaction, fulfillment, and growth from sharing everyday life with human beings, who, for the most part, are made of the same emotions and desires that we see in ourselves.

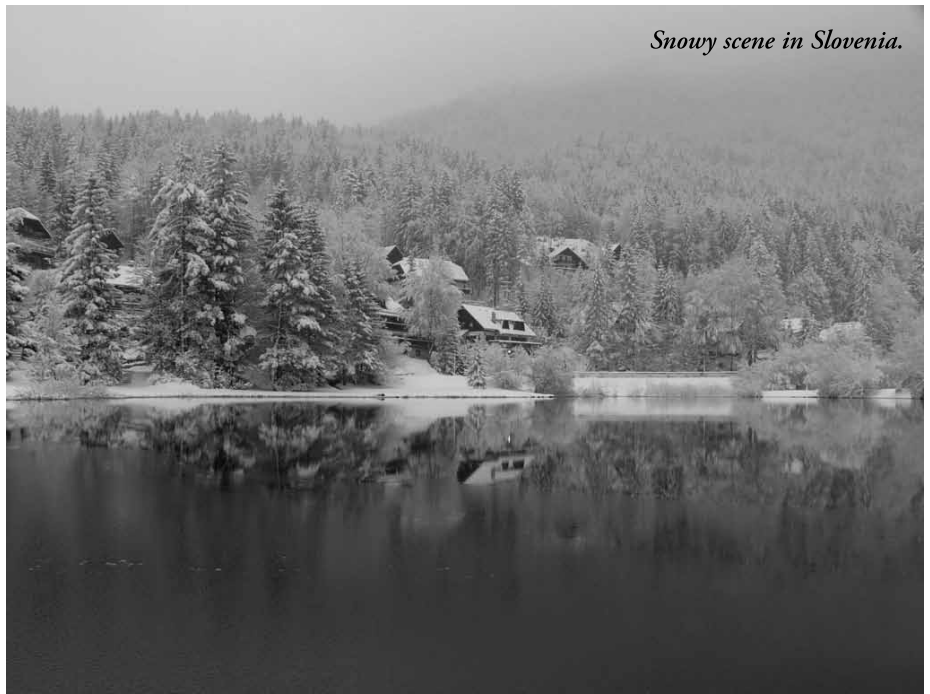
You cannot experience community and remain the same. You cannot experience community and not in some way connect to the same vulnerability and longing you witness in others as you feel yourself.

Community helps you to see just how different we can be in terms of personality, communication styles, and personal expression, but just how similar we all are when you strip back the layers, the protective shields we have learned to hide behind. Stripped down, we are the same flesh and bone, have the same root flaws and tendencies, and are created to enjoy the same sensations, feelings, and experiences.

Communities are far from perfect. Our community was far from perfect. In fact, communities may include some of the messiest, most lost, erratic individuals on earth. That's what makes community necessary. We need each other, more than we ever know, and collaboration towards greater intentional purposes requires a diversity of thoughts, opinions, personalities, and experiences. Reentering the "real world" several times after periods of living in the community bubble has always been an adjustment for me as I confronted feelings of withdrawal and loneliness and had to reacquaint myself with the silences in eating alone, sleeping alone, and occupying my time by myself.

Before community, I sort of suppressed those deep-down feelings—longings for the diversity and excitement that a close group of people brings to life. I was okay with doing things alone and just went about my way, harboring thoughts, feelings, and opinions to myself. But oh, after community, it's as if the world became Technicolor. My sociality blossomed and I opened myself up to people in such personal, vulnerable ways. I learned how people can help you to cherish each moment, to make each moment fun, fulfilling, and worth living. People's quirks and habits met with my own, blending into my personality and behaviors. We morphed into one unit and pursued life together full-force.

For the time being, I have transitioned out of community to pursue my career. It's hard living alone these days. Waking up alone just isn't as fun as waking up to a room full of girls singing and carrying on. Ice cream runs by myself just aren't as fulfilling as strolling around the town square with gelato in hand and friends at my side. It's these moments, with my family, that I will always look to as a cure for loneliness. I will always carry that communal spirit in my heart. Although somewhat displacing, those times in my life were remarkably transforming, and I will always look to them to re-center myself within creation's larger design, our deeply human purpose of celebrating life as a body of believers, a community. 🐣



*Snowy scene in Slovenia.*

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*A graduate of Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism in Athens, Tara considers herself a sort of "ramblin' woman" who dabbles in a lot of different activities and projects which lead her to her next literary idea. Currently, she is a writing partner with the United Nations and has been devoting many of her freelance writing projects to her interests in Ayurveda, nature, and social justice.*

# Journeying on the Ark: One Woman's Experience at L'Arche

By Janna Payne

*Pilgrim,  
when your ship,  
long moored in harbour,  
gives you the illusion  
of being a house;  
when your ship  
begins to put down roots  
in the stagnant water by the quay:  
put out to sea!  
Save your boat's journeying soul  
and your own pilgrim soul,  
cost what it may.  
—Dom Helder Camara*

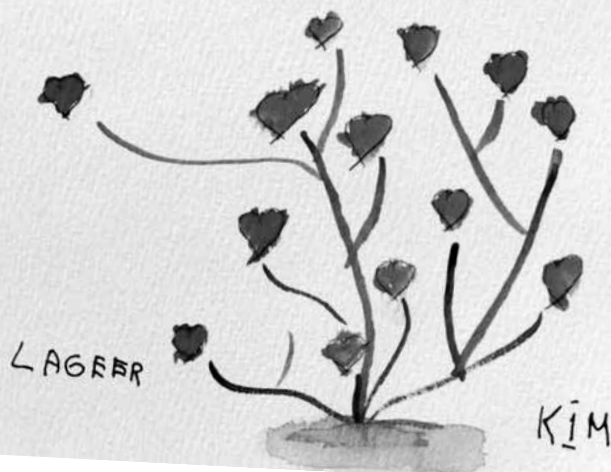
## Boarding the Ark

I have been serving as a live-in assistant at L'Arche Daybreak (Richmond Hill, Ontario) for the past year and a half, which means I have been creating home with assistants from around the world and core members (individuals with intellectual disabilities). In my home there are four core members and four assistants. L'Arche is an organization that seeks to provide safe, nurturing homes for individuals with intellectual disabilities, honouring their unique value and vocation. The word *L'Arche* means *the ark* in French, which has been described as a place of refuge and of safety from the flood in various L'Arche documents.

Moving into L'Arche, I brought openness to intentional community life and to learning in and through relationship with core members and assistants alike.

I came excited to be a part of a community of difference. I saw responding to the needs of core members as an important part of building community, and was eager to live out Jean Vanier's invitation to sacrifice my own freedom while building relationships based on mutuality, handing over power, claiming (significantly) less space, making peace with difference, and honouring/celebrating the core members.

Artwork by a core member  
at L'Arche Daybreak.



Kim Lageer

(L to R) Lorenzo Sforza Cesarini, Janna Payne, Carl MacMillan, and John Bloss perform in a L'Arche Daybreak Gala Event featuring artists with and without intellectual disabilities.

Courtesy of Janna Payne



## Mooring in the Harbour

While I started off with a lot of momentum, it wasn't long before I realized supporting the value and vocation of the core members was serious business. As a live-in assistant, I was trained to provide extensive physical, emotional, social, behavioural, and spiritual support for approximately 60 hours a week. Assistants in my home were encouraged to be physically present to the needs of the core members throughout the day, and advised to listen, learn, observe, and respond to their offers if we wanted to build trust. Assistants were also encouraged to see the core members as the true artists and visionaries while sacrificing their own freedom and practicing self-control. This meant core members had individual support from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. with assistants on hand to interject at the first sign of a core member becoming sad or angry. Assistants were directed to counsel, comfort, console, or offer to pray with a core member to de-escalate a situation or prevent a core member from having a verbal outburst. Looking around the house, there seemed to be correlation between supporting the core members and stroking their hair, sitting directly beside them, and responding to their every comment, tear, yawn, sneeze, question, or complaint along the way!

Living in a gentle, conflict-free space

proved tiring. I questioned how the philosophy of L'Arche was being played out, and was skeptical of whether or not it was in the best interest of the core members. I started to think the philosophy of care fostered dependency, stifling the growth and expression of the core members. I recognized many of the core members had complex needs and would benefit from having assistants trained in more than befriending. I didn't think it was healthy for assistants to be meeting the relational and emotional needs of the core members (without establishing healthy boundaries or facilitating opportunities for connection outside of the home). I started to believe it is possible and crucial for all people—with or without intellectual disabilities—to confront parts of themselves, manage their own emotions, meet their own needs, and listen to their inner voices without always having an assistant—albeit a needy one—to thank. I was uncomfortable shielding the core members from pain, and uncomfortable living in a fantasy land.

As someone who values independence and individuality, I should also fess up I found myself burnt out from continually providing excessive care and continually being in relation with others. I felt like a being-for-others, which, quite frankly, blends well with Freire's definition of oppressed (see *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, 1968, 1970). I felt small, silenced, and stifled.

I hated living in a dream land, and became bored dwelling in peace, safety, and security. I resented heralding the voices of the core members, and resented a community ideal that saw assistants refusing to insert their identities into the space, and withholding their "I believe" and "I think" assertions in the presence of those with disabilities. I was saddened that those with disabilities were not having the opportunity to encounter real people—the wrath of authentic, fully alive, fierce, creative, beautiful people. I hated being in a space where self-control trumped self-expression, and where the stories of assistants centered almost exclusively on what they had learned from L'Arche or the core members. I found the philosophy disempowering.

I yearned to tell my own story, and to open myself up to the stories of others. As Jeanette Winterson wrote, "I was not being myself, but I didn't know how to be myself there. I hid the self that I was and had no persona to put in its place." (*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*)

## Putting Out to Sea

Serving at L'Arche was a painful process that saw me doubting my own capacity to care, feigning diplomacy, and struggling to remain open to the community and to



Courtesy of Janna Payne

Performers take the stage in a L'Arche Daybreak Gala Event featuring artists with and without intellectual disabilities.



Courtesy of Janna Payne

(R to L) L'Arche Daybreak assistant Janna Payne takes in a view of Lake Ontario with core member Heather Goodchild.

those telling me to “die to self.” It was a delicate dance, but with much frustration and even more reflection, I gradually came to some pretty great revelations about myself, about caregiving, and about community-building.

Being thrust into the position of caregiver at L’Arche challenged my self-understanding. I found myself yearning for space to collaborate, insert my identity, and share my true self. I found myself becoming empathetic toward others in caregiving roles, and more attuned to fellow assistants who were disconnected from the work and scrambling to form their own identities (in their limited time away from caregiving). I now believe assistants, like myself, could provide better care if we had outlets for telling our own stories, making our own meaning, developing our own talents, having power, having intimacy, taking ownership, and working toward mutual liberation. Being whole means giving the gift of the self—not emptying the self.

While L’Arche promises spiritual becoming in exchange for labour, I would argue caregiving has little to do with spiritual becoming. I think spiritual becoming means exchanging the self, which happens in moments of mutuality along the way. It can be a part of caregiving, but I think seeing caregiving as a compassionate act or as something others deserve undermines the services being provided. I believe working toward a balance that is mutually liberating and life-giving for assistants would better support the core members.

When it comes to responding to the needs of core members, I also think assistants could benefit from learning more about the importance of emotional and creative expression in their own lives and in the lives of core members. Self-advocacy hinges on core members developing their capacities to lead, tell their own stories, enter into dialogue, honour their emotions, and demand justice. Prophets were known for angrily demanding justice, and anger is an important emotion that can be cultivated for good.

Maintaining a gentle web doesn’t necessarily support the growth, expression, and independence of anyone and often leads to dependency. Encouraging emotional and creative expression is essential for engaging in life, building/restoring relationships, linking one’s life with others, and journeying against, toward, and with others.

Being at L’Arche has strengthened my philosophy of community. I initially came to L’Arche thinking that if I wanted to build community, I had to enter the world of the core members and respond to their needs. While some think community people turn toward one another, share space, and remain true to the self. I’ve seen this happen at an art show featuring work of artists with and without disabilities, when people

with and without disabilities share the stage, and when people with and without disabilities show openness to the perspectives, stories, and beauty of others.

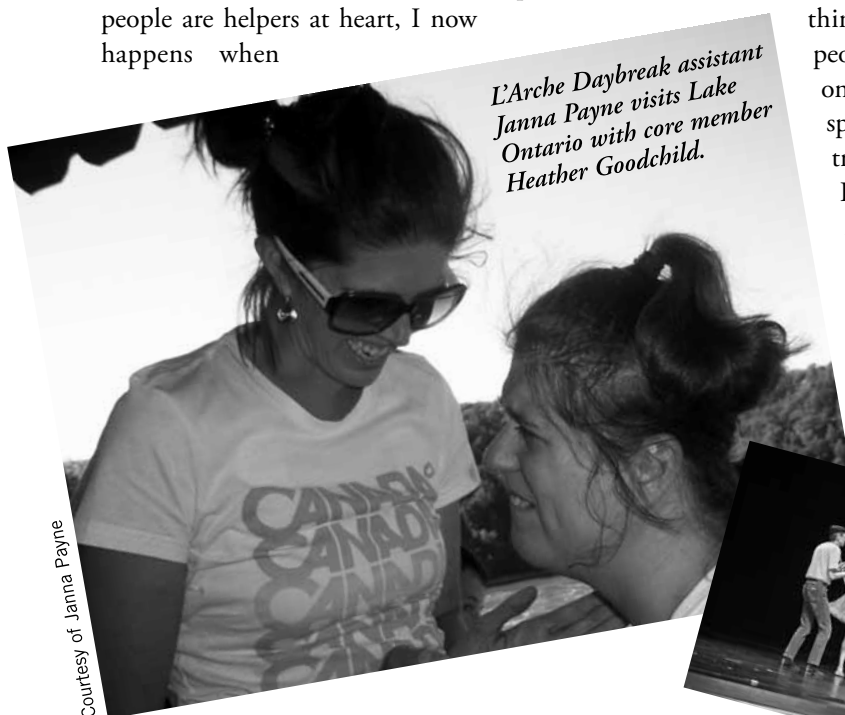
Community is about vulnerability, and I see vulnerability as having the courage to express the self, the courage to declare “this is who I am,” and the courage to be open to truly meeting with others. Vulnerability happens when we enter our true selves into relationship with others. Building community means telling the truth, sharing the self, and moving forward in and through relationship. Community is raw, honest, vulnerable, and sometimes awkward.

## Journeying Forward

Irving Zola writes that disability demands “a continuing effort to reclaim what we have lost: the right to act sexy, get angry, be vulnerable, and have possibilities.” My hope is that as I weave my way in and out of community I can co-create spaces of difference where people with and without disabilities can fully embrace the self, inviting sex appeal, anger, vulnerability, and possibility into the conversation. I believe in honouring the voices and identities of myself and others. I also hope to connect with others who are navigating issues of identity, process, and power while telling their own stories and engaging their social imaginations. Recognizing I’m called to become an individual in community, to stand up for justice, and to assert my true self into the world might just help me to move forward, grow in self-understanding, care for myself and others, and build community while offering something authentic into the world. 🐦

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*Janna Payne is a Canadian storyteller, master of divinity candidate, and live-in assistant at L’Arche Cork (Ireland). She wrote this reflection while serving as a live-in assistant at L’Arche Daybreak (Canada). She strives to tell her own story while honouring the stories of the individuals with intellectual disabilities she supports. She can be reached at [paynejanna@gmail.com](mailto:paynejanna@gmail.com).*



*L’Arche Daybreak assistant Janna Payne visits Lake Ontario with core member Heather Goodchild.*



Courtesy of Janna Payne

# Greening Your 'Hood

**An ignorant kid from the suburbs learns the lessons of living sustainably—  
from kibbutzes to ecovillages, from cohousing to pocket neighborhoods**

By David Leach

When I was 20, I ran away from home to live on a kibbutz in northern Israel. I wasn't Jewish. I wasn't Marxist. I wasn't a back-to-the-lander. I wasn't even seeking (in the words of one volunteer coordinator) the "sun, sand, and sex" that has drawn 350,000 young visitors to the 270-plus communal villages of Israel's famous kibbutz movement.

No, I was escaping both a broken heart and the claustrophobia of growing up in the most middle-class neighborhood, in the most middle-class city, in the most middle-class country in the world. (Ottawa, Canada, if you must know.) I landed by chance on Kibbutz Shamir, near the border with Syria, which had been founded in 1944 by hardcore Romanian socialists.

As a new volunteer, I learned that the kibbutz movement embodied the "purest form of communism in the Western world." (Fifteen years later, kibbutz members would ditch Marxism, privatize Shamir, and list its optical factory on the NASDAQ stock exchange.) I was less impressed by the radical ideals of the kibbutz, however, than its architecture and design. I had grown up in a subdivision where the car was king. Like almost every suburb since Levittown, New York, my neighborhood had been designed to move vehicles quickly from A to B, with walkers and cyclists considered a nuisance or an after-thought. Commercial activity and social hubs had been zoned far from its long crescents of setback homes and double garages. (In fact, the only store you could reach by foot was an automotive dealership.) Cemented into this suburban DNA was an Orwellian message: Two cars, good; two legs, bad.

On the kibbutz, I discovered the simple joy of life on a human scale at a human pace. Like most kibbutzes, Shamir had been purpose-built in concentric circles of small buildings and row houses, linked by pedestrian pathways. A multi-purpose dining hall and an open green space exerted a centripetal force to draw everyone into the community's center. No resident lived more than a 10-minute amble from this hub, where they could share meals, debate issues, and celebrate holidays together.

We wandered down car-free paths to our workplaces every morning, and later to the general store, the bar, the library, the sports hall (which doubled Tuesday nights as a movie theatre), and the swimming pool. These informal gathering sites acted like "third places"—the phrase that American sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined for the casual in-between spaces (like cafés and hair salons, neither work nor home) so vital to a truly democratic society.

On the kibbutz, cars were few, shared among members, and sequestered in peripheral parking lots. Walking formed the fabric of everyday life. So, too, did the conversations sparked by unexpected footpath encounters. Who needed Facebook—still 15 years away—when you could collect the daily news by strolling to the kitchen for an after-dinner snack?

In a quirk of etymology, *kibbutz* (Hebrew for "gathering") and *kibitz* (Yiddish for "chitchat") sound remarkably similar. That confusion contains an accidental truth: At the heart of any community



Photos courtesy of David Leach



*Street party in Victoria.*



*Neighbor harvesting produce with author's son.*



beats the power of positive gossip, the semi-random conversations that bind friends and neighbors together. That was why the early kibbutzniks built their communities to promote kibitzing.

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Communal life changed me, of course, as it does most people. But the transformation wasn't instantaneous, like a flash from the heavens. I didn't return home to found a commune or live in a co-op. I didn't even join a neighborhood association. No, for the next decade or so, I cut my roots short. Almost every year, I moved (between countries or cities or apartments) for school or work or wanderlust.

Wherever I dropped my backpack, I became conscious of how architecture brings people together or keeps us apart—and how that sense of community impacts the environment, too. I'd grown up in a sprawling Wonder Bread subdivision with the carbon footprint of Godzilla. I later worked for Greenpeace, and my late-blooming ecological awareness nagged at my imagination. Wasn't there a better way to live? Could we design a community to be friendly both to its neighbors *and* to its environment? Could we replicate such eco-'hoods on a large scale, as we'd done with suburbia?

I stumbled across clues to this puzzle in surprising places. My wife and I bought a house in Toronto, Canada's biggest city. It was situated in an odd parallelogram of older duplexes, hemmed in by two busy roads, a subway yard, and a train track. Eco-paradise it was not.

And yet neighbors had turned the geographical constraints to their advantage. They had christened this forgotten corner "The Pocket"—a micro-neighborhood that didn't exist on any official map. One family opened their doors every Saturday to sell fresh-baked bread. Other residents published a regular newsletter to broadcast the history, culture, personalities, and urgent issues of The Pocket. (It evolved into a lively online social network.) A sense of community developed around what had been just another postal code. This common purpose was built, like the kibbutz movement, on a foundation of shared myth. We weren't isolated strangers, powerless and alone; we were the people of The Pocket.

The Pocket felt like an oasis amid the surrounding megalopolis. Eventually, even this micro-neighborhood couldn't keep my family in a city that was losing its battle with Carmageddon: the endless, angry storms of traffic, the summer "smog days"

when simply breathing seared our lungs. A new job and new dreams carried us west. On the Pacific coast, in Victoria, British Columbia, my wife and I moved into a small bungalow on a cul de sac. We could have afforded something bigger and newer on the edge of the city. But we liked the proximity of our new home. It was on a bus route and walking distance to a village-like main street of small shops, two grocery stores, a library, recreation center, a dozen cafes and restaurants, and several schools. We wouldn't need to buy a car right away. (Eight years later, thanks to a car-share co-op, we still haven't.)

Oddly, the house's backyard had a hot tub but no side fence. (Perhaps the old owner was an exhibitionist.) It was assumed we would keep the jacuzzi and erect a fence for privacy. We did the opposite: got rid of the energy-hogging tub and left the yard open.

A funny thing happened: We got to know our neighbors. We didn't need to strain over a fence to chat. When my son was born, he began crawling across the invisible property line and into their strawberry patch. Soon, our neighbor took him under her wing, gave him seedlings, and helped him plant a patch of his own. Over the years, she has become his garden mentor and "shirttail aunt"—closer to him than many of his blood relations. He brings her our old newspapers; she teaches him Spanish and how to prune berry bushes. We look after their house when they're away; they let us borrow their car to run errands. That casual sharing might never have happened had a fence stood between us.

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As I learned to accept the kindness of neighbors, I became aware of a global movement that was taking greater steps toward sustainable living. Soon phrases like "ecovillage" and "cohousing" no longer seemed alien to my ears. (O.U.R. Ecovillage, on Vancouver Island, had sprung up not far from where I lived.) I visited a few communities and talked to experts

to glean lessons from these new pioneers.

Last fall, I met Charles Durrett, the guru of the North American cohousing movement, when he came north to advise two ecovillages on the mainland of British Columbia. “The most successful ecovillages,” he told me, “have cohousing as part of them.” On an earlier visit, he had asked residents to face each other in two rows, so they could calculate the ideal distance between their future homes. The car-free commons that would separate their porches had to be wide enough for privacy and yet near enough so they could gauge, at a glance, whether a neighbor needed a joke or a hug or to be left alone.

That weekend, Durrett was helping ecovillagers to plan a common house that, like a kibbutz dining hall, would provide a modern, multi-purpose hub of food and friendship and communal activity. He made living ecologically sound *fun* by insisting that residents don’t sweat the details, so they could “enjoy a homebrew on the patio together” sooner rather than later. During a break, he spotted a two-story private house across the street, looming on a huge swath of lawn, with an airport runway for its many vehicles.

“You couldn’t build a house with a bigger carbon footprint if you tried!” he marveled. (I blushed: it looked like my childhood home.) “Cooking one big pot of spaghetti is more ecological than cooking 30 pots,” continued Durrett. “Where I live, we have 34 houses and one lawnmower.” That was the simple arithmetic of sustainable sharing at the heart of his cohousing ethic.

Recently, I read a new book by American architect and community planner Ross Chapin, called *Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small-Scale Community in a Large-Scale World*. He emphasizes five architectural features that connect neighbors: a central grassy commons or courtyard; a common building, for meetings and shared meals; smaller homes that don’t dominate sightlines; low or no fences; and cars kept to the margins. These “pocket neighborhoods” (Chapin has designed several in the Pacific North-

west) can take many forms, from purpose-built ecovillages, to co-op apartments circling a courtyard, to suburban streets in which neighbors have torn down backyard fences or retrofitted rear lanes to create common gathering spaces. They all rely on what Chapin calls a “web of walkability” to get people out of cars and into casual conversations.

From such kibitzing comes cooperation and a truly sustainable sense of community. I began to think of this effect as a neighborhood’s K.Q., or “Kibitz Quotient”: the social health of any place, judged by the random conversations you have walking through it.

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I still marvel at the *chutzpah* of pioneers I’ve met, in Israel and elsewhere, who have sacrificed so much to build a better society from scratch. Whether they are octogenarian kibbutz founders or idealistic young ecovillagers, they’ve shown more vision and courage than I could ever muster.

But I realize that maybe I don’t need to sell my house, flee the city again, and live off the grid to save the planet. I belong to the 99 Percent—the vast majority who make our homes in communities more conventional than a commune, an ecovillage, or cohousing. (You can take the kid out of the suburb, I suppose, but you can’t take the suburb out of the kid—not all of it, at least.)

And yet many of us 99 Percenters aspire to live more intentionally, too. With a little inspiration, we can all create our own pocket eco-hoods by reclaiming our yards, our streets, even our suburbs—from the cars, *for* the people. We can weave new webs of walkability and rediscover the power of positive gossip to bind a community together. We can tap into the ecological benefits of simple neighborly sharing. We can broadcast our values through hyper-local newspapers and niche social networks to create new myths, rooted in a rich sense of place, so that we all can feel, whatever we’re doing—planting a garden, lending a hand, telling a joke—that we’re working toward a common good.

We might not build utopia overnight. But we can move toward a greener future, one less fence and one more story at a time. 🐦

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*David Leach is an associate professor of writing at the University of Victoria and a former fellow at the Centre for Cooperative and Community-Based Economy. He is finishing a book about his kibbutz experiences, called Look Back to Galilee: Searching for Utopia in a Divided Land.*



# New Beginnings at Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing

*By Pat Bryan*

**N**eering retirement, many of us begin thinking and talking about what we want our aging to look like. While many of my friends are drawn to coming together with existing friends to share resources and companionship, I found myself dreaming of living in a multigenerational community. I visited a few cohousing neighborhoods in Portland, Oregon—a few hours from Eugene, where I'd made my home for many years and had sunk deep roots. The city held allure, but did I want to be that far away from my Eugene friends? Then I heard about a new cohousing development starting up less than a mile from my home in Eugene: Oakleigh Meadow—and thus began my cohousing sojourn.

Chuck Durrett and Katie McCamant staged a Getting It Built workshop in Eugene not long after. Filled to the brim with facts, fears, and excitement after the first full day, I consulted the I Ching, which delivered up the image of the wise fox crossing the frozen river, cautious, ears pricked, advancing one step at a time, alert to any impending cracks in the ice. What good counsel, tempering my enthusiasm and allaying my fears at the same time! I left the workshop having agreed to head the membership team.

How does a dream become a reality? I'm finding it takes two things: doing the required work (including lots of meeting and workshops!) while nurturing the first green shoots of community. My first social with other Oakleigh Meadow dreamers took place at Pen and Jim's on Superbowl Sunday, where no one watched the game but

all had great fun counting Madonna's costume changes. Kai and Phoebe let me play Chutes and Ladders with them. That day marked the beginning of community for me. That sense of community grew when we spent a day sharing our individual visions of our cohousing community and arrived at four sentences that would become the

foundation of our community vision statement. We were becoming "we"!

Images as well as words began to shape our sense of "we." Jen, who cobbled together our first website, pulled a photograph of a sunflower off the internet to serve as a bright welcome to our homepage. We all loved it as both a contrast to the gray skies of the Oregon spring and a promise of sunny days living in community. The sunflower has become part of our logo, and we give away packets of sunflower seeds at our marketing events. Jen also posted the first blog, with a photo of an earth-constructed greenhouse that sparked our imaginations. Yes, we definitely want one of those in our neighborhood! Fantasies of neighbors from seven to 70 working together to build it represent the essence of living in community to me.

Then we hit our first bump: a workshop that went somewhat awry. The facilitator mentioned in passing a conversation she had had with our project consultant, who talked about discussing project feasibility with us at some time in the future. We were taken aback, and said so, because we felt we had already been assured that the development was feasible. Unfortunately, the facilitator chose to stick with the workshop agenda rather than allowing us to process what we perceived as a possible setback. We left the workshop with our

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**As my sense of community grew, my personal "must have" deal-breakers began to soften around the edges.**

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confidence shaken. One household emailed the community the following week, drawing back from full membership.

At our next business meeting, we spent some time debriefing the workshop. I felt apprehensive, unsettled, uncertain. Then David spoke up. David and his wife Joan had purchased the site, and they dreamed a dream of cohousing which had become our Oakleigh Meadow group. David said, “This is great. Everything we’ve read told us we’d hit difficult times, and here’s our first one. How will we respond to it, I wonder?” I could feel my shoulders and my guts relax as I looked around the room and thought, “Oh, right, it’s just us!” After five months of working, eating, and playing with them, I knew these people, knew that we made good decisions together, knew that the wisdom of the group was something I could rely on. (And “feasibility,” as it turned out, is an ongoing evaluation routinely done by project managers, nothing for us to worry about. The household with cold feet became full members along with the rest of us on April 1, when the LLC was formed.)

Most of us begin a new venture with ideas about what it must offer in order for us to participate in it: deal-breakers. Mine was wanting a ground floor, single-level unit—not for any immediate reason but “just in case.” Other members of the group wanted a development with just a few units and lots of open land, or a community without dogs or chickens. As my sense of community grew, I found my “must have” beginning to soften around the edges. It became a “maybe,” something to consider within the context of the larger community. I witnessed the same process happening for others. Those who began by envisioning six or eight households on the site realized that, for many of us, this would make the project cost prohibitive, so their original vision began to yield. Those who abhorred the idea of living in close proximity to other people’s animals listened to dog owners willing to take responsibility for their pets’ behavior, and they began to recognize possibilities they hadn’t considered before. Seeing these shifts in perspective in myself and others inspired the first glimmerings of understand-

ing how commitment to community affects orientation to one’s own preferences. They still count, but they now exist in a larger context which counts more.

At one point in our process, we spent some time articulating our values. It sometimes amazes me that what seems like a random group of folks coming together should share so many. Of course, we are not a random group of people. Cohousing and like communities attract people longing for connection and a more sustainable way of living.

Yet the bumps keep coming. Each one is unsettling, at least for me. Sometimes I find myself speaking with impatience and irritation in a meeting while others meet the turmoil with equanimity. Other times, it’s my turn to lend some calm and perspective to the group. Somehow, we seem stronger, smarter, and saner as a group than as individuals.

Most recently, the group spent an agonizingly long time choosing an architect for the project. Months of phone interviews with cohousing communities around the country that had worked with this or that architect took place. Many of us spoke with wished they had gone with a different architect than the one they had. Some members of our group felt it crucial that we work with someone who would freely collaborate with us on design. These are the artists and architect wannabes whose passions are creativity and aesthetics. Others wanted to keep costs down and focus on moving the project ahead. These are the pragmatists and the business-minded members.

Tense meetings ensued. The process team utilized a number of formats to move our collective thinking forward: a fishbowl, a list of considerations to be ranked by importance, proposal discussions, and so on. Members voiced concern that the group would split, and one member even asked for a show of hands of those who would leave if their architect were not chosen. How did we move through this? I think each of us forged a unique path, yet we took our individual journeys in company with each other, and that made all the difference.



*This photo: Vision workshop. To right: Some of us at the site design workshop, an intensive process held over four days to design the overall neighborhood: where the buildings will sit on the land and their relationship to open land and larger neighborhood.*



For example, not long ago I became quite frustrated at the seemingly endless architect-choosing process. The group seemed to be swimming in circles. I decided I could not invest further in the project unless “my” architect was chosen. I felt very justified in this, especially because I felt that several other households might also pull out. It seemed imperative to communicate this to the group somehow, but I also did not want to take responsibility for creating a split in the group. I posted a message on our online discussion board stating that I would support any decision the group made and then make a decision about my own participation in the community. I did this hoping it would further the conversation in a useful way. No one was fooled by my crafty dodge, however, and a deafening virtual silence followed. Oops!

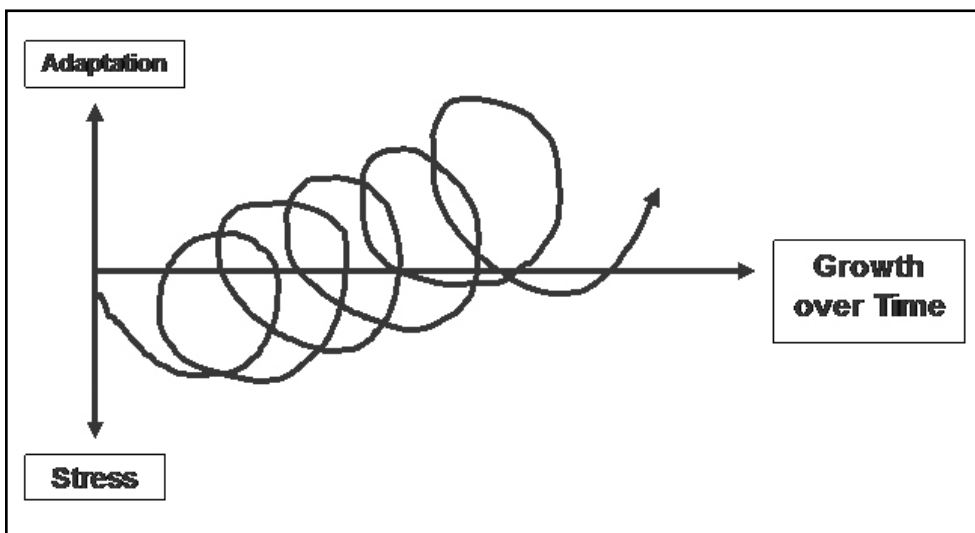
The following week at our membership team meeting, Laura very tactfully remarked to the group that some conversations should not be attempted via postings. Since I trust Laura’s judgment, I immediately recognized that I had responded to the conflict within the group in a reactive, patterned way—by seeing my well-being as separate from that of the group, by moving to protect my self-interest without considering how that move might affect people I had come to care about. The next few days were uncomfortable ones for me. Was my desire for community a fantasy? Was I willing to stick out difficult times, or was I just in this for the warm fuzzies? What did I really want my life to look like, and how hard was I willing to work to realize that vision? Surprisingly, I eventually found myself feeling MORE committed to the cohousing group than I had before, more aware that I would get out of this venture in proportion to what I was willing to invest—not in dollars and cents, but in faith and effort.

At work recently, I attended a presentation on cross-cultural adaptation (I advise international students at the University of Oregon). The speaker referred to the writing of Young Yun Kim, who developed the “draw-back-to-lean” model to describe an individual’s progress in adapting to a new culture. (See accompanying figure.)

Kim sees humans as systems that, when confronted with a new culture, go through “disequilibrium” and then incorporate feedback to bring the “system” back into balance. It occurred to me that this model could be applied to most members of a forming cohousing community. We’re coming from a culture which values independence, self-reliance, and individualism, and moving into one of valuing group benefit over personal preference and teamwork over the solitary pursuit of happiness.

Kim’s model resonates with my experience in the Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing “culture.” Bumps occur, and I feel stressed out, overwhelmed, uncertain of my ability to cope. Over time, and with healthy servings of humor, my perspective evolves and I notice a change in how I think and act. At least until the next bump.

Community: it arises out of a longing for connection and is nurtured through shared work, laughter...and sheer tenacity. In its beginnings, the venture seems quite fragile, and yet its promise keeps us moving ahead. Are we delusional or visionary? Maybe a little of both, huh? ☺



*Pat Bryan works in the field of international education. She is a longtime Oregonian and has never lived in community. Oakleigh Meadow is a cohousing neighborhood in formation on the Willamette River in Eugene, Oregon. It is an intergenerational community of independent households committed to finding purpose and a sense of belonging through working, learning, and playing together in a neighborhood designed to make a small and beautiful footprint on the land. For more information, visit [oakleighmeadow.org](http://oakleighmeadow.org).*

# Grief and Growth: Six Babies' First Year and Peter's Last

By *Fiona Patterson*

**P**eter Carlough's death in November 2011 was the first one in our Burlington, Vermont 32-unit cohousing community, and ironically came after the arrival of six babies. Before that there had been only five children under 14 in Burlington Cohousing East Village.

I first met Peter at a 2006 planning meeting while our community was being built. He seemed enthusiastic about our November 2007 move-in date and not especially sad about the idea of leaving the house he shared with his wife Clara, where the entire upstairs was no longer available to him in his wheelchair. Once we all moved in—and Peter and Clara were across the hall from us—his wings began to unfold like a butterfly as he freely moved by elevator to common dinners, to get the mail, out to be picked up for physical therapy appointments, or to volunteer with telephone follow-up of night calls at the local police station. Soon he joined our Social Committee and regularly wheeled himself over to meetings in our flat.

After getting to know Peter, I also realized that he was featured in a video of testimony at a 2004 Vermont legislative hearing about Death with Dignity that I had often shown students in my classes at the University of Vermont. With that new connection, I learned about Peter's passionate advocacy on this topic. On the tape he first objected to the word suicide with all its negative connotations, preferring instead physician assisted death or assistance in dying. Then he added "To me it's a question of right to life, my right to my life, with conversations with family and others. I don't and won't choose death over life. It's the type of death that I consider..."

In the summer of 2010 our small band of children began to grow with the announcement that a set of boy-girl twins were about to be adopted. Little Alison and Tristan arrived in late August and were soon brought to meals, meetings, and parties and happily held by various community members.

Next, new renters were announced and we were delighted to discover that one family had seven-year-old Anessa and five-year-old Moby with a third child due in December. Then another resident couple, Kate and Bart, announced their pregnancy. By Halloween, we had two expectant mothers dressed up for our party and talking eagerly about how they each planned home deliveries.

At that Halloween party, Peter shared a story with a few of us about how Moby and Anessa had approached him with fascination and a little fear about his artificial legs (he didn't always wear both of them because of soreness in one or the other of his stumps). Apparently these two children had followed Peter to his flat and gotten to witness—and timidly touch—a leg while it was being taken off. The story goes that following this learning opportunity, Moby had cautiously asked Peter "but how do you poop?" By the time of the party, though, Moby came bounding over with an enthusiastic welcome and Peter responded with his usual warmth, kindness, and wry sense of humor.

In the fall of 2010, Peter was active in many ways: writing poetry for a friend's 80th

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**Peter's surge of creative activity continued. When we saved adjacent land from development, Peter helped us celebrate with a poem about a newly transplanted tree.**

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birthday party and enjoying regular visits from his granddaughter Sarah and other family members. He also hosted monthly lunches in our common dining room for his church group. At about this time Peter first brought up at an Owners' Association meeting his opinion that we absolutely should have included automatic doors at our front entrance. Not only was this an ADA requirement but, as he reasonably pointed out, these could help parents with strollers as well as loading and unloading for one of our families who run a successful stand at the Burlington Farmer's Market. Peter and Clara were often busy pursuing their interests in local theater performances and sports events, especially the UVM women's basketball team, of whom Peter was a well known fan. He also modestly shared with some of us that he had been a soccer player in earlier years. Only much later did I learn that he had been named to the 1953 NCAA All-American Soccer Team!

In December 2010, David and Iana's third child, Sara Grace, was born at home. Next day Iana's mother shared with me in the common laundry room that it had been a new and impressive experience for her to witness! Then January 2011 brought baby Liam to Kate and Bart with another home birth. Excited neighbors carefully kept a private distance but also brought in meal support or ran errands. Soon Liam's proud paternal grandparents arrived to visit from Holland and stayed in one of our recently finished guest rooms.

Meanwhile, Peter's surge of creative activity continued. For several years our community had struggled to buy a narrow piece of land ("198"), immediately to our south, on which developers wanted to cut down all of the mature trees in order to fill the land with student housing units. Finally we managed to stop the development and buy the land. In the spring of 2011, Peter helped us celebrate with a poem about a newly transplanted tree:

#### CELEBRATE 198

To ritualize the gain of this land abutting cohousing,  
 We plant a tree, to settle our dispute and stop the grousing.  
 We think that we shall never see  
 A poem lovely as this tree,  
 Which joins in chorus  
 With our row of Sherwood Forest.

The developers of 198 planned to build housing about,  
 But we raised their asking price and bought 'em out.

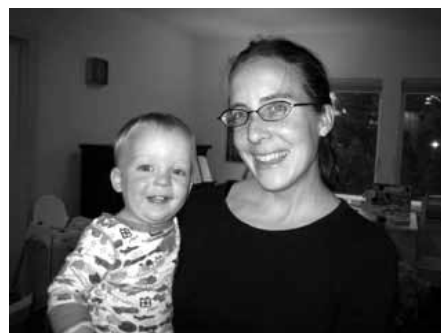
We plan the upper section as a playground for kids.  
 The center, quite wooded, with trails in the midst.  
 The lower piece all open and formed with roots  
 Of perennial foods, like nuts and fruits.

And that transforms 198  
 Into the Burlington Cohousing East Village Estate!

In July 2011, Peter had another idea: he would like to be a candidate for our Owners' Association Executive Committee because he felt well enough to serve in a leadership position—as, I later learned, he had often done earlier in his long career as an English teacher, newspaper writer, and editor. The committee, which was down by a couple of positions, was delighted to welcome him in. And a fundraising drive for the automatic doors was soon started.



Photos courtesy of Fiona Patterson



*This page from the top: Peter in his wheelchair. Iana and Kate in Halloween costumes. Rebecca and Malcolm. Sara Grace. Opposite page from the top: Kiley and the twins. Kate and Liam. Kalen with Gemma and Pippa. Jonathan and Winslow with Thomas. Moby and Anessa with Halloween friend.*



In late summer and early fall of 2011, three more sets of renters arrived in our community, Rebecca and Andy with sons Winslow (aged four, who later built with his dad log steps into the woods) and Malcolm (seven months); Kalen and Zach with daughter Gemma (aged two, with lots of curiosity and distinctive sunglasses) and eagerly expected baby Pippa born in October; and then Marc and Thomas with their four-year-old son Jonathan (energetic and a bike rider par excellence). We were delighted to welcome these families and their active young children.

In September 2011 I organized a job-related (non-cohousing) discussion group about multigenerational care giving and care receiving and, as Peter eagerly became involved, I learned even more about this special and caring man. Attendees included people from their 20s to their 80s. Peter contributed a lot, including taking on an informal role of support person with an older man who was caring for an extremely ill wife but at the same time neglecting his own needs for exercise and respite. One night Peter shared with the group some of his own helping experiences, including his long-time involvement in a support group for amputees, and earlier as both a Hospice volunteer and Planned Parenthood escort.

As Halloween approached and the Social Committee began to plan the annual party, Peter came up with a suggestion to build a large scarecrow by the front door. He had seen such figures on local roads so he wanted to make one at East Village—and of course with children helping! He and Clara had gathered some tall corn stalks and a few of us augmented them with garments and hats from our “Free Table” (where residents put out clothing, books, and all manner of other things which they want to give away rather than throw out). We launched a search for helpers and Moby and Anessa soon turned up, bringing great enthusiasm and creativity. Peter advised and watched from his wheelchair as the figure grew. Everyone who saw the ungainly creature loved it and the scarecrow stayed up for weeks.

An elaborately spooky walk-around party was also planned for that Halloween. It ended with a candlelit dance and song ceremony way out by our barn, and Peter, in spite of the difficult terrain, wheeled himself down to admire costumes and join the fun. Clara even made him a “Pete the Moose” mask to wear!

A week later, on November 5, 2011, Peter died, suddenly and peacefully. It was a Saturday afternoon, before he and Clara were to go to a basketball game. Shock and sadness gripped all of our community. This was different and somewhat compounded for community members who come from other cultures. Ming, one of our Nepali residents, stopped me in the hall the next day to ask “What should we do? In my country we would all cook lots of food and take it to the family and stay there with them to help out. But here I just don’t know...” Her confusion was understandable. All of us wanted to help but also to be appropriate and not crowd Clara and her family. Cards and notes were pinned on her door and flowers and small gifts left on the doorstep. People also brought her meals, put up pictures of Peter, and posted his obituary in the common dining room. Indeed from his obituary many of us learned even more about his rich life (only then, for example, did I become aware of Peter’s work with the early stages of the Vermont Refugee Assistance Program).

As it turned out, Clara decided to wait five weeks to have a memorial service when their family and friends could gather—and almost all cohousers attended with several speaking in remembrance at the church. We walked over with Winslow and his mother and Malcolm in his stroller. Liam and his parents, and perhaps other cohousing children, were in the crowd as well. After the service and reception, a dinner for

*(continued on p. 75)*

# When Do We Begin to Flourish in Senior Cohousing?

The answer is: Sooner than you'd think

*By Margaret Critchlow and Andrew Moore*

“Look at all these old people!” exclaimed one of our members as she joined the group walking toward a property for sale in Sooke, outside Victoria on British Columbia’s Vancouver Island. Then she reminded herself that she is one of them, a person who is young at heart in an aging body.

Everyone in this group was stepping out of denial about getting older. We had bonded through 10-week study groups on “Active Aging in Community.” We looked forward to finding a site on which to build our own senior cohousing. Perhaps the site we were walking toward along the road that day would be it? Committed to

improving on the alternatives available to our own parents and to leaving the world a better place, we have chosen to start a cohousing group that will allow us to flourish for the rest of our lives and to model an alternative way of living as our legacy.

What we discovered on the road and at the other sites we visited that day is that our new community has already begun. Far more than a place to live, it is a way of living. And we have a lot of living and learning to do!

Long before we have a common house or a place to call our own we are already building the skills to work effectively together. We are sharing the experiences



Photos courtesy of Margaret Critchlow



that show us how much we enjoy each other's company, most of the time, and we're learning how to work through our difficulties when we don't see eye to eye.

As we imagined our houses overlooking this stream, or peeked into that kitchen, wondering if it could be adapted for a common house, our hopes and dreams became the community we shared. Suddenly we were no longer just talking about senior cohousing; we had started living it.

We are working hard at building communication and rapport with each other, which is an important prerequisite if we are going to live in proximity and collectively look after the communal property (something that is crucially needed when you examine the failure of the condominium model). But we will be looking after more than property. Communication and rapport become essential if we shall be looking after each other—sometimes in quite intimate ways—as we age.

Senior cohousing includes the principal of “co-caring,” or neighbourly mutual support. Building on Charles Durrett's foundational work in *The Senior Cohousing*

*Handbook* (2009), we are developing a model of co-caring for neighbors, not just those in cohousing, so as to foster community.

Co-caring, which can include physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual caring, aims to enable ourselves and others to flourish through mutual support and live in an optimal range of human functioning for the rest of our lives. It is likely that conventional health systems will be considerably strained as the proportion of seniors in the population grows with the aging of us Baby Boomers. With social structures changing rapidly, traditional ways of looking after elderly family members are becoming less viable options to provide for the care that is already needed and will become increasingly required.

On the one hand we are all taking this journey into senior cohousing very seriously, investing time and money in study groups and workshops with Ronaye Matthew (Cohousing Development Consulting) and others so we can all be aware of and meet the challenges that might be ahead of us. On the other hand we often replace seriousness with fun; collective potlucks, visiting sites together, making new friends from amongst the members of the cohousing group.

We are already encouraging each other to flourish in our 50s, 60s, and 70s, when many might have been starting to live our lives in isolation for want of any better choices. As one group member put it, “I have not met and enjoyed the company of so many new people since my adolescent years. I look forward to working and living closely with this group of mature adults in cohousing and co-caring—probably until the end of my days!”

By the end of our site tour, we “old people” were like kids in summer camp fording a stream and befriending cows. Walking back up a hill to leave the final site, one panting city dweller said to her new senior cohousing friend, “When I live in cohousing you all will get me more fit. Oh wait, you already are!” 🐾

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*Margaret Critchlow is an anthropologist and retired professor who is convinced it takes a village to raise an elder. Andrew Moore is an architect and community developer in charge of special projects for the T'Sou-ke First Nation. His experience as a manager of rock bands may be his most useful preparation for senior cohousing. They, and other members of our community, can be reached through [seniorcohousing@gmail.com](mailto:seniorcohousing@gmail.com).*



# Thinking Flexibly About Consensus

By Tim Hartnett, Ph.D.

I am very pleased to see Diana Leafe Christian's articles open up a new dialogue about the use of consensus in intentional communities. It takes courage to be willing to question the assumptions and doctrines we communitarians have lived by for many years. But this willingness to reflect and reconsider is essential if we seek to offer our communities as viable alternatives in an ever-changing world.

Since my book, *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making*, is often referenced in Diana's articles, I feel called to join the discussion. I'd like to highlight two key points that I have found helpful in freeing our thinking about consensus and how to make it work in different types of groups.

The first key concept is an understanding of the difference between a decision-making process (like formal consensus, CODM, or Robert's Rules of Order) and the decision rule applied at the end of the process (like unanimity, majority rule, or supermajority). Unfortunately, the term "consensus" is used for both the process and the decision rule. This muddies our ability to think clearly about the difference. By using the term "consensus" to denote a collaborative, agreement-seeking process, and "unanimity" or "full consent" to denote the decision rule that requires full agreement to pass a proposal, we gain clarity and the capacity to consider these two components independently.

This distinction paves the way to see that a consensus process can be used with different types of decision rules. This means that you can have a very collaborative, cooperative, agreement-building discussion even if you do not require unanimity. This distinction also clarifies that just because a group requires unanimity does not mean that they are using a consensus process.

The opposite of a consensus process is not majority rule (as is commonly claimed). Such a claim compares an apple (process) to an orange (decision rule). The true opposite of a consensus process is adversarial debate. The way that a group discusses its decisions is what determines whether it is using a consensus or an adversarial process.

Most of us communitarians are clear that we prefer a consensus process to adversarial debate (as in Robert's Rules of Order). We value consensus process because it embodies the values of inclusiveness, cooperation, collaboration, maximizing agreement, relationship building, and respect for all viewpoints. These are the outcomes we hope using consensus will provide us.

Decision rules, on the other hand, delineate the level of agreement needed to pass a proposal. But no decision rule insures that people will actually agree. When full

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**You can have a very collaborative, cooperative, agreement-building discussion even if you do not require unanimity.**

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agreement is not reached, some groups default to “status quo rules.” Other groups default to “majority rule” or “supermajority rules.” In either case, a decision that not everyone agrees with is made. (To not pass a proposal is as much a decision as passing one is.)

Some groups can require unanimity and use a consensus process to successfully achieve it. This is more likely in groups that are small, homogenous, mature, and well trained. When successful, a unanimous decision generally embodies the goals and values we associate with consensus.

Unfortunately, when groups require unanimity, but cannot reach it, the goals and values of consensus are not well met. In fact, the widespread disagreement that prevails when a proposal is blocked by a small number of people can be very toxic to group morale and effective group functioning.

This problem is more likely as group size increases, as groups become more diverse, and as the maturity level of participants varies. A group of six to 10 dedicated and mature community mates may be able to require unanimity without difficulties. But a diverse, 60 member cohousing community would likely self-destruct if it were unable to make decisions unless everyone agreed.

The good news is that groups too large, or too diverse, or groups who are otherwise unable to successfully reach unanimity, can still use a consensus process paired with a more flexible decision rule. In so doing they retain the values and goals associated with consensus, but shed the agonizing problems that occur when you simply can't get everyone to agree. The Occupy Movement seems to understand this clearly. Occupy groups typically use a consensus-type process to deliberate issues, but generally require only a supermajority to pass proposals.

The second key point I'd like to make is that the consensus process model that intentional communities have been using for the last 40 years needs a major update. While the fields of conflict resolution, mediation, group facilitation, and Nonviolent Communication have all made huge advances in the past couple of decades, many consensus trainers still champion a 30-year-old text, *Building United Judgment*, or a similarly outdated manual, *On Conflict and Consensus*. It is beyond the scope of this article to articulate how the models described in these books fail to insure high levels of collaboration and agreement. Suffice it to say that using these texts is like designing your new photovoltaic system from a book written 30 years ago.

With an open mind, we can avail ourselves of new principles and methods in conflict resolution and collaborative dialogue. But first we must be willing to question our own dogma. To many professional facilitators, the “formal consensus” model intentional communities have championed as a harbinger of a new society is actually considered an anachronism. Too often communitarians struggle with formal consensus and blame themselves (or each other) without ever questioning the model they are using. There are better ways. But to see them you have to be willing to think flexibly. ☺

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**The widespread disagreement that prevails when a proposal is blocked can be very toxic to group morale.**

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*Tim Hartnett, Ph.D., is author of Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making (New Society Publisher, 2011); see [www.timhartnett.com](http://www.timhartnett.com) and [www.consensusbook.com](http://www.consensusbook.com). Tim lives in a community outside of Santa Cruz, California. He works as a mediator, facilitation trainer, and family therapist.*

# How the “N Street Consensus Method” Helps N Street Cohousing Thrive

By Diana Leafé Christian

In recent issues of this magazine I’ve criticized what I call “consensus-with-unanimity.” The “consensus” part is the *process*—the intention to hear from everyone in the circle, asking clarifying questions, expressing concerns, and modifying and improving the proposal.

The “unanimity” 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. (This distinction was first pointed out by Sam Kaner, et. al. in *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, for example, having criteria for a legitimate block, or requiring anyone blocking to collaborate with others to co-create a new proposal. In my experience, consensus-with-unanimity is what most communitarians mean when they say “consensus.”

As I described in “Busting the Myth that Consensus-With-Unanimity is Good for Community,” Parts I and II (*issues #155 and #156*), I don’t think consensus-with-unanimity works well for most intentional communities. In fact, as noted in the articles, I think using it can cause harm. When one or more people block proposals a lot, a community can suffer from frustration, discouragement, dwindling meeting attendance, and low morale.

However, consensus-with-unanimity is only *one* possible way to decide things after the consensus process. N Street Cohousing in Davis, California, has been successfully using a different consensus method for almost 25 years.

## How N Street Cohousing Uses Consensus

N Street Cohousing has a simple, straightforward way of using consensus. Here’s what they do.

When the facilitator calls for consensus on a proposal and no one blocks, the proposal passes.

**Up to Six Meetings:** If one or more people block a proposal, however, the person(s) blocking are obligated to meet with small groups of other members in a series of solution-oriented, consensus-building meetings. Their job is to think through the issues and mutually agree on a new proposal that addresses the same problem as the blocked proposal. They present the new proposal at the next business meeting.

The small groups are required to meet up to six times and in no more than three months after the proposal was blocked. They’re not *required* to take six meetings or three months! In fact, in 25 years it’s never taken them more than two meetings to do this step.

The people who supported the proposal can send representatives to these meetings, but they don’t have to attend all of the meetings.

The person(s) blocking are responsible for organizing the meetings, and the meetings must take place.

**A New Proposal:** If a new, mutually agreed-upon proposal is created in one of the

meetings, it goes back to the whole group and is taken up as a new proposal.

**Seventy-Five Percent Supermajority Agreement:** If the person(s) blocking and the other members cannot come up with a mutually agreed-on new proposal during the series of meetings—or if the meetings don’t take place for some reason—the original proposal goes back to the next Council to be reconsidered. But at this meeting, it can be passed by a 75 percent supermajority agreement of the members present.

(If more than just a few people block a proposal, depending on the size of the group, of course the proposal doesn’t pass because it clearly doesn’t have enough support, and the group does not invoke this process.)

## Why the N Street Consensus Method Works Well

This consensus method makes anyone who wants to block take more responsibility for the effect of their block on the group. “If you’ve blocked,” says Kevin Wolf, cofounder of N Street Cohousing and originator of this method, “you’ve got to be part of the solution. Anyone who wants to block has to ask themselves, ‘Do I oppose this proposal enough to go through all this?’”

**Satisfaction.** When I visited N Street Cohousing several years ago, I asked various community members how they liked their decision-making method. “We like it,” I heard over and over. “Our meetings run smoothly.” An unusual aspect of N Street Cohousing is that 75 percent of their members are renters (60 percent of the homes are rentals), and having both renters and owners in the community decision-making process sometimes triggers conflict. But not in this community.

**Deterrence.** While this method could seem like a lot of work and bureaucracy, N Street members believe it's effective not only because it works well but also because it exists. It's a deterrent to the kind of frivolous, personal blocking one can see in many intentional communities.

"Someone blocked a proposal in one of our meetings recently," N Street member Pamela Walker told me when I saw her there. "We'd forgotten to tell this person how we work with blocks here. So when we told them, they said, 'Well, if I'd known I had to do all this I wouldn't have blocked!'" (Pamela told me the person then rescinded their block.)

In the nearly 25 years since N Street was founded, Kevin Wolf estimates there have probably been about 12 blocked issues total. Of these, only two or three have invoked this process. Each time the blocking people and proposal advocates reached only a second small-group meeting before they mutually crafted a new proposal. Thus they've held only about six small-group meetings in nearly 25 years to deal with blocks!

(The other 10 blocked proposals were resolved informally outside the meetings, by coming up with let's-try-it new solutions that worked, or often because assumptions just needed more time to be clarified.)

**Respect for Community Members.** This method is effective, in my opinion, because it respects both the person blocking and those who support the proposal.

- It respects the person(s) blocking because it offers up to three months of informal opportunities—and up to six formal opportunities—to share his or her views with others in a more intimate setting, mutually create a new proposal, or persuade at least 26 percent of the people that the proposal should not be passed.

- It respects the people supporting the proposal because, if the small groups cannot build enough consensus to reach agreement, the later 75 percent supermajority agreement will ensure that the most number of people will get the most of what they most want. "Tyranny of the minority" isn't possible.

**Balancing Power with Responsibility.** Community-based consensus trainer Tree Bressen highly values inclusivity in community and is passionate about consensus. She considers N Street's Consensus Method to be inclusive and fair to everyone. "It seems like consensus to me," she says. "And I like how it balances power with responsibility."

## Alternatives to Consensus-with-Unanimity

Over the last year I've studied Sociocracy, a governance and decision-making method developed in The Netherlands in the 1970s and used by an increasing number of intentional communities instead of consensus. I've also studied Holacracy, a governance and decision-making method developed in the US in the early 2000s, and with which at least one community, ZEGG in Germany, replaced their consensus method. I believe these methods result in more effective, productive, and satisfying community business meetings and committee meetings than when

a group uses consensus-with-unanimity.

And I believe the N Street Consensus Method works very well too, and is easier for a group using consensus-with-unanimity to implement, because they don't need to learn anything new. What do you think? Want to try it? ☺

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*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](http://EcovillageNews.org)), and a columnist for *Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)* ([gen.ecovillage.org](http://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](http://www.DianaLeaféChristian.org).*

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**The method is a deterrent to the kind of frivolous, personal blocking one can see in many intentional communities.**

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*Future articles in the series will describe 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 they work especially well in intentional communities), as well as politically incorrect tips for adopting a method that may work better than consensus-with-unanimity, even if your older members are devoted to it.*

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## Resources

- Tree Bressen: [www.treegroup.info](http://www.treegroup.info)
- *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](http://www.sociocracy.info)
- SocioNet online discussion: [www.socionet.us](http://www.socionet.us)
- Governance Alive, author and consultant John Buck: [www.governancealive.com](http://www.governancealive.com)
- *Holacracy One*: [www.holacracy.org](http://www.holacracy.org)



# REACH

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You may use the form on the last page of Reach to place an ad. THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #158/Spring 2013 (out in March) is January 22nd, 2013.

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**SANTA ROSA CREEK COMMONS**, Santa Rosa, California. We are an intergenerational, limited equity, housing cooperative 60 miles north of San Francisco. Although centrally located near public transportation, we are in a secluded wooded area beside a creek on two acres of land. We share ownership of the entire property and pay monthly charges that cover the usual expenses of home ownership. We have kept our costs reasonable by sharing all of the responsibilities of our cooperative and much of its labor. All mem-

bers serve on the Board of Directors and two committees oversee the welfare of the community. We enjoy a rich social life and a mutual concern for the natural environment. Contact: Membership 707-575-8946.

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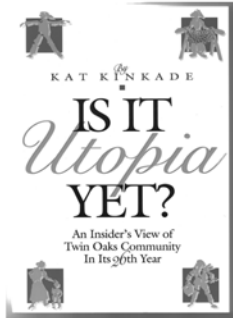
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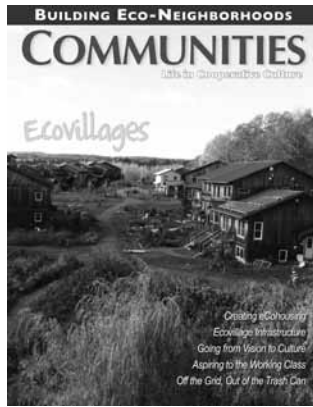


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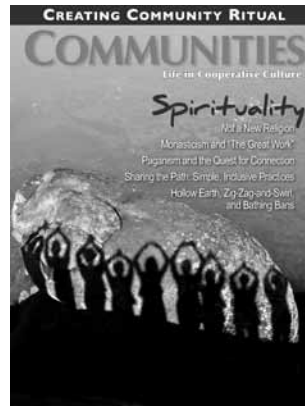
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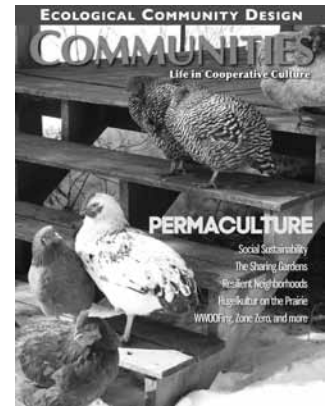
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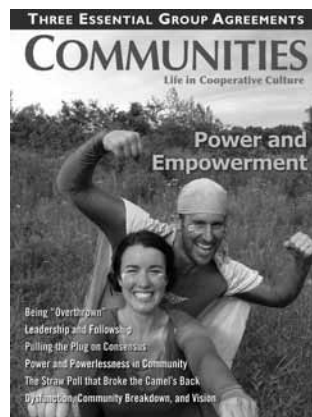
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#157



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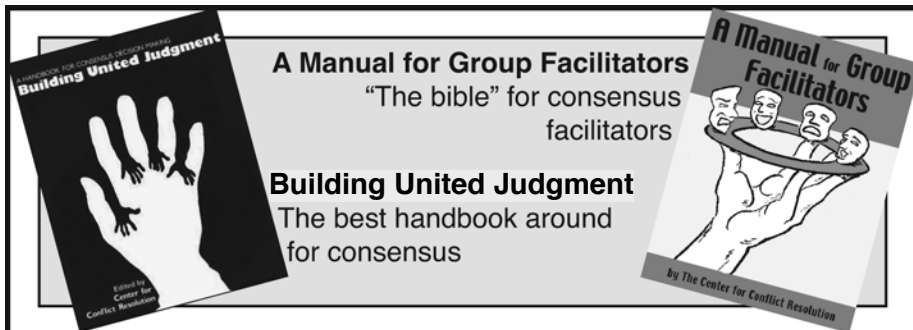


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## THE BOOKENDS OF COMMUNITY

(continued from p. 35)

Events that happen only once deserve a bigger celebration.

Compare different forms of recognition. A logbook is a great method for things that involve a bunch of people over time: marking the beginning and end of visits, miles clocked on a jogging trail, fruits or vegetables currently in season. These help us mark the passing of time as well as specific accomplishments or opportunities. Public acclaim, such as an announcement with applause, is a good component for service done or goals met. This is especially apt if what the person did benefits the community. Awards, plaques, ribbons, etc. are well known as end markers; but there are also “participant” badges or tokens given at the start of projects, which help foster a collective identity and investment in the process. For ongoing projects, you may want a progress meter with clear start and end points. A communal feast, game, or other festive activity gives a sense of release and reward, encouraging people to relax after their hard work.

Think about how many people you want to involve. Very personal, private matters should be handled in a low-key way with no more than a few people. Personal but public things draw in a substantial number of friends and family members. Topics of interest to a subset of your community will attract their core participants, but if you make them open to other community members, then you may get new participants to join. Topics that affect the whole community should be designed with everyone in mind, aimed for a time and place where as many people as possible can attend.

A ceremony can be simple or complex, spiritual or secular. Draw on your community's theme and traditions for inspiration in this regard. The more you can weave those into your events, the more you manifest your ideals. You may also find inspiration in the “Spirituality” issue of COMMUNITIES magazine (#154).

Pay attention to these things and try out different ways of acknowledging the beginnings and endings in your community. Discuss what seems to work for you and what doesn't. The traditions unique from your community will evolve naturally as you repeat the most effective ones, leaving you with a stable set of bookends supporting your life together. ☺

*Elizabeth Barrette writes and edits nonfiction, fiction, and poetry in diverse fields including speculative fiction, alternative spirituality, and community. She ran the Pagan magazine PanGaia for 8 years and writes regularly for the Llewellyn annuals. Visit her blog The Wordsmith's Forge ([ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com](http://ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com)) and coven website Greenhaven: A Pagan Tradition ([greenhaventradiation.weebly.com/index.html](http://greenhaventradiation.weebly.com/index.html)).*

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## GRIEF AND GROWTH: SIX BABIES' FIRST YEAR AND PETER'S LAST

(continued from p. 59)

Clara's family and friends was held in our common dining room, with various cohousers preparing and serving the food and, in some cases, providing accommodations afterwards for those from out of town.

Since he left us, Peter has often been in our conversations in the common areas and remembered in community meetings. Our automatic front doors were finally paid for and installed in spring of 2012—too late for Peter but in good time for strollers and farmer's market produce, and always opening and closing in his memory. Meanwhile all the babies grew and moved fast towards their first birthdays. The twins not surprisingly began crawling in different directions. Sarah was the first to stand up and walk, while Malcolm discovered the main building staircases and eagerly grabbed the hands of anyone willing to help him climb down or up. Liam was walking and active too, playing with his dog Matja or "helping" to load or unload an open dishwasher. Little Pippa, the youngest of the six, began to crawl. It was a spring of activity, exploration, and new joy!

And Peter's spirit seems always to be with us as we appreciate the young, the latest garden growth, new ideas to strengthen our community, and when we honor our founders and first paths led by important people like him. ☹️

*Fiona Patterson writes: "I have lived—with much joy—in Burlington Cohousing East Village in Burlington, Vermont since building was completed in November 2007. I have worked for many years as a social worker and now teach about it at the University of Vermont. I am particularly passionate about multigenerational and multicultural living and relationships."*

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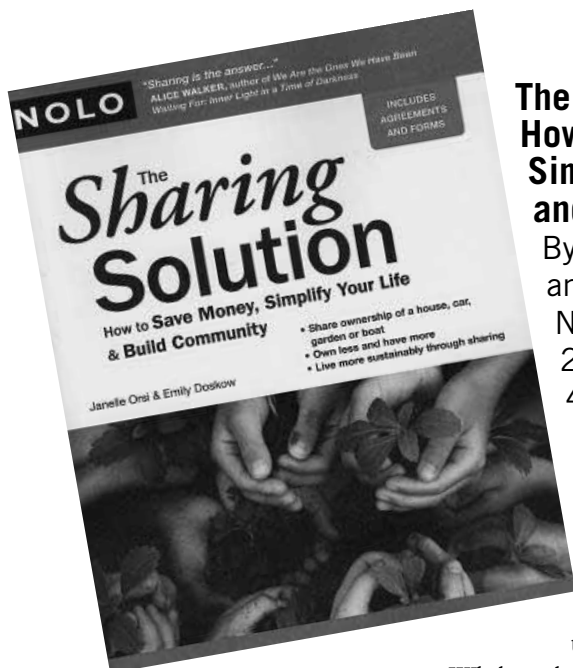


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## The Sharing Solution: How to Save Money, Simplify Your Life, and Build Community

By Janelle Orsi and Emily Duskow  
Nolo, Berkeley, California, 2009; Paperback, 496 pages

Nolo is well known for publishing “do it yourself” books and software to help people write their own wills, set up nonprofit corporations, apply for patents, and much

more. While a book on how to share (*The Sharing*

*Solution: How to Save Money, Simplify Your Life, and Build Community*) might seem, at first glance, to be a bit afield from Nolo’s typical genre, *The Sharing Solution* is, still, about autonomy. The focus is on how you yourself can create the life you want by using your creative energy to meet your needs in satisfying ways rather than waiting for someone else or the government to do it for you. And, in the Nolo fashion, the book includes lots of forms and sample agreements to avoid the need for hiring expensive professionals to create them for you.

*The Sharing Solution* is broken into two main sections. The first section, entitled “Sharing Basics,” offers tips for identifying your sharing goals, finding sharing partners, deciding how to form a sharing arrangement, making decisions, managing conflict, and preparing a written sharing agreement. The second section, “Sharing Solutions,” includes practical step-by-step advice on how to share aspects of your life, including housing, meals, childcare, transportation, jobs, and more. Each “sharing solution” chapter is rounded out with a bulleted list of social, personal, environmental, and financial benefits of sharing, allowing readers to contemplate the ways in which sharing may enrich their lives, strengthen communities and society, and help the planet.

The book includes two appendices, the first of which is a list of sources where readers can go for more detailed information on the topics raised in the book. The second appendix includes blank forms that readers might find helpful in the process of identifying their sharing goals and developing their sharing arrangements.

It is unlikely that anyone would read this book cover to cover. Rather, it works well as a reference book, where a reader skims the topic headings to find his/her interest area—whether that be creating a babysitting co-op, sharing a car, buying a house in common, sharing meals, or sharing a job—and explores the benefits, pitfalls, real-life examples, and sample agreements related to this topic. People with different levels of commitment to sharing will likely find a solution that appeals to them, with ideas ranging from the relatively simple—sharing season tickets or starting a carpool—to the more complex: sharing a home or sharing a job.

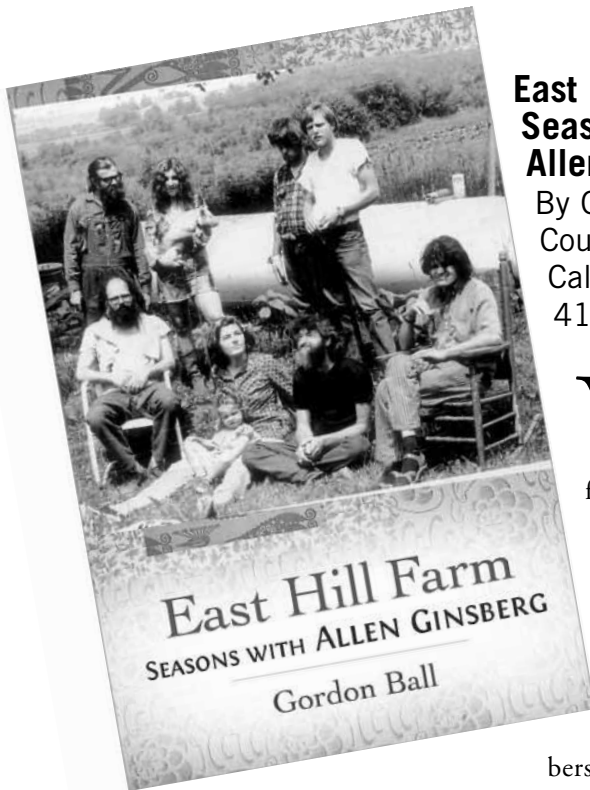
In addition to enumerating the many benefits of sharing, the authors do a

nice job of helping the reader anticipate pitfalls and problems that are, if not inevitable, at least common when people share goods, services, housing, and the like. For example, the authors address issues such as what to do when a sharing partner moves or dies, how to distribute risk, how to divide property when a group dissolves, how to handle unexpected costs, how to address the tax implications of bartering, how to handle conflict, and much more. While these problems may feel daunting to novice sharers, the authors address them in a matter-of-fact way and provide practical solutions for preventing and rectifying problems. They show that thoughtfully planning a sharing agreement is likely to result in greater benefits and more satisfying relationships than haphazardly jumping into an arrangement without thinking through the implications.

People who already live in intentional communities and have many years of experience in sharing many aspects of their lives may not find much new in this book that would be useful to them. *The Sharing Solution* is geared more to people who are newer to sharing and would benefit from some inspiration about what is possible and some guidance in getting started. This practical, step-by-step guide is a helpful reference for anyone wanting to save money, reduce use of resources, create meaningful social connections, build community, and help the environment. And, in the good Nolo tradition, the book stresses that individuals are, with a little guidance, capable of creating a solution that will work for them. 🐦

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**East Hill Farm:  
Seasons with  
Allen Ginsberg**

By Gordon Ball  
Counterpoint, Berkeley,  
California, 2011; Hardcover,  
416 pages

What do you do after being put into jail and deported from Mexico for marijuana possession? If you are Gordon Ball in 1969, you go to New York City and then, along with your girlfriend, Candy, move to a group farm in upstate New York with Allen Ginsberg, who's invited you to caretake it.

One of the founding members of the Beat Generation writers and most famous for his poem "Howl," Ginsberg was also central to the '60s counterculture, a benefactor to many troubled artists of his age, and a mentor to younger artists such as Ball, a writer, poet, filmmaker, and teacher. The book brings us face to face both with Ginsberg and with some of the era's other leading writers, poets, and counterculture figures.

Of particular relevance to those interested in intentional communities, the book also chronicles the founding of the farm and the community needed to develop and maintain it. The idea for Ginsberg's farm germinated from an experience Ginsberg had (while on acid) that prompted an interest in ecology. As treasurer of the Committee on Poetry, Inc., Ginsberg funded what he hoped was "a haven for comrades in distress." With Ginsberg's blessing, filmmaker and friend Barbara Rubin went to upstate New York and located real estate which became Ginsberg's East Hill Farm.

Ball's memoir covers the four years, '68 to '71, after his deportation from Mexico and through his seasons as the farm manager. The place was really an intentional community before the term was popularized.

Ginsberg was the leader and founder of the community, with a number other artists living there and working—or not working, in some cases. In the beginning, Rubin was one of the main driving forces behind the farm. She helped establish the farm along with Ball, girlfriend Candy, Ginsberg's companion Peter Orlovsky, and Orlovsky's troubled brother Julius.

At the heart of the book is the development of the culture, society, and relationships that evolved from living on the farm. Here is where the book becomes a great commentary on living in an intentional community. Ball offers an intimate portrait of the growth of his relationships with Ginsberg, Candy, Rubin, the Orlovsky Brothers, and other shorter-term residents on the farm. Learning how to develop the soil,

and animals was a challenge made more complicated by household imbroglios such as the difficult relationships with the Orlovsky brothers. Julius had a mental condition that made him challenging to communicate or work with, and Peter's drug addiction could make him just as challenging—if not more so.

Romantic relationships and the drug addictions of other temporary residents add more spice to the pot. Yet a consistent sense of growth and bonding develops through the course of the story. With the help of their hermit neighbor Ed Urich, Ball, Ginsberg, the Orlovskys, and the other inhabitants of the farm enhance their capabilities in organic gardening, preserving food, plumbing, understanding the land, caring for the animals, and respecting each other.

As a writer, Ball is able to get across events in a way that gives the reader a good sense of what it was like to be there. And like any good filmmaker, he is able to frame the events in a way that gives the reader a sense of the times. Ball has enough distance and wisdom of years to give his own perspective without shying away from displaying his own weaknesses and youthful naïveté. In this way, the reader is allowed to grow with Ball as the story progresses. In many ways, East Hill Farm serves as a model of how *not* to set up an intentional community, with the drug abuse, unclear rules framework, inconsistent governing structure, and uneven distribution of work. Under the surface, however, it also manifests the love, joys, and satisfaction that an intentional community can provide. 🐦

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*Michael Brickler is an actor and media services manager. He is the founder of newly forming Donald's View intentional community in southwest Virginia.*

## WITHIN REACH DVD REVIEW

(continued from p. 80)

farm communities, groups focused on education and self-education, service-oriented communities, and a green town.

While we see relatively short clips of dozens of different communities, certain groups get significant segments of at least several minutes each; these include Earthaven, The Farm, Cobb Hill, Ecovillage at Ithaca, The Possibility Alliance, Dancing Rabbit, Joyful Path, Hummingbird, and the “green town” of Greensburg, Kansas.

The film also catalogs a broad range of sustainable-community-related practices and technologies (often highlighted with on-screen text), including consensus process, solar cookers, suburban farm animals, community kitchens, skillshare workshops, gardening and permaculture, natural building, community potlucks, eating local diets, “unschooling,” homemade entertainment, neighborly collaboration, and eco-retrofitting.

Our view alternates between the small picture—one couple’s trip around the country—and the big picture—national and global social and environmental trends that make a change of direction toward “sustainable community” paramount for our survival. Richard Heinberg, Bill McKibben, Rob Hopkins, Aron Heinz, and others offer valuable insights, interlaced throughout the film, on everything from the end of cheap fossil fuel, the urgency of addressing climate change, and the increasing dissatisfaction and social isolation in America over the last 50 years, to the importance of localization, of deep listening, and of self-examination. Just as valuable are the reflections of community members on what life in community is like for them. While they tout its many benefits, they also discuss some of the challenges: decision-making can be an ordeal, and compromising can be difficult. As one Cobb Hill resident observes, our culture doesn’t teach most of us how to live in community, so we have a steep learning curve when we decide to.

Fortunately, community can also be an ideal place to safely engage in the emotional and inner work that helps us become better community members. That work is necessary to create the “social sustainability” that, many in this film observe, is the backbone of ecological sustainability. “The way we treat the planet is really connected to how we treat [each other and] ourselves,” says one student visiting Ecovillage at Ithaca.

Yet the magic of community is felt most directly not through words, but through the many scenes in which community members are fully engaged in creating “sustainable culture” themselves—through sharing music, food, play, practical projects, helping one another live not only more ecologically but more joyfully. The spirit of community is palpable, leaving viewers with the (correct) impression that there is a whole world of cultural and ecological-living innovation awaiting them, if they move beyond the constraints of mainstream America.

An engaging soundtrack—comprised of homespun music reinforcing the grassroots perspective of the film, alternating with interviews, the bikers’ reflections, and community scenes—helps the movie stay stimulating and dynamic. The videography, surprisingly professional given the sometimes challenging traveling and shooting conditions, conveys the experience of the journey well. Titles and captions are also used to excellent effect.

My favorite single segment depicts the Superhero Alliance in La Plata, Missouri—probably the most radical experiment included here, a service-oriented group operating on the gift economy and dedicated to simple living not dependent on modern technology. In this section, the power of engaging in “emotional inner work” is per-

haps most clearly described: speaking in candlelight in this electricity-free community, with flashes of lightning visible through the windows behind her, Keren Ram describes how healing it is for people to “see my dark areas and still love me” in an environment that is so supportive and embracing of each person’s humanness. She also conveys clearly the power of shared dedication to being present and spiritually centered, of which the “bell of mindfulness” is a common reminder at the Superhero Alliance Sanctuary.

(I must admit that my personal acquaintance and several longstanding friendships

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**The magic of community is felt most directly through the many scenes in which community members are creating “sustainable culture” themselves.**

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with those we meet in this segment help make it my favorite. In fact, the movie is full of people I know and/or have at least met, part of the extended community network of friends and colleagues that helps this feel like a “movement” rather than just a set of isolated cultural aberrations.)

Every in-depth segment has its memorable moments and revelations, from the interviews with the children participating in Ecovillage at Ithaca’s Primitive Pursuits program (best line, from an extremely imaginative child: “It’s not imagination!”) to the reflections from ex-suburbanites learning rural skills at Cobb Hill and from ecovillagers learning how to create homes for themselves at Dancing Rabbit.

For someone already familiar with much of the intentional community landscape—and perhaps for any viewer—the most inspiring, hopeful segment may be the depiction of Greensburg, Kansas. Following a 2007 tornado that destroyed 95 percent of the town, townspeople banded



together to rebuild using green principles, doing community planning as a group. They decided not to re-erect their backyard fences, but instead to encourage neighborly interaction wherever they could, while adhering to an ecological approach that, rather than being dogmatic, meets each person “where they are” and helps them move organically toward more sustainable practices.

Greensburg’s mayor, Bob Dixon, is one of the most eloquent voices for community in this film. Describing the social isolation that has overtaken our society in recent decades, he says it’s time to change from being “back porch, back patio people,” walled off from one another, into once again being “front porch people,” who get to know our neighbors and thus are able to deal much better with the issues we’ll inevitably face together. Perhaps because they’ve learned the lessons of the tornado, the town’s residents all seem up to the challenge of working together. The fact that such a radical movement toward sustainability and community can happen in a “regular” middle American town inspires real hope that it can happen anywhere.

Each town, city, or rural area may need to confront its own form of “disaster” in order to make such a transition. Since current trends suggest that we will have no shortage of those in coming years and decades, the best we can hope for is that we start making these changes before the full force of disaster strikes. In an age of resource depletion and climate change, such an approach can mitigate both local and global suffering.

At one hour and 38 minutes, this film cannot be exhaustive in addressing the issues it raises, or in depicting all dimensions of the intentional community world. One fundamental question that it does not answer is: are any of these “sustainable communities” truly sustainable? They are all clearly moving in the direction of, or working towards, a way of being that is regenerative rather than self-destructive—but in the modern world, true “sustainability” is hard to ascertain and may be impossible to achieve without larger-scale, more fundamental changes. Even Mandy and Ryan’s human-powered trip around the country was fueled by many “unsustainable” elements. The idea that simply by moving to (or creating) a place calling itself a “sustainable community” we’ve achieved sustainability strikes me as an illusion. Instead, all any of us can do is take steps toward what that kind of world could be; it seems unlikely that any of us will arrive there in this lifetime.

The movie does a good job of depicting both the joys and challenges of Mandy and Ryan’s bike journey, including mechanical, breakdowns, injuries, difficult weather, dwindling finances, hostile authorities, and personal and relationship challenges (at one point, we learn, Ryan has smashed his computer and quit the project in frustration—he later apologizes, relents, and rejoins Mandy). But it doesn’t maintain the same balance in its depiction of the communities the couple visits.

True, as already mentioned, multiple interviewees talk about some of the difficulties they’ve experienced; especially in the areas of collective decision-making and compromising our personal desires, they remind us that our culture hasn’t taught us how to live in community. But we viewers don’t see these difficulties first-hand. We don’t experience any of the pain and disappointment, the frustrations and breakdowns of various sorts, that happen in community just as they happen on bike trips. In effect, with each community, we—like the short-term visitors we’re accompanying—are in a “honeymoon phase.” We get to see how appealing each place can be; we don’t get to feel how challenging it can be. And ironically, when interviewees talk about the challenges, their honesty makes their communities seem even more appealing.

The most common criticism of this film is likely to be that, while it opens viewers’ eyes (including mainstream viewers’ eyes) to many new horizons related to sustainability and community, it does so through rose-colored biking glasses.

However, one movie cannot be all things to all people. This one is a surprisingly in-depth introduction to the wide-ranging world of forward-looking community-building. It demonstrates that it is possible to leave a mainstream lifestyle and enter into a world that most people only dream about. It also shows that one can make changes in one’s own life and community to move much closer to a future that is healthy and friendly to both people and the planet. The film doesn’t hit us—at least not viscerally—with the potentially discouraging news that life in community can be just as challenging as life outside of it, fraught with potential pitfalls. However, if we are making conscious choices, these pitfalls occur in the context of a reality we feel more aligned with, and that has more staying power than the lives we’ve left behind.

The movie concludes with Mandy and Ryan’s arrival at Hummingbird, the community they have chosen as their new home—“but,” an on-screen caption tells us, “their journey toward a sustainable life never ends.” In the years since their bike trip ended, they have in fact moved on from Hummingbird. Mandy now lives at Dancing Rabbit, and Ryan, having tried Dancing Rabbit as well, now lives outside of intentional community, in Hawaii. In other words, for each of them (as for anyone who commits to an extended exploration of community), the “honeymoon phase” has passed.

Yet the lessons of their film remain just as valuable, and the journey they share is a compelling one. This documentary deserves to be seen not only by those in the “sustainable community” movement, but by a much larger mainstream audience as well. It has the capacity to change lives—and, whether creating ripples or waves, it can make a real contribution to the more regenerative, community-based future that, we hope, is still “within reach.” 🐣

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*Chris Roth (editor@ic.org) edits Communities.*

# Cycling toward Sustainable Community



## Within Reach

By Mandy Creighton, Ryan Mlynarczyk, and friends  
 Into the Fire/Reach Within/Doctrine Productions, 2012, 1:38 run time  
 DVD available from [withinreachmovie.com](http://withinreachmovie.com)

Nearly five years in the making, *Within Reach* is a major new documentary about the promise of intentional community and cooperative living. Its creators suggest that the dream of “sustainable community” is within reach of all of us, and, through their personal story, offer many possible paths to that hopeful future.

Mandy and Ryan left their mainstream jobs and lifestyles to cycle 6,500 miles across the United States over a period of two years, visiting 100 communities of many different flavors and talking to people everywhere they went about ways of living more sustainably. Accompanied at times by fellow videographers and additional cyclists, they documented their journey, assisted by a crowdfunding campaign. The monumental task of wading through, excerpting, and editing together portions of their countless hours of footage into a coherent film took another couple years.

Happily, the result is a broadly-appealing mixture of “road trip” movie, community documentary, and exploration into practical approaches to social and ecological sustainability. Entertaining and understandable enough for a mainstream audience, it also delves deep into the “sustainable community” movement to offer fresh material to even the most experienced communitarians and eco-living activists.

Its central conclusion is perhaps best summed up by cohousing pioneer Jim Leach: “Community is the secret ingredient in sustainability.” In scene after scene, we see vibrant pockets of community, and witness firsthand all the ways in which cooperation allows and encourages people to live more lightly on the earth while creating resilient webs of mutual support.

Eight years after doing service work together in Central America, where they first experienced “small communities living simply, in harmony with nature,” Mandy and Ryan (who

fell into much more conventional, increasingly unsatisfying lives in the interim) find each other again and decide they want to recapture the magic they felt there. They embark on an epic “quest for utopia,” hoping eventually to find a new home aligned with their ideals.

The film documenting their journey ingeniously overlaps several thematic progressions. Its structure is not entirely linear, but rather a set of overlaid patterns. While most of the visits are presented in chronological order, this is not a rigid guideline; when it serves the purpose of the movie to jump ahead or back to a setting or interviewee with something important to say about a theme, it does.

One progression (indicated by three dimensional letters embedded in the landscape at the start of each new section) attempts to answer the initial question, *what is sustainable community?* The answers, in order, are that community is sharing; community is family; community is a legacy; community is food; community is education; community is service; and community is economical. The film then poses and attempts to answer another question—*what does it take to live in sustainable community?*—and concludes with suggestions about creating community wherever you are.

Another progression concerns type of community. We start with cooperative houses, then visit cohousing groups, transition towns, ecovillages, spiritual communities, extended communities growing “beyond the community border,” working

*(continued on p. 78)*

# Within Reach

Journey to Find Sustainable Community

A documentary film that tells the story of one couple's 6,500 mile bike-packing journey across the US, visiting 100 sustainable communities.



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