

**SEXISM, FEMINISM, AND GENDER BENDING**

# COMMUNITIES

**Life in Cooperative Culture**

## *Gender Issues*

**Genderqueer Geeks**

**Who Builds the Houses?**

**Evolving Gender Consciousness**

**Moving Beyond Women-Only Space**

**From Margaret Thatcher to Opportunity Village**



# Network For a New Culture

*Network For a New Culture holds that we can all contribute to recreating a world without fear and violence.*

[www.NFNC.org](http://www.NFNC.org)

We offer several avenues towards this end, believing that once individuals become aware of who they are and what their genuine desires are, they'll be inspired to act in a multitude of ways that make the world a better place. We also believe that these goals are most effectively carried out in the context of supportive community, so one of our primary purposes is to create residential and non-residential communities as vehicles for social change.

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NFNC Camps provide extended experiences in building a sustainable, violence-free culture through exploring intimacy, personal growth, transparency, radical honesty, equality, compassion, sexual freedom, and the power of community. Summer Camp features a wide array of experiential workshops that facilitate self discovery, deep personal transformation, emotional transparency, honest communication, and greater intimacy in our lives.

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City Groups do this by helping their members break through emotional, mental and sexual blocks, thus allowing their "life force" energy to flow freely. We recognize the world as one community, made up of many sub-communities, made up of many individual members. We operate on the assumption that self-aware, empowered individuals won't passively accept a world rushing toward social and environmental disaster.



## Communities

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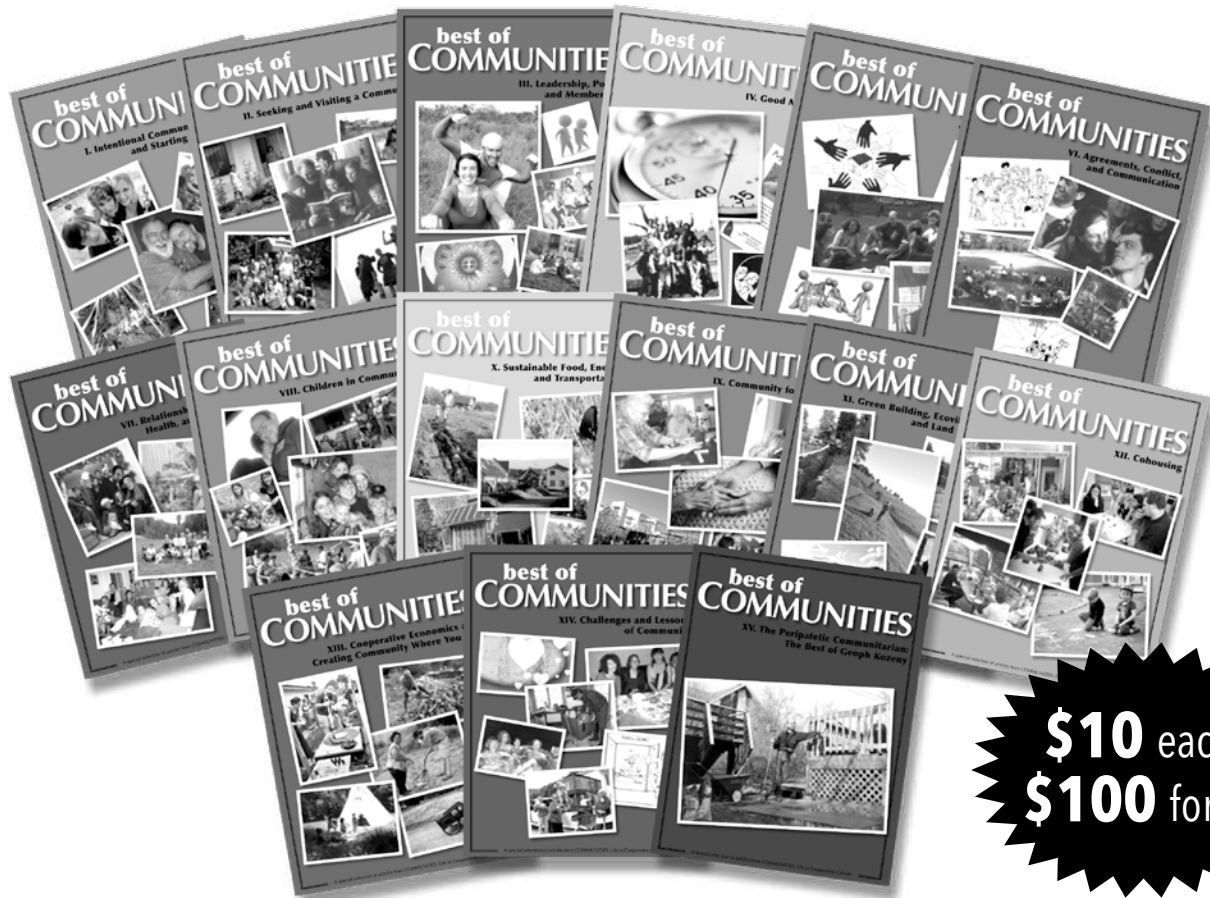
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# COMMUNITIES



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One of many giant puppet masks on display in the Bread and Puppet Museum in Glover, Vermont. For more information about Bread and

Puppet Theater, including its museum, publications, the Why Cheap Art? manifesto, performance and touring schedules, and opportunities to participate, visit [breadandpuppet.org](http://breadandpuppet.org). Photo by Jack Sumberg.

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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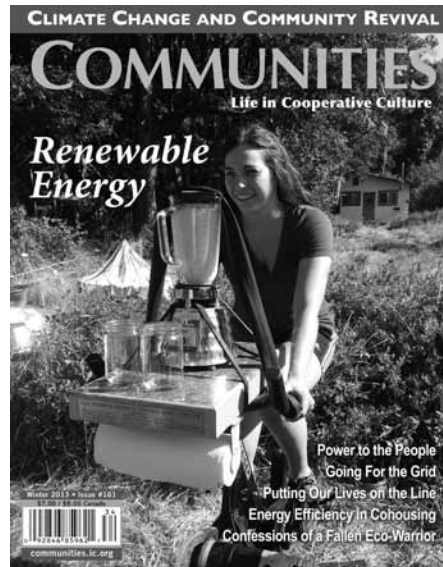
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# LETTERS



## Stellar New Ecovillage Video

I highly recommend Ma'ikwe Ludwig's Carleton College TEDx talk, "Living a Sustainable Life Doesn't Suck," now up on YouTube. Ma'ikwe combines a down-home warmth and delivery with knock-your-socks-off statistics about living at 10 percent of the US average per capita resource use.

This little 20-minute gem is such a good way for those of us who live in communities focused on ecological sustainability to share what the heck we're doing—and why we're doing it—with relatives, "mainstream" friends, coworkers, and other folks out there who might not innately understand why we'd want to live this way.

I especially appreciate that Ma'ikwe's language and approach is not only friendly but layperson-accessible. And, while I think her talk would interest any of us who already live like this, it anticipates and answers, step-by-step and with statistics, the likely concerns of mainstream, non-community dwellers. (Just like a really good magazine article.)

It's absolutely the most complete and convincing introduction to ecovillage life I've seen yet—and I regularly scour YouTube for well-made videos describing ecovillage life in accurate, engaging ways. For me, this is the best so far!

I plan to recommend this video to folks on my email lists worldwide, show it in classes and workshops when there's

time (and recommend it when there isn't), and share it with everyone in my own community too.

Please do take a look at Ma'ikwe's talk if you haven't already.

www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=BS8YeDKKBcU

## Diana Leafe Christian

Diana.Leafe.Christian.org

*Diana, the author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, is a workshop presenter and consultant about starting successful new communities and community governance issues in North America and abroad.*

## Favorite Use of a Verb

....in Chris Roth's "Confessions of a Fallen Eco-Warrior" in the Renewable Energy issue (COMMUNITIES #161):

"to out-earthfirst EarthFirst!"

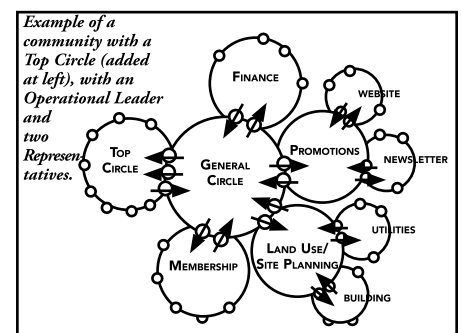
Extra credit for the attention to specific punctuation and capitalization!!

## Valerie Renwick

Louisa, Virginia

## Double-Linking, Take Two

**Errata:** We regret that we incorrectly drew the double-link relationship of Representatives and Operations Leader between the Top Circle and General Circle in Diana Leafe Christian's article on Sociocracy in COMMUNITIES #161, Winter 2013 (page 63). This illustration shows the correct relationship:



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

Your letters may be edited or shortened. Thank you!



# Communities Directory Print Edition

## COMMUNITIES DIRECTORY



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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 ic.org/communities-magazine.

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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



# GENDER DYNAMICS IN COOPERATIVE GROUPS

I've recently been in a dialog with a thoughtful friend who has lived half his life in a consensus-based community and shared this reflection about gender dynamics (which I have lightly edited to preserve anonymity):

*As I see it, there is a distinct difference between the genders that has persisted for decades, well beyond the behaviors or personalities of particular men or women. When our group experiences open conflict in arriving at consensus it almost always becomes positional/territorial “lines” between one or two men, not women. I have recently seen the group get close to agreement only to have the consensus founder because one or two males believe they have a better understanding of: a) how consensus works; or b) what the real problem is that the rest are missing. It happens repeatedly...and heatedly.*

*Recently, I was standing in a circle of members when I expressed a concern that a committee had sent out a written message to a departing member that had not been cleared in plenary. When anger erupted in response to that revelation all the women took a physical step back, while the males exchanged heated words. Though we worked through the anger over the next days, it has made me look more closely at male-female dynamics during our plenary conversations—to read the body language, to observe if females are speaking out or not, and to see who is helping us move collectively and who is holding onto some “sacred” place that cannot be touched.*

*Lately, I've been finding a wonderful amount of courage and inner clarity to challenge these positions, yet I admit to almost wishing to be part of a community where the women's views were weighted a bit more than the men's (I know that's a big generalization, but there are threads of truth for me), because women can sense much of what is being felt in the group and what is being lost that the males often miss while proving themselves “right.”*

I replied:

*I can certainly resonate with your observation as someone who gets to peek behind the curtain of many groups (people don't hire me to confirm that everything is going well).*

*The way I've made sense of the gender phenomenon you described above is that women in our culture are conditioned to be more relational than men; and men are held up to the standard of John Wayne, the archetypal rugged individualist. (To be sure, I know plenty of women who are every bit as roosterish as those men whose behavior you have highlighted in your community, but in general I think your observation is sound.) For relationally*



oriented people it's not so difficult to set aside personal preferences for the good of the group. For those taught to trust their inner truth above all else, it can be the very devil distinguishing between personal preference and divine inspiration. In that context, asking them to think of the whole is an insult because they believe that their inner truth is always about that. They just have trouble accepting that other people's inner truth might be different, and just as divinely inspired.

On the whole, it's been my observation that strong women tend to run intentional communities. Not because they are naturally better leaders, but because it's essential for leaders to have developed fairly sophisticated social skills to be effective in community, and girls tend to be steered in that direction more than boys. While you want leaders to be good at both relational skills and systems thinking, it's my sense that it's easier for a woman to learn systems than it is for a man to learn to see an issue from another person's perspective.

What do I mean by relational skills? It's the ability to:

- Articulate clearly what you think.
- Articulate clearly what you feel.
- Hear accurately what others say (and be able to communicate that to the speaker such that they feel heard).
- Hear critical feedback without walling up or getting defensive.
- Function reasonably well in the presence of non-trivial distress in others.
- Shift perspectives to see an issue through another person's lens.
- See potential bridges between two people who are at odds with each other.
- See the good intent underneath strident statements.
- Distinguish clearly between a person's behavior being out of line and that person being "bad."
- Own your own shit.
- Reach out to others before you have been reached out to yourself.
- Be sensitive to the ways in which you are privileged.

Intentional communities (at least the ones that don't espouse traditional gender roles, which is most, but by no means all) tend to be especially attractive to strong women for two reasons. First, communities tend to be progressive politically and are therefore likely to be committed to breaking down stereotypical gender roles. Thus, women are far less likely to encounter glass ceiling dynamics in community. That means openings for *everyone* without reference to their plumbing. Hallelujah!

Second, communities are committed to creating cooperative culture, and that means *how* things are done tends to matter as much as *what* gets done. This is in striking contrast with the mainstream culture and its fixation on results. In consequence, those social skills (that women have been conditioned to excel at) stand out as a big plus.

Going the other way, community can be a challenging environment for strong men because their behavior may trigger knee-jerk suspicion about whether their strength is rooted in a desire for personal aggrandizement (the mainstream tendency) instead of service to the whole. It is not enough that the strong man *thinks* he's clean (by which I mean not ego-driven and working on behalf of everyone); it matters more how he comes across to others, and this is all about social skills, not facility with rhetoric or branding.

It's even more nuanced than that. Given the historic privilege that men have enjoyed in the wider culture, the determination to create a more feminist culture in community (by which I mean egalitarian—not woman-centered) translates into encouraging women to step up and men to step back. In practice this can result in women being celebrated for being assertive (in the interest of encouraging their stepping up) while men *taking the same action* are criticized for being too aggressive (in an effort to encourage their stepping back).

While this may be demonstrably unfair, a more subtle question is whether it's an appropriate strategy for closing the gap in societal prejudice that favors men. While there's no doubt that this strategy won't work long term (because it would just reverse the inequity), it's an open question whether this exercise in affirmative action is just-

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Intro to Shamanic Herbalism (14-16)  
JourneyDance/Yoga (21-23)

**April 2014:**

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fied in an effort to accelerate getting to the promised land of equal opportunity—and if so, for how long it should be supported.

All in all, intentional community is an incredibly potent laboratory for experimenting with gender dynamics in pursuit of the holy grail: a better life for all.

• • •

After I shared the above thoughts in a blog post, I received several comments, including this one, from a reader named Abe:

*I have had a lot of experience visiting communities and hearing this bigoted viewpoint about men being one way and women being another way. I mean, I hear it outside communities as well, but I would have imagined more critique, in communities, of the concept of the gender binary or the idea of gender being anything more than a concept in our heads. I have heard quite a bit of critique of these ideas of “men are this” and “women are that” in the circle of Acorn, Twin Oaks, and Living Energy Farm. Still, there is a womyn’s gathering and a womyn’s collective at Twin Oaks.*

*I remember, at an early Gaia U board meeting, a proposal to divide the board by gender (just women and men, no one else). It was decided there be two heads of the board, because, you know, “you have to balance the feminine and masculine energies” and “men and women have a different way of looking at things.”*

*What does this idea that men and women think and do things differently serve? Let’s say it’s not being said from a biological perspective of sex, rather than gender, and you’re only talking about the cultural norms and how people were raised. Even then, what can this thought even serve? First, it is said from a cisgender perspective, speaking only of women and men and no one else. It excludes intersex people. It excludes transgender people. Beyond that, what do you do with an idea like that? You apply it to the people around you and make judgments on individual people based on what your belief is about people of their gender. The problem with prejudice like that is that there is no way to take a whole classification of people and accurately apply it to any one individual within the classification.*

I wrote the original piece because I believe there are important differences in the way that boys and girls are conditioned in the mainstream culture. It was not my aim to encourage stereotyping or to promote the assumption that all feminine-presenting people act one way and all masculine-presenting people act another; it was to describe a gulf that I see played out repeatedly in cooperative group dynamics and which I believe we must learn to recognize and develop the capacity to bridge between.

The most important part for me is the ways in which cooperative culture differs from competitive culture with respect to how it solves problems. In the wider culture, we venerate rational problem solvers and systems thinking. In cooperative culture those qualities are still an asset, yet so is the ability to work relationally and empathetically.

What was intriguing for me about my friend’s observation (which was the inspiration for my original blog entry) was: a) that both styles persisted in his well-established community; and b) that the clash between the styles was *the* major impediment to peaceable resolution of conflict. I was not so interested in the analysis that women were never strident, or consistently did a better job of setting aside their egos to think of the whole, yet I *was* interested in how gendered cultural conditioning could explain what my friend observed.

That’s exciting because it means that there is every reason to believe that if *all* children were trained to be skilled at human relations, then we could all be better cooperative problem solvers. 🐦

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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. 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). This article is adapted from his blog entries of November 30 and December 3, 2013.*



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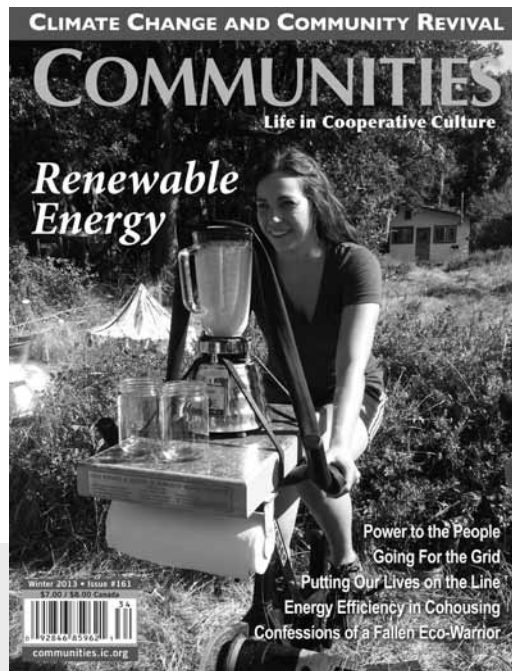
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## Gender: Is There a “There” There?

As best I can remember, my first diary contained scant or no evidence of any kind of emotional depth, social intelligence, or even sensitivity of any kind. In it I recorded my exploits, batting average, and other baseball statistics as a member of Edgewood School’s fourth-grade boys’ “B” team. It was hardly a stepping stone to the Major Leagues, but nevertheless my lone grand slam (the result of a couple fielder errors, to be honest) was apparently the highlight of my year, eliciting the largest capital-letter writing in the entire diary. In this journal, at least, I was all “boy,” sports-obsessed, competitive, and almost charmingly unaware of the relative insignificance of my achievements.

Fast forward 15 years, though, and I’d embarked on decades of working in fields in which three quarters or more of my colleagues were women. I could care less about sports, and most of my close friendships turned out to be with women, with whom I could relate so much more easily than I could in stereotypical male culture. I went out drinking with buddies exactly zero times; eventually, I would spend hours at a stretch conversing about personal and interpersonal matters with women friends, not as any kind of male conquest (I was mostly celibate) but because it was where I felt most at home. In relationship, I found myself attracted to women with a strong mix of “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics, and I often seemed to be the one dwelling in the emotional realm more of the time. If I’d once hewn closely to my culture’s gender expectations, I had experienced at the very least some slippage.

My first draft of this editorial started by listing six statements that could be interpreted as sexist and oppressive of the feminine, all of which I’d heard from fellow intentional community members over the last 30 years. Four out of the six, however, had been uttered not by a man, but by a woman. In the interests of not reliving or perpetuating those sentiments, or the disharmony and imbalance I associate with them, I’ve removed them from this piece of writing. (I’d like this magazine to embody what we want to manifest more of, rather than get too mired in places we don’t want to be—or at least to offer a representative balance—and my experiences in intentional community have been overwhelmingly positive in terms of overcoming sexism.)

But my point remains: both men and women seem capable of embodying a large spectrum of characteristics, of varying degrees of suitability to cooperative culture—from qualities we think of as extremely masculine to those we think of as quintessentially feminine. What emerges in each of us may have as much to do with social circumstances and pressures as it does with our inherent natures...at least until we become aware of the full range of being and expression of which we are capable.

Once we start making our own choices about who we allow ourselves to be, we may find ourselves throwing cultural gender expectations to the wind, as many of this issue’s authors do—and also discovering that our identities and relationships are much more nuanced and rich than traditional gender definitions would have them be.

In the final stages of assembling this issue, we received text for a sidebar to Oblio Stroyman's "Evolving Gender Consciousness in New Culture Camps" (p. 28). In a passage we didn't have room for, Michael Rios wrote:

"Though I present as white/male/heterosexual, my reality is anything but. I grew up in a multicultural environment where men (and women) cried with each other, kissed on the lips, and touch was a near constant. Men were considered to be the emotional gender, and the women, if anything, were expected to keep the level head in the family. So my experience of being physically male left me with virtually nothing in common with what US males in a men's group talk about. ...

"Realizing how different my experience was from others here in the US, I had spent years in both neurobiological and sociological research, trying to determine what the core reality of gender must be. The more I explored, the less I found that could be considered essential gender—and the more I concluded that 'when you got there, there wasn't any "there" there.'"

Is there any "there" there, when it comes to gender? For me, the jury is still out—I have many more questions than answers within myself about gender and how it correlates with biology and sexual identity. At the very least, gender is a continuum, not a strict duality. Perhaps, if there's truly no "there" there behind our current theme, we have nothing to talk about in this issue...

Yet judging from the bulging contents, apparently we do.

Rather than making gender, sexual identity, and gender relationships seem irrelevant in a sea of "we're all the same," the intensity of community living can bring these issues to the fore as nothing else does. In this issue we hear from a multitude of contributors, with diverse gender and sexual identifications, about the issues they've encountered in community. The Table of Contents provides just a hint of the breadth and depth you'll find inside. We hope you find this exploration as fascinating as we have. As always, we'd love to hear your feedback and additional contributions to this discussion. Please let us hear from you!

Speaking of fascinating subjects, we're excited to announce that you can delve into a wide range of them in new materials now available from the FIC. Our "Best of COMMUNITIES" article compilations distill the most incisive and enduring stories we've published this millennium in COMMUNITIES (with a few holdovers from the 1990s). Fifteen collections, each with a different theme, are now available for purchase and digital download at [ic.org/products/communities-magazine](http://ic.org/products/communities-magazine).

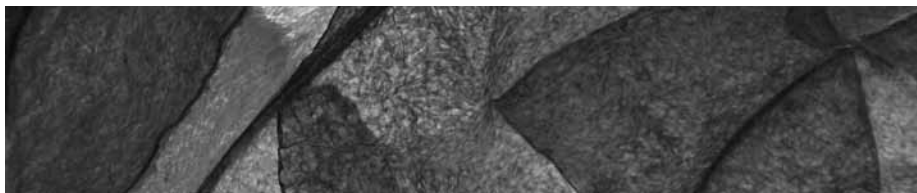
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*Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.*



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# On This Episode of “Girls with Tools”...

*By Cole Wardell*

**A** Midden is an intriguing or marvelous rubbish heap, much like our house. Located in the middle of urban Columbus, Ohio, our income-sharing community (The Midden) finds that its greatest resources are the artifacts (groceries, furniture, shoes) thrown away or overlooked by mainstream society. We use all this stuff to build more whole, egalitarian systems for ourselves.

But thriving off mainstream trash still means we're immersed in mainstream society every day, including the forces and behaviors that make the status quo so painful: sexism and street harassment, bosses and jobs, poverty and evictions. The primary way that our community members struggle with the dominant paradigm is outside the house: negotiating a sexist boss, organizing a campaign against fracking, or protecting a neighborhood from encroaching development.

With so many projects it can be easy to forget that the status quo lives inside our community, too. If we fail to take time and energy to undo learned behaviors, heal ourselves, and reflect on our relationships, we risk making our community no different from any other group of activist roommates—except with more trash. That's why we've made space this past year for deliberate conversation (and sometimes conflict) to work through the ways that patriarchy and gender inform our community and our relationships with each other.

## **Caring to Work—and Working to Care**

This all started with a conversation about working together, which we decided to have after a major house project came to a standstill—and remained stuck—as we failed to resolve major conflict.

After some time, we decided that the broadest and safest way to talk about these concerns was to discuss working together in general. As our conversation continued, it became clear that “working together” was a topic that highlighted ongoing tensions around gender in our house. Sure, it also had to do with personalities, communication styles, and other factors—but the tension we encountered had to do with the *patterns* of our shared work, for which gender is a driving force.

Patriarchy divides skill sets along gender lines: When young girls are given dolls to learn caregiving while boys are given legos to learn how to build things, the result is a gendered divide in adult skills that *all* people need—especially when living in community.

This was (and is) the clearest example of gender informing our collective activities: our women members have less experience with construction and manual labor than our male members. However, our increasing difficulty in working together occurred for more complex reasons. For one, we failed to acknowledge all of the associated cultural knowledge that goes along with manual labor, such as technical terminology, muscle memory, and confidence in working alone or in leadership. In other words, you can't just teach someone where the on/off button is. In order for a project to have truly shared investment and participation, we have to work extra hard to teach, demonstrate, and practice skills with each other. We have to care for our comrades as



much as the end product.

One of my housemates describes the self-conscious voice that plays in her head when working on construction projects as a TV show called *Girls with Tools*. (*GWT* is a reality show documenting women struggling with power tools. We're trying to copyright it.) Our community's challenge was that women were alienated from these projects, even when participating in them. I spent more than one construction job primarily fetching and handing over tools after my ongoing questions received unsatisfactory answers, and I fell quiet out of frustration.

Women members in our house have responded to this in a variety of ways. One housemate decided to avoid the stress of group construction projects altogether and contribute in other ways. Another more recent member chose to take the time and emotional energy to work through the frequently painstaking conversations necessary for preparing, learning, and fully participating in manual labor projects. I've chosen to be selective in my participation, or to work on these projects alone, until I can build more trust in our process and communication.

When the experience of working on manual labor with men alienates women from this type of work, male members avoid (temporarily) the challenge of confronting how male privilege informs our shared work—not to mention how it informs our relationships in general. And when women do want to contribute to construction projects, we risk making ourselves vulnerable to criticism, dismissal, and low self-esteem.

In talking, we also observed ways this problem played out in our shared labor system by rewarding certain behaviors and ignoring others. We eventually decided to try an experiment in which we pro-rate "skill share" hours and leave gender out of the equation entirely. By incentivizing mutual aid instead of "gendered" labor we avoid a host of complications, not the least of which is that "gender" itself is a socially-constructed category that creates falsely-restrictive divisions between individuals. Gender builds walls, and we want our community to break walls down.

## What Community Gives Us

If we truly want a new (ab)normal—and we do—we should desire that in our lives as much as in our activism. This means recognizing and confronting systems of oppression in our intimate relationships, even when it feels more risky or painful than with strangers. (In general, we're quite good at yelling back at street harassment.) It also means that desiring freedom isn't enough: transforming our daily, sometimes trivial behaviors requires a lot of effort.

Living in community isn't an answer to the problems of larger systemic oppression, but it can serve as an intentional space to minimize or resist their authority. By living in an egalitarian, income-sharing community, we've freed ourselves to a degree from landlords and financial precarity, and created more opportunities for horizontal cooperation and community activism. But despite all the things community offers, it's still up to us to experiment and hopefully shape our interpersonal relationships to be a little more free. 🐦

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*A resident of The Midden (themidden.wordpress.com), Cole Wardell is a writer and artist with a background in feminist/queer and environmental organizing. Her current efforts include growing deeper roots in Ohio. Her work and blog can be found at colewardell.com.*

1. For the purposes of this article, I'm defining patriarchy as a system of oppression that organizes our practices and culture along gendered lines. In a patriarchal culture, masculine qualities are valued over feminine ones, power is held primarily by men, and women—as a category—are economically, emotionally, and physically oppressed.

2. Since our community's values are oriented around radical anti-authoritarian politics, we like use Peter Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid to describe the way we voluntarily cooperate with each other, rather than acting out of obligation or guilt.



# Particulate Matter

By Molly Shea

*Editor's Note: By the author's request, we are alerting readers that references to sexual assault occur in this article (paragraphs six and seven).*

**H**olding each other accountable to the vision we share isn't simple. Living in community involves challenging each other to become better, stronger, more full people. It gives us the opportunity to learn from each other, and share our experiences. We're able to gain understanding and analysis about the world and the ways in which we interact together. Using our interactions and experiences to evaluate gender and oppression can get really, really complicated.

It can be unbearably challenging to pinpoint and dig into "gender issues" in our community (The Midden—see "On This Episode of 'Girls with Tools'...", page 12). The way it forms my interactions with strangers, coworkers, family, friends, and fellow community members is pervasive. Gender issues are often small and nuanced. They're not always dramatic or clear cut. It's the thoughts that go unsaid, but become visible through body language and heard between the lines. In our community, we can't look to one person, one conversation, or one trend to identify the ways gender impacts our lives. It's seeing the ongoing patterns and build up of all the little interactions that allows us to grasp the depth and breadth of the situation.

## All the Little Interactions

Often when we host visitors, women in our community feel a deep sense of obligation and desire to make them feel welcome and comfortable. I clearly recall a quiet visitor who stayed with us for a short time last year. Despite earnest attempts on my part, I failed to deeply connect with him and as he left to continue his travels, neither of us reached out to say our goodbyes. I felt blamed for his lackluster experience, and can clearly see the ways in which my gender made it feel unacceptable I did not wish him well. I felt guilty for not being able to graciously host him during his visit.

Women in our community tend to have easier intimate connections between each other than with men. Late night conversations allow us to process our emotions, ask each other questions, and simply lend an ear to create a lot of trust and empathy between us. On the other side of

the story, men around here often process their emotions on their own, by writing or daydreaming. This often creates a gendered division between ways of emotionally connecting to each other, and leads men and women to different relationships.

This undercurrent became present recently when I found myself feeling frustrated that a male housemate had

asked another male housemate to work a paid landscaping job together for the day, while none of the women (some of whom have landscaping experience and are looking for employment) were asked or included. Standing in the kitchen, I found myself sharing my frustration with the women who were there with me—but it took several weeks before I shared that with my male housemate. Ultimately, both of the conversations were useful and productive, but frequently tensions like these stay between women until bubbling over as rage. Our rage is not unjustified, but a lack of empathetic communication between men and women can build the fire instead of allowing it to usefully simmer down.

Women also tend to experience and carry a lot of trauma in our lives. That's true of men too,

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**Our rage is not unjustified, but a lack of empathetic communication between men and women can build the fire instead of allowing it to simmer down.**

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but it's less pervasive and systematic. Sexual assault against women is a prime example of the ways trauma enters women's lives—a stunning one-third of women report being sexually assaulted. While systematic control of women through sexual violence is not small or nuanced, the ways experiences of assault can impact our daily lives can be quite hard to see and identify. Trauma can be triggered at almost any moment and sometimes by things we wouldn't expect.

The impacts of trauma came up less than a month ago when a long-term guest described someone she knew as having “rape face.” While it was meant in a light-hearted and funny way, it immediately flooded my head with memories of being assaulted, and what, exactly, their faces looked like. Instead of letting her know what was happening, I froze up and had to slip away as quickly as I could, spending a long night alone trying to change the image inside my head. In some ways, this example is too obvious or straightforward. Smells, particular words, tones in someone's voice, songs, food, conversation dynamics...you name it—these also can trigger experiences of trauma. For me, trauma can be flipped on more easily than turned off, which means women are pretty likely to carry these experiences and emotions forward into interactions, decisions, and generally our lives. It can prevent me from being present with those around me, can make “small problems” feel like huge ones, and a loss of agency over my life can unjustly become applied to all aspects of it, including creating a shared life with my community.

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**Gender normativity is the particulate matter that swirls around in the air and slowly fills our lungs until we simply can't breathe.**

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### **They Are Everywhere**

It is these small, sometimes unnoticed, interactions that perpetuate gender inequality and force us into limited ways of being. There are large and incredibly present normative systems that hold us down. They show up as massive inequalities like the wage gap, where as of 2010 women earned only 77 cents on the dollar compared to men for equivalent work. Examples like this are worth noting, talking about, and changing, but these systems are not the thing that really gets under my skin. The gender norms that shape my life and prevent my freedom are more ubiquitous than that; they are everywhere. Gender normativity is the particulate matter that swirls around in the air and slowly fills our lungs until we simply can't breathe.

Our community is finding itself immersed in gendered norms, and ways we choose to resist them, as we build a microcosm of what we do want. Not all males who have been a part of The Midden fall into these examples. Not all women do, either. When we perpetuate oppressive norms, as our society has trained us to do, it hurts. It can feel easy and acceptable to ignore patriarchy at our jobs, at the bar or coffee shops, and on the streets, because we simply expect it there. We keep our defenses up and are ready to brush it off. But in our community, we want so much more. We hold each other to higher levels of accountability for tearing apart the systems that oppress us. We aren't prepared for a surprise attack of patriarchal behavior, and the ways we feel it cut us when it pops up and penetrates our lives so deeply.

We continue to struggle to find balance between critical analysis and allowing ourselves forgiveness. Talking through the big and small ways we find ourselves engulfed in gender norms allows us to start to transform our relationships with ourselves and each other. That is, if we can stomach the conversation and begin to clear our lungs of all the dust that's settled inside of us for so long. 🌸

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*Molly Shea is a member at the egalitarian community The Midden in Columbus, Ohio (themidden.wordpress.com). Born in rural central Ohio, she's lived in a variety of collective and communal environments and uses her energies as a change maker doing social and environmental justice work.*

# Sexism at Dancing Rabbit

By Sam Makita

**D**ancing Rabbit is a growing community outside Rutledge, Missouri, made up of about 70 individuals with different backgrounds and experiences. We're an ecovillage, founded in feminism but not focused on it and without a unifying idea of exactly what feminism looks like. I'm offering my perspective, which is certainly not universal, on how sexism affects us here. What you're about to read is my opinion, and not the official stance of Dancing Rabbit by any means.

## Sexism

I'm a woman. I am genetically and physiologically female. I have some masculine traits but I don't think I'm mannish. I'm pretty tall for a woman, but not at all tall compared to all humans. I have pretty strong arms for a woman, but they're probably less strong than the average adult's. I'm extremely messy compared to the women I know, but only sort of messy when compared to my friends and neighbors who are men.

Let me be clear: I absolutely do not think that we can make a conclusive statement about the relative heights, strengths, or messinesses of two people based on their gender. I *do* think we can draw some bell curves based on observations, and make statistical predictions based on what we see. Maybe the curves will change with time and culture shifts, or maybe they won't. I might be able to pass as a tenor, but how many women are there who can pull off a baritone or bass part as well as an average man? That's not to say that a woman couldn't be a very good bass singer, only that those people are more rare and it's reasonable that their representation in their field should reflect that.

Noticing, speaking, or accepting that different genders have different tendencies is not what I would call sexist. Some folks might, and I think that's their way of helping others avoid making assumptions and decisions based *solely* on gender. We're sensitive to the fact that the assumption that a person of a certain gender is necessarily incapable of a given task has led to many missed opportunities for people to rise to their full potential and created much injustice in the world. That sensitivity helps us to be aware of what sexist mistakes have been made and to avoid them.

Discrimination is what happens inside a person when they lack the information, the energy, or the motivation to make decisions based on what they see, rather than assumptions based on culture, habit, or previously observed trends. At Dancing Rabbit we're pretty good at making many choices based on actually taking the time to look at people's characteristics rather than just lumping them according to gender. For example, this past spring a woman announced at the WIP

*Dancing Rabbit has much looser gender expectations than most of the wider culture, as demonstrated by member Coz Walker.*



Josi Nielson

(our weekly meeting) that she needed “some strong people” to help with moving her propane tank. By identifying the trait she was hoping to maximize she got what she actually needed.

What if I were looking for a wet nurse? I could advertise for a “person who is lactating” instead of “a nursing mother” so I don’t exclude anyone based on their gender alone, even though I’m pretty sure the best person for the job will be a woman. In short, sexism is making decisions or having reactions based on gender instead of some more relevant characteristic.

Avoiding sexism is not as easy as I just made it sound. People are generally pretty bad at knowing why they make the choices they do and even worse at accurately communicating those motivations to others, which makes it really hard to know whether sexism is at play in a given individual action. Plus, we make so many decisions throughout our days and years, and so many of them are sub- or barely-conscious, that some amount of lumping into groups seems necessary for getting through the day.

In order for people of all genders to have the same opportunities and rights, we need to put in the extra effort necessary to consider the possibility that people might surprise us, to be open and aware enough that we can see things even when we don’t expect them. The surprise could come from a person being an outlier for their gender or from the assumptions of previous generations being wrong, or both. Such a moment could cause confusion, fearfulness, and insecurity, or curiosity, wonder, and humility. Openness to people being their very best selves, whatever their gender—that’s the antidote to sexism.

### Counter-Discrimination Tactics

Folks at Dancing Rabbit are generally good at being open to the possibility that a woman might be the best choice for a job that has historically been done mostly by men, or vice versa. I’ve seen folks get really excited about it. In fact, I’ve seen us consider as a group whether we should choose a woman for a traditionally male role even if there’s a more qualified male available. During that discussion I heard from my fellow community members that the aim of this calculated sexism would be to give an advantage to women in historically male fields to help correct for disadvantage they’ve experienced otherwise. I think there’s merit in that. I also think we have to acknowledge that it is a kind of sexism, because it includes or excludes people based on gender. On the whole, I think Dancing Rabbit is in favor of this kind of corrective discrimination.

I personally have concerns that giving preferential consideration to one gender over others, especially for paid work, could have the opposite effect that folks are hoping for.

In addition to the offensiveness of the implication that a woman in a man’s world must need our help to succeed, I have concern about how giving such advantages affects the resulting workplace. Imagine, for example, that you’re hiring a work crew of six carpenters and want to have 50/50 gender balance. If you get applications from qualified candidates in a ratio proportional to the ratio of carpenters in the US as a whole, which according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics was 1.4 percent women in 2010, you have to turn down about 194 qualified men even if you hire all of the female applicants. If the three men you hire are the best three for the job, then those men are almost certainly going to be better at the job than the women, not because men are necessarily better carpenters than women overall, but because you had to hire the best, middle, and worst woman candidates available, but only the top 3 percent

of the men. On the worksite, then, those guys, *and those gals*, are certainly going to see more evidence to back up the very stereotype we were trying to counteract.

It’s hard to be patient, but I think that’s what we need to do to effectively correct the erroneous perceptions that are harming women’s ability to earn a living, participate meaningfully in fields that excite them, and live up to their full potential. Pushing men out of the way

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## Pushing men out of the way isn’t the way to correct misperceptions about women’s abilities.

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isn’t the way to do it. My suggestion to folks at Dancing Rabbit who wish to help women who have interest and talent in very male-dominated fields is that they should run educational workshops in those fields and welcome women to join, and show them as much respect and encouragement as the men in the group.

There have been a few workshops at Dancing Rabbit open only to women. This is another example of sexism aimed at counteracting the historical trend. I appreciate that some women might not feel comfortable exploring a new skill while there are men around, and they should have a chance to learn. At the same time, though, it’s that very argument that feels degrading to me, which bothers me even more than the simple, overt sexism of excluding men and other genders out of hand. It feels degrading because it implies that women are not emotionally strong enough to do something we want in the face of discomfort or fear—that we need to be protected from our own feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy in order to succeed. To me that feels patronizing. It also seems counterproductive to building a global culture in which we are equally open to accepting the particular gifts of everyone, and in which we feel able to confidently offer those gifts, regardless of gender.



While I am thankful for folks' efforts and good intentions in offering skill-building opportunities to a segment of the population less likely to have gotten those opportunities elsewhere, I question the overall wisdom of using sexism to fight sexism.

### **The Boys' and Girls' Clubs**

One of the behaviors that comes up the most for me when I think about sexism at Dancing Rabbit is the gathering of people together for emotional support, divided by gender. Men's Group and Women's Circle are not official Dancing Rabbit events or organizations, just gatherings of people who want to get together for a shared activity, open to anyone to participate in, with one catch: Women's Circle is for people who identify as women, and Men's Group is for people who identify as men. There is not yet a group of or for people who don't identify as either of those genders.

Were a group of people to decide, after getting to know one another, that they feel safe together and want to get together to talk about some tender things, without the whole village looking on or bringing unwelcome energy, and they all happen to be of the same gender, I would not call that sexist. Choosing all woman friends does not make a person sexist, it simply belies a preference. On the other hand, being explicitly open to any woman-identifying person and closed to any non-woman-identifying person is overt sexism. Ditto with men. I don't go because I'm not sure the kind of sexism embodied by the existence of gender-specific groups is healthy for the kind of culture I hope we're growing here. Many people think it is healthy, the groups are well attended, and the reports I get from Men's Group, at least, are that those who attend are better people for it.

But I can't help wondering what the reaction would be if Dancing Rabbit had a richer racial diversity than we do and there existed something like "Whites' Night" which anyone who identified as white could attend. They'd participate in deep sharing and mutual support in their whiteness, and everyone else was explicitly excluded, though free to form their own group if they so desired. The reason for that racism might be given as some white people not feeling safe sharing some parts of themselves in the company of other races, perhaps because in the past they've been hurt by a non-white person. That's kind of how Women's Circle looks to me.

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## **I can't help wondering what the reaction would be if Dancing Rabbit had a "Whites' Night."**

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It's hard for me to lodge a complaint with something that my fellow communarians find so rewarding, and it's not totally clear to me whether the net effect will be toward an end I'm hoping for or not, but, if you ask whether the gendered support groups are sexist, the answer is clearly yes. Genderist? I'd say so. Will I participate? No thank you.

Will I think less of those who attend? No. I wish we had a culture in which people could be more thoughtful about including and excluding people based on criteria more relevant than their gender, but it takes so much energy to do so, maybe that's better spent on other things.

### **Gender Balance**

Another clearly sexist occurrence at Dancing Rabbit is the pretty frequent talk of seeking or needing "gender balance" on a given committee. We are likely, as a group, to give preference to people who round out the gender diversity on a committee, over those who might be more interested or more proficient in the task at hand. Honestly, I haven't seen it happen very often, but it is talked about an awful lot.

Warren Siting is the committee responsible for helping people figure out where and

how to build their homes and other structures in order to be harmonious with the existing village and with the plan for growth. I heard a concern that with all men on the committee there was no one that a woman might feel comfortable talking with about the sensitive topic of where and how to build her house, that she would feel intimidated. That's both sexist in the assumption that a man cannot be easy to talk to and disempowering in the implication that women shouldn't be expected to communicate with a man without a woman-savvy liaison. On the other hand, it could be that it's another kind of discrimination to not accommodate the needs of everyone, and maybe help communicating with men after a lifetime of oppression by them is a need some people have.

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**It's hard to know how much unequal representation of genders in certain fields reflects inherent gender differences instead of cultural influence.**

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Our mission at Dancing Rabbit is partly to be an example for others to follow, so I can see the merit in creating a tableau of what we hope the future will naturally look like. It's hard to know how much of the unequal representation of genders in certain fields is related to inherent differences among genders, and how much is due to cultural influence stemming from some long-standing and arbitrary or outdated bias. Maybe in a perfectly un-sexist world those committees would still end up mostly made up of one gender. We won't know that until we live in an un-sexist world.

### **Are We Sexist?**

Yes, there's sexism at Dancing Rabbit. Of course. We're a community made up of individuals who came from the wider US culture and tens of thousands of years of human history before that. Some of our sexism stems from noble intentions, some from confusion or lack of energy to examine our motives and our goals closely. At the organization level, our membership agreement contains a pledge of non-discrimination based on sex, among other things. It seems to me that we're letting some things slide as far as overt discrimination, but at least our paperwork is in the right place.

Men wear skirts, women wear pants, and we have at least a stated norm that wherever a woman must wear a shirt, so must a man, though that last one's not always remembered and observed. Long hair, short, whatever. Armpit and leg hair is totally acceptable, regardless of gender.

We're also doing well insofar as sharing chores across established gender lines. Most people here take a cook shift, most people clean public and private spaces, all parents (and many others) participate in childrearing. There're men and women in leadership roles here, and on physically, technically, and socially strenuous tasks. More importantly, there's not the expectation or requirement that people of a certain gender are the ones who perform a certain task. We're free to choose how to contribute based on our interests and talent—one reason I am proud to be a part of this community.

We're far beyond most of the country in terms of accepting people for who they are and the contributions they bring, regardless of their gender. Part of that's thanks to Dancing Rabbit's foundation in feminism, for which I'm grateful. I think there's room for us to be more open-minded and objective around gender, and I look forward to watching that unfold at Dancing Rabbit and beyond. 🐰

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*Sam Makita moved to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage ([www.dancingrabbit.org](http://www.dancingrabbit.org)) in late 2009 from suburban New Jersey. Among other things, Sam writes for the weekly newsletter and runs the village dry goods store.*

# Who Builds the Houses? Gender in Eco-Communities

*By Jenny Pickerill*

*The following piece is adapted from one first written for a new book on Low Impact Development published by the British group Diggers and Dreamers.*

Most houses in the eco-communities I've researched are built by men. This article explores why this matters and some ways that women have started to reclaim the task of building their own homes.

Gender is just one form of difference between us; we also differentiate ourselves by race, class, sexuality, size, and many other markers. But when it comes to examining how houses are built in eco-communities, the biggest divide I've seen is around gender. Despite the feminist movement, significant gains in equality between genders in the last century, and the fact that eco-communities tend to be politically left and liberal, the gender politics of building often go ignored.

I've witnessed men dominate building in eco-communities through a mixture of blatant and subtle ways, though with all generalisations there are important exceptions. This article is not a tirade against men; rather it explores how both men and women involved in eco-communities struggle to overcome gender as a form of division, and how this has consequences for both genders. By ignoring gender as an issue we are potentially excluding a wealth of knowledge and labour from eco-building. Gender should not be a barrier to being a builder, but neither can it be ignored. Exploring gender requires us to look at the social aspects of housing as being as important as the physical structure, and thus including more women might also change how our homes are built.

I have been researching and working with eco-communities for the last decade. In particular I conducted a research proj-

ect comparing British eco-communities with those in Spain, Thailand, Argentina, and the US, visiting 30 different communities overall. My interest is in how houses in eco-communities get built, the decisions, choices, and dilemmas involved, the costs (social and emotional as well as economic), the compromises, and how the completed house is lived in, works, and functions—in other words, the social practices through which housing is built and lived in.

This approach is vital in order to understand why we do not have more eco-houses. We already have the knowledge, technology, materials, built exemplars, and often the finance, and yet few people choose to build, or even live in, an eco-house. If we can examine what drives those people who do build eco-communities and how their choices are made, then we would be better able to encourage others to do the same.

There are some interesting historical examples of women being actively involved in house building. In the Pueblos of New Mexico (US) indigenous women led house building. Although the men erected the main timbers, women did everything else, including being responsible for physical maintenance of the buildings.<sup>1</sup> In the US in the 1970s the feminist movement fought to challenge the mainstream ways of building houses and instead designed kitchenless houses as a way to free women from their domestic burden.<sup>2</sup> At the same time many eco-communities emerged in that era with increasing numbers of women trained as carpenters and builders, and women were heavily involved in construction of their own homes.







Photos courtesy of Jenny Pickert III



### Assumptions about Women

Throughout my travels through many eco-communities I rarely met a female eco-builder. Even so, when I raised the issue of gender many people denied there was a problem, instead asserting that the lack of women on build projects was a result of women's personal choice. Gender exclusion today is rarely blatant; it tends to rely on often quite subtle assumptions made about women's minds, bodies, and roles in society, which are then reinforced by both men and women repeating and performing those roles.

People might not even realise that they are being sexist in voicing these assumptions, and women might not believe that their "personal choices" are influenced by such assumptions. Yet however hard we

try we are very often influenced by what those around us say, do, and expect of us, and thus naming those expectations and assumptions has been an important part of the feminist movement. This focus on gender, however, is complicated by emerging understandings of transgendered and intersexed people who do not fit the rigid binary distinctions of women/men and thus transgress gender norms. So in using the terms men/women I am simplifying the current debates.

For example, in western society it has long been assumed that a woman's role is primarily to have and raise a family, and in so doing to spend much of her time in the home doing domestic chores (such as cleaning, childcare, and food production). Thus a woman becomes stereotyped as a "homemaker."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly in this context women make homes, but it is men who build them. These assumptions are evident when women seek to do different things such as have demanding careers, choose not to have children, take up risky sports such as mountaineering, or work in traditionally male dominated fields such as engineering or architecture. The lack of women on the boards of top companies reflects the underlying assumptions in society that women are not equal to men.

Some believe that these differences between genders are biological, that women are different not just in bodily form but also in brain chemistry, think-

ing skills, and spatial abilities.<sup>4</sup> I see these views, however, as convenient ways in which women can be constrained to roles which suit a patriarchal society. Instead, feminists have long argued that gender is a social category with which various stereotypes tend to be associated. Thus women are constructed to be feminine, caring, creative, and emotional. Yet, as many men also identify with these character traits, it becomes possible to understand gender as a spectrum and therefore women as being no less good at being scientific, rational, strong, or careerist than men. Rather, both men and women become constrained by society's expectations and stereotypes.

## Assumptions about Building

These assumptions influence justifications as to why women's minds, bodies, and roles in society stop them from being good at eco-building. A popular opinion amongst builders I interviewed was that women are not as physically strong or able as men and because building is primarily about strength women would be limited in what they could do. This assumption is misleading in three ways. First, women are not necessarily weaker than men; there is a huge diversity in our body types and capabilities, and such assumptions do a disservice to both strong women and men who have a weaker body. Second, if building requires strength there are a number of ways to make this navigable to those less strong, such as using smaller block sizes or working in teams. Many such changes have already been made in recent years to comply with health and safety requirements. Finally, strength is rarely the most important skill in building.

"The physical aspect of building is to me a small aspect," Amanda Bramble (of Amper-sand Sustainable Learning Center, New Mexico, US) told me. "There's so much you have to do right. You have to really pay attention to what you're doing, and with those details or just making things plumb or level, you really have to think ahead in order to integrate what's going to come later and later and later with what you're doing now... It takes so much more than just your brute force, and it's a lot more important, that thinking stuff."

Similar assumptions are made about women's mental capabilities. These tend to identify women as naturally more creative, but less scientific than men. Consequently women's artistic input is welcomed, but their views on structural design are not. These assumptions can be expressed in quite subtle ways, which might not immediately appear sexist or derogatory. For example, Gregory Crawford of Panya Project, Thailand told

me: "I feel as if it's more accessible to more people if it's not a science but an art, and natural building sometimes, often, feels more of an art to me than a science."

For women at Panya Project, however, these sentiments were restrictive in determining who could do what on a build project. Shelly told me: "There was definitely a more feminine presence in the creative aspect; men seemed quite happy to let women somewhat direct the artistic side of things, but when it comes to talking practically they're a little bit challenged. There needs to be a bit more of men coming in and being creative. There are a lot of creative men who live here and come through here, and there are a lot of practical women who come through too. It is allowing both sides to acknowledge that."

Finally, different roles in society are often aligned with different genders. These stereotypes of what men and women do can be surprisingly entrenched, making them hard to challenge. For example, childcare is still in the main associated with women, while manual occupations such as mining or building tend to be viewed as best suited to men. Feminists have been challenging these stereotypes for centuries and yet they still remain.

The problem in eco-communities is that despite being politically alternative in many ways these stereotypes still influence the division of labour within them and how building is perceived by others. Even when construction has been a joint effort, the contribution of women gets undervalued. Often women do the support work for a build—collecting build materials, cleaning, planting, cooking for volunteers, etc.—but because this is less visible than the men's contribution it gets overlooked. Instead, houses become "Simon's house" or "Tony's house."

This also has consequences for men. For example, in Green Hills (UK) the men had to take over the gardening business for a while as both the women were heavily pregnant. One of the men realised that actually he loved gardening more than building (which he had taken on by default for many years), and has ever since been far more hands-on in the garden.



## Women Building Houses

Despite gender being largely ignored as an issue in eco-communities there are pockets of excellent examples of women building and teaching others to. By learning from their approach we can encourage more gender equality.

Several projects deliberately focus on the importance of the body in building, but rather than discussing strength as a key attribute, they teach that all builders need to re-learn how to use their whole body in building. This is most obvious in natural building where builders such as Paulina Wojciechowska of Earth Hands and Houses teach how to use our bodies in making and using earth plasters. Others, such as Shay Salomon (US) and the Mud Girls (Canada) lead women-only builds as places women can feel comfortable in themselves to try things out, experiment, and not be judged.<sup>5</sup>

Challenging the assumptions others and women themselves make about women's mental capabilities is quite difficult. We need to identify and support leading female eco-builders such as Barbara Jones (Strawworks), Brenda Vale (The Autonomous House), Rachel Shiamh (Quiet Earth), Lydia Doleman (The Flying Hammer), Alix Henry (Henry Architects), Kirsten Jacobson (Earthship Bioteecture), and Amanda Bramble (Ampersand Sustainable Learning Center), to name just a few. These women have already proved that gender is no barrier to being outstanding architects, builders, and designers. At the same time we need to celebrate diversity in building practice. By questioning the emphasis on strength we can instead stress the importance of other elements, like communication and listening, as being central to successful building. This is not to reject that certain engineering principles are best to follow, but we should acknowledge that there are multiple ways to build a good house.

Finally, in trying to change the broader societal expectations of what men and women do, we need to embrace gender as a form of diversity, but not as a division of labour. We need to create space for women to build and to acknowledge the work that



many women already do on build sites. This is about making women's contributions visible and valuing them in the language we use to describe houses. It is also about encouraging women to be whatever they wish, to learn from the knowledge we already have, but also to be free to make mistakes and have the space to learn from doing.

## Next Steps

There are several steps we could take to get more women building eco-houses:

- Facilitate builders of all genders to reflect and discuss their assumptions and views. This should not be about blaming men for women's limited involvement. Rather, change requires all participants to acknowledge there is a problem and collectively identify solutions.
- Educate on how many existing assumptions are sexist and unnecessary, and illustrate how many women are expert eco-builders through sharing examples of their technical work.
- Facilitate and run women-only building workshops through which to share skills, knowledge, and examples.
- Support women-only experimental space for building; a space which would enable women to experiment without being judged and to have the freedom to learn through doing.
- Establish women eco-build support groups as forums for sharing advice, stories, and experiences. 🐦

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# Gender-Bending on the Commune

*By Valerie Renwick*

**A**s a self-identified feminist ecovillage, Twin Oaks (Louisa, Virginia) definitely has gender as a social construction on its radar. Many aspects of our culture reflect this, from the work we've done eliminating gender bias from our labor, to the way our egalitarian values blend seamlessly with a feminist approach to life, and also including the experiences that the community has had with transgendered people and the experiences that they've had with us.

For people who want to delve more deeply, a lot of information about gender at Twin Oaks is available on our webpage, specifically in our online newsletter from Spring 2013 ([www.twinoaks.org/leaves-of-twinoaks/leaves-pdf-archive.html](http://www.twinoaks.org/leaves-of-twinoaks/leaves-pdf-archive.html)). Meanwhile, here is a glimpse into several aspects of gender on the commune.

- **Our Gender-Neutral Pronoun “Co”:** This is used when the gender of a person is irrelevant or unknown, as in, “Each week, every member should turn in co’s labour sheet so that the Labour Assigner can get all the jobs covered.” It’s much less unwieldy than her/his or even s/he. Also handy for thickening the plot in conversations like, “I hung out with a special someone last night, and co wants to spend more time with me” (effectively doubling the number of people that this might mysteriously be referring to). We use this word in policies and also to some extent in daily life, sometimes somewhat facetiously and at other times genuinely. The grammarians among us get antsy when people start using phrases like “Each co should...” (using a pronoun as a noun) and often a lively grammar-geek conversation ensues.

- **“Addressing the Dress”:** This is a policy we adopted for our Saturday Tour guides. Each weekend we offer a tour for the public who want to learn more about the community, and sometimes male members of the community who are giving the tour happen to be wearing a dress or skirt. (At Twin Oaks, men as well as women wear dresses and skirts for comfort and fashion during warm weather.) For us this is normal, but we are aware that for many of the people who come for a tour, it is not. And so if a Twin Oaks man is giving the tour and is thusly attired, he must “address the dress,” and consciously explain to the tour group that at Twin Oaks, our culture does not limit this style choice to female-bodied members, and that we’d prefer all members be able to be comfortably attired instead of having to adhere to an arbitrarily-imposed fashion norm.

- **Our Shirtlessness Norms:** Virginia gets very hot in the summertime, and some people would like to take off their shirt to be cooler. In the mainstream, it is socially acceptable for men to do this but not women. We would prefer not to incorporate this gender bias and male privilege into our lives, and so our Nudity Policy (yes, we have one) states that at the times and places where it is acceptable for members to be shirtless, this applies equally to women and men. However, we don’t want our mail carrier or UPS delivery person to be uncomfortable and so in the generally public areas of the community, both men and women need to wear shirts, and in the more sheltered areas, both genders are free to be shirtless.

- **The Collective Menstrual Calendar:** In our main dining hall, on the wall of the bathroom, each year a member creates a beautifully artistic menstrual calendar. In addi-

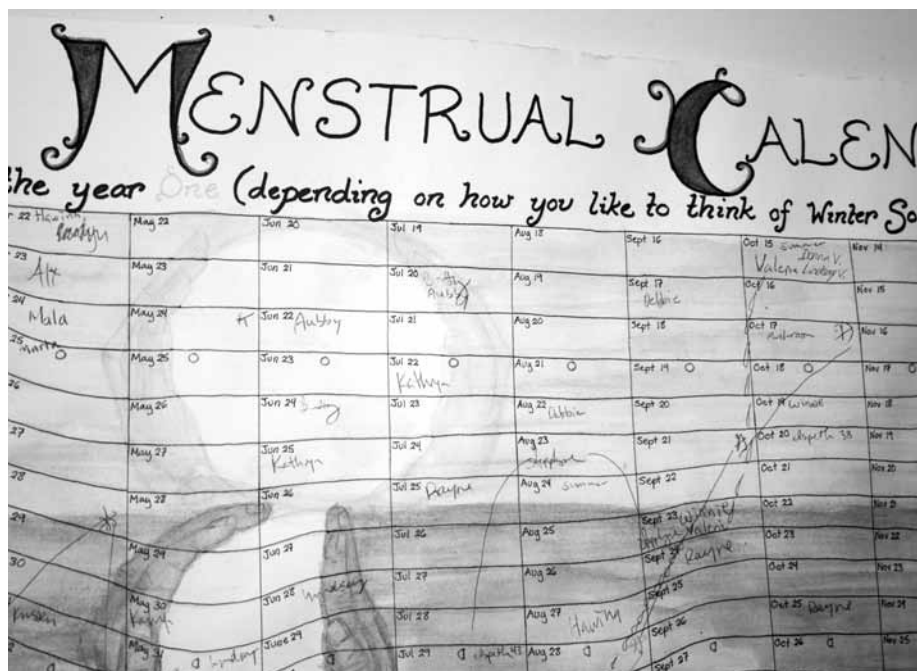


tion to the wonderful artwork on it, it is large enough for a square for each day of the year, and every menstruating woman can write her name on the day that her menstrual cycle starts each month. This is one way that gender intersects with our alternative culture—in the mainstream, this information would not be considered suitable for public sharing. For us, it is both a convenient way for women to track their cycle, and a fun art installation as well, without stigma around its subject matter. Although it is true that when it was first proposed, we had one member who was in general quite vehemently opposed to gender-segregated activities of any type, and who made an alternate suggestion that we post a “masturbation calendar,” which both genders would be equally able to participate in. While many members appreciated the humor in this (mostly-facetious) suggestion, nothing ever came of it.

• **Homemade Edits of Kids’ Books:** This is a familiar scenario to progressive and radical caregivers everywhere—you’re reading a book to a child, and as the story unfolds, you realize the gender biases that are woven into the plotline, and find yourself starting to change pronouns to model a more eclectic reality. A group of Twin Oakers wanted to take a more direct approach, and so, wielding a bottle of white correction fluid and a pen, they methodically went through our children’s books, and altered the gender and features of some of the characters with relation to who was the farmer and who was the nurse, changed select “Mrs.” and “Mr.”s to “Friend” (we do not use honorifics at Twin Oaks), and generally enjoyed re-imagining the storylines created by various authors.

*Coda:* I was just about finished writing this article when my four-year-old god-daughter came by my desk, and saw the current COMMUNITIES magazine (Youth in Community, Fall 2013), the cover of which features a child with blue eyes and shoulder-length reddish hair. She commented on it, asking, “Is that boy eating popcorn?” My partner and I exchanged glances, silently remarking on the fact that upon seeing a child with medium-length hair, her baseline assumption was that the child was male. Perhaps the perfect final commentary on the subject... 🐾

*Valerie Renwick has been helping to raise gender awareness at Twin Oaks (www.twinoaks.org) for 22 years. She was an organizer with the Feminist Ecovillage Project (www.ic.org/eco) and her work at Twin Oaks includes Outreach, Forestry, and teaching Yoga.*



Valerie Renwick

# Feminism vs. Spaghetti Pits

*By Kathryn Simmons*

**I**t was my birthday, and I was enjoying a good cuddle, drifting contentedly into that sleepy in-between state, when my partner's words pulled me abruptly back to full consciousness. "I think you have spaghetti pits."

Really?

I hadn't heard talk of spaghetti pits in years. When I was a newish member of Twin Oaks, spaghetti pits were a common topic of conversation during the summer, following a close third behind conversations involving either the comparison of bathing habits or the difference between grits and hominy. It was commonplace to see people squinting at each other's armpits, looking for the telltale orange halo on the hairs, trying to determine who could claim to have the worst case. Spaghetti pits were a badge of honor amongst the 20-something communards, proof that a) you did not shave your body hair; b) you sweated, which often implied physical work; c) you were not a daily bather; d) you did not put chemicals in your armpits; and, moreover e) you were proud of, or at least oblivious to, your body odor.

All of the above, except the last, were true of me at the time. I was fond of my own armpit smell, but I never invited other people to share it with me. It just seemed a little too intimate. So, in spite of the fact that I rightly deserved the spaghetti-pits badge of honor, I did not particularly want to get them, because it meant others would ask to inspect my armpits. To my good fortune, my armpit hairs made it through that summer or two without succumbing, and spaghetti pits seemed to me to fade from community consciousness after that.

I've wondered now and then over the past several years why spaghetti pits apparently disappeared from Twin Oaks after about 2005 or so. It's possible that Twin Oakers have gotten cleaner since then; it's been years since I heard a boastful conversation about who has gone the longest without a shower. It's also possible that I just haven't been party to the right conversations, or that the people who were most excited and educated about spaghetti pits dropped membership around then. Maybe spaghetti pits have lived happily on Twin Oakers without fanfare all along.

Have you thought about googling "spaghetti pits" yet, wondering what they are? You won't find any hits (except for my blog post), so let me tell you. Nobody I know of has claimed to coin the term, so perhaps it's a Twin Oaksism. It refers to the fact that affected armpit hairs are coated with a yellowy-orangish bacterial film that makes them appear thicker and lighter in color than unaffected hairs (depending on your hair color, of course), almost like spaghetti. And, that's about all there is to spaghetti pits. Wikipedia has very slightly more to say about it (search for *trichomycosis axillaris*). Supposedly the infection also changes the armpit odor, making it stronger or more unpleasant, but that's a subjective call.

Back to my unexpected birthday present.

I awkwardly tucked my chin and crossed my eyes as I tried to focus on the hairs in my left armpit. “See that one, compared with a normal hair?” Nope, I couldn’t see it. I was pretty sure my partner had to be making it all up. It didn’t make any sense for me to have spaghetti pits; it was so mild this summer that I couldn’t remember breaking a sweat in weeks. Determined to convince me, he got a pair of scissors and snipped a couple of hairs so I could compare them at a reasonable focal distance. Oh dear. The diagnosis was clear. There was no point in wondering why this was happening now, and not in 2004. Instead, I searched my memory for remedies. How had people overcome this plague eight or nine years ago? Witch hazel—I thought I remembered people using witch hazel. My partner was a spaghetti pits survivor from way back, though, and he vetoed that idea. He’d bathed his pits repeatedly in witch hazel with no success. The only thing that had worked, he said, was shaving.

I went back to scanning my memory, this time to figure out the last time I had shaved. I wasn’t sure. Maybe for a wedding in 2002? When I first stopped shaving, the act was a conscious feminist statement. I was nearly always aware of my visible body hair when I was out in public, and any decision to conform to mainstream expectations, even temporarily, would have been made only after a long internal dialog and conversations with feminist friends. Now, after many years, I don’t even think about it. Hairy pits are the norm at Twin Oaks, and, off the farm, if people look askance at me anymore, I don’t notice it. I am still attached to my body hair, not because of what it says about me, but because it IS me. The thought of shaving no longer bothers me because I might lose an opportunity to demonstrate that an adult woman can feel comfortable choosing to keep her armpit hair. It bothers me because

I am comfortable with my choice to keep my body hair, and cutting it off would be...weird.

Spaghetti pits are weird, too, however, and it was no trouble this time to decide to shave. A housemate informed me that commercial anti-perspirants had worked for her, but shaving is cheaper and instantly effective. I headed to the courtyard to get a razor from the house closet. (I’m pretty sure the community didn’t even stock razors nine years ago. If you wanted to shave, the community would subsidize them, but you had to order them yourself.) Twenty minutes later, I peered at my infestation-free, denuded armpits in the mirror. It was strange to see myself without hair, but also fun to do something different, to feel unfamiliar. Still, I was in no way interested in remaining hairless, and suffering with itchy-poky armpit whiskers for several days afterwards only made me appreciate my usual maintenance-free locks more. Now that my hair has grown back, it is here to stay. Unless, of course, the orange coating makes another appearance. 🐦

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*Kathryn Simmons joined Twin Oaks (Louisa, Virginia; [www.twinoaks.org](http://www.twinoaks.org)) in 2003, and is best known for her iron grip on the community purse-strings. She wishes her room were cleaner.*



# Evolving Gender Consciousness in New Culture Camps

By *Oblio Stroyman*

*[Editor's Note: For more information about Network for a New Culture (NFNC), the focus of the following article, see [www.nfnc.org](http://www.nfnc.org) and also the articles "New Culture Perspectives for Everyday Life" (COMMUNITIES #159) and "Network for a New Culture Camps" (COMMUNITIES #142).]*

It's the year 2000 and I am 24 years old, sitting wide-eyed and wide-open in a slightly musty and incredibly magical "women's tent." It is "gender circle" time at my first Network for a New Culture's (NFNC) Summer Camp West and we have finished our "check-ins."

"Now we're going to play the dating game," the sparkly-eyed facilitator instructs. "The women will write on slips of paper to request dates with the men and change things up!"

There is chatter and excitement in the tent, and a woman quietly speaks up, asking "what if" she wants to request a date with another woman. The energy in the tent tangibly shifts; the air feels a bit heavier, a bit mustier. I never hear her request addressed directly. While I am pretty sure she is not told no, being told "you are at choice" does not feel like the same support the majority of the women are getting around asking the men out. I never will find out if she asks for a date with another woman. I'll never feel comfortable.

I spent my first two years with NFNC as a camper, boldly going where no Oblio had gone before. I wholeheartedly threw myself into the NFNC experience, choosing to live with 100ish relative strangers for 14 days at a time deep in the woods, without cell phone signal, without wi-fi, doing personal growth and community-building work. I found a home in NFNC. For the first time I was surrounded by people who shared and furthered my understanding of polyamory, sex positivity, nonviolence, eco-consciousness, and transparent, authentic, respectful nonviolent communication.

It was through this experience that I recognized the power in community, in collective intention and accountability, in shared resources, vision, and values. I felt healthier in this community than I had ever felt in the nuclear style living situation I was enculturated into. With my head in the clouds, the niggling pain I felt over experiences like the one in the women's tent seemed transient—more like the nagging of a thorn stuck in the bottom of my foot, a foot that was too involved in its joyous dance to stop and take stock.

Over time, the smallest of thorns unaddressed work their way into debilitating agony. In 2000 and 2001, I didn't have the skills to take the thorn out myself, nor the language to ask my community for help, I just knew I didn't feel good. After a nine-year break, a B.S. in Sociology and Women and Gender Studies and M.Ed. in Couples and Family Therapy, I developed an understanding, a language, and sense of embodiment to wrap around what did not fit for me in this New Culture space: the community's old culture relationship to gender norms and sexuality.



Since this realization, I have run the gamut of emotions regarding the ways the community as a whole reinforces, challenges, rewards, and punishes adherence to gender and sexual norms. I have seen this in a number of areas including heterocentrism, gendered space allocation, gender identity, and LGBTQ inclusivity, to name a few.

So why do I return? Every time I feel decimated and torn down by gender/sexual ignorance in NFNC, I find myself rebuilt by the community's capacity for compassion and willingness to expand its consciousness. I understand we are all working together to create New Culture, of which my pain, process, and showing up is an integral part. Isn't this what community-building truly is?

This story started in 2000 in the women's tent, a "sacred space" for women to gather and discuss what was present for them in a "safe container." This was a protected space, set up for the duration of camp to be used by women at will, a container blessed with altars and decorations. I noticed right away that there was no space dedicated for the men except when a common space was off limits at the designated gender circle times. When I shared that I did not feel that the community demonstrated that it valued men's space, I was told that "it is up to the men to make that happen." At the time I did not challenge that answer, though now I would say it is up to the community, not male-identified people alone, to show that it values "men's space" equally.

A decade later this dilemma still exists at Summer Camp West. While there is no longer a women's tent, it was not until 2013 that the men at this camp were offered a comfortable, private meeting place during gender circle time, and this was because I chose where the gender circles took place. The women were asked to meet in "the lounge" where the men had met previously, an outside living room in "downtown" summer camp, between the kitchen and showers. The feedback was that it was "too loud, too public, too hard to make a container, too hard to focus." This was a step up from where the men had met the previous year, in the beautiful-but-damp, dark, and chair-less garden. Often times we have to experience some discomfort to recognize the extent of our privilege; this year it was the women's turn.

In the 2000 and 2001 women's gender circles, I was struck by the way the bulk of the conversation focused on romantic relationships with men and/or negotiating how to feel comfortable sharing "their" men. I left those years feeling that the gender circles taught me a lot about the relationships women were in, but not so much about who the women were as individuals. As a female-bodied person I was not invited to sit in the men's circle, though a male lover of mine shared that he felt disappointed by his experience that the men kept a physical distance from one another, did not share the space in a way that felt like everyone was heard, and did not have a designated space that stayed sacred to the men during camp. He shared that he did not feel closer to the men at camp after these gender circles and was uncertain what to do, so he didn't attend any more. He never returned to camp and I never returned to the women's circle.

Since then I have heard from women who continue to attend the West Coast women's circles that the conversation has not changed much. From the men I have heard that their circles have changed for the better year after year, increasing physical and emotional intimacy and improving communication skills to include everyone in the circle.

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**The gender circles taught me a lot about the relationships women were in, but not so much about them as individuals.**

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In 2010 when I returned to NFNC Summer Camp West, I was delighted to see that in addition to men's and women's gender circles, a third "gender fluid" group had been established the year before. The existence of the group and the potential awareness it represented was an oasis and an invitation for me at camp. I ended up co-facilitating the group with the person who had started it, and the three-hour discussion time was abundantly filled with only six attendees. It became strikingly apparent that there were OTHER people who did not feel at home in the gender normative environment that had always existed, and in this I found my calling at NFNC. I joined the NFNC Summer Camp West organizing team (SCAMP) for the following year to become an unrelenting voice for the change I wanted to see.

I could feel my heart rate increasing before it was my turn to speak. The only thing

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**I could feel my heart rate increasing.  
It was a "make it or break it" moment  
for me and NFNC.**

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I was certain of stepping into the 2010 debrief of summer camp was that it was a "make it or break it" moment for me and NFNC. As the only genderqueer/queer-identified person on the Summer Camp West organizing team, I felt very passionate and a little nervous to state my feedback and make my proposal, imagining that many would not understand

the gravity of what I was sharing. I took a deep breath in, and I came out. I shared that I felt that gender was at the foundation of *all* the healing work we were doing, that in order to truly do the work on a core level we needed to address gender and sexuality directly, and I proposed that gender be one of the early and primary camp workshops.

Deep breath back in and holding. The response was not only yes, but an enthusiastic, rapid-fire cascade of support! Deeply moved, I recognized that a powerful aspect of NFNC is that though it is also wrought with the challenges and limitations of the "default" world, it is different in that it is a community open to owning and examining growth edges.

Running with the momentum into 2011, I excitedly invited my dear friend, the Dean of Students and Director of LGBTQ Services from the University of Oregon, Chicora Martin Ph.D., to open the gender discussion at the West Coast camp. She and I worked together to shape a presentation that would challenge and support the community. We raised consciousness regarding sex, gender identity, sexual identity, and LGBTQ identities. We offered experiential exercises to demonstrate the concept of gender norms as a social construction, encouraging the community to think meaningfully about how they may want to create NFNC tenets around gender.

I expected some people to be inspired, some people to be challenged, and some people to be completely clueless as to why this topic mattered. Many people met my expectations, though I was particularly intrigued by the reactions I did not anticipate. When it came time to move into gender circles, after the presentation, many campers were frustrated and confused about which one to attend. They began questioning: "Are these biological sex circles or gender circles?" They began processing what it would mean to choose to participate in any one of these segregated circles. Chaos ensued.

"All of the people with penises are invited to attend the men's circle," the leader of the men's circle stepped up and asserted. "Do you mean attached penises?" I inquired before the community. "Are trans men who have not had bottom surgery welcome?"

The men's facilitator did not seem enthusiastic to have that discussion on the spot, and he was even less prepared than I to figure it all out in the five minutes before lunch. The participants were again invited to self-select and continue to dialogue about the challenges with others, as we were to break for lunch. As if on cue, a beloved

community leader entered the circle, enthusiastically announcing that the next day would be “Sadie Hawkins Day, where the women (female-bodied people?) instigated connection with the men (male-bodied people?), who were to await to be approached.

My heart and mind imploded. A couple of my trusted confidants just held me while I sobbed in anger and frustration. I spoke in an unfiltered stream of consciousness: “Can this community change? Are they willing to? Are they even listening? Am I in the wrong place?” I could see that so much work in this area was needed, and I was uncertain if I was the one to hold it for them when I could be so personally affected.

I have since come to believe that it is because I am so personally affected that I am the perfect one to hold space for the community. To witness me, a beloved community member, hurt by the ideas and behaviors takes the topic from conceptual to personal, semantic to humanistic. The next morning the man who had made the announcement asked to sit with me at breakfast, sharing that he realized that he had perpetuated the very thing we were working so hard to deconstruct. He spoke in the morning circle, humbly shifting his invitation to ask the extroverts to step back that day, encouraging the introverts to take a risk and instigate connection with others. He apologized publicly and the experiment was a success. In 2011 the Summer Camp West “gender fluid” circle was twice as big as the year before.

Between 2011 and 2012, I received a number of personal correspondences regarding the way that people were affected by the gender presentation, “coming out” about the alternative unexpressed gender and sexual identities of individuals in the community or in those they loved. This included a personal story from a set of parents who shared with the community the triumphs and challenges in supporting a gender-non-conforming child. Their pain and triumph became the pain and triumph of the community. Again I felt profoundly moved and resolved to continue to spearhead the topic of gender and sexuality in NFNC. Through fully showing up and being out and open, an environment was starting to take shape where others were able to come out. Very Harvey Milk.

In 2012, I continued to have the full support of the West Coast SCAMPS, and I worked with behavioral specialist and educator Shanya Luthier from Portland, Oregon to shape a presentation that took the work to the next level while still including new campers. We raised the consciousness of the community regarding the rewards and punishments for “passing” and adhering to gender/sexual norms. Through experimental exercises Shanya offered the community the opportunity to assess the ways unconscious biases affect views of self, views of others, and all interpersonal interactions. This “gender fluid” circle once again grew in size, though the discussion that year helped me realize that I was selling myself, and other members of the community, short. I realized it was time to invite the group to step into the next level of consciousness.

I do not identify as “gender fluid,” shifting from one gender to the other as inspired, but rather as “genderqueer,” something entirely different and non-binary. Once I was able to identify this, develop a language, and assert this, other campers came out to me as feeling similarly. Before the 2013 camp, I attended Gender Odyssey, a Seattle conference for trans and gender non-conforming people. For the first time I was immersed in a New Culture specific to gender and sexuality. Not only did I not have to advocate and educate people regarding my identity, I was clearly perceived and desired for who I am. Sometimes I do not realize how tense my muscles are until I

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**We raised community consciousness of rewards and punishments for “passing” and adhering to gender/sexual norms.**

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release, and as I was able to release for even a moment into the Gender Odyssey community, I was gifted with clarity about how to hold NFNC in 2013.

“Hello, my name is Oblio and this is Shadow, and we will be your hosts through the topics of gender and sexuality today. Let’s start with assumptions, and let’s start with us. The most dangerous assumptions are the ones unspoken, so what do you think you know about Shadow and me regarding our gender and sexuality?” I began.

“Check Your Junk at the Door: Exploring and Expanding Concepts of Sex and Gender Identity” was my playful, personal, and heartfelt offering to Summer Camp West in 2013. I walked into this workshop feeling more supported by the community than ever as they had requested that I be the primary presenter, showing me that that they appreciated the challenges I posed to their paradigms. The presenters for the other workshops jumped on board and took the initiative to coordinate with me before camp to incorporate the topic of gender and sexual diversity as threads that ran through their presentations. At the very least they were using same-sex and non-gendered examples in their work, and in that they watered the seeds of change.

“Do you have assumptions about my sex? My gender? Do you assume I was always the sex you perceive me as? Do you have assumptions about how we would interact sexually? Do you have assumptions about my sexuality? Do you have questions about yours in relation to me?” I inquired.

I relaxed into my trust of myself first and foremost, and trust of the community’s willingness to be kind while pushing their edges. It became clear that the best way to present *to* them was to be present *with* them. I shared my knowledge and personal experience from the heart, opened non-shaming and inviting dialogue with the community, and took them through experiential exercises in which we all looked one another in the

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## “Do you have assumptions about my sex? My gender? Do you assume I was always the sex you perceive me as?”

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eye and “came out” about our assumptions, the way these affect our abilities to connect, working on letting them go. In this space we all became more deeply transparent with one another. This year I introduced the “trans\*” group in place of the “gender fluid” group. It was open to trans-identified and gender-non-conforming people by self-identification, including gender fluid and questioning people. It was the largest of the three gender circles.

“They are lovely and worth it, they are just very gender normative and hetero-centric. It is not intentional, they just don’t know what they don’t know. We all have our blinders, and they are patient with mine.” It is 2011 and I am talking with one of my partners, a gay man who is considering Summer Camp West for 2012.

“It is hard to be in the Summer Camp environment as a queer person for many reasons, and I still believe it is really important. I am already seeing change,” I continue.

He chooses to attend in 2012 and 2013 for his own reasons, and is affected by the community’s biases in ways he did and did not expect. As a gay man he is certainly accustomed to the dangers, prejudices, judgments, and triumphs involved in being who he is daily. What is different about NFNC is that he lives in the woods for 10 days immersed in a group primarily comprised of people still ignorant about how their unconscious gender/sexual privilege affects him personally, developing bitter-sweet heartfelt connections and doing deep personal work.

“I am not gay but let’s have lunch. I am not gay but I feel attracted to you. I am not gay but let’s be sensual...I am not gay but...I am not gay but...” His experience of being able to freely relate from a heartfelt space, especially with male-bodied camp-

ers, is deeply affected by these ideas and attitudes. In 2013 he comes back as a SCAMP, and what seems clear to us both is that as long as the pros outweigh the cons we will continue to stay engaged as leaders in the community.

“Are there showers with a curtain?” my transgendered partner asks me concerned. “Have there been other transgendered people who have attended, and how were they treated? Will they let me in the men’s circle? Will they be open to me if they do?”

I wish I could allay his fears, but the best I can do is share that I believe Summer Camp West will hear and help with his concerns, though he will have to advocate for them. He is already sharing heartfelt connections with many NFNC community members and the road is less bumpy than 10 years ago. I imagine his journey, and NFNC’s journey, will be wrought with its own unique triumphs and challenges that we cannot anticipate. I believe that all will be furthered through growing pains.

**I**n NFNC currently, we are having the discussions about the changing role of gender circles, and ways we can create an inclusive environment that draws in people across the gender and sexuality spectrum. No longer do I hear the ignorant hands-off remark, “We are open, they just aren’t attending.”

With all of the growth still needed regarding gender/sexuality in the NFNC community, I continue to be soulfully grateful that I, my partner, and other gender/sexual-non-conforming folks are able to see through what is painful in the community to the beauty that also exists. I am grateful for our individual decisions to expend the energy and emotional fortitude it requires organize, teach, model, mentor, and be students in the community. With all of the growth still happening within my partners, myself, other LGBTQ and gender-non-conforming folks, I continue to be soulfully grateful to NFNC’s commitment and willingness to welcome us as teachers, students, and cherished community members. I believe we are all owning that as a community we are still at the beginning of an ever expanding gender/sexual consciousness and are actively choosing to walk willingly hand in hand into this social experiment. 🐦

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*Oblio Z. Stroyman is a queer-identified former relational therapist turned Ecstatic Dance DJ who lives in Oregon’s Eugene/Springfield community. She is the steward of “The Point” studio, an intimate venue that supports community by hosting events and skill share opportunities. She has always been passionate about community and social trends, focusing her undergraduate and graduate studies on family, gender, and sexuality. She has been connected to the Network for a New Culture community ([www.nfnc.org](http://www.nfnc.org)) since 2000, participating as an organizer since 2010, helping to bring gender to the forefront of New Culture dialogs. She also offers regular trainings that focus on raising awareness in professional organizations regarding polyamory, gender, LGBTQI concerns, and community. Oblio strives to weave together strengths from her communities into group processes that cultivate increased intimacy, depth, learning, and social change.*

## Gender at Summer Camp East

I first attended Network for a New Culture Summer Camp in 1999 in Oregon, and encountered many of the same gender dynamics Oblio describes in her article. Over the next few years, as a far-from-gender-normative camper, I worked to create change—specifically, to “queer things up” within the men’s group. Then in 2004, in addition to attending the Oregon camp, my nesting partner and I started New Culture Summer Camp East in the Mid-Atlantic area. Beginning fresh, we were able to eliminate some of the most oppressive gender structures, but we were still learning ourselves, and many of the people who came to camp had not explored the issue at all.

The first year of Summer Camp East, we had several exercises to raise awareness around gender. One of the first stereotypes we encountered were men who were resistant to touching other men, claiming among other things that they could tell the difference between a man’s touch and a woman’s. We created an exercise where half the people were blindfolded, and the other half would give them non-sexual touch, on the cheek, the arm, or the back, and had the blindfolded people guess whether it was a man or woman touching them. The men who had been most adamant about there being an important difference found that their guesses were no better than random chance—they got it wrong half the time!

Over the next several years, the organizers and experienced campers were able to create more and more of a culture that saw gender as malleable and diffuse, rather than binary and fixed. Grappling with the concept itself, trying to identify *anything* that could tie gender to biology, we came to the realization that there was far more difference between some men and other men, and some women and other women, than there was between the average or normative man compared with the average or normative woman. Other than basic reproductive functions, there was nothing that was true for the vast majority of men that was not also true for large numbers of women, and vice versa. For virtually any characteristic we examined, we saw two bell curves that overlapped, with far more overlap than separation. Coupled with a deeper understanding of how societies shape and control behaviors that tend to exaggerate whatever natural differences might exist, we came to the realization that gender, for all practical purposes, is an arbitrary construct.

From the beginning, the mix of participants at Summer Camp East included a range of gender expressions and sexual orientations, starting with bisexual women and men, and expanding to include gay, lesbian, transgendered, non-gendered, and intersex people. Perhaps because of the culture of radical acceptance that we were creating, there was never much attention focused on these variations, nor did people express difficulties with the issue. Where queerness at the West Coast camp seemed controversial or political, at the East Coast camp it just seemed “normal.” People were who they were, they did what they did, and no one seemed to be particularly concerned about it.

Over the years, most returning campers have come to see gender as an arbitrary choice, with few if any assumptions associated with any individual’s choice. Rather than focus on identifying gender differences of any kind, we prefer to see each individual as being who they are, and making choices to present however they wish. Each year, we continue to have discussions and workshops on gender issues, and we keep discovering new dimensions that need to be explored, tested, and included in our shared perspectives.

—Michael Rios



# Genderqueer Geeks Discover Hivemind in Community

By Esty Thomas

I commented to a straight friend the other day that sometimes I forget that not everyone is queer and geeky. She laughed, and you may too, but there's a good reason: for the last few years, I lived in a community composed entirely of geeks, and my close friends in that community were all queer.

We didn't know when we became friends that that was the case. We're a pretty unlikely crowd, given the setting: Computer Science Housing (CSH), an interest-based intentional community in a university dormitory. We all applied, and were accepted, because of an interest in computers. Then it turned out that five of us, one-fifth of the whole floor, were transgender or otherwise genderqueer. Alan is genderqueer (not quite comfortable as male or female); he's dating Dave, a trans man. My ex-Casey is a trans woman, I'm genderqueer, and our friend Bennett isn't sure where he falls, but it isn't "normal."

All of us but Bennett joined between fall 2009 and fall 2011. By the next spring, we were such close friends we nicknamed ourselves the Hivemind. There was a recurring joke that the two "women" in the room (me and Dave) were more masculine than the two "men" in the room (Alan and Casey), but at least in the full group we didn't talk about gender issues much. We were too busy playing board games and discussing the anthropological implications of character archetypes in Star Wars video games.

The next semester, I met Bennett and, when I found out he was a Computer Science major, pushed him to come hang out at CSH. He moved in, and one day a bunch of people were joking around about putting him in a dress, so he wore it, and just about everyone at CSH that day thought it was super-adorable. He told me, "The fact that it actually happened made me realize that I can wear and buy whatever I want to, and that the people I live with not only wouldn't mind, but would support that." The other members of CSH have always kept the larger space safe for queerness, almost by accident; it doesn't matter to them, because we're their friends and floormates.

The benefit of that supportive, unquestioning environment cannot be understated. Dave said, "I'm not quite sure how I collected all the queer ducklings, but it means my corner of the

dorm was safe and welcoming and okay to come out in." When Dave and Casey, in particular, asked everyone to change the pronouns they used, to call Dave "he" and Casey "she," everyone just did, and didn't treat either of them any differently. "I got some questions," said Dave, "but they were the sensitive variety—'how should I refer to you,' and 'is it okay if I ask you more?'" The important part for the rest of CSH, though, is that we keep doing awesome geeky things with them. When Bennett plays a card game while wearing a frilly maid outfit and cat ears, the important part is the game.

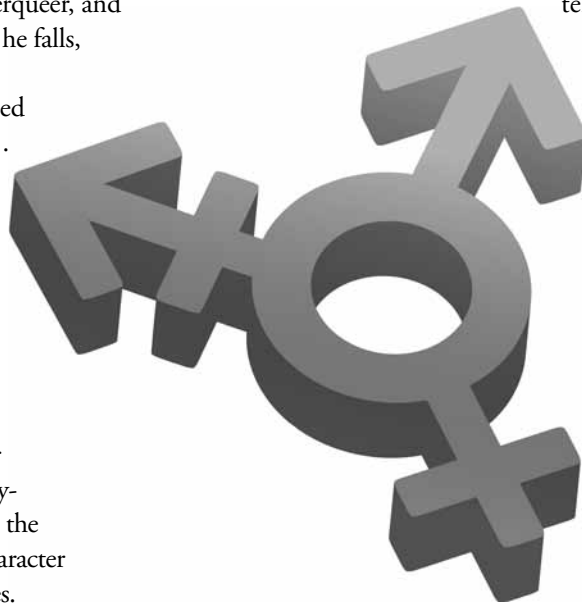
I talked to Flora, a former member who is now Dave's housemate; she said, "For me, CSH was always a place where gender just simply didn't matter. It didn't matter if you were feminine or masculine or neither or both—you were a geek and you were awesome, or you weren't." And on CSH, geek status isn't tied to gender; geek girls, geek guys, and geek others are all equally welcome.

In fact, I think it's partly that nobody tried to make the space safe for queer folks that got most of us to come out to each other and the larger group. Most of us either didn't know or wouldn't have said that we were queer when we joined. It was only over the year after Bennett joined that everyone came out to everyone else as not quite straight or not quite cisgendered (that is, our gender not matching the letter on our birth certificates).

Speaking for myself, I love my friends dearly but if they went out of their way to make the community specifically welcoming to queer people, I would get tired of having to be queer all the time. When I'm at CSH, all that matters is the games and books I like, and my programming skills, and that Dave and I are practically siblings. What matters, in other words, is that I am a community member first and foremost, and anything else second. 🐣

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*Esty Thomas attends a private university in New York (State, not City). She lives in a housing cooperative and is studying the intentional communities community in her city, as well as finishing a degree in math, linguistics, and medieval studies. She can be reached at [esty@umich.edu](mailto:esty@umich.edu).*



# Gender: The Infinite Ocean

By Innis Sampson

## **S**elf-Created, Self-Defined, Self-Sustained

When gender is seen as binary, any deviations from these polar extremes are rendered invisible. In this silenced state, diversity suffers, which in turn negatively impacts individuals and community. A person's identity and individuality are robbed from them when gender becomes a binary label. This binary labeling demonstrates a lack of sensitivity and respect for a person's background, experiences, skills, and knowledge. Variety within community diminishes when this valuable information is not shared and diversity isn't valued and prioritized amongst members.

When gender is self-created, self-defined, and self-sustained, existence within community becomes positive and allows people, as well as community, to flourish. Because one cannot exist without the other, it is the responsibility of both the individual and the community to maintain a healthy and safe environment for gender variant people. This ultimately creates a safe environment for everyone. Most people would not allow another to dictate their race, ability, sex, or other personal characteristics. Although sometimes these things may seem apparent, no one can truly know another person's realities or preferences. This ignorance often leads to the "isms" (ageism, racism, sexism, able-ism, etc.) and can become hurtful to individuals and community at large.

When speaking about the isms, genderism does not come up often. Genderism is the belief that gender is binary, and that only two genders—male and female—exist. Genderism marries gender and sex, concluding that they are one and the same. Many people make this mistake, but it's important, even crucial, to remember that "sex" refers to one's biological sex at birth: male, female, or intersex. Gender is a person's internal sense of self, role, expression, and behavior. Gender is also determined by society and others' perception. Misgendering can become very detrimental to the person who is being misidentified.

I have experienced genderism in many different types of communities. Even the most open communities which tout feminism, diversity, and queer inclusion have exhibited genderism towards me. These experiences have been in cities, towns, neighborhoods, intentional communities, group organizations, and friend circles. Often these experiences were due to a lack of information about gender politics and visibility of gender variant people within community. I do not believe that my gender and my sex are one and the same, and that has been difficult for many to understand and accept. For me, these experiences have been hurtful, awkward, scary, and painful. They have also been enlightening, positive, and have allowed me to work on my patience as well as develop my teaching skills.

For the purposes of this article, I feel that examining my own "gender work" is more valuable than focusing on the gender-based interactions I have had with others. Although my experiences with others have helped shape my understanding of gender, most of my work has been done within myself. Communities can become sensitive to gender variant people but I think they can benefit most from becoming sensitive to everyone's realities and preferences, because this story could be anyone's. Gender is something that is

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**Gender is incredibly intimate, exceptional,  
and is often left unspoken until there is  
a safe space without judgment.**

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incredibly intimate, exceptional, and is often left unspoken until there is a safe space without judgment. It is a community's responsibility to create these safe spaces.

For many years, the unfavorable gender-based experiences I have had within community affected my self-confidence negatively. When I found myself in a community that was understanding of gender issues, I valued that safe space and I made the decision to live my truth and let my true spirit show. I set off and embarked on a journey that has been perpetually changing the way I look at my life, relationships, and self as a whole.

## Spiritual Gender

I am a storyteller. I am a spiritual body. I am a gender warrior. During my time on this Earth, I have been a conscious and unconscious warrior: fighting politics, disassembling stereotypes, and constructing (dis)comfort all in the name of freedom—my own name. There is an innate personal freedom inside everyone, one which is often denied. It is often absent-mindedly given to other people, institutions, or structures to determine and label. This act of surrender compromises respect and responsibility, and therein, the true self is relinquished. When the self is given up, you can envision this act as the conforming masses of society moving quickly down a voracious river, advancing towards an unforgiving sea without question. Some find that their eyes fill with water, splashed from another's desperate attempt to stay afloat. The vision is skewed, creating blurred forms and grandiose ideas. It becomes a sink-or-swim game and many who drown never dream of growing gills. There is a comfort in the darkness of the depths and there is always company just as nearsighted and comfortable.

A few years ago, I went through the painful process of growing my own gills. My new breath allowed me to explore all parts of the ocean: the beautiful and the terrifying. Then I grew legs and walked upon the shore. All in due time, I returned to the Earth, and thus became the rocks, the soil, the plants, and the animals. My name is Innis. My name means "an island with two rivers flowing through it." I am an island in the sea. These rivers flow through me as sentient representations of the sacred feminine and the sacred masculine. The sea surrounds me, steady and safe in my comfort. My fluid nature is muted, influenced by quiet balance of the creator and the nurturer. Great energies undulate; the Earth and the sky form the great coalescence. I have built and sustained myself in this sea. I have accepted that the rivers are an innate part of me. I am a spiritual body and I do not deny my presence on this Earth.

When I was denying my presence in the past, I was denying my spirit. I define my own gender as the seamless interrelationship between my physical self—my body, my outward presentation and behaviors—and my internal sense of self: my spirit. Ultimately, my gender is a mirror of my spirit. It has taken me years to even begin entertaining that idea, and even more energy for me to live it. There is an innate spiritual connection between how I present myself as a human being and who I am as one of the innumerable souls navigating the sea of the universe. I certainly did not always feel this sense of spiritual connection to who I have become.

## A Mirror of the Soul

I have found, through my life experiences, that gender is not at all what it appears. It is in the presentation, expression, and actions of a person, so it is expressed internally and externally. It lives, grows, and sometimes hides within the heart. Sometimes it is swaddled and sometimes it is bare. Its appearance sometimes can feel like pure comfort; other times it is extremely raw.

My gender has been in a constant state of flux for my whole life. This fluidity has always been rooted in my being, and my journey has been about connecting to that base root. No matter how far I feel I have diverted off the path to understanding my true self, I always come back to center, pulled back in like the tides of the ocean.

Sometimes this pull has been abrupt and painful, and sometimes it is nothing less than blissful.

I identify the ever-fluidity of my gender as genderqueer. For me, genderqueer is an umbrella term but it means that I am queering my relationships to gender and sexual orientation. For me they are intertwined. For me, queering is a deviation within the norm. Those who identify as queer as a sexuality often work beyond traditional labels to create space for those who are gender and sexually variant and who may have alternative views of sexual orientations. I also qualify my sexual orientation as "queer." My exploration of gender has certainly been a transition, but I am not trans-identified.

I think that some people who are unaware of gender politics perceive gender transitions, in whatever form they make take, to be a dualistic transition. It is seen as linear, beginning at one place and ending at another. In speaking about my journey, this can't be further from the truth. My ritual of identity and transition often feels akin to the cyclical energy of the moon, dictating the tides of the ocean and creating undulations and surges of self-discovery. My identity and transition are both conscious and unconscious. I exist as much as I live. I make conscious choices about how I present myself in certain communities. I try to examine and understand how that affects my self-confidence and others' understanding.

## Duality and Triality

My spiritual journey is not a linear experience where I began at one place and ended in another. It is an ongoing process that moves beyond the perceived duality of nature. Duality is a polar expression where only realms of opposites exist. In the quality of being dual, or being made up of two things, energy is focused on contrast and the differences between those two points. The values of those opposing points are not celebrated; they are only pitted against each other. Male and female, black and white, night and day are common examples of duality.

Duality can be seen visually as a line with two points at each end of the line. As humans, we are bombarded with examples of duality every day, and have become accustomed to absolute polar extremes. In my exploration of gender, duality has reared its two ugly heads time and time again in opposition of my journey.

With inhuman amounts of strength, my fight against duality turned into a peaceful battle. My spirit evolved with truthfulness and love. I began listening to myself more. With my intuition I was able to become more in touch with my true needs. I began to live my truth. It was certainly uncomfortable, but the more I changed my life to become the one that I wanted, the more I became happy, grounded, and proud of myself.

Spiritually, I searched for something that could help put some perspective on the work that I had been doing. One day I came across the idea of triality. From my understanding, triality is moving beyond duality by adding another point, or perspective that is virtually infinite. This other vantage point allows one to recognize the balance between the dualistic nature of things. There is a state of observation that is separate from emotion, which allows us to consciously balance out perceived opposites. This act creates an internal and external transition that in turn births openness and infinite possibility.

Triality is a limitless spectrum of points not married by a line or lines but connected in a universal nature. Think about the stars and how they are all connected and part of a common form but each has its own place in space. This model of triality feels like a community to me. There is a collective force to this group that is unified because of its sharing of space and relationship to each other, and its celebration of diversity.

My gender became reaffirmed in the idea of triality. My identity was not one (female) or the other (male) but something else. This something else is not entirely new, but birthed from these dualistic energies. I channel my masculinity through a feminine lens (specifically my body) to create a holistic otherness, a third gender that is infinite. It is everything those energies are, but everything they are not. It is in between and outside. It is a multi-colored spectrum. It is self-created, self-defined, and a true product of my soul's searching. The community sustains the self and allows for all to interact. It is that cosmic community and it is that ocean.

### **Empowerment in Community**

As a gender variant person I have realized that not only is my honesty my most powerful tool, but it allows me to create truthful relationships with those in community. To me, community is my most powerful support system. I cannot compare anything to the feelings that I have had being involved in my community, the queer community. Queer community has granted me the space (physically and mentally) to express my true self. There is an understanding of

*(continued on p. 71)*



Photo courtesy of Innis Sampson

# FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND GENDER Lessons from Beyond Women-Only Space

By Mary Murphy

“This is women’s space and we come here to claim our power!” proclaims the priestess to a circle of 50 women, emphasizing her words by beating a drum at the end of her sentence. The women trill and yell and stomp their feet, smiles break out on the more timid faces in the group, and the energy in the room builds. There will be dancing, singing of sacred songs, opportunities to proclaim the release of old patterns, and celebration of calling new abundance and joy into our lives. The women have come to this gathering space in the middle of a snow-bound Vermont February, invoking the goddesses Brigid and Artemis with poetry and song, and claiming their right to determine the course of their own lives. In this space each woman is reminded that she is a personal embodiment of the divine.

Last year I helped lead the ritual I describe above, and have participated in similar circles all over the country for 13 years. But increasingly I question the beliefs that are the source of our desire to claim women-only space.

While I still believe that for many people women-only ritual spaces are a valuable tool, I see incredibly rich healing work being done in all-genders ritual spaces. Modern goddess-centered spiritual communities are deeply rooted in feminism, but as we all should know by now, you don’t have to be a woman to be a feminist. The restructuring of power demanded by feminist theory benefits all people, breaking down hierarchies of power and giving people equal say in the conditions of their world. Just as many men are devoted to feminism, many men find that the spiritual philosophy of goddess-centered faith communities offers a deeply nourishing path aligned with their empowerment politics.

What purpose does it serve to bar these men from women-only spaces? Does this culture of women-only space still serve a worthwhile purpose, or does it perpetuate division? In these days of queer and transgender empowerment, are women-only spaces too limited a concept to encompass a flourishing diversity of gender?

When it comes to spiritual experience, we have to start where we stand. In a world still steeped in patriarchal power structures, it can feel like a deliciously audacious act

of rebellion to claim women-only space, and by doing so declare our own authority over our spiritual lives. This is important work, and I myself have been deeply shaped by participation in many women’s communities, from attending a women’s college to training as a priestess for 11 years in a women’s spiritual tradition.

The empowerment offered to women in these spaces is very real. A strong women’s culture has sprung up from the nexus of second-wave feminism, lesbian separatist politics, the reconstruction of a goddess-centered spirituality based on the myths of female deities from around the world, and ecofeminist beliefs about our place in nature. This women’s culture has changed many lives for the better, including mine, and its influence has reached far beyond the women-only circles where it began.

However, in recent years I have started to see some cracks in the logic of separatism in these women’s spiritual communities. These cracks were invisible to me until I started participating in a feminist goddess-centered community that was open to all genders. This spiritual community gathers for a week-long camp once a year, is run by a consensus-based group of volunteer organizers with rotating roles, and contains an incredible diversity of gender, sexual orientation, age, and many other metrics of identity.

It was stunning to me, after years in women-only spaces, to discover that I felt just as safe and empowered in this all-genders space as I had among only women. The men I met there were not only deeply feminist (if anything the balance of power rested with the women leaders in the community), many of them were actively experimenting with a far broader gender expression than I was used to. Lots of playful drag and gender-role reversals popped up around camp,

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*The Spiral Dance  
Samhain Celebration  
in San Francisco welcomes people  
of all genders to their event.*

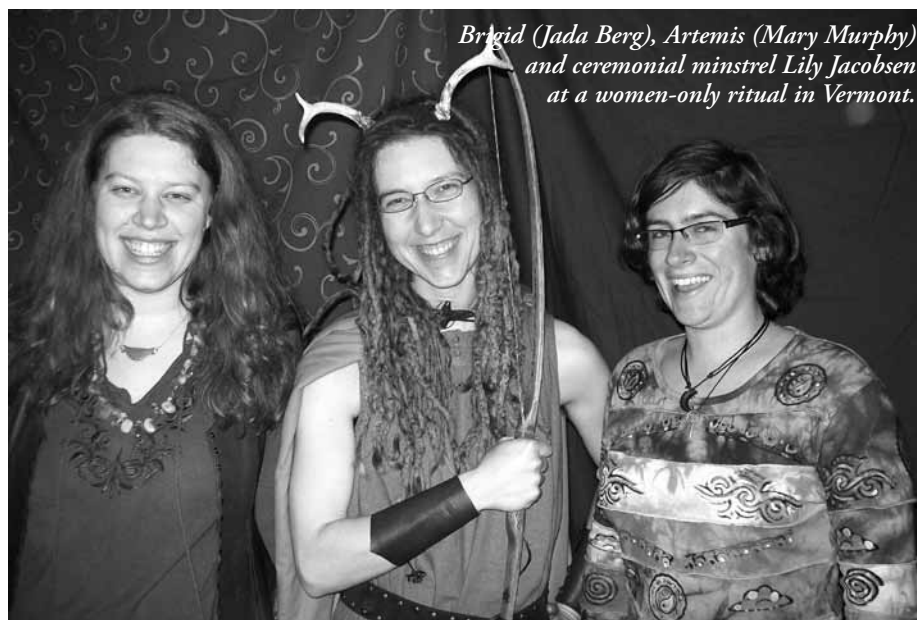


childcare and kitchen chores were shared equally among all members, and gender quickly became insignificant in the spiritual empowerment work we were doing together. We all worked on healing our culturally wounded masculine side and strengthening our feminine wisdom and power, we all sang sacred songs together under the starry late-summer sky, we all laughed and cried through the week as our hearts opened and our souls spoke to us.

I realized that for every woman who felt limited by the gendered expectations projected on her by our culture, there was a man who felt equally limited by masculine expectations. Shedding gender as a form of expectation and building an alternate culture based on bringing our inner selves out into the light became an incredibly healing and empowering practice for everyone involved. My experiences in this community sure made me wonder why all my spiritual circles had been limited to women before this!

Another wedge that widened the cracks in my devotion to women-only spaces was my increasingly nuanced understanding of gender identity. Over the past decade I've been blessed to live and work with some wonderful transgender folks, and learning about their experiences in our transphobic world has prompted me to become an advocate for transgender equality in my workplaces and also in my spiritual communities. Many women-only spaces struggle with the issue of transgender inclusion. The older lesbian-separatist belief that transwomen are really privileged men trying to infiltrate women's spaces is heartbreakingly out of date, but policies rooted in this belief persist to a surprising degree in women-only spaces. These days I can't comfortably participate in women's spaces that exclude transwomen unless I'm actively agitating for change from the inside, and even then I'm ambivalent about it.

Even when transwomen are welcome (as they increasingly are), the binary-gender concept that underlies women-only space creates a difficult choice for those people whose gender identity does not easily fit in one of two categories. All-genders spaces solve these problems



*Brigid (Jada Berg), Artemis (Mary Murphy) and ceremonial minstrel Lily Jacobsen at a women-only ritual in Vermont.*

Photo courtesy of Mary Murphy



*The New England Reclaiming Tradition teachers' guild trains pagan "priestesses" of all genders.*

Mary Murphy

entirely, as well as allowing every person to explore a more fluid way to inhabit gender identity if they choose to.

Furthermore, as someone who identifies as a woman, I find that having my powerful self honored by people of all genders carries a deep power to it that is different than my experience in women-only spaces. In women's space, I feel a strong sense of safety, affirmation, and support, but there is also a subtle thread of antagonism towards men that silently underlies the choice to exclude them. We build a strong culture of sisterhood and pledge our support to one another, and then re-emerge into our mixed-gender world with a sense of being warriors defending our right to be empowered. After years of being energized by this separatist form of power, I have realized that it can be a good first step to finding our female strength, but soon it begins to severely limit the allies we can make and the ways we can spread feminist change in the wider culture.

Being affirmed and supported as a priestess in all-gender communities has helped me realize that the feminist healing work I facilitate is needed and valued by people of all genders, and that the potential for cultural change greatly multiplies when we

*(continued on p. 73)*

# Teaching FEMINISM by Example

*By Kim Scheidt*

By default, intentional community in North America seems to be a haven for middle-class white folk interspersed with a small smattering of individuals of various other ethnic groups. The community where I live follows that same norm for the most part. It is an interesting mix, though, because we also serve as a tourist stop for quite a few visitors and interns from all over the world. I do lament the lack of racial diversity in my everyday life. However, I also try to teach by example—and by mini-lectures to the kids around here—that people are not to be judged based on outer appearances.

My lips still curve into a smile at the memory of what I consider an example of this teaching yielding quality results. A very dark-skinned man from Uganda visited our part of northeast Missouri for a handful of weeks. Upon meeting him for the first time, my then four-year-old daughter turned to me and said quietly, “Michael must have a lot of melanin in his skin.” Brilliant. It was a simple observation of the situation with no judgment whatsoever placed on something that is skin-deep.

Of course, race is not the only cultural divide within the larger population. Societal roles of men and women are a big deal almost everywhere. And I am not surprised that in the alternative culture of intentional community, gender seems to be a much more fluid state than in the mainstream—a multiple-choice question having more than just a few answers.

Societal norms around dress are not so prevalent here. Men regularly wear skirts and it is no big deal. I like that we have adapted our everyday language to account for such diversity by incorporating gender-neutral pronouns into our vocabulary. In introductory classes I’ve attended of activities ranging from acroyoga to co-counseling, instructors have begun by asking the group which pronouns each person prefers to go by. We aren’t so quick to assume that a person by definition is a “he” or a “she.”

A couple of years ago a new resident arrived in the area who identifies as transgendered. He threw a gender-bender dance party for his birthday...and since he and I happen to share a birthday, I got to go to a gender-bender dance party on MY birthday. That was awesome. Seeing so many of my community mates dressing with abandon contra to their typical gender style just warmed my heart. And I certainly loved sporting the sideburns and mustache I drew on myself with purple and gray eyeliner. (The black eyeliner was otherwise being used, and I’m not one to stand around waiting in line when there’s music to be danced to.)

I like to denounce societal brainwashing in general. The process of dismantling sexism is in particular a key issue for me. I support and encourage those around me to question assumptions about traditionally defined gender roles. However, I usually like to phrase it in positive language and say that I’m pro-feminist. The intentional

community network to which I belong also touts feminism as a top value.

I recently corresponded with a person we’ll call John who wrote saying he is in 100 percent alignment with the core principles of my sub-community except possibly for “one which I may be a little fuzzy on the definition of—that would be feminism. What is your definition?”

Now up to that point I had never sat down to think about or put into written words my definition of feminism. My response to John was this:

“Hi John,

“I understand that feminism has different meanings for different people. For me it is mostly about ‘anti-sexism.’ I am interested in ending all oppression of all people for any and all reasons, though for me personally the key issue is sexism which includes both the oppression of women and the oppression of men based on gender. However, it is often women who bear the brunt of sexism (and I am a woman) so that is more my focus. Empowering women, and empowering men is good too.

“I am interested in people who like to look directly at the messages society has almost subconsciously placed in our heads about what females can and can’t do, for what they are valued or not valued, etc. Also questioning this for men I think is important.

“A brief story I read a couple months ago hit home for me as a good analogy. The author was at the beach and saw a man playing in the ocean waves with two

young children about the same size, one boy, one girl, one on each arm. When the big waves came he would brace the boy with his arm (subtly) teaching him to meet the power of the waves head on, that he was strong and capable and needed to face fears and the challenges of life. At the same time, when the waves came, with his other arm he would lift the girl child out of the water up in the air (subtly) teaching her that #1 she is to be treated differently than the boy, #2 she is not strong enough or capable enough to handle the challenges of life, and #3 she needs to rely on a man to 'save' her.

"Even around these communities, supposedly pro-feminist, where I live, there are many times I have experienced hearing a woman voice a particular idea to an individual or group and no one really listens, then a couple minutes (or even seconds) later a man says exactly the same thing and everyone listens, oohs and aahs about this important or brilliant or whatever thing he just said."

My email response went on to rant about further topics not entirely unrelated, but I think you get the gist of it. I'm desirous of equal treatment, equal value placed on the inherent intelligence of us all.

This past summer I hosted a lovely couple as visitors who were entirely new to the communities scene. On the fourth day of their visit, the woman confided to me that when she originally read the blurb I had written on the ic.org directory website citing feminism as a top value of my sub-community, she had been curious what that would look like actually put into practice. She told me she'd had some qualms that I would be overzealous or preachy about women's equality. And what she said to me was that instead she saw that I was acting as an empowered woman. Simply by living my life I am setting an example of what feminism can be, and witnessing it encourages others to act in a similar vein.

Perhaps this role of EMPOWERED WOMAN was forced upon me a little abruptly—to take on certain responsibil-

ities myself when the default typically would have been to outsource them to a male. But I've gathered up the strength to learn new skills and I'm doing it, as well as asking for help and advice from others when I want it. My life is a demonstration project, and I care about empowering others to shrug off the limits we place on ourselves and one another around gender roles and all other typology boxes. I'd like for us to bite our thumbs at society's status quo—to blaze new territory where value is placed on individuals simply for being, and where assumptions are never made about a person based on appearances, sexual orientation, or gender. ♪

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# My Gender Journey, in Family and Community

*By Luke Byrnes*

I come from a homophobic family. Growing up, I would regularly call people “faggot” for any slight involving perceived homosexual or disagreeable behavior. The young men in my family engaged in this kind of language usage with even greater intensity. Looking back, I’m not sure that anyone actually considered the gravity of their statements, or even felt that they had strong feelings about homosexuality. Nonetheless, it was understood that being a faggot wasn’t for us; that it was something that didn’t “afflict” our family. And when my cousin Adam came out of the closet in his 20s, after years of his own apparent hatred toward gay men, no one was surprised at his silent and immediate withdrawal from the annual family get-togethers.

My experience has been that in the mainstream patriarchal society, the conversation on gender is closed. Dissent is silenced. In my case, when my cousin came out and cut his ties with our family, no one felt (and this is still true) comfortable discussing the possibility that he left us because of the rabid homophobia that was expressed so freely over Thanksgiving dinner. Our perceived consensus on the gender controversy was never questioned because it threatened the dominant order. My cousin didn’t leave us, so much as we collectively severed him from one of the prevailing myths of our family. He had to leave to preserve the integrity of the patriarchal myth. Silence prevailed.

During an extended family camping trip when I was 14, my older cousin, who was still a role model at the time, asked me, “What kinda girls you screwin?” My other male cousins quickly chimed in and asked if I had had sex yet. I had not, but the humiliation overwhelmed me and so I lied and said that I had lost my virginity. This cleared the air with everyone and ushered in an invitation to drink beer with them all night.

Experiences like this were frequent throughout my adolescence, both with family and friends, and they always felt coercive, forceful, and false. Where was the space in the conversation for me discussing my female cousins costuming me in dresses and make-up and a stuffed bra when I was 10 and carting me around town? Or what about my posse of eight girls that made up most of my social life when I was 13? And what about my real, visceral, excited, disgusted, humiliated, exhilarated virgin self seeking pretty girls to experiment with sexually in my pubescence? It seemed like there wasn’t enough room for these experiences and these conversations in the dominant culture. There wasn’t room for me.

Before entering into the communities world, I had never lived in a space where these blurry lines could exist and be beautiful. Most recently, I had been living in a neighborhood in Philadelphia with a queer politics legacy. Although I found this environment rich and colorful and just, I never felt comfortable or able to expose the complexity of my own gender and sexuality. I felt that my own sexuality and gender choices were so politically charged in that environment that I could not freely express them without fear of protest or offense.

I had a queer friend in the Philadelphia activist community who had become a mentor. As we became closer I naturally became more affectionate, hugging him, squeezing his shoulders, and patting him on the back. This level of contact bothered him a great deal, and he asked me to stop touching him. I apologized, somewhat surprised at his reaction, and he replied, “It’s okay, because you’re a man, you think everything belongs to you, so

you think it's okay to touch me." He spoke in such a condescending tone that I felt I had no space to explain myself and seek compassion. It seems that the overemphasis of confronting oppressive systems can distort our ability to perceive and process what is actually happening in real day-to-day experience. It was not until I entered the communities world that this intolerance of oppression was tempered by nonviolent communication, deep listening, and group process.

Dominant society tried to convince me my entire life that a man was one thing, not many. It failed. I knew all along, deep in my bones, that I was more complicated, more abundant and bountiful than the strict definitions of manhood that bombarded me from billboards and television and mean older boys. But I had no place or way to crystallize these feelings into expression and understanding until I left the mainstream in search of a community. I arrived, as an intern, at Lost Valley Education Center, a 50+ resident intentional community, nonprofit, and aspiring ecovillage.

At Lost Valley there are men who like to wear dresses and no one asks questions, or even seems to think it unusual. The highest paid staff position belongs to a woman. Our annual permaculture design course is co-taught by two women and one man. Women teach plumbing, natural building, and construction to the interns, alongside a male garden manager. One member of a lesbian couple living as an intern at Lost Valley spoke out about feeling more comfortable being a gay couple at Lost Valley than anywhere else they had been. For sure, dominant culturally-defined gender roles are being flipped on their head here.

On one occasion, the lesbian couple from the internship got into a lengthy discussion about gender with my partner and me and a middle-aged woman that was staying at Lost Valley for a short stint. In a calm and fruitful discussion, we shared our viewpoints. The lesbians thought that gender was entirely a social construct, and that the reproductive organs were minor differences compared to the history and violence of patriarchy. The middle-aged woman had given birth to both of her children in her living room. She felt that the ability to carry a new human life inside her body was so profound and completely unique to women that no male, however much they identified with the feminine, could relate to this pillar of her and all women's experience. My partner listened and shared. I listened. To hear the symphony of a calm clash between a 20-year-old radical feminist lesbian and a 44-year-old divine feminine Pachamama—I think that's why I came to community. Their conversation was the whole purpose of the space, of the vision, the "project."

While trying to document my experience and views about gender at Lost Valley my tendency was to assume that everything was hunky dory because I was viewing it through my own lens, the lens of a white, heterosexual male. Give the women a voice at meetings, equal pay, and jobs often reserved for men and the problem's solved, right? Of course, when it plays out on the ground, everything is a lot more complicated than that. The reality is that from the point of view of a male at Lost Valley, not much has changed, and in some ways the situation has improved as I described above. I was empowered

as a male in dominant society, and I am even more empowered as a male at Lost Valley. This makes my views on gender in our community unreliable because they rest upon my privilege. I had to get the feminine perspective to present a better picture for you, my reader. I also wanted to achieve a form of justice for women through my writing by getting their viewpoints printed, so I set out to interview and converse with several women from the community about gender at Lost Valley.

In speaking with the women at Lost Valley, I found no shortage of dissent about the operations of both the intentional community itself and the nonprofit. Those I spoke with felt that the situation at Lost Valley was generally an improvement over the experience for women and feminine men in dominant society. But they also voiced several pertinent concerns. In our conversations about gender, femininity, and masculinity at Lost Valley, we were able to uncover several potentially damaging tendencies within the community that we hope to remedy by first describing them here for all to see.

One of the most prominent and dan-





gerous extensions of the mainstream has been Lost Valley's continuation of dominant society's tradition of denigrating childcare. "There is a disconnect between the desire to have children as part of the community, and realizing the extent of the investment needed," as one of the mothers I spoke with put it. Each of the single parents I interviewed was experiencing a strong conflict between participation in community and governing gatherings, and providing or finding childcare. Some of them pay other residents to babysit so they can attend and be mentally present at meetings. The community has tried to be inclusive of everyone, but when it plays out in reality, it is as though there is a cover charge for attending community meetings that applies only to single parents. Even though children are often tended for free, parents feel obligated to pay at least some of the time.

As in the mainstream, it seems that the labor of the primary caregiver is not accounted for in the economy at Lost Valley. As one of the women put it, "You always hear, 'Good job for taking care of this or that proj-

ect for the community or nonprofit,' but not, 'Good job at feeding and loving your daughter and making the two-hour commute every day to drop her off at school so that you can go to work to pay the bills.'" To one of the single mothers, the lack of respect for how difficult it is to raise a child alone was exemplified in the book *Creating a Life Together*, which draws on various episodes that took place at Lost Valley for some of its source material. She thought the portrayal of a single mother in one of the chapters—who was involved in a conflict with the Lost Valley community—was stereotyped, and made her look needy and victimized. She expressed a desire for a more positive representation of successful and strong single mothers.

All of the women expressed a sense that the business meetings for the nonprofit often have a masculine tendency. We struggled to articulate what this meant, but it was felt clearly and distinctly by each of them. What we gathered was that there was an overemphasis on compartmentalization. I interviewed a long-time staff member who has sometimes worked at Lost Valley as the only female on the administrative body of the nonprofit. She explained that there was a tendency to view situations in each department as though "nothing was related." This is due in part to the overwhelming task of making the operation at Lost Valley work, but she also feels that the lack of integrated, holistic, feminine thinking has been problematic here. According to the women, meetings can often feel too rigid, and discussion cut off. "There's an expectation that there should be no interruptions," even if those interruptions are

important peripheral details or a baby crying. We all agreed that "production" often dominates life here and is readily prioritized over meeting the needs of our relationships with one another and ourselves.

Our conversations helped articulate a feeling that Lost Valley bore resemblance to some of the same social structures in the dominant culture that we wanted to change. This doesn't mean the project isn't making life better for all us, because it clearly is, and we all agreed on this. It simply means we have a few leaks that we need to fix and we feel blessed we can figure it out together. The space that we maintain here invites discussion about these sensitive topics, and I think the conversations that I documented above are a testament to that. These conversations were casual and happened out in the open, often with several other community members within earshot. We discussed these contentious and incendiary issues because we all understood

that dissent is a fundamental ingredient for change to occur.

And partly as a result of these conversations—and of conversations which would have hap-

pened even without my working on this article—people are now addressing many of the concerns I uncovered in my interviews. Even as I made final revisions on this article, a childcare cooperative was forming, and members were considering proposals to make parents' (and children's) attendance at community meetings much easier. I expect this article will stimulate even further discussions of gender issues within the culture of Lost Valley, and we will continue to evolve in addressing them.

At Lost Valley, I found safety in my confusion with gender and sexuality. The traditions that many of us inherited from our experience outside of community life are being scrutinized, slowly, one by one. We have a lot of healing work to do together as we try to evolve in a direction that satisfies our needs for being treated as whole, complex beings. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. Like a young sapling growing out of a clearcut, we reach for the sky, holding close to the memory of the grandeur and rightness of the old growth forest that gave birth to us. 🌿

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**We have a lot of healing work to do together as we try to satisfy our needs for being treated as whole, complex beings.**

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*Luke Byrnes is a person just like you. He yearns for freedom, joy, the sensuous, play, connection, and security. To pass the time, he enjoys reading, writing, living in the community of life, skiing, gardening, conversing, and playing with family and friends. He is a student of poesis. He is searching for a poetry of life that bends the world in on itself in a way that, when read or experienced, bursts into flame and drifts into the ethereal. He currently lives and works at Lost Valley in Dexter, Oregon ([www.lostvalley.org](http://www.lostvalley.org)).*

# Healing Gender Issues through Community

By Marcus DeGauche

How could this be happening? For years I had prided myself on maintaining friendships with both women and men, not playing “favorites” (or so I thought), or at least not getting pulled into strong uncomfortable emotions that I often saw accompanying romantic relationships. I *could* accept strong emotions of attraction and love (which almost inevitably settled on women); but what about aversion and antipathy (which men more typically brought forth in me, especially if those men were linked to women I liked). I had maintained my equanimity partly by avoiding all situations where an “other” male might awaken such feelings. I had often steered away from possible romance because of this potential conflict. I hated holding someone else as an “enemy”; I hated feeling their antipathy toward me, and hated my own wish that they would disappear.

And yet, there they were: those skin-crawling emotions, accompanying the equally skin-tingling emotions I was much more fond of. For the first time in many years, I was in love! What’s more, I was in love with a community-mate, who lived on the same beautiful piece of rural land as I did. So why was I also in such a yucky state of dislike? Why did I simultaneously consider a woman the most special person to me in the world, and an associated male as the one person who was most interfering with my unfettered happiness? If I were truly gender-blind, as I had attempted to be for decades, why was I now starting to want all males except me to vanish from the earth, or at least from my immediate vicinity?

While it would have been easy to blame intentional community for the situation that was causing me turmoil, the roots of my turmoil stretched significantly deeper than the topsoil of my current situation. Our polyamorous experiment in a small intentional community in rural Vermont seemed a long way from my mainstream upbringing on the opposite coast—but it brought up emotions I hadn’t felt so strongly since childhood.

## Relationship and Community as Mirrors

“A relationship is like a mirror. It reflects everything we have been avoiding. It has the power to reveal our divine potential as well as the darkest recesses of our shadow side. Loving, intimate relationship has a tendency to stir up all our old hurts, traumas, insecurities, fears, and control issues. Sooner or later, we must recognize and embrace the parts of ourselves and our loved ones that we’ve been avoiding, suppressing, and denying. When we use a

*Photos accompanying this article are used by kind permission of Bread and Puppet Theater (Glover, Vermont; breadandpuppet.org) and the photographers. They depict scenes from the group’s “Birdcatcher in Hell” production (pp. 45, 47) and the Bread and Puppet Museum (pp. 46, 48, 49).*



Massimo Schuster

loving relationship as a mirror to see who we truly are and what we have been hiding from, we enter the process of Self-discovery that moves us toward internal integration.”

A friend recently sent me the wise words above, excerpted from Yogi Amrit Desai’s article “The Yoga of Relationship” ([www.amrityoga.org/more-teachings/yogarelationship.html](http://www.amrityoga.org/more-teachings/yogarelationship.html)). Substitute the word “community” for “relationship,” and this statement may be just as true. When we combine the two—intimate relationship *and* community—the mirror can become impossible to deny, and the opportunities for awareness, acceptance, and healing doubly powerful as well.

## Leaving It to Beaver

I grew up in a stereotypical ’50s-era middle-class US family, as “wholesome” as they’ve probably ever come in human history. Although we resided just outside Hollywood, our lives were anything but dramatic. My parents obviously loved each other, my brother, and me, and took good care of us. We ate together every night, went to church together, vacationed together, and were the most important people in one another’s lives. We were materially and emotionally secure—or should have been. Because of that “should,” a fairly wide range of emotions were never accepted or acknowledged—and usually not even expressed.

Part of me dwelt in that comfortable reality, in which my family and I lived in harmony and nothing was “wrong.” Anger, resentment, rivalry, jealousy, and similar feelings had no place in this world. Beneath the placid surface, however, another emotional reality lurked. Because it was suppressed, it gained power. And it instilled a lot of shame in me, because I knew I had “no good reason” to feel some of the feelings I *was also* feeling (in addition to love and appreciation for my caring family, which could become dulled beyond recognition at times, because emotional suppression is not entirely selective).

What was the problem? Sometimes I’ve thought I had a combination of an Oedipal complex and a Cain complex. I never did kill my father, even in my imagination; and the only time I killed my brother was in a dream, and I immediately regretted it; but nevertheless part of my subconscious often wanted them to disappear so that I could have my mother to myself. In this region of my inner reality, my mother became

my unwavering ally, and my father and brother my enemies. Even in “real life,” I almost always felt more connected to my mother, and more distant from my father and brother, and noticed that my temperament more closely resembled hers than theirs. In my least happy years, that awareness of greater difference between us could easily morph into annoyance and

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## Within my family, I grew to see the Female as my ally, and the Male as my enemy.

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even animosity. Within my family, I grew to see the Female as my ally, and the Male (of which I felt almost ashamed to be a representative, for reasons also extending far beyond my own family) as my enemy.

Strangely enough, these emotions, though strong, were not fixed or unchanging. When all four of us were together, I frequently found myself feeling close to my mother and estranged from or judgmental of my father and brother. (In hindsight, I came to believe that we three males were all acting as rivals for my mother’s attention, in competition with one another—although somehow my father and brother had formed an apparent alliance in this.) But on those rare occasions when my mother would travel, leaving us three males alone for a week or so at a time, things changed markedly. As if miraculously, I and my father/brother would stop reacting negatively to one another, or being habitually silent with one another—we’d start to reach out and appreciate one another. We’d find a genuine comfort in each other’s company that never was present in the same way when my mother was part of the equation. And as soon as my mother returned, my feeling of estrangement from them would return as well.

## No Words for the Shadow

We never discussed this dynamic. We didn’t have words for it, nor did it fit into the image that others had of us, and that we



Jack Sumberg

had of ourselves, as a wholesome, trouble-free family. Wherever these very inconvenient emotions may have come from—and perhaps that didn't matter—there seemed no way out of them. In addition to the ongoing distress they caused me, they also instilled in me a sense of shame and a pattern of emotional suppression that extended to all areas of my life.

I think of this as the Shadow Reality of my childhood. The Sunny Reality of my childhood is one of many happy memories and genuine love among all of us. Especially when I talk with others about their often traumatic upbringings, I recognize that my relatively happy childhood was particularly blessed—making it is easy to push aside the Shadow Side as if it never existed. Yet that emotional underbelly did exist, gained power from my denial of it, and sometimes seemed like a terrible rut from which I'd never escape. I grew accustomed to living in those two emotional worlds, but only feeling good about one of them.

### Independence and New Approaches

Eventually, the years brought independence and adulthood. With distance from my family, and more of my own life to live, I was able to loosen the ties of sometimes unhealthy emotional



Massimo Schuster

amount of relief as I found apparent freedom from the bondage of those uncomfortable and apparently-impossible-to-deal-with-or-even-talk-about family gender dynamics of my childhood.

To achieve that independence, I had moved to the other side of the country. I found myself in rural New England, hotbed of conscious, back-to-the-land countercultural awakening—far from what I came to see as the artificiality and superficiality of Los Angeles County. I became involved with the intentional communities movement, lived in several communal settings, and finally found a long-term home in a community in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont.

As a young adult and even into my 30s and 40s, I never tried to replicate a nuclear family—I focused on building my larger extended community family. I had few intimate relationships, believing that either they weren't important to me or that I wasn't cut out for them.

By constructing my life the way I did, I perhaps unconsciously steered away from situations that would have brought up the uncomfortable feelings of gender-related rivalry and conflict that had plagued the Shadow Side of my childhood. I'd sometimes have flashes of those feelings again: several times, I developed crushes and relatively close friendships with female community-mates who were already partnered with males from whom I felt much more

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## I succeeded for many years in avoiding the core issues that had shaped many of my choices and relationships throughout life.

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dependence and unspoken conflict. My relationships with the individuals in my family of birth matured. My feelings of competition, rivalry, and jealousy in relation to my brother and my father subsided and finally fell away. While I could still experience judgment or annoyance, they had lost much of their power. In fact, after awakening to some of the ways that I had distanced myself from them, and deeply regretting it, I made conscious efforts to rebuild bridges—efforts that eventually succeeded. I felt a great

distance. But those dynamics always resolved themselves without it becoming imperative to work through those deeper, lifelong issues they had started to bring up: dislike of a perceived rival for a favored female's attention, and by extension dislike on some level for men in general.

I backed away from most potential intimate partners, largely because I had developed a story that I was unfit emotionally for a typical romantic relationship. I felt resigned to that story, without necessarily seeing its connection to unresolved gender-related issues from my childhood. I succeeded for many years, even decades, in avoiding the core issues that had shaped many of my choices and relationships throughout life.

### Jolted into the Present

I might have sailed along fine this way, in avoidance, without the events of September 11, 2001. As it did for many, that day shook up my reality in multiple ways. It



Jack Sumberg

impacted me personally because some of my close friends' friends lost their lives. It also gave me more understanding than I'd ever had of the fleeting nature of my own physical existence—and my good fortune at being alive at all. (I myself was almost in lower Manhattan when the planes struck, on a very rare visit to New York City; only a delayed train kept me from being there.)

I didn't know immediately that everything had changed for me, but it had. Over the next year, newly aware of mortality and emboldened to live and stretch my boundaries while I still could, I opened up to others in ways I hadn't before. In particular, I found myself considering the first intimate relationship I'd had in years.

This relationship would not have happened, *could* not have happened, outside the context of intentional community. And it brought me face to face with my family-of-origin "gender issues" as nothing in the previous 30 years had done. Ultimately, it offered healing. It was extraordinarily complex—kind of like life in community. At the same time, it was one of the most simple, essential, basic experiences I'd ever had—also like life in community.

## The Architecture of Intimacy

In our rural, land-based community on shared land in the

Northeast Kingdom, we don't have the fences or property lines that separate most "normal" modern households. In fact, we don't even have "normal" houses. Most of us live in small cabins or converted barns with minimal or no kitchen facilities; we share a communal kitchen/dining room and several other common buildings. We are in one another's lives all the time, partly as a result of architecture and physical layout, partly because of our desire to be a close-knit neighborhood and the ways we've designed our community's functioning and culture.

Age, class, educational background, sexual orientation, and other characteristics that often influence the formation of social circles and associations in the mainstream don't appear to matter much here in determining friendships. We are surprisingly diverse in these areas (though politically, we are all significantly left of center and/or green), yet our friendships seem to evolve from our connections on a heart/soul level, unimpeded by superficial differences. We are all dedicated to cultural experimentation, to shaking up assumptions, to supporting one another in finding individual and collective freedom from blind adherence to dominant paradigms.

In this open-hearted, convention-defying setting, the ground has always been fertile for polyamory and unconventional relationships. And after many years of steering clear of such entanglements, that's exactly where I found myself.

## In the Stars, or Star-Crossed?

Cynthia and I had had a long courtship, though neither of us had been thinking of it that way at first (she was in an apparently committed monogamous relationship). Over the course of several years, we had grown closer, and I'd noticed significant attraction, which, I started to suspect, went both ways. More than a year into our friendship, she'd told me that she aspired to be polyamorous, and that she believed her partner would eventually be open to it—though we didn't discuss who might be involved in any new relationship she had. A number of months later, after he'd agreed "in principle" to polyamory, we found

ourselves starting that experiment. Its allure had become irresistible, despite a significant age gap and many other differences that became increasingly obvious over

time. And while physical attraction certainly played a role, I do believe it was also a genuine love that brought us together.

Unfortunately, her other partner, Rob, did not celebrate this new love. In fact, once polyamory moved from principle to practice, he reacted strongly against it. He and I had been friends, at least until he sensed where Cynthia's and my friendship was headed. Now, he was upset with both of us.

Without describing all the events of the next several months, I

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**In this open-hearted, convention-defying setting, the ground has always been fertile for polyamory and unconventional relationships.**

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can say this: at times I was amazed that our experiment in unconventional relationships was going as well as it was—that Rob and I were inhabiting the same intentional community and being civil to each other, even sharing some meals together, rather than challenging each other to fights (as rivals for a woman’s attention might have done in more conventional settings). And at times—especially when his reaction against our attempt at polyamory ended up solidifying rather than softening as Cynthia and I had hoped it would, and thus cast doubt on the long-term viability of our new relationship—the situation seemed miserable.

Rob and I had tried to “talk it out,” and even seemed to be making progress, but eventually we reached a standstill. After a while he no longer even looked my direction, and there was apparently nothing I could do to change that. Theoretically (per our understanding of polyamory), love was limitless and each expression or experience of love was only going to create more love and happiness for everyone—but in real life, Rob felt extremely threatened by Cynthia’s and my love for one another, even though it wasn’t meant to exclude him, and he was in great distress, rather than being happy for us.

### A Turn for the Worse

Cynthia realized that he wasn’t going to “come around” any time soon. To try to achieve some peace in the household, and because of the general strain that the situation had brought about, she pulled back to a significant extent from our new relationship. Now, my discomfort with Rob morphed into a wish that he would just disappear from the scene. After all, he stood between me and happiness. I had liked him once—but now, he was the archetypal male kill-joy. Why did men always ruin my happiness? My world narrowed down, closed in on itself. Here I was, living in a place that was intended to be a model of healthy relationships, “living the dream”—and I felt like a fraud, with an inner emotional reality entirely out of sync with what my life was supposed to be about.

The feelings were so familiar—and they seemed to come from so long ago.

I realized that Rob had become indistinguishable, in my emotional world, from my father and my brother as I remembered them back in my childhood home. I found this profoundly disturbing. So much for having grown up and achieved freedom...

No longer could I deny that my family-of-origin gender issues still lurked in my psyche—and that they could still dominate it given the “right” conditions. Was there any way out this time, other than running away? I had invested a lot in my relationships within this community, especially with Cynthia and Rob. The prospect of fleeing seemed heartbreaking. While

I didn’t see a clear way out of the extremely distressing emotions I was experiencing, I knew by now to expect the unexpected, and that patience and trust can yield surprising outcomes. I didn’t jump ship.

### Recalibrations and New Beginnings

Fortunately, nothing in life is truly stagnant. Our experiment in polyamory was doomed to dissolve, and it did. (We came to realize that this had been inevitable—as we heard from mul-

multiple polyamorists, functional polyamory needs to be based on a strong foundation of consent and commitment to making it work among all

involved.) Yet this dissolution led to further opportunities for growth. Cynthia, Rob, and I remained community-mates—in fact, we lived within sight of each other, and participated on some of the same work-teams. We couldn’t have avoided each other if we’d tried.

Cynthia and I had gone through some ups and downs during our romantic relationship, even independent of Rob’s influence on it. Post-relationship, in the absence of the affirmation of affection through sexual connection, we experienced some even stronger “downs” than we’d had as lovers, with fewer “ups” to balance them out. Simultaneously, the strain in Cynthia’s

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## I had liked Rob once—but now, he was the archetypal male kill-joy. Why did men always ruin my happiness?

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Jack Sumberg

relationship with Rob—a disharmony which had already been present and substantial before the polyamory experiment—continued to grow even with a return to monogamy. The iciness between Rob and me began to melt.

And soon it was Rob I felt much closer to, as we both were experiencing strain and hurt in our connections with Cynthia. Eventually, Rob and Cynthia separated romantically, and Rob and I discovered we probably had more in common with each other than we had with anyone else in the community, in terms of recent relationship experiences and even some core inner qualities (those same qualities that had bonded each of us with Cynthia, while also creating the dances of polarity we each had with her).

We talked with each other in moments of distress, when we needed someone to listen who would understand the pain we felt and the situation that had precipitated it. We offered each other perspectives that the two of us were in unique positions to have gathered. We found a level of trust with one another that I could never have anticipated during those times of intense rivalry for Cynthia's attention, when on some level we had each wanted—despite the desire to be a better, more enlightened person than that—for the other to disappear.

We even felt safe discussing the love and attraction we both still felt for Cynthia—though Rob, more than I, had concluded that he was “done for good” with any kind of romantic connection with her. We talked in a way that didn't seem to escalate our personal hurts, but helped release them; it never felt like “ganging up,” but rather trying to achieve understanding. It opened the door to renewed appreciation in each of us of the person we had both loved, while also affirming the importance of our own self-care, respecting our own needs and boundaries in relating with her or with anyone else.

### And More...

In fact, once this new landscape of trust and openness was firmly established between Rob and me, Cynthia and I also started spending more time together again. And, as I hadn't imagined in those dark days of apparently total separation from her, at times she and I even explored our connection physically again—developments I did not hide from Rob, but shared as I would with any good friend. My connections with Cynthia and Rob were obviously far from mutually exclusive, all-or-nothing propositions, as they'd once appeared—I came to understand they were complementary, and that I could value and cultivate both of them without imperiling either.

For perhaps the first time in my life, the Female and Male were not forces I needed to choose between. I could embrace them both, fully. I started to sense what “internal integration,” as described by Yogi Amrit Desai, might mean—and to get an inkling that it might be happening to me.

What had seemed like a lifelong, subconscious schism in my world—both within and without—suddenly, miraculously, appeared to knit itself together. It seemed to not only bridge itself, but to join together as if one land mass—one with diverse terrain, rather like the Northeast Kingdom: some steep and challenging to traverse, other parts easy to enjoy and relax in, but all of it beautiful and worthy of wonder, and none of it cut off from the rest of it, or from me.

### Appreciating a Perfect Storm

Though I'd eventually made peace with the males in my family of origin, I had obviously never successfully worked through the inner issues predisposing me toward estrangement from my own gender—the “Shadow Side” I had worked so hard to

deny. It took the perfect storm of a relationship with an already-partnered woman in a close-knit intentional community, where there was no way to escape from or avoid the other

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**What had seemed like a lifelong, subconscious schism in my world suddenly, miraculously, appeared to knit itself together.**

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people involved, to not only bring those issues to the forefront, but to present an opportunity to heal them.

And although difficult experiences in love often seem to lead to a callousing or shutting down, this experience seemed more to crack me open. It brought me to new experiences of honesty with a lover, with friends, and with community-mates alike—irrespective of gender. It revolutionized my inner emotional world. It expanded my capacity to love, and allowed me to fall permanently in love with those who contributed to this journey. It didn't make me permanently happy—I still experienced wants, desires, neediness, loneliness, a wishing-for-things-that-aren't—but it helped me see that my allies in life are everywhere (including within myself), regardless of anatomy, sexual orientation, or anything else. I'm thankful. 🐾

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*Marcus DeGauche is a long-time communitarian, Bernie Sanders supporter ([www.bernie.org](http://www.bernie.org)), Bread and Puppet fan ([breadandpuppet.org](http://breadandpuppet.org)), Ben and Jerry's ex-customer ([www.unilever.com/brands-in-action/view-brands.aspx](http://www.unilever.com/brands-in-action/view-brands.aspx)), and pseudonymous contributor to COMMUNITIES. Some names and details have been changed to protect the innocent and well-intentioned (everyone in this story). The author thanks the editor for aid in wordsmithing, rearranging, and helping make head or tail of this tale.*

# Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

## Sharing a Heartfelt Conversation

By Niánn Emerson Chase

I realize that gender identity and sexual orientation for any individual are very complex issues, with not only biological factors but also environmental, social, and cultural elements to consider. In our modern society, with its fast pace and digital device onslaught, we all need to slow down and take time to have honest and thoughtful conversations about this sensitive and important aspect of today's culture.

I lived most of my childhood on an Apache reservation in Arizona. I grew up in a home where my mother and father had strongly-identified female and male roles. Both parents were comfortable with their identities within our family arrangement as woman, mother, homemaker and man, father, provider, protector. My three siblings and I benefited greatly from our parents' mutual commitment to their shared spiritual ideals and to their family, as well as their ease and harmony with their gender identities.

We children also benefited from the wide range of friends and associates of our family who were of different cultures, religions, politics, and social leanings. None of us felt pressure from our parents to be exactly like them but rather to become what God designed us to be—the smartest, most compassionate, and ethical women and men that we could become, always doing what was right in the eyes of the Creator. I still have that basic theological foundation and hopefully have passed it on to my children, grandchildren, and all of those in the spiritually-based intentional community that I co-founded.

Living on the reservation, I had friends who experienced the various dynamics and circumstances that plague families living in dire poverty and racial discrimination. So even though I came from a harmonious and well-ordered home with much love and support, many of my friends did not have that stable foundation of physical, emotional, social, and economic security. Regardless of our different racial, cultural, and economic circumstances, my friends and I still shared the struggles of living in the larger dominant culture, which I grew to consider greedy, materialistic, and run by imbalanced white males. These men determined the politics and social standards of our nation, that in turn perpetrated the environmental and social ills that we all still suffer from today in various ways.

As children and youth, we females wrestled with our own perceptions of our self-worth because of the societal messages we accepted from our peers in school, from most human institutions, and from the media of the larger society—messages that indicated females were not as worthy



*A beautiful circle of sharing and appreciation in honor of one of our community's beloved sisters.*

Ellanora DesManae DellErba, Global Change Multi-Media



*The most important thing for any soul is to grow into a sense of personhood, being "at home" within her or his personality, and having self-esteem.*

as males. Many of my friends received those kinds of messages from their own grandfathers, fathers, and brothers, some even suffering physical and psychological abuse as females, which enraged me.

An especially strong message for us females in our young years was that if we girls were not pretty and sexy, we were not cool, and most females have carried this "programming" into their womanhood, which still deeply affects how they see themselves as human beings. But many males suffer too from this type of programming and do not meet their potential as whole human beings who are able to be in truly loving, complementary relationships. I eventually came to the realization that any type of societal programming that promotes misunderstanding and any kind of prejudice, bullying, and social injustice harms both the victims and the victimizers.

In my grade-school years I handled any male bully or sexist by simply beating the hell out of him, so any male friends I did have (and I had quite a few) appreciated my "tom-boy" ways, and I became their "equal," even though I was a girl. In my teen years I had outgrown my angry reactions to male bullies and withdrew from all male and female peers who pressured me to become something I was not and did not want to become. I became an

excellent student and studied independently, feeding my ever-expanding curiosity about reality on this world.

In college I became more radical in my views of social and political issues and proactively took part in the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements that were all going on simultaneously in the 1960s and into the early '70s. I had an active social life with a large group of friends who shared some of my passions, but my closest friends were those who shared my love of spirituality, which was applied in every aspect of our lives.

Though I have always been consistent in my own gender identity as female and in my heterosexuality, I have had friends—from childhood on—who were not so clear in their own identity or sexual orientation and some who changed their sexual orientations in mid-life. I grew up with two

males who always seemed uncomfortable in their "maleness," and eventually both, as adults, identified themselves as females and now dress and act within that identity.

One of my closest female friends, whose friendship has lasted from third grade into the present, displayed much confusion and distress over her mother's tremendous pressure to be a "fluffy" girl and do all of the girly things expected of her. After a stressful marriage with a man that involved having a child and experiencing a deep sense of betrayal when he had an affair with one of her "best" friends, she divorced him and spent many years in and out of lesbian relationships that never panned out. Finally, she found a woman with whom she has been in a committed relationship for many years, though she still seems to be tortured about her gender identity.

As souls ascending, we humans are born into physical mechanisms (bodies) that in most cases are either female or male. I believe that within divine pattern the God-gifted personality circuitry of each individual fits the body of that person, thus being either female or male in gender identity. But due to many reasons, not every person identifies with the gender body with which she or he was born.

Interestingly, within the Apache culture is a beautiful tradition that promotes self-esteem for both genders—the Sunrise Ceremony for a girl at the threshold of womanhood, in her puberty years. This takes at least one year of planning and preparation, involving the whole extended family and friends of the designated girl, and culminates in a three-day, coming-of-age ceremony for the entire tribe/community. Throughout the process, the men have well-defined roles and the women have theirs, and they work closely together to create this spiritually-based, socially-uplifting ceremony.

The year (or more) planning process provides the opportunity for communion and cooperation among family and friends, with love and support extended to each other in the careful, methodical training and preparation that is given to a girl-becoming-a-woman. Ideally all persons involved can experience a sense of self and place within a loving family and community that gives the message that all individuals, female and male, are highly valued and needed.

In the decades that I have attended these ceremonies, I continue to observe and personally experience the tremendous sense of healthy pride and respect that the people have for each other during those three days. Even those individuals who are handicapped in some manner, or "different" from most, are treated with love and

included in some function that makes them an integral part of the event. If only this sense of personal and social “wellness” could be extended for the rest of the year, but unfortunately those three days have not yet been integrated into the whole of the culture of the reservation for the rest of the year. Nor has the overcontrolling dominant culture changed enough to provide the opportunities needed for each individual, family, and society to unfold into the divine pattern of wholeness, wellness, and personality integration.

Here in the culture of the EcoVillage at Avalon Gardens, we have implemented our own form of coming-of-age ceremonies for our girls and boys respectively, which include a series of activities over a two-year period for children of pre-puberty and puberty ages. The entire community is involved at some level, with a team of parents, school instructors, and mentors being part of the planning. For the children, the two-year process includes individual vision-questing, artistic creations, rugged and gentler outdoor activities, study and contemplation, interaction with older mentors, service projects, and so on.

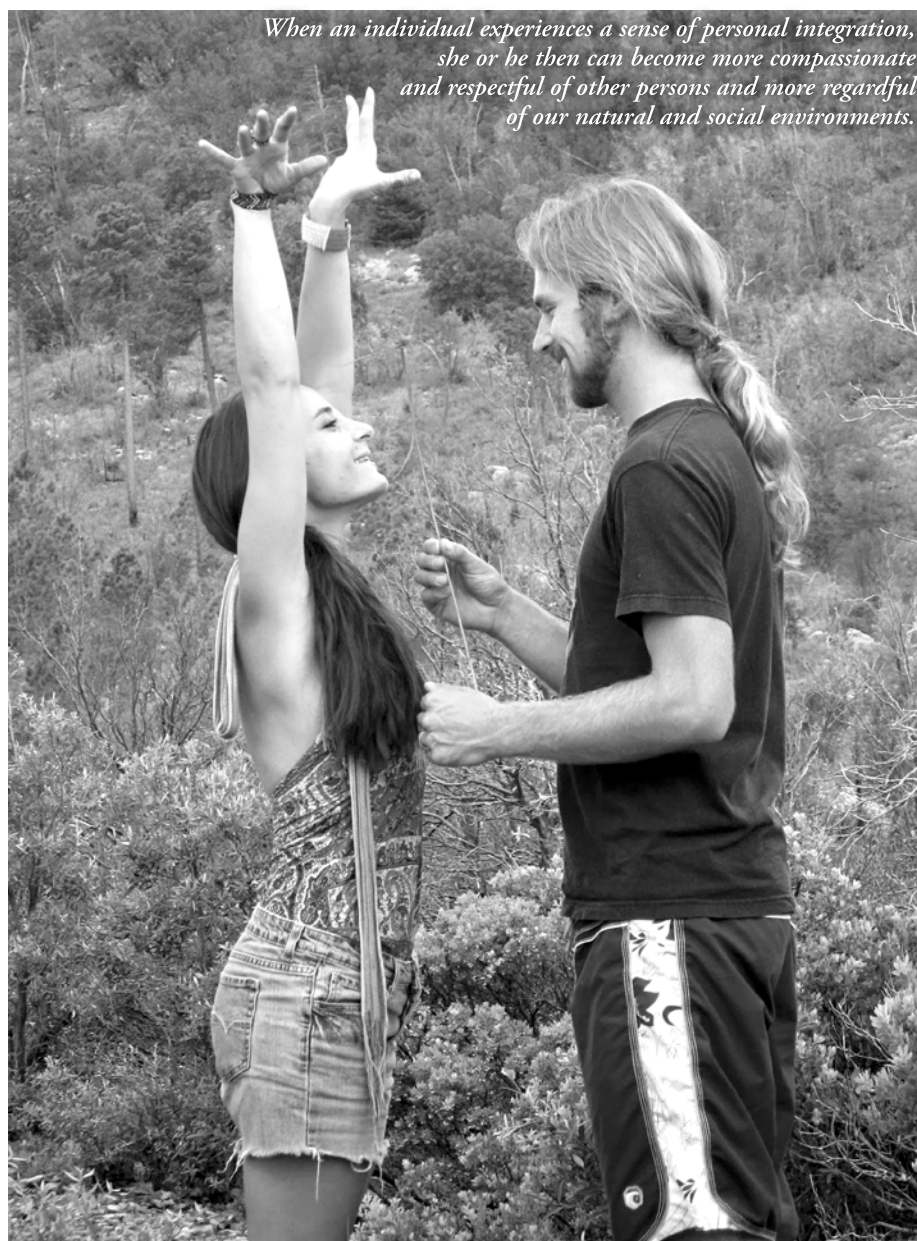
The purpose of these various activities is to assist each girl and boy to identify with her or his unique individuality as a person, a soul ascending. The most important thing for any soul is to grow into a sense of personhood, being “at home” within her or his personality, and having self-esteem. When an individual experiences a sense of personality integration, she or he then can become more compassionate and respectful of other persons and more regardful of our natural and social environments.

What our community realizes is that ecosystems, social systems, and person systems are interrelated and cannot be separated when trying to solve the many problems and ills within ourselves, as well as in our world, which include inequality of opportunities, spiritual and economic poverty, physical and psychological violence, the unraveling of most ecosystems, and so on.

When an individual is confused and imbalanced within her or his personhood, then she or he is not encircled with her or his true Creator-given personality and thus experiences a sense of lostness and not knowing oneself. That lack of personality integration can result in various mental and social disorders that are acted out in many ways, one of them being difficulty in relating to those of the opposite gender or anyone who is considered “different.” So, as with the coming-of-age activities for children, we adults need coming-of-age experiences throughout our lives to assist us in the unfoldment into our personality integration and ability to relate to others more lovingly and respectfully.

Intentional community living can provide opportunities daily for individuals to feel loved, supported, and assisted in their own healing and growth. The culture of congruency that is more possible in an intentional community can provide a paradigm for living with compassion and respect for others as ascending souls, children of God. The entire community culture can be designed to help individuals outgrow various unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that are disrespectful and at times even hateful to others.

And community offers something else wonderful: the gift of a genuinely “safe” environment, where ideally the sexual pressures and “images” of men  
*(continued on p. 75)*



Ellanora DesManae DellErba, Global Change Multi-Media

# MARGARET AND ME

## The Iron Lady Becomes an Unexpected Ally

*By Andrew Moore*

*Editor's Note: In the eyes of some, as Conservative Party Leader for 15 years and Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher turned stereotypical gender traits on their head, embodying more masculine-associated qualities than even the most hard-nosed male politicians of her day. Many of the "Iron Lady's" policies seemed to epitomize right-wing hostility to egalitarian and feminist ideals. Yet in at least one case, she became an unexpected ally to "anarchist, subversive" change-makers working for cooperative housing for the homeless. Here, a key player shares the inside story...*

It was not my idea and I could have spoken against it, but it was the first decision the housing cooperative had taken completely on its own. Inviting Margaret Thatcher to open the cooperative's first newly built apartment building in North London surprisingly turned out to be a brilliant decision and a game changer for us all.

I and some friends had started a not-for-profit cooperative agency housing homeless people in London. One of our land purchases had been a sizable green field site next to a golf course in the leafy lanes of outer London in the borough of Finchley. As project manager and architect I had played a big part in helping a group of single parents and their children from disparate overcrowded inner city council estates come together to form a cooperative.

It was a bit of social engineering on our part, moving working class families into the heart of Tory land where they would live in and manage this property and support each other in splendid suburbia. I felt I should do everything I could to help them fit it. Having Margaret Thatcher MP for Finchley give her blessing to the project would be a good start.

I had already had several encounters with Mrs. Thatcher and none of them had been very pleasant, hence my reluctance to engage with her again. I especially did not want to give her the opportunity to gain kudos from this housing project when her own policies would never have allowed such a scheme. The cooperative decision had had unanimous member support so I went along with it.

My first encounter with Mrs. T. had been a strange one. It took place when I was 17 years old and still at school. Just as I was mastering the art of subterfuge against anything establishment, to my great surprise the priests and Head Master made

me Head Boy at the Catholic Public School I attended in Finchley. I could hardly get out of it as my parents, who were spending a fortune on school fees, considered this a great honour. One of my duties at the end of the year, on prize-giving day, was to give a speech of thanks to the visiting dignitary that gave out the prizes, which were usually great tomes of books describing the lives of the saints. This year the guest of honour was to be the local member for parliament, Margaret Thatcher!

The headmaster told me that it was tradition for the Head Boy not to read his speech but to memorize it. On the night, desperately trying to focus on the few paragraphs I had to deliver to the whole school including the parents, I walked onto the side of the stage at the appointed time. The Head Master was finishing a very long-winded list of his school achievements when I found myself standing next to Margaret Thatcher. She looked me up and down and whispered, "Head Boy, your shoe laces are undone." I looked down and they were not. "Head Boy, you had better do them up or you will trip," she insisted.

I bent down to retie my laces just as the Head Master had introduced me over the microphone. I looked up to see the whole hall looking at me quizzically as I appeared to be genuflecting at Margaret Thatcher's feet. Needless to say, by the time I reached the microphone my speech had completely flown out of my head. Luckily I had written it on a piece of paper in my pocket and after an agonizing few moments I found the speech, read the first line, and the rest came back to me.

The second run-in was a bit more serious. The late 1960s, with the Labour Party in power, saw a swing to economic prosperity and a massive spending on public sector infrastructure projects. Thousands of houses were compulsorily purchased from their owners in the inner boroughs of London



so that they could be demolished to make way for school and hospital extensions as well as major road-widening schemes. By the early '70s unfortunately the economy had suddenly nosedived and none of the ambitious projects could be afforded any longer. Thousands of handsome five- and six-story stucco Georgian and Edwardian houses were left to rot as there was not even enough money to demolish them.

By this time I was an architect and with some friends had formed an agency to house homeless people in inner London. We saw an amazing opportunity. All we had to do was provide some links and resources to encourage homeless people to occupy all these abandoned empty properties. We wrote *The Squatters' Handbook*, a do-it-yourself house repair manual for people who had very little money or building skills.

Whilst my colleagues had written the chapters on how to get the plumbing and electricity working again, I had written a forward which explained how to occupy a property without committing a crime. Squatters were encouraged to tear this page out of the handbook and to pin it to the front door of their newly occupied house. It made the point, just in case the police arrived, that the occupation was not a criminal case but a civil one.

We encouraged everyone to photocopy the handbook as often as they liked and to add any tips to it themselves before passing it on. *The Squatters' Handbook* was a huge success and soon took on a life of its own, with many versions in circulation. There were very few challenges, by the property owners and the police, to this early "occupy" movement which enabled thousands of disenfranchised, excluded people living in London to find homes overnight.

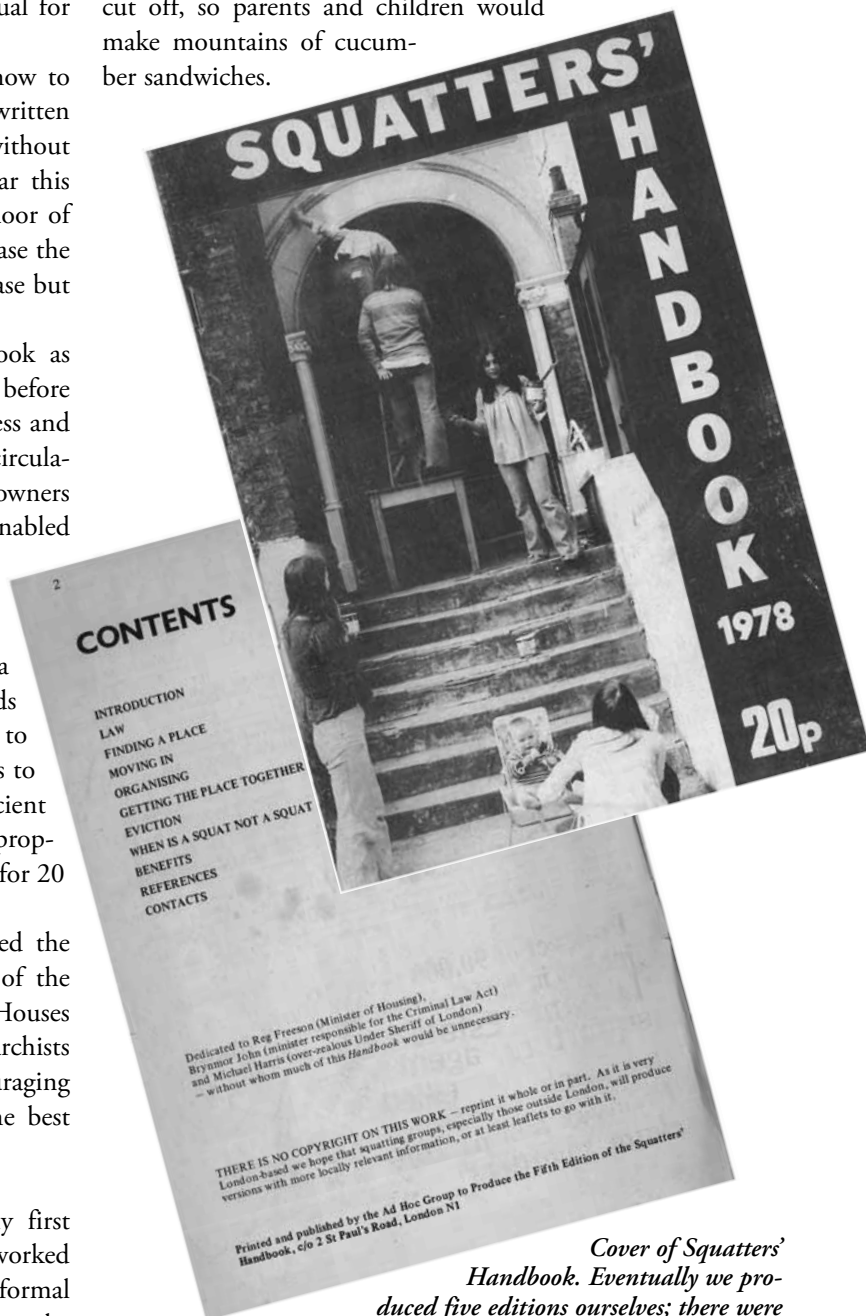
It was clear too that many of the municipalities which had purchased these properties in the heady days of a white-hot economy did not now know where the deeds were located. What greatly encouraged the occupiers to secure their position and invest in improving the houses to a high standard was that they had heard by now of an ancient medieval English law. It states that if anyone occupies a property not belonging to them and is not legally challenged for 20 years then the property becomes theirs.

These activities and a copy of the *Handbook* reached the attention of Margaret Thatcher who was now leader of the opposition in Government. She made a big fuss in the Houses of Parliament: "Did the House know that there were anarchists in the city subverting the course of capitalism by encouraging scroungers and down and outs to occupy some of the best properties in London?"

This explains why Margaret Thatcher was not my first choice to open a unique housing project I had worked very hard to bring to fruition. However I duly sent a formal letter of invitation to Margaret Thatcher MP for Finchley at the Houses of Parliament half hoping that, with only three months to a national election, she would be far too busy. Within a week

we received a House of Commons embossed envelope and letterhead with a personal letter from Margaret Thatcher saying that she would be delighted to attend and officially open our housing project.

The co-op members were as thrilled as they were anxious, never having been involved in anything like this before. One of the single mothers' boyfriends said that he would like to be Master of Ceremonies and everyone agreed that they should make an effort to make her feel at home by holding a tea party in the back garden, in a Marquee with bunting. Someone had heard that the Queen normally offered cucumber sandwiches at her garden parties, in triangles with the crusts cut off, so parents and children would make mountains of cucumber sandwiches.



*Cover of Squatters' Handbook. Eventually we produced five editions ourselves; there were scores of different versions in circulation. The Contents page explained that we retained no copyright on the Handbook, encouraging everyone to copy it.*

On the appointed day, co-op members and children, friends, and the press were all out in the street eagerly awaiting our guest of honour. There was no sign of the MC, who had earlier gone to the nearest pub for a drink or two to settle his nerves. Nobody was sure what happened to him but he never did make it back that day.

A black chauffeur-driven limousine arrived on time and Margaret Thatcher MP stepped out and waved to everyone. The only person accompanying her was her bodyguard, a plain clothes policeman who pretended to be invisible and unthreatening even though you could see that he had a big bulge under his left arm pit. The limousine pulled away and left her in the middle of the road with a crowd of people gawking at her in a circle around her.

With the MC missing and no backup plan in place, Mrs. Thatcher stood isolated in this crowd. She tried to engage a few people in conversation but everyone was too shy to reply. She looked stranded in her own constituency, unfamiliar with the social ways of the interlopers from inner city streets. The bodyguard was no help as he always kept a steady 10 paces behind her. Every time she walked a few steps the circle followed her but with everyone keeping a safe distance.

Although I had intended to have very little to do with her I could see that an intervention

was needed. I jumped into the circle, walked up to our guest, introduced myself as the architect for the project, and invited her to view the apartments and to meet the housing cooperative members. She looked so grateful; clutching my arm, she said that she would love to have a tour. We established an odd relationship; she only ever addressed me as Architect, with me calling her Margaret. She attached herself to me in a way that clearly showed that she was not going to let me out of her sight for the rest of the day.

We did not get off to a promising start. No sooner had I shown her around the first apartment than she started telling the occupier that I had put the kitchen in the wrong place. Maybe this was an attempt to build rapport with the members. She followed this up by saying, "We know about these things, don't we, ladies?" The mothers, all carrying babies on their hips, nodded in agreement with everything she said. I thought that this was bad manners on her part and decided to go next door to alert the tenants of her imminent arrival. Whilst there I was surprised to hear Margaret calling me from the communal staircase, "Architect, Architect, where are you?" When I caught up with her she almost beseechingly said, "Please stay close to me," and then by way of explanation, "In

case I need to ask you questions."

During the rest of the tour she was politeness itself and by the time she had visited the last apartment, stroked the last babies under the chin, and complemented the mothers on their choice of décor, she was clearly a convert. She was impressed not just with this project but with the whole cooperative concept. What she most liked about it was that it provided affordable housing without any level of government having to manage the project.

"Marvelous, Architect, splendid—I can see this is a very good way to enable the less well-off to help each other to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."

Very surprised at her encouraging words, I led her around to the back of the building where the huge Marquee had been erected with bunting flapping in the breeze. There were over 100 people gathered, taking part in the sunny afternoon tea party. She was quite taken aback. "Architect," she exclaimed, "where did all these people come from?"

We had been told that we must follow a political protocol. To an event such as this, if you invite someone from one level of government, then you have to invite members from all other levels of government. I thought she would be pleased with

the opportunity to jolly along her Party only weeks away from the general election. Perhaps we had overdone it in our eagerness.

"They are all going to want me to promise them the earth, which I will not be able to deliver, even if I become Prime Minister, and then they will be disappointed in me. You had better keep me in conversation so that I will not have to talk to them." I was already warming to her, particularly after her earlier supportive words. Her confiding tone and irreverence for the established way of doing things was, dare I say it, creating a bond.

I led the way to the cucumber sandwich mountain, filled up four plates, and found a quiet spot at the back of the Marquee. I could see the assembled notaries and press peering into the tent wondering why we were not mingling and socializing.

"As a matter of fact Margaret," I said, "I did want to pass an idea by you."

"Go ahead Architect, what is it?"

I explained that the cooperative model could be the answer to the squatting "problem" in London. Despite many complaints by local communities about the dilapidated state of the houses pulling down market values, and much to the delight of the occupiers, nobody had worked out a solution to date.

"Architect, if you can come up with a solution, I and my office will fully support you."

As a nonprofit organization we could receive the properties

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**"Councilor, I want to introduce you to Architect here. He has a splendid solution to your squatting problem."**

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in a land transfer possibly free of charge. By now the properties had very little value, particularly if you take into account the expense of evicting everyone, boarding the houses up, and paying a security company to watch them 24 hours a day. Through access to federal Housing Association funding our group could handle the rehabilitation of the properties, bringing them back to their former glory. We could also work with the squatter communities to assist them to transition to long-term rent-paying cooperatives.

She thought that this was a very good idea and that we should go and talk to some of the politicians right now. Clearly her best form of defense was attack.

A high-up official of the Greater London Council was first in her sights.

“Councilor, I want to introduce you to Architect here. He has a splendid solution to your squatting problem.” (She implied that he had created the problem; in fact it had been his Labour predecessor who had gone on a massive municipalisation spree.) “You have far too many properties as it is without taking on the squatter issue; just transfer them over to Architect’s organization and let him get rid of the problem. I can vouch for his good work here in Finchley.”

I had already met the Councilor on several occasions and I was sure he thought of me as a communist. I could see him trying to work out how I had gained the trust of one of the most right-wing members of the Conservative Party. She suggested we make an appointment to meet and that we must report back to her on our progress.

She gave a speech that afternoon in the garden saying how much she had enjoyed herself. She thanked me publicly for explaining the project and the cooperative concept. She said this scheme should become a model for housing the less well-off throughout the country.

After a few more sandwiches and a few more speeches, we said our farewells and she was gone. I never did meet her again.

**I**t took several months to follow up with the Greater London Council meeting. By this time Margaret Thatcher was in office starting an 11-year reign as Prime Minister. The Councilor kept to his word and began transferring hundreds of houses over to us.

This was by no means the largest housing program in the office but it had become the most comprehensive. As project managers we were not only rehabilitating hundreds of houses but effectively we were rehabilitating thousands of squatters into law-abiding tenants and collective landlords of prime property in central London. I often attended their committee meetings to ensure the transformative process was working. Many times we had difficulty reaching a quorum as so many members were out at night classes upgrading their certificates and training to become Yoga teachers, acupuncturists, and school teachers—in fact everything Margaret Thatcher would hope to see: tax-paying members of society.

I often look back on that day and wonder how I had persuaded her to go out on a limb on this controversial squatter program. I have always had a nagging doubt that it had been the other way around. She had recruited me to her worldview and seen me as her agent.

The last time I visited the single-parent cooperative I discovered that the mothers had all joined the Finchley Conservative Party. The Party had more than welcomed them on account of their Margaret Thatcher connection. When I looked a bit shocked, they laughed and explained that they were more likely to meet wealthier men here; men who could presumably keep them in the lifestyle to which they now aspired in their new salubrious suburban surrounding. 🐣

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*Andrew Moore is an architect who specializes in community development. He has worked extensively with all levels of government, the private sector, and grassroots organizations in Canada, the UK, and South Africa over the last 30 years. For the last seven years he has been employed by the T’Sou-ke Nation on Vancouver Island to transform its community vision into a reality (see “Power to the People: T’Sou-Ke Nation’s Community Energy Solutions” in COMMUNITIES #161).*



*Author (back to camera with bell bottoms) and Margaret Thatcher, with Marquee in the background.*

# Opportunity Village Eugene

## Pioneering New Solutions for the (Formerly) Homeless

By Alex Daniell

Opportunity Village Eugene is Eugene, Oregon's newest intentional community. In less than three months, in late summer and fall of 2013, for less than \$60,000, it went from an empty public works parking lot to a village housing 30 people. There have been many players, major and minor, male and female, straight and gay; organizers, volunteers, and villagers themselves. It is a self-governing village, with oversight and veto power over Village Council decisions by the board of the nonprofit organization Opportunity Village Eugene, which is chaired by Dan Bryant, minister of the First Congregational Church downtown.

Opportunity Village ([www.opportunityvillageeugene.org](http://www.opportunityvillageeugene.org)) is governed by the Village Manual and its Village Agreements ([www.opportunityvillageeugene.org/p/community-agreement.html](http://www.opportunityvillageeugene.org/p/community-agreement.html)). The Village Manual is an improved version of similar documents written by the residents of other homeless camps, like Dignity Village and Right to Dream Two in Portland, Oregon. It is authored by Andy Heben, who is also the urban designer of Opportunity Village.

Nine Conestoga Huts, insulated vinyl-sheathed shelters made from a combination of reused and new materials, were built in the village by Community Supported Shelters ([communitysupportedshelters.org](http://communitysupportedshelters.org)). I have designed, and built with the help of many others, all 18 of the solid-walled buildings in the village, including dwellings, a bath house, a kitchen, a front office, and also an outdoor grill. Like the Village Manual, the Backyard Bungalows ([hebenaj.wix.com/backyardbungalows](http://hebenaj.wix.com/backyardbungalows)) we've built are improved versions of the dwellings erected by residents of other homeless villages. They are modular designs, composed of panels that are constructed in the shop and assembled on site in big work parties.

In July I submitted four of these prototypes, all under 100 square feet, with inter-

changeable wall and roof systems, to the city of Eugene and the state of Oregon for pre-approval to house the homeless. All four were accepted without any alterations. I now have nearly a dozen prototypes that have passed inspection by the city.

Ted Drummond, a longtime leader in the First Christian Church's annual house-building Mission to Mexico, erected a heated 30-foot yurt for the villagers just days before the early-December snows came. Andy, Ted, and I are partners in the micro-housing business I founded in 2012, called Backyard Bungalows. Our mission is to build Affordable Villages, after the model of Opportunity Village.

When the city of Eugene broke up the Occupy camp in December of 2011, they promised to give the homeless another piece of land. Dan Bryant, a minister who wears a leather jacket and drives a motorcycle, Jean Stacey, a fiery

*Our last "Big Build."  
We've had five so far, all on the  
last Saturday of the month.*



lesbian advocate for the homeless, and Andy Heben, a young urban designer who wrote his thesis on homeless camps around the country which he visited, went around touting the idea of Opportunity Village.

I was working at the time with Erik de Buhr, finishing up one of my Bungalow designs for Jerry and Janet Russell, who have given endlessly to the communities movement in this region. We were also working on the Conestoga Hut, a design that Erik and his partner Fay Carter created in a moment of need at the Occupy camp. At the December 2012 open forum Eugene city council meeting, on the heels of an enraged speech by Jean Stacey, who was camped out with SLEEPS near a Conestoga Hut we had set up earlier in the day, I made a proposal to the city council. I proposed that the Conestoga Hut be permitted as a vehicle in the St. Vincent de Paul car camper program, where homeless people can sleep in their cars in business and church parking lots. Though the city attorney had said that this ordinance would take two months to expand, the council did so in three days. That night they also approved the site for Opportunity Village.

In the following days the Conestoga

Hut got a lot of press and Erik and I had a divergence of opinion. While Erik and Fay wanted to start their own nonprofit professional organization independent of Opportunity Village, called Community Supported Shelters, with the hopes of becoming the village's main housing provider and building Opportunity Village almost entirely out of Conestoga Huts, I wanted to work with Opportunity Village, and to build a village of two dozen micro-houses each of which looked unique—in the process creating a prototype for an affordable village. So I went to an Opportunity Village steering committee meeting.

At this first meeting the group was ecstatic. On the heels of a solid year of pleading with the city to provide the piece of land that they had promised, they were talking of the great popularity they would have, of the micro-businesses they would incubate, of the Academy they would set up. Playing devil's advocate, I mentioned that they had no villagers, no approved structures other than the Conestoga Hut, and no site plan. I proposed that they set up a core group of villagers, and begin orienting them in the philosophy, agreements, and rules of the Village Manual, so that a village culture would be in place before the village itself opened.

Brent Was, father at the Church of the Resurrection, took the lead in this process, and Andy and Ann and several volunteers dove into the paperwork. We began the application and intake process almost immediately. A particular focus was placed on vetting couples and single women, so that there would be a strong female presence in the village. This has proved invaluable, as women have come to dominate both the governance and administrative responsibilities of the village.

At this point I began working with Andy Heben. In addition to producing sketch-ups for my prototypes, working on the site plan, and hammering out the operating agreement with the city, Andy worked tirelessly writing and rewriting the Village Manual, based on the ongoing input of many well-meaning contributors, myself included. It is a brilliant document. I made dozens of copies, and handed them out to everyone. It is a brief, clear set of agreements and rules villagers must understand and agree to before joining the village. Based on simple majority and occasionally two-thirds majority vote at the village meetings, it uses simple clear language that can be interpreted but cannot be corrupted by the board or by the villagers. We read it out loud line by line during our biweekly orientations, with open discussion.

Of particular importance was the village site plan. Despite the difficulties it



*Ron and Kathy—  
married in the village.*



*Kathy, Rhonda, and Fredricka in the village kitchen.*

entailed, Andy avoided orienting the Bungalows and Conestogas in a grid, instead orchestrating them in a series of graceful circular courtyards that maximize a feeling of openness on the small site. By orienting four distinct roof systems thoughtfully, and placing the generous used doors and windows optimally for both light and privacy, we created a village that appears to have grown organically. Each Bungalow is trimmed, painted, and finished individually by its owner. There are distinctly masculine and feminine structures. The most popular prototypes seem to be the Lean To, the Club House, and Dianne's Love Shack, with its purple cornice and black gargoyles.

It's long after supper. I sit with Craig and Randy in the yurt. The flickering light and steady hiss of the pellet stove fill the large, dim space. Chairs and fold-up tables, a coffee pot, and donated food in plastic bags are neatly arranged along the walls. The newest villager, Mandy, drifts by and says hi. Terry comes in and sets up her laptop.

Craig is a quiet, confident hippie, with a bandana over his forehead. He is a father, and a natural leader in the village. "How come no one's in here?," he asks.

"Because it's not below 34 degrees," Randy replies, "so no one thought that they'd be allowed to sleep in here tonight."

The village is full of rules, but they are good rules. The villagers seem to need them. People do file unwarranted complaints, but it's not something the board worries about. It takes time for the villagers to settle in and learn a different way than the Eugene Mission, where a lot of applicants come from. Actually, Craig and I agree, things are going really well. Ernie and Katie and Jones and Matt all have jobs, and two other people just found work too.

"How much more time," I ask Craig "do you have on the Village Council?"

"Two weeks." He smiles serenely.

So far only one person has finished out their three-month term. The only man on the five-person Council, Craig has spoken of stepping down, but the Council has pleaded for him to stay, saying that they need his masculine presence. Craig presented with me at the Central Lutheran Church adult education program recently, answering questions for a half-hour. The Lutherans have donated thousands of dollars worth of materials and thousands of work hours in the shop. They, and Dan Hill of Arbor South, who donated \$15,000 worth of materials, were the backbone that allowed us to build Opportunity Village.

"Some people on the board think that it's ridiculous that so few Council members finish out their terms."

"What's ridiculous about that?" Craig asks. "It's not like anyone is getting kicked out of the village. It's a clear sign of the health of the democratic process."

With the stress of a continual influx of new people—living in tents during at least

part of their probationary period—and the rest of the village living in unheated Bungalows and Conestogas, Village Councilors have to be steady. When someone is not, they get voted off. No hard feelings.

"The women are much more involved in the administration and governance tasks, and the men are more involved in construction—roofing and finishing the Bungalows. Most of the cooking has been implemented by the women, with much of the infrastructure work being done by their men."

"Why does the Village Council need a male presence? In order to feel credible in the eyes of the male villagers?"

"Probably."

Andy, Joline, and I, along with a half dozen villagers, sit before the warm flames of the fireplace at Papa's Pizza Parlor, eating taco pizza and drinking dark beer at a fundraiser for the village. Every villager needs to come up with \$30 a month towards utilities. There is no drinking within 500 feet of the gate but we are farther away than that.

To my left is Anton, a working cobbler, who has repaired two pairs of my shoes and refuses to be paid. He is Greek, so I don't push it. His wife, Fredricka Maximillia Sanchez, a tall beautiful woman, talks of her four daughters, and the honorable lives they lead. Hal, across the table, is a computer programmer. Louis sits to my right, a crafter of wooden inlaid jewelry, who is designing a micro-business that can employ villagers doing piecework. Carl and Dianne have finished out their Bungalows with architectural details and color schemes that we can use as models for regular paying clients. Mark Hubble is one of the original founders of the village.

Ron and Katherine Griffith, who were married at the village, speak of their gender roles:

"It's a reverse relationship," Katherine says, in her North Carolina accent, "and it always has been, ever since Ron tore his ACL. I work, and he does the cooking and cleaning. I don't care if I never wash



another dish in my life.”

In the last village meeting, in the interests of keeping peace in the community, Richard James and Louis volunteered to wash all the unwashed dishes.

“They make sure we get stuff done,” Ron says.

All the villagers are required to do eight to 10 hours a week staffing the front desk, cooking, cleaning, doing paperwork, and/or roofing, insulating, and finishing the Bungalows. Katherine does more than her share, on and off the Village Council.

“I do the electronics, and home improvements. A lot of times when the women try to do the heavier physical labor the men step in and say: ‘Let me do that.’ I don’t care; I let them. Break your back. I don’t feel threatened by it. I don’t have to do that stuff. If someone wants to do the hard work let them do it.”

Mark Hubble, who was the public figure of homelessness at the presentation Dan and he and I gave to the American Institute of Architects, who was the lead speaker at the opening of Opportunity Village, who has been the subject of several articles, and who resigned from the Village Council, shakes his head.

“When we started out it was just a dozen of us, and I liked to take care of my girls. Now everything is different. It’s an intentional community.”

“I don’t think this is an intentional community” Hal chimes in. Hal was voted off the Village Council.

“If this were an intentional community, it would be more intentional about who it let in. Someone else here is footing the bill. We’re bringing in outside labor, rather than doing the work ourselves. This is a transitional homeless camp, nothing more.”

Craig disagrees: “This is still an intentional community. It’s just a different intention. The intention is shelter. What comes through is something very much like the intention of food—the cycle of sowing and growing and harvesting and feasting. This act of building, of cultivating shelter for ourselves and others, builds community like you wouldn’t believe. Even those who participate in only part of the cycle still go away with a greater sense of community. The builders of this village are sowing the seeds for another village. The villagers themselves will be the mentors, the seeds for the creation of the next community.”

On December 9th, one year after my first presentation at the open forum city council meeting, I spoke again before the mayor and city councilors of Eugene. The homeless of Whoville, a big tent camp jammed in beside the overpass next to the courthouse, threatened with being disbanded in the snow, spoke first. Then Jean Stacey made another impassioned plea. I offered a solution. I spoke of the Conestoga Huts I advocated for last year, now permitted and sheltering 20 people. I spoke of the Backyard Bungalows in Opportunity Village, permitted and housing 20 people. All had come at no cost to the city, state, or federal government. Then I said that we could easily build a second Opportunity Village. The next day an anonymous donor gave \$25,000 to Opportunity Village, restricted for the purposes of building a second Opportunity Village, as a challenge grant for \$25,000 more. Someone also gave another \$12,000 to finish this first village. So far we have spent around \$70,000 on Opportunity Village.

The first legal urban camping site in Eugene is about to open across the street from us, run by Erik de Buhr and Community Supported Shelters. Ted and I are visiting Erik and a helper, when Mark Hubble comes up as the welcome party, offering blankets and food for the first residents. He has applied for the job of one of the five property managers who get Conestogas at the 15-person site, which is fenced, monitored, and secure. Mark is the seed of a new village.

Hal says it’s time to go home, and leaves. I go to get another beer. When I get back they are playing stupid human tricks. One game, called “Mad Dog,” involves holding a plastic ruler with an open box of Tic Tacs taped to either end, clamped in your mouth. You shake your head up and down, and whoever spills the most Tic Tacs wins. Another involves stacking as many Ding Dongs as you can on your forehead.

*(continued on p. 77)*



*Lean To under construction.*



*Village Circle at Opportunity Village. Graceful circular courtyards like this one maximize a feeling of openness on the site.*

# ENERGISING COMMUNITY SPIRIT

## Australian Intentional Communities Conference, 2013

Australia's several hundred intentional communities are so dispersed across this vast continent that many do not even know of each other. There have been several gatherings to try to rectify this, the most recent being a conference at Bundagen community, central New South Wales coast, in 2011. In December 2013, we are meeting at Moora Moora community near Melbourne. The organisers are Mark Snell and Peter Cock, supported by numerous community members.

Moora Moora ([www.mooramoora.org.au](http://www.mooramoora.org.au)) was established in 1972, and today has about 50 adults, plus children, living in six "clusters" or hamlets across 245 hectares (605 acres) of beautiful, rolling mountain plateau, with magnificent views, and only 90 minutes from Melbourne. It is one of Australia's best-known intentional communities, often featured by the media as an example of "successful" community. And, while Moora Moora is quite different from

what its founders (only two of whom remain there after 40 years) intended, it is, by any assessment, a great place.

About 80 members, from about 30 intentional communities from every state, gather on a lovely December summer's long weekend. Our mornings are devoted to parallel strands of lectures, panels, and directed discussions, with the afternoons more oriented to workshops and open discussions. There are numerous opportunities for people to ask questions, argue, raise issues, and discuss topics, and for sub-groups to form and meet. Further information and conference proceedings can be found at [www.aicc2013.info](http://www.aicc2013.info).

My favourite session is when four members of Moora Moora and Tunttable Falls communities, both thriving for over 40 years, discuss their rules and regulations, successes and failures, and their wish-list of how, given hindsight, they might otherwise have done things. When these two intentional communities began they were as different as chalk and cheese with Tunttable Falls being a classic hippie, anarchistic, drop-out commune, while Moora Moora was a self-declared bourgeois community. Nevertheless, 40 years later, their problems and solutions are much the same.

Both are concerned about their ageing populations, both have problems attracting younger members with sufficient understanding, skills, and commitment, both have problems with declining member work contributions, and both have problems holding privatisation and individualism at bay.

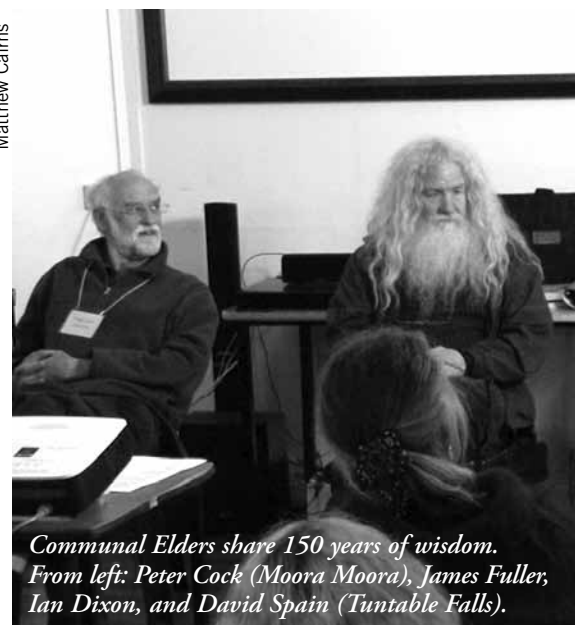
Moora Moora and Tunttable Falls have developed different forms of governance that, while far from perfect, manage to allow the wisdom of their communal elders to prevent naïve newcomers from destroying the place—while not stifling dissent, new ideas, and constructive criticism and change. Both impulses—the pushing, questioning, seeking of change by new members, and the wise restraint of the senior members—are *equally* important. Through clear, yet flexible, guidelines, both communities avoid the well-



Bill Metcalf



Matthew Cairns



*Communal Elders share 150 years of wisdom. From left: Peter Cock (Moora Moora), James Fuller, Ian Dixon, and David Spain (Tunttable Falls).*

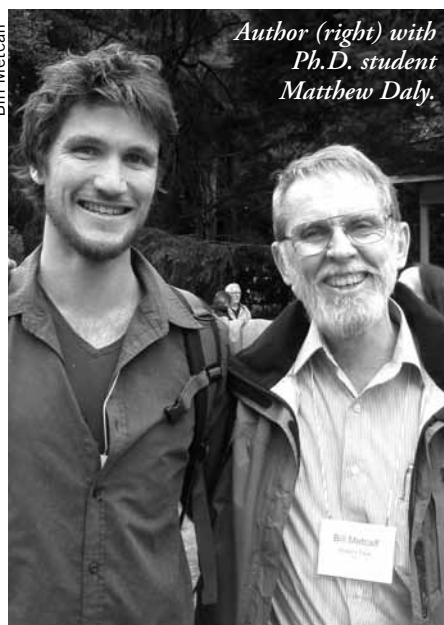


*Discussions outside The Lodge.*

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*Discussion group in Marquee.*



*Author (right) with Ph.D. student Matthew Daly.*

known “tyranny of structurelessness.”

A sociologist would regard both communities as displaying a “healthy tension” leading if not to optimal then at least to reasonable outcomes, and probably ensuring their survival at least in the mid-term.

My three favourite quotes from the conference are from pioneers and veterans of community living. Robin McPherson, founder of Digger Street, an urban commune, says, “the less we organise, the more it turns out the way we want it.” Phil Bourne, a 32-year-long communal-living veteran from Commonground community, observes, “some conflict may be terminal—but most is solvable.” Ian Dixon, a 40-year-long member of Tuntable Falls community, points out the importance of keeping clear records of decisions: “40 years ago we not only thought that we knew all the answers—but that we would remember them.” One of his fellow communards responds, “yes, and we thought that we would all remember them the same way!”

I present an illustrated talk about the history of intentional communities in Victoria since 1852. As I find in most parts of the world, intentional community members are often glibly unaware of the fascinating history to which they are heirs, and persist in reinventing the wheel. Victoria has a rich history of urban and rural, big and small, spiritual and secular intentional communities, and with just enough “cults” and “gurus” thrown in to add colour and spice, and help us appreciate how good most of them have been over the past 160 years.

As always with conferences, what happens outside the formal sessions can be as important as what happens within. Moora Moora’s cooks provide excellent food, the coffee and snacks are great, we are comfortably billeted with members or sleep in tents, and we have ample opportunities to network. I connect with a wide range of intentional community folk, from the very experienced, whom I usually already know, to the enthusiastic novices. What a feast!

Each evening, we enjoy some form of participatory entertainment, a bush dance, cabaret, or fire ceremony. The fire ceremony is a Moora Moora ritual to

“welcome” the summer bushfire season, reminding each cluster to ensure their underground fire shelters and fire-fighting equipment are functional. Their land was burned out in 1939, and Moora Moora narrowly missed being destroyed by the catastrophic bushfires of 2009.

Having attended many intentional community conferences during my lengthy academic career, I find that one core issue often dominates. At the previous conference, at Bundagen, the key issue was how to deal with, and perhaps expel, “problem” members. At this Moora Moora conference the key issue is how to ensure everyone contributes to the communal or collective ends rather than being a free-rider (or parasite!). For example, in one session, several new members talk about what intentional community should provide for individual members, such as support, life-meaning, security, etc. The more mature intentional community members present point out that “community” can only exist as far as members put in the effort so, with apologies to JFK, “ask not what your intentional community can do for you, ask what you can do for your intentional community.”

In relation to this, members from one young intentional community relate how they face a crisis because a minority of residents refuse to contribute even the minimal effort needed to maintain the physical structures, let alone create meaningful community, their mindset apparently being that since they pay their fees, everything should be done for them. Another minority, desperate to make this group work, expend incredible efforts but are becoming worn out and bitter.

A clear observation from my 40-plus years of research is the tendency for intentional communities to move from communalism and sharing to individualism and privatisation. Continuation as a worthwhile intentional community is only possible when almost all members actively contribute in some way. The communal “impulse” or “spirit” is like a spinning flywheel

which, no matter what the speed, weight, and quality of bearings, will slow down and stop unless fresh energy is regularly applied.

As long as most members, most of the time, are putting in energy, then some members can have a free ride for awhile when sick or aged. One conference participant called this “a good will bank” to which members can contribute and make withdrawals. But members who rarely, or never, put in energy are always in debt and act like a brake on the system, a form of “individualism-friction.” To overcome this “individualism-friction,” new efforts need to be continuously made. The harsh reality is that few intentional communities can long cope with free-riders.

In the final session, we discuss holding another conference in a couple of years, and there is a clear preference for this to be at Tuntable Falls Community, in the famous Nimbin area of northern New South Wales. The three Tuntable Falls members

in attendance agree to take the suggestion back and work it through their “tribal-meeting” system.

I leave the conference on a bus to Melbourne city, utterly exhausted from all the talking, listening, dancing, eating, arguing, networking, etc. But I am enthused to meet young and enthusiastic intentional community aspirants, while observing that the wisdom of Australia’s communal elders, loosely defined as members with at least 20 years communal experience, is being heard and respected within this movement. Most Australian intentional communities, in spite of myriad problems, are sustainable and seem to be doing reasonably well in the 21st century. 🐦

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## The communal “impulse” or “spirit” is like a spinning flywheel.

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*Dr. Bill Metcalf, of Griffith University, Australia, is the author of numerous scholarly and popular articles, plus seven books, about intentional communities, the most recent being The Findhorn Book of Community Living. He is Past President of the International Communal Studies Association and has been COMMUNITIES magazine’s International Correspondent for many years.*



*Fire ceremony with children bearing candles through the maze.*



*Moora Moora volunteers preparing dinner.*

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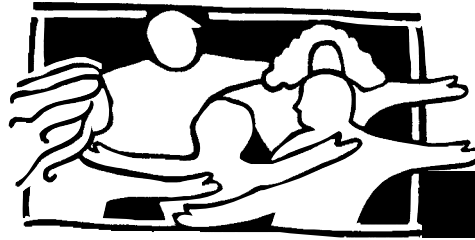


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You may contact the Advertising Manager Christopher Kindig to place a Reach ad. Email [Ads@ic.org](mailto:Ads@ic.org), call 443-422-3741, or go to [communities.ic.org/ads/](http://communities.ic.org/ads/) for more details or to submit your ad online.

THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #163 - Summer 2014 (out in June) is April 24, 2014.

The rate for Reach ads is \$15 per issue for up to 50 Words, or \$49 for annual placement of four issues. For up to 125 Words it is \$29 per issue, or \$99 for four issues. For up to 375 Words it is \$49 per issue, or \$175 for four issues. If you are an FIC Member you may take off an additional 5%.

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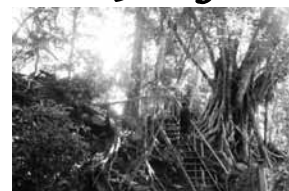
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[ic.org/communities-magazine](http://ic.org/communities-magazine)

## GENDER: THE INFINITE OCEAN

(continued from p. 37)

sensitivity towards everyone's identity and journey, and there is an emphasis on respecting that. Respect in queer community breeds empowerment within me.

I cannot always be in queer community though. An overwhelming majority of my time is spent outside of queer community. When there is not a lot of LGBTQIA (lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, queer, intersex, asexual) and gender variant visibility in a particular community, I often feel hyper aware of my environment and the way that people react to my identity and appearance. I have created internal and external safety tactics for myself to ease navigating through non-queer communities, as well as worked on ways to stay constant, sure, and comfortable in my gender and self-expression. I have recognized that when I exhibit these tactics, people become aware that I am pushing away fear, conformity, and self-restriction. My presence does not become about gender anymore but living my truth in an effort to be a positive example to others to simply be themselves.

I believe there are universal and humanistic tools communities can use in an effort to work towards becoming sensitive and more understanding to gender variant people. The most powerful implements of compassion are listening, having empathy, becoming allies, and respecting everyone regardless of internal or external identity. We truly have no idea of each other's struggles until we open our hearts and shed all of our stereotypes, projections, and stubborn ideas of "this is the way it has always been."

When it comes to gender, I can only speak for myself and from my own experiences. I do not believe that everyone's gender journey is spiritual; mine just happened to be. I also believe that there is no such thing as coincidence, and I see all of my life's lessons as part of a bigger whole.

My journey is far from over but I have found myself grounded in that ocean I once feared. I remember that my transition is internal as well as external—and that it is as limitless as the communities that surround me. I remember that the best work that I can do in community is to simply be myself, watching the trickle-down theory form a vast ocean, ever wealthy with beautiful diversity. 🐾

*Innis Sampson writes: "I have been living in and visiting a vast array of communities for the past four years. I am a co-facilitator and the Sustainability Director of Project Knomad, a youth-oriented community group dedicated to preserving the arts, creating safe spaces, and empowering underprivileged individuals. I am a poet and writer of queer life and spiritual exploration. I love cats."*



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- Aldo Leopold



## FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND GENDER: LESSONS FROM BEYOND WOMEN-ONLY SPACE

(continued from p. 39)

break down barriers to access based on gender. We can amplify the impact of our culture-building by opening the door based on who is ready for the work rather than based on their gender.

Despite all these theoretical criticisms, I still love my women's Dark Moon Circle, and I'd throw a fit if my alma mater announced it was going co-ed. What about women-only space am I still attached to? While I see the avant-garde edges of feminist culture creating incredible new traditions around gender, I know most folks aren't there yet. Throw a bunch of suburbanites into a cooperative, consensus-based community structure without any training and watch it crumble! Similarly, throw a bunch of men and women steeped in the gender norms of Standard American Culture into a goddess ritual together and you've got a recipe for disaster.

As anyone in the intentional communities movement can appreciate, alternative culture-building takes time and there are a lot of course-corrections along the way. While I find myself increasingly drawn to this work of creating gender-inclusive feminist spiritual communities, I know there are many women who need the spiritual support of a goddess-centered community in places where this culture-repair isn't yet taking place, and women-only space may be the quickest, easiest, safest-feeling alternative.

Dynamic approaches to navigating the gender-based oppression of all people are being developed in the cultural laboratories of all-genders feminist spiritual communities. I believe that these solutions will spread, in the same way that many of the cultural traditions of women-only communities have trickled into the wider

culture. I hope women who want to use women-only spaces to "claim their power" will have that opportunity, and that people who want to "claim their power" among fellow humans of all genders will increasingly have that opportunity as well. ☺

*Mary Murphy is a priestess, feminist, wilderness guide, and ethical deer hunter who runs Mountainsong Expeditions, a small company which offers spiritually-based wilderness trips and classes on The Sacred Hunt (some just for women and some open to all genders). She lives at Dragon's Nest Cooperative Homestead in central Vermont, which she shares with four adults, two children, and various goats, chickens, and llamas. You can contact Mary through her website: [www.mountainsongexpeditions.com](http://www.mountainsongexpeditions.com).*

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## GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION SHARING A HEARTFELT CONVERSATION

(continued from p. 53)

and women are basically nonexistent, thus allowing each adult a healing opportunity and emotional support to test out new waters, so to speak, and discover their beautiful, true, and higher selves within their male or female circuitry design without fear of ridicule or peer pressure.

We have found that most individuals who have a difficult time relating respectfully and compassionately to others, including those who may even use the intimidation tactics of a bully (whether with a lover or with just about anyone), suffer from a lack of true self-esteem within her or his Creator-gifted personality circuitry. If the “bullies” or “bigots” or misogynists or “whatever” are willing to become proactive in their own healing and growth processes, they can be transformed as they find themselves within their unique personhood and thus no longer need fear or hate other persons or individuals.

A culture of congruency provides opportunities for people to think about and discuss with each other how mindsets, certain ideologies, and behaviors are counterproductive in building a society of wholeness and wellness. And such a culture encourages people to “take off the mask(s)” they hide behind to seek refuge within the facades of “image” they’ve built in order to protect themselves from further emotional pain.


At Avalon Organic Gardens & EcoVillage we have group and individual counseling and sharing sessions where people can attempt to respectfully and regardfully work out their differences, which include counsel for couples who are having difficulty in relating to each other. We have found that couples often conclude that they need to put some space between each other in order to attend to their individual healing processes, with the hopes of reuniting again.

Regardless of someone’s racial, national, religious, cultural, or gender identity, I believe we all need to consider ourselves and each other as beloved children of the Creator and planetary citizens—true “brothers and sisters”—who have a responsibility to personally find ourselves within our own unique personalities and support one another in that process. Thus we can become more whole, healed, and compassionate beings who contribute to the genuine progress of human civilization by helping create cultures of congruency within divine pattern. I invite everyone to begin having more conversations in this vein, with open hearts and minds, for the restoration of our world and all its majesty, including its peoples. ☺

*Niánn Emerson Chase grew up on four different Native American reservations in the southwestern United States. After earning her Bachelor’s Degree in Literature/English and Education, she returned to the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Arizona where she lived and taught for 15 years. In 1989, she co-founded Global Community Communications Alliance—currently a 100+ member intentional community and working ecovillage (at Avalon Organic Gardens & EcoVillage) located in southern Arizona in the historic southwest towns of Tubac and Tumacácori. Within the community, she serves as the Director of the Global Community Communications Schools for Adults, Teens, and Children, as well as serving on the Board of Elders and as a pastor.*

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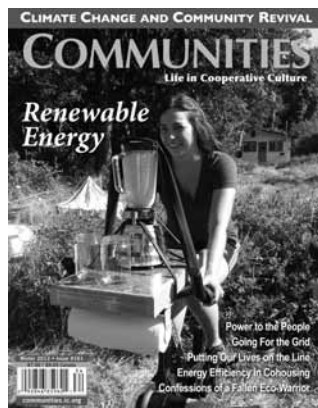
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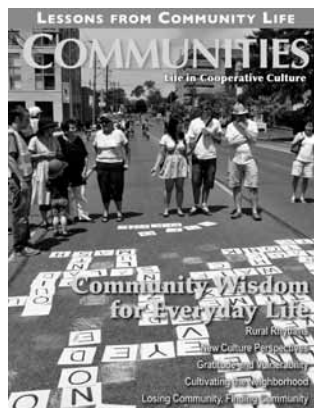
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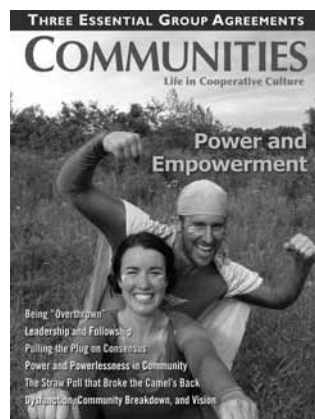
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**OPPORTUNITY VILLAGE  
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*(continued from p. 61)*

First Joline, with five, and then Louis, with six, are in the lead. Then Andy steps up. First he tries the trick while sitting, but we call foul. Then he arranges all the Ding Dongs on the table first, so they will best fit, and then mashes them down on his forehead, to howls of protest. But he wins in the end, by bending the rules.

In a way Opportunity Village itself is bending the rules. But this is because the rules need to be bent. We have to make sure that we adhere to the intention, and not the letter of the law. The city and the neighborhoods do not want shantytowns. They decrease property values and increase disease. But a nice clean orderly village with rules and sound governance? At \$2,500 a person in direct set-up costs? Well, that's hard to beat. The big concern is governance. And that is a big concern. An Opportunity Village board member needs to be at every village meeting. A half dozen people have been kicked out so far by the villagers, with good cause. This is a good thing.

I vetted the first people. Some, I thought, were never going to make it. But it's amazing to see the spirit with which people lift themselves up. The truth is, if you give a homeless person a home then they're no longer homeless. This is the opportunity of Opportunity Village. ♡

*Alex Daniell is a designer and builder of small residential structures. He has owned and redesigned six houses, and built several more. He has visited over 30 intentional communities, and lived for two years at the Walnut Street Co-op in Eugene. He consults as a financial advisor and belongs to the Wordos, a science fiction and fantasy writers group.*

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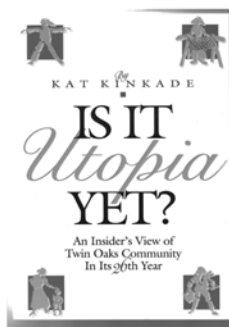


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## HONORING IRA WALLACE

(continued from p. 80)

enemy?). She is an expert at enrolling others in projects and endeavors designed to benefit all—whether they know it or not.

Ira's genius is found at the intersection of entrepreneurial insight, a ward healer's understanding of community politics, the discipline to never ask anyone to work harder than she does, and an infectious appetite for laughter and enjoying life. She's incredibly difficult to say "no" to—just ask the good folks at Monticello, who think they're running the Heritage Harvest Festival instead of her.

While Ira's early community years included the development of a successful house cleaning service and a tinnery business that relied principally on recycled tin cans as raw material (a pioneering example of upcycling), the unquestioned capstone of her business career has been the development of Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (SESE)—that specializes in heirloom, non-GMO, open-pollinated vegetable seeds. Acorn bought this business in 1999 and Ira has been at the heart of the management team that's built it into a spectacularly successful community business today. It's a perfect fit for Ira's love of gardening, her love of food, her love of growing community businesses, and her natural talent for wheeling and dealing such that everyone comes out a winner.

In addition, SESE is perhaps the ideal community business: there's minimal environmental impact; there's plenty of room for community members to plug into the business; the work can be readily extended to include partners anywhere who are interested in growing seeds for income, and it's a terrific values match—everyone eats, after all, and what could be more basic than providing seeds for growing wholesome food, and what could be more inspiring than protecting genetic diversity for future generations of organic gardeners?

While Ira has done much over the course of her life that is worthy of celebrating, in bestowing on her this lifetime achievement award, we are highlighting five qualities:

### A. Networker

Since her early days at Aloe, Ira has had close ties with the Federation of Egalitarian Communities. Her work with FEC has included serving as a delegate from her various home communities, being a mainstay in support of events such as the Twin Oaks Communities Conference, and a steady backer of FIC initiatives.

Influenced by her deep understanding of cooperative dynamics, Ira has gone well beyond community networking to become a respected player among heirloom seed companies and organic gardeners.

### B. Media Relations

Ira has developed into a respected author and public speaker, who is just as likely to be a spokesperson for organic food production as intentional community; who can discuss as knowledgeably how to cope with bad apples in fruit storage, as how to cope with bad apples in group dynamics.

### C. Good Neighbor

Wherever Ira has lived, she has taken the time to build solid relationships with those living around her. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the good relations enjoyed today between Twin Oaks, the parent community, and Acorn, the offspring.

Ira became a dual member of Twin Oaks and Acorn right at the outset, when the new community got started in 1993. For the first half of its life Acorn was strongly dependent on Twin Oaks for financial support. Then, however, there was an unex-

pected reversal of fortunes: SESE took off for Acorn, and at about the same time Twin Oaks lost the Pier One hammock account, which had been the mainstay of its income stream for decades.

Suddenly Acorn was in a position to repay Twin Oaks for all those years of child support by making available major components of its burgeoning seed business. What a delightful story of mutual support between communities, and Ira was there throughout the last two decades—with a dual member foot in each community—to see that compassion prevailed to the benefit of all.

### D. Community Builder

Twice now Ira has been a founding member of an income-sharing community: first at Aloe and then at Acorn. She has seen communities succeed financially only to fail socially; and she has seen financial success help to solidify groups that were otherwise on shaky ground. Ira knows that community is more about relationships than paychecks; yet she also knows the value to morale of regular paychecks earned by doing work where your walk is in line with your talk.

Many groups have failed because they were unable to establish values-based businesses that were robust enough to satisfy their membership's income needs. That has not been a problem at communities where Ira has lived.

### E. Cooperative Leadership

Over the years, Ira has accrued a tremendous amount of social capital. Essentially, she has accomplished this through doing two things consistently well: delivering successful results, and doing what she says she'll do. Today, when Ira makes a commitment, people believe her. This is leadership by example.

Ira is also a coalition builder—the type of person who can bring together individuals who are able to function effectively as a team, without anyone



knowing Ira's key role as catalyst. In this she is more interested in results than credit. This is quiet leadership, yet no less valuable than the kind that gets the leader's picture in the paper.

Finally, as someone who can approach leadership either way, she's aware of the need to develop all-season successors—for leadership is needed in all its forms. While this work proceeds quietly and behind the scenes, it's a relief to us all to know that she's on it. This is leadership through foresight.

For all of these reasons, Ira, it is a pleasure that you are within our sight today, and we salute you. 🌻

*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. (After 39 years at Sandhill, he has started a year's leave of absence to join his wife Ma'ikwe Schaub Ludwig at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage.) Laird 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). This article is excerpted from his blog entry of September 1, 2013.*



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# Honoring Ira Wallace

One of the perks for me as the Fellowship for Intentional Community's main administrator is that occasionally I get to do something really nice to honor a friend and compatriot in the community business. I enjoyed one of those opportunities on the evening of Friday, August 30, 2013, during the opening session of the annual Twin Oaks Communities Conference, when I got to publicly award the 2014 Kozeny Communitarian Award to Ira Wallace. [For more about Ira, see "An Interview with Ira Wallace" by Lee Walker Warren in COMMUNITIES #158, Spring 2013.]

Here is the citation I read to the audience of 100, as Ira sat in front of me:

The FIC hereby recognizes Ira Wallace as the 2014 recipient of the Kozeny Communitarian Award, honoring the indomitable spirit of Geoph Kozeny, who devoted his adult life to creating community in the world.

Over the course of nearly 40 years Ira has been a significant contributor to the North American Communities Movement, most notably in the field of income-sharing communities. In succession, she was a founding member of Aloe in North Carolina (now defunct), a member of Dandelion in Ontario, of Twin Oaks in Virginia, and then a founder of Acorn, a neighboring community that Twin Oaks started 20 years ago. All of these groups have been members of the Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC), a network organization that has been around since 1976—almost as long as Ira has been living in community.

In particular, we note that Ira was an FEC delegate in 1987, when that network played a crucial role in the revitalization of the Fellowship for Intentional Community. It is quite possible that the FIC would not exist to give her this award today if Ira had not been such a strong voice in support of its launch 26 years ago.

Ira is an indefatigable networker and a tireless promoter of joint ventures. She is that rare animal, a successful businessperson who has thrived in a milieu that is deeply suspicious of moneymaking motives (isn't capitalism the

*(continued on p. 78)*



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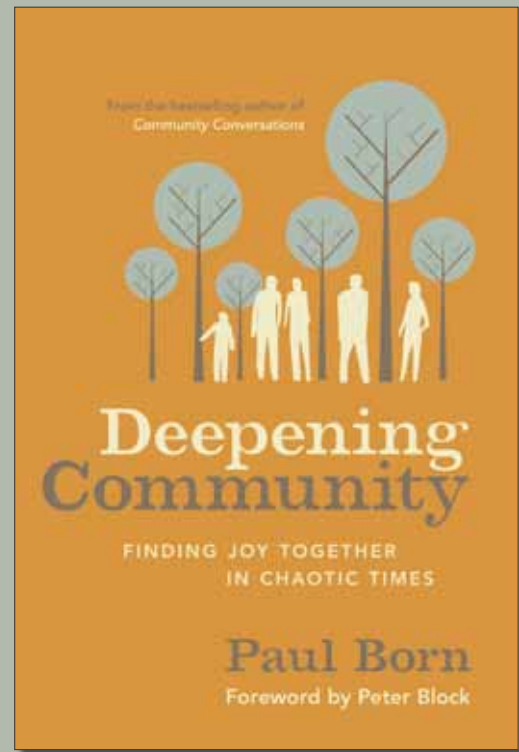
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**Paul Born** is the cofounder and President of Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement, a global leader on issues of place, collective impact, and community innovation. The author of four books, including the bestseller *Community Conversations*, Born is internationally recognized for his community building activities that have won awards from the United Nations and as a senior fellow of Ashoka, the world’s largest network of social innovators.

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