

FROM CONVERSATION TO COMMUNITY

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Community Conversations

Deepening Community

Love and Bucket Brigades

Sharing Stories and Rituals

Radical Governance Changes

A Welcome Intimacy, or Too Little Privacy?



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

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Communities

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Members of BEAN (the Bus Expedition Alumni Network—former students and staff of the Audubon Expedition Institute) gather for conversation, exploration, and celebration on the Story House lands next to Whidbey Institute, Whidbey Island, Washington, July 2014. (For information on AEI’s successor, EEI, see getonthebus.org.) Photo by Chris Roth.

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Life in Cooperative Culture

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LETTERS



Gender Issue a Roller Coaster

I saw your issue on gender at an area food co-op [Honest Weight, Albany, New York], and thought both the subject and your magazine looked intriguing. What a roller coaster ride to read!!! I was by turns enraged by some of the sexism ["our culturally wounded masculine side," "distinctly masculine and feminine structures," etc.], deeply moved by the courage of sexual assault survivors—especially knowing as a rape survivor myself how painful and terrifying this level of social and emotional vulnerability can be—and astounded by the variety of topics covered.

I have to say my favorite by far was Valerie Renwick's "Gender-Bending on the Commune." Twin Oaks' radical, delightful, and simple solution to use the completely genderless pronoun "co" so that no one any longer has a linguistic sex is awesome!!! My second favorite piece is Kim Scheidt's "Teaching Feminism by Example"; her matter-of-fact radical strong self-assurance is wonderful to behold—right on!!!

Then there was Sam Makita's "Sexism at Dancing Rabbit" that seemed completely worthless and off-topic because its patriarchal premise accepted the multi-bigoted argument that equates all experience. This type of false "excluding anyone is the same as excluding anyone else" thinking was debunked decades ago. Men and women, blacks and whites, gays and hets, etc., are NOT equal in our society—so to say that women-only space is "sexist" is

simply UNTRUE. On the day when NO WOMAN is raped or battered or prostituted or paid less or disallowed from doing everything that men are allowed to do, then that argument can be made. But in some of the communities mentioned, it sounds like some people are dedicated to trying to change that, and that is GREAT to know.

The other thing in this issue that was deeply disappointing was how lesbophobic it was. Lesbians were *mentioned*, but that was it. The subject matter was heterosexual, pro-man, about male homophobia, or about trying to be trans-accepting. This heterosexual invisibility shows how radical it still is to be an out lesbian in the media, even yours. As a lesbian who came out in 1983 and has remained out with my wife of 23 years [yes, we both like the term "wife"], living in a small town in upstate New York where I'm on my local Planning Board along with the old boys' network stalwarts who appointed me, I can tell you it's past time to give lesbians a voice in your magazine. You know we are here anyway, and we have already earned your respect and acceptance by our contributions to community, to society, and to political change—which means **always** allocating space for us to voice our own realities along with the hetero, male, transmen, mtf, queer, and everyone else out there who get to share their lives with your readers.

Peace and thanks,

Trina Porte
via email

The Editor responds:

Dear Trina,

Thank you very much for your letter. We really appreciate feedback like yours. I'm glad that you found the magazine so engaging and that you found at least some of the articles moving and valuable.

I'd also like to comment on a couple of the characterizations you made of the issue: pro-man, and lesbophobic.

I find the "pro-man" (and by implication not-as-pro-woman) description odd, since of the 17 pieces that deal directly with gender (15 main articles plus the Publisher's and Editor's notes), a dozen of them were written by women—and only five by men. The first 11 main articles, after the intro. pieces, were all written by women; the men were mostly relegated to the back. If the issue is

more pro-man than pro-woman, that must not be the doing of the men who wrote, but of the women, since women dominate the issue's contents (and for good reason—we received a lot of great submissions from women, and few from men).

As for the “lesbophobic” description, I don't see evidence for that either. We opened up submissions to anyone who wanted to send them. We did not turn down any submissions on the basis of the sexual or gender identity of their writers—and the submissions we declined to publish did not come from lesbians, as far as I know, but mostly from men, and the reasons they were not included were that they were less well-written, less on-topic, or some combination thereof (we also weren't consciously discriminating against men, though they ended up being less represented as a result).

The other element that puzzles me is that you say that lesbians were not allocated space. In fact, we offered space to anyone who wanted to write and could meet our article criteria. Furthermore, I believe that lesbians *were* represented among our authors, along with bisexuals. That these authors did not specifically talk about their personal sexual orientation in their articles may have led you to believe, by default, that they were heterosexual—but I am fairly sure that if that was your assumption, it was a faulty one. It is not our place to insist that authors reveal and write about their own sexual orientation in their own articles—these authors had valuable things to say about gender even if they didn't delve into their personal *sexual* orientations. But we certainly didn't discriminate and I don't think the issue is as hetero- as you may believe.

In any case, what it takes to get lesbian (or gay, or any orientation) voices into the magazine is simply people of those orientations to send us articles that we can publish. We always try to cast as wide a net as we can—and if you can help us cast it wider, we welcome that. I'd be happy to add you (and anyone else in our readership) to our quarterly Call for Articles email list. We'd welcome your forwarding those emails to anyone you think might be willing and able to contribute a submission to an upcoming issue.

Thanks again for your letter,

Chris Roth
Editor, COMMUNITIES
editor@ic.org

Sam Makita responds:

Dear Trina,

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts; I appreciate the opportunity for reflection. Maybe I can offer a bridge or two and some more clarity about what I was trying to convey in the article. I did hear that my perspective isn't one that you personally found worthwhile to read, and even more words from me seems like a funny solution, but maybe more context will help us relate to each other. I also think the tension this exchange exemplifies is a notable aspect of feminism today, and might be interesting to others as well.

You and I have some pretty core things in common. For one, I also love the word “co.” It seems ridiculous to me that one gender be considered “default” linguistically, and I like that when gender is irrelevant, it can be left out altogether. I also like that it avoids the necessity of assigning one or the other of two genders to a person when neither may be truly applicable.

We also have in common that women suffering injustice because of their womanhood fills us both with outrage. I am desperate for a world in which any woman is just as safe and respected as a man in the same position and all women are offered the same opportunities, from birth onward, to reach any position, regardless of gender. I think you feel the same.

We even agree that in some cases it is quite possibly a better choice to make a decision about someone's fitness for a given role based solely on their presentation of gender. However, whenever we do that, I want us to be doing it with mindfulness of not just the direct effect of that choice, but also the messages that are being sent, both overtly and more subtly.

One of those subtle messages we send with “women's circle” and “men's group” is that gender is binary. I'm not personally in favor of that way of thinking. The other, more overt message that I hear in gender-exclusive requests is that any woman is preferable to any man for certain kinds of gatherings or roles, even in the presence of lots of additional information. As a woman who sometimes lacks the traits being sought in that kind of request, that way of communicating triggers my social insecurities as well as my desire for fairness.

When circumstances are so much and so horribly to the advantage of males, I understand that it seems distracting or misleading to call a bias in the other direction “sexism.” You're looking at the overall picture, the net advantage of one gender over another in which any instance of using gender-based discrimination to women's advantage is a vanishingly small chip out of the prevailing sexist patriarchy we live in. From your perspective, since overall the advantage is toward men, “sexism” could mean “oppression of women” because taken as a whole, that's what it overwhelmingly adds up to. On the other hand, I use “sexism” in the more literal fashion, to describe the act or practice of being influenced in decision making or judgment of an individual by one's perception of that person's sex or gender.

As an analogy, consider the word “violence” in the context of a war or a struggle against an oppressor. If a small child who's being beaten daily by co's adult custodian bites the one who beats co in an attempt to escape, is that bite an act of violence? You might say that it's not, because in the context of the relationship, it's a tiny ripple against the overall tide of violence, and because it seems justified as a means toward ending that violence altogether. Does it count as an act of violence if in the end it serves to end an overwhelmingly violent situation? You might say no. I would say yes. That's not because I want to argue that the act isn't justified, or that the situation is somehow balanced now that violence has been committed on both sides, with the daily beatings and power inequity being undone by that one act—but because, strictly speaking, biting a person to cause unwelcome pain is violence, regardless of the context. That doesn't make it wrong, or right, it's just the word for that kind of act.

In the case of sexism, as in the case of violence, appropriateness is not always as easy to judge as it is in that example, and can be blurred by habit and other kinds of historical or personal influences. That's why I value

(continued on p. 72)

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

COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

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

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

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

Submissions Policy

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



ENHANCING COMMUNITY WHERE YOU ARE

This issue focuses on the theme of Community Conversations. In that spirit, I'd like to have a brief conversation about how the experience of *intentional* community can help anyone interested in bolstering the sense of community in their life.

At FIC we believe that intentional communities are terrific R&D centers for figuring out the day-to-day nuts and bolts of cooperative living, yet most people who are looking for more community in their life blithely bypass what could be learned from intentional communities as too exotic to be applicable in more mainstream settings. It's ironic that those who have learned the most about what it takes to successfully live cooperatively—by painstakingly blazing the trails of cooperative living amidst the jungle of competitive, adversarial dynamics—are largely ignored by those who could substantially benefit from the lessons.

Though the numbers are growing, there are only about 100,000 in the US living in some form of self-identified intentional community. Yet that represents just a tiny fraction of the people who hunger for more community in their life. When it comes right down to it, it's too much of a stretch for most folks to consider jointly owning property, or sharing their house with people who are not related by blood or marriage. But it doesn't have to be all or nothing.

- People living in neighborhoods can learn a lot about childcare co-ops, meal rotations, or tool sharing by looking over the shoulders of intentional communities.

- People who crave more cooperative culture in the workplace can be inspired by skilled facilitation that is honed in the demanding environment of intentional community, where *how* you reach decisions matters just as much as *what* you decide.

- Churches yearning for greater depth of connection among their congregation can take a page from the hymnal of residential communities when it comes to hearing the song in people's hearts as well as the truth in their voices.

- Schools hoping to develop more mutual respect and collegial relationships among students, teachers, and administrators can be educated by the way these qualities are nurtured in intentional communities.

- Nursing homes looking to maximize vitality and quality of living among seniors need look no further than how intergenerational communities are developing creative solutions that allow aging members to lead vibrant, contributing lives that makes it possible to stay in their own homes as long as possible.

FIC is in the business of promoting cooperative culture. To that end, nine years ago we purposefully expanded our mission to include making available to anyone in the wider culture the lessons gleaned in intentional community about how to do that. Our challenge is how to

package what we have to offer in ways that are attractive and accessible to mainstream audiences. It's a work in progress.

In producing this issue of COMMUNITIES, we have partnered with the Tamarack Institute for Community Encouragement, headquartered in Kitchener, Ontario. This collaboration is a perfect example of how FIC hopes to promote cooperative culture: both as an example of inter-organizational cooperation (after all, what does it mean that we stand for cooperation if we don't practice it?) and as a way to create entrée to the general population—the arena in which Tamarack works in its effort to eradicate poverty in Canada.

Here are half a dozen specifics, to give you an idea of what I'm talking about:

—The ability to recognize and work constructively with emotional input in meetings.

—Offering live examples of how sharing can lead to deemphasizing material acquisition while maintaining a high quality of life.

—Modeling healthy leadership.

—How to have difficult conversations that are compassionate, authentic, and get to the heart of the concern (examples include: are you at the limits of diversity in your group; the sense that someone has misused power; is someone being manipulative in the way and frequency with which they express strong feelings).

—How to solve problems in ways that enhance the sense of cohesion in the group—even when people disagree.

—Creating the container needed to creatively bridge between different positions in ways that respect underlying interests (it doesn't have to be winners and losers).

We're learning how to do these things in intentional community and to the extent that we succeed, we have magic beans to share with those who crave more community in their lives. These skills are the building blocks of cooperative culture and all of them can be transplanted successfully wherever there is cooperative soil.

If you crave more of these in *your* backyard, give us a call. We deliver. ☘

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.



Stephen Gaskin Dies at 79

By Laird Schaub

This past July the world mourned the passing of its most celebrated hippie.

Stephen Gaskin died peacefully at The Farm, the Tennessee community he helped start in 1971, and which survives him. Though I met Stephen on only a few occasions, I had the honor of presenting him with the FIC's Kozeny Communitarian Award in

May 2012. It was the last time I saw him and I can think of no better way to honor his lifetime commitment to community than by excerpting a portion of his citation:

Starting with his years as a teacher and public speaker at San Francisco State and continuing through the present, Stephen has been an advocate and adviser on community living for more than 40 years. Countless numbers have been inspired to seek cooperative lifestyles based on his gentle, yet persuasive influence.

For more than four decades, Stephen has been one of the most sought-after spokespeople to interpret for the press the inspiration and hope of community living. He has consistently made himself available with humility and humor to offer the message that community can thrive in the intersection of compassion, magic, and responsibility.

Stephen was seminal in launching Plenty in 1974, based on the simple, yet profound notion that "there is plenty to go around if we share." As a nonprofit outreach arm of The Farm, it started by distributing crop surpluses to the hungry in the Midwest and South. Efforts were redefined on a grander scale when Plenty responded to a massive earthquake that rocked Guatemala in 1976, leaving one million people homeless. Over a four-year period The Farm's crew built more than 1200 homes, schools, and public buildings.

Over the years, their work expanded widely, to include such disparate efforts as the establishment of soy dairies in Lesotho and Guatemala, an ambulance service in the South Bronx (when no other ambulance service would go there), and help for the Lakota at Pine Ridge. Under the banner of Plenty, The Farm has walked its talk about how community can be a splendid base of operation for doing good in the world.

Even as the community accomplished far-reaching humanitarian deeds through the agency of Plenty, Stephen never lost sight of the need to simultaneously be a good neighbor at home. Though less than 5000 people live in their zip code and the community could easily have dominated local affairs, The Farm has been careful throughout the years to respect the traditions and lifestyles in its area, and thereby enjoys exemplary neighbor relations today.

Finally, Stephen stands out as someone who has gracefully modeled the difficult transition from central leader (a role he filled for the first 12 years of The Farm's existence) to being just one of the members.

When the community's centralized economy failed in 1983 and The Farm de-collectivized, Stephen stepped down as the secular leader and was replaced by an elected seven-person Board of Directors. While he's continuously been available to offer his thinking on community matters, he has been a steadfast believer in the community's ability to adapt to emerging needs and has never served on the board that replaced him as the community's governing body.

It is extremely rare for an inspirational leader to be able to make the adjustment to a lesser role and continue to live joyfully in the community he founded. Stephen has done so with dignity and a degree of ego management that's an inspiration to cooperative leaders everywhere.

Stephen, for all that you did, we salute you.



Chris Roth

Talking about Community

What if a strand of DNA were to become aware of how it functions? Of its role within its organism? Of its relationship to other strands within a community of organisms?

What if that strand of DNA could communicate, share its experiences with others, become part of a growing body of self-awareness of how we as living organisms work? What if that strand recognized itself as a tiny part of a web of life that manifests infinite variety and also common patterns? What if, through conversation, it recognized the miracle of its own existence? What if it stopped taking anything for granted? What if, through conversation and growing awareness, it became a tiny, vibrating, spiral of appreciation, rippling outward?

Putting together this issue has seemed to me like a similar stepping-back—away from the “everyday” and more specific topics, and into more fundamental questions:

Who are we? What does community mean to us? What is this larger picture we are part of? As social animals, how do we function? Why do we find ourselves in groups, seek out community, crave connections that we find with others? And how can awareness of the place of community in our lives, and of others’ experiences of community, improve how we live together?

These questions are relevant both to those living outside of intentional community and to those within it. And they raise some other, related questions: *What do we talk about in community? And do we take time to talk **about** community?*

This issue has shown me, more than anything else, the value of doing just that: talking **about** community.

Our first seven articles come from the Tamarack Institute, a nonprofit group in Canada which is sponsoring this issue. We then move on to authors within our own ever-growing network of con-

tributors, many of whom saw our Call for Articles and contacted us on their own. The result is a fascinating stew of community reflections and experience.

For reference, and in case you want to start your own conversations (it’s never too late), these questions provided a starting point for many of these conversations:

- What has been a memorable experience of community in your life?*
- What does community mean to you?*
- Why is community important to you now?*
- Where do you most experience community today?*
- If you’ve ever had a negative experience of community, please describe it.*
- What do we do to make our community strong?*
- How do we care for one another?*
- What do we do to have fun together?*
- What role does working for a better world play in binding us together?*
- Have we ever organized against others? When is this the right thing to do and when is it the wrong thing to do?*
- What do we do when we are afraid together?*
- What would deepening your experience of community look like?*
- What are the benefits of community?*
- What are the challenges of community?*
- What is the job of community?*
- In your conversations about community, what themes emerge? What new ideas, perspectives, and feelings resonate within your group?*
- What actions emerge from your talking about community?*

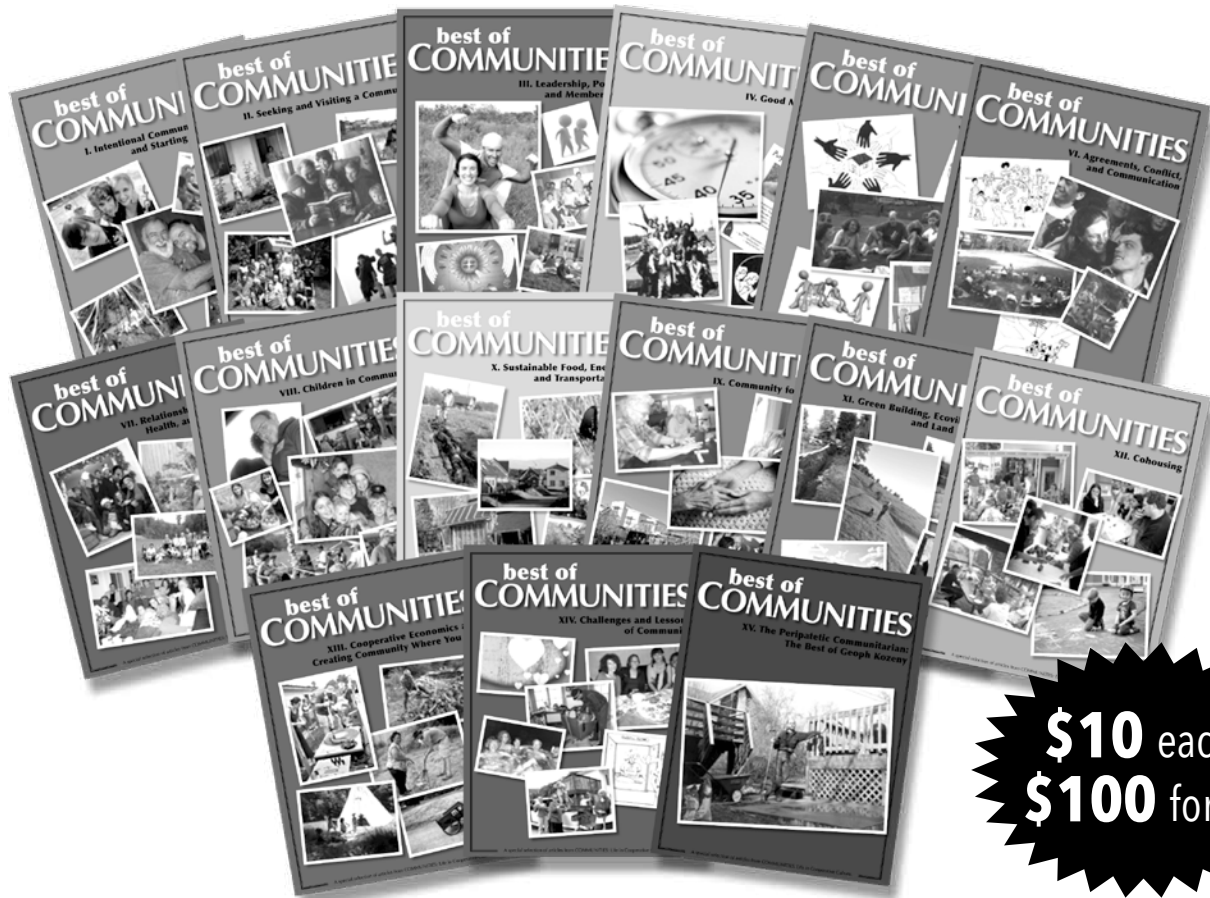
May the conversations continue...and thanks again for joining us! 🐦

Chris Roth (editor@ic.org) lives at Lost Valley Education and Event Center/Meadowsong Ecovillage (www.lostvalley.org) in Oregon.

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DEEPENING COMMUNITY

The joy of togetherness

By Paul Born

“I really do not want more community than we already have at this church,” shared a congregant during a Sunday morning adult Sunday school discussion. “What I like about this church is that no one judges you for not being more involved or attending regularly. If we had more community, people would expect too much from me.”

I remember being dumbstruck when I heard these words, especially in this church context, having never considered that a Mennonite congregation—or any of its members—would not embrace community as one of its central organizing principles.

I need to admit, though, that my afterthought was, maybe he is right. If community means I am expected to be present every Sunday, give money, sit on at least one committee, join a smaller fellowship group, contribute to monthly potlucks, and provide meals and support to congregational members who are sick or in need, who has the time or energy for all that?

Maybe this is the same reason so many people do not know their neighbours. Do we really want to know when they are sick? Do we want to help them seed a new lawn or dig up one to plant a garden? Do we want to trust them enough to lend them a car or even our favourite kitchen tool?

Is It Worth the Investment?

Some days I think it would be so much easier to be anonymous in the crowd, to come and go as I like, to care only for those I choose and when I choose. I love this feeling of being free, anonymous, of living life on my terms. Besides, my days are so full, I am constantly with people and exhausted most days when I get home. I deserve that glass of wine by myself, in the backyard with that “keep your dog inside” and “only cut your lawn from 11-12 Saturday morning” kind-of-quiet all around.

Alone

I often feel alone and I do not like it. I find this feeling especially troublesome when I am in the midst of a crowd. You know that feeling you get when you go to a restaurant alone, or you are at a reception and there is an awkward moment when everyone is talking to someone other than you? You stand there alone, feeling left out, isolated, self-conscious...feeling like you want to hide or just walk away.

I am not talking about the introverted side of me that loves time alone to read, to re-energize, and to sit in the quiet of my own thoughts. I am talking about this deep-pitted feeling that it is all up to me. In the midst of the crowd—people all around, even people who love me—I get this anxious feeling and hear this recurring voice that reminds me to “take care of yourself because no one else will.”

I recently had a conversation with a friend who reminded me that we die alone. Therefore,





Photos courtesy of Tamarack Institute

as we age, this pervasive sense of alone is an evolutionary preparation for death. That may be the most depressing thought anyone has ever shared with me.

What I find most curious is that this alone feeling I get is not related to the loneliness I feel at various times. Loneliness might happen when I am missing someone or wishing I was with others. I actually like the feeling of loneliness if for no other reason than that it indicates that I still love and want to be around those others who are dear to me. Viewing loneliness through this lens, it means I am very much alive. It is a part of living in community.



Community

During a recent interview, a young man just out of high school shared, “When I am in community, I do not feel alone.” He was clearly an introvert, shy and self-conscious. But for him, this feeling of belonging was the antidote to feeling alone.

Community has many benefits, and feeling a sense of belonging is likely the most important. To feel a sense of belonging means that we feel we are in the right place; that we feel welcomed and embraced in a place or with a group. To belong is to be cared for and to reciprocate that caring, to know that “I am home.” It is a willingness to extend our identity to a group of people or to an experience.

Having others in your life whom you know you can trust helps you make sense of who you are. It also can help shape your identity as you recognize the gifts you have to offer. The African term *ubuntu*, often used by Nelson Mandela, means “I am human because I belong. My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.”

Community can better your economic prospects. Those in your community—family, friends, neighbours, fellow members of whatever communities you consider yourself a part of, faith-based or secular—can help you find a job, or lend you money for a business or to buy a house. They can also teach you to garden or help you learn a new skill. They can support you when you are unemployed and help you choose an educational direction. They can bind together to create a credit union, a school, or a community foundation, which all enhance your economic prospects.

Community makes us healthier. In his book *Love and Survival*, heart surgeon Dean Ornish shares his observations of patients with many supportive relationships and how they were more than twice as likely to recover well and live longer, compared to those who had fewer or no close relationships. The love, emotional support, and positive healing energy others bring to us during times of illness contribute to our healing just as much as medical science and procedures.

Perhaps the best reason to pursue more community in our lives is that it has proven to make us happier. A whole body of thinking is now catching on, known as the “economics of happiness.” At its core is the argument that our gross domestic product is not a very good measure of human progress; instead, we should be measuring those things that enhance our collective quality of life.

One of the leading scholars advancing this idea, John Helliwell, a world-renowned professor at the University of British Columbia, concludes his talks by leading the audience in the song, “The More We Get Together, the Happier We’ll Be.”

A Missed Opportunity

My own community of faith, the Mennonite church, is struggling to maintain member-



ship growth. Many individual churches are losing their young people to other denominations or they are stepping away from church altogether. Most Mennonite institutions have opened up to “non-Mennonite” membership, not so much to enhance their mission, but to survive.

Most blame this decline in church attendance to shifting priorities in the larger society and to people moving away from a faith identity.

My own Mennonite identity has been shaped both by a belief system that forms my faith and the historical Mennonite community I belong to. This identity certainly includes borscht and shoofly pie, but also peace and service. My Mennonite identity, and the people who have shaped it, make up an important core of my sense of community for me as it does for many others in our congregations.

Have we taken the importance of our identity as a community for granted? Have we downplayed the community aspect of our faith in order to emphasize the religious or spiritual dimension? I believe we have, and that this certainly must be considered when we look to determine the reason for struggling churches.

Deepening Community

At my home congregation, Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, we are taking four Sunday adult education hours to explore the role of community in our congregational life. The goal of this exploration is, first of all, to celebrate our communal life by sharing our stories, and, second, to consider the importance of and restore our commitment to a communal life together. We are exploring community by considering these four concepts:

- **Share Our Story:** The journey towards community begins as we share our stories, be they stories of fears or of joy. Sharing helps us to open up, to become vulnerable and to hear other people’s stories. Thus do we begin to work together to distinguish truth from untruth and rational fear from irrational fear, to determine what we might do together. When we really hear one another, the bond of community is forged between us. We smile at each other; we feel warmth and joy as if we are home. In these times, we must make it a priority to take time for community. We need one another now, and we will need one another even more as times become more difficult.

- **Enjoy One Another:** As we continue to share our stories, and do so with the same



players over time, reciprocity and trust grow between us. This is an investment in deepening community, and the dividends this investment pays will be crucial to us in times of need. When we enjoy one another in a community we have invested in, we become a collective witness to the events around us. We can celebrate our achievements and those of our children together. How sweet are the victories and even failures that are experienced in community!

- **Take Care of One Another:** Reciprocity and trust have a wonderful effect when reaching out to help one another becomes as natural as breathing. We take care of one another not only because it is the right thing to do, and not only because people will help us if we help them, but primarily because the bond of love that has grown between us moves us to do so. Mutual acts of caring that happen often forge a sense of belonging. When we feel we belong, we feel safe and fulfilled; and when we feel safe and fulfilled, we can dare to develop hope and common purpose. Together, we have the strength to overcome almost any challenge that comes our way.

- **Build a Better World Together:** The first three acts of community give us energy for the fourth act of deepening community: building a better world together. In fact, we become a force for change that is unstoppable. The work of restoring our communities feels light and possible. We no longer feel alone in our fear or hopeless in our dreams; rather, we have the courage to see our dreams become real.

Each Sunday, we share a Bible verse and introduce the topic for exploration; then two members of the congregation share their experience of community. Next, we take time to share our own experiences in small groups.

During the four Sundays, we are able to answer these questions: How do we come to know each other’s stories? When do we have fun together and why is this important for our congregational life? When have we felt cared for by this congregation, and when have we had the opportunity to give or express our caring to others in our community? What do we do together to make the world a better place and how has working together this way deepened our commitment to our congregational life?

Investing in Community

Like any investment, our community takes time and effort. We spend years investing for our retirement, setting aside dollars in order to live a good life in our old age. Our financial advisers tell us to start this process early, when we are young, in order to have enough when we’re old, although they’re always quick to add that it’s never too late to start.

Investing in relationships to deepen community reaps a similar benefit. A strong family, a faith community or club, neighbours we can rely on, and friends who make the hours pass quickly, are equally worthy investments. Especially in times of loneliness, financial insecurity, or failing health, the skills we learn by seeking and living in community, and the network of relationships we build, will provide us with the joy and security we need. ☺

Paul Born is a community activist and best-selling author who has just released a new book, Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times. He is also president of Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement; a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute; and a senior global fellow of Ashoka, the world’s largest network of social innovators. Learn more at www.deepeningcommunity.org. A different version of this article previously appeared in Canadian Mennonite magazine (canadianmennonite.org).

Creating a Movement

By Rachel Brnjas

Recently, a YouTube video showing a man dancing in a field, initially by himself, went viral. In the video, slowly others join him until, within a few minutes, hundreds of people are dancing together. A TED Talk explored what takes place in this video and asked larger questions: How does one start a movement? How do we inspire others to follow? What is the tipping point that transforms a small group of committed “dancers” into a larger “dance party,” and how do we access this potential? How do we create the conditions for others and ourselves to share our unique “moves” in a way that complements the whole?

Over the last two years Tamarack Institute has been inviting others to join us in asking these types of questions in our *Community Conversations* campaign (formerly called *1000 Conversations*). This is a research project of Seeking Community, one of Tamarack’s three learning communities. The Community Conversations campaign and Seeking Community are intertwined; they need each other. The research data coming from the conversations informs the overall focus of the campaign: the curriculum and resources we offer, the workshops we choose for our yearly gathering, and the speakers we invite to share in our bi-monthly tele-learning/webinars. Likewise, the research needs a vibrant, co-generative space to live and be of use to others, so www.seekingcommunity.ca has become the platform for this to be made possible.

A little more information about these core pieces will help to build an understanding of how they work together and how they just might inspire a community revitalization movement.

Seeking Community brings people with diverse experiences and understandings of community together into a dialogue about the importance of having a deepened sense of community. Members of this online community can create personal profiles, listen to podcasts, share their questions, insights, links, and resources with the community via blog posts, and monitor what others (who share their interest in community) are doing and thinking. This online learning platform enables a learning agenda, which includes: a Thought Leader program; regular, free tele-learning/webinar opportunities; the Seeker’s Journal, a monthly e-newsletter; and face-to-face learning events (www.seekingcommunity.ca).

Seeking Community’s Thought Leaders play four distinct roles, all aimed at enhancing the learner-experience by engaging with learning community members to become a network for social change. The four roles of Thought Leaders are:

- **Adviser:** Offer leadership to the Learning Community
- **Contributor:** Provide articles, blogs, and knowledge to the learning community
- **Teacher:** Teach in online and face-to-face events
- **Promoter:** Promote the Learning

Community and Tamarack

Our Thought Leaders have been helping shape and promote the Community Conversations campaign in their networks, and will provide insight and support as we begin to discern how this data may shape our society at a policy and program level.

Bi-monthly, we invite a speaker to explore a topic that the online community has identified as valuable and relevant to their work and interests. These currently take the form of a conference call with a person who is well-known and respected in the field on a particular topic or issue. Half of the one-hour event is structured as an interview and the other half allows listeners (from all over the world, sometimes upwards of 200 listening at once) to ask

The screenshot shows the Seeking Community website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, LEARN, FIND, and CONNECT. To the right of the navigation bar is a logo for Seeking Community featuring a group of people holding hands. Below the navigation bar, there is a main content area with a large image of people sitting outdoors. The text on the image reads "Learn to care for one another". To the right of the main content area is a sign-in form with fields for Username or e-mail and Password, and a Sign in button. Below the main content area is a section titled "What is this site all about?" with a brief description of the site's purpose and a link to Read More. To the right of this section is a "Subscribe NOW to The Seekers Journal" banner.

any questions they might have. The calls are recorded and turned into podcasts that are accessible for all.

The Seeker's Journal is a free monthly e-magazine sent to over 1400 people in our database. This e-magazine highlights content from seekingcommunity.ca from that month. A section about the Community Conversations campaign highlights key findings and conversations held, allowing our constituency to stay informed as this campaign continues to evolve.

In June 2013, Seeking Community held its first face-to-face gathering in Kitchener exploring the importance of neighbourliness—Neighbours: Policies and Programs 2013. John McKnight, Jim Diers, and Al Etmanski joined us as national/international Thought Leaders and Lynn Randall, Milton Friesen, and Paul Johnson joined us as local Thought Leaders. We aim to create catalytic events that inspire participants to deepen cross-sectoral relationships and make positive change happen in their communities. Since this gathering, we have formed a monthly Community of Practice with participants to learn, explore, and share resources and tools on the issue of neighbourliness.

Now, why Community Conversations?

We are deeply curious about what people in North America are thinking and saying about community: What is the role/job of community today? Where are people experiencing belonging and caring? What are the barriers to experiencing deep and meaningful connections with others?

Beyond curiosity, we see a need for intentional thought and action to be invested in the exploration of community, as people in North America are lonelier than ever before, mental illness rates are skyrocketing, and simple acts, like knowing one's neighbour, often seem like a lost value. That said, there are many instances of caring, belonging, neighbourhood parties, and community gardens. So the question is not, "Why are these acts of community not happening anymore?"—rather, it is "Why are these acts of community not happening **more often**?" Thus, an exploration to hear the voices of diverse people and their thoughts on community has ensued.

Since this initiative launched in Fall 2012, nearly 200 conversations involving more than 2000 people have been held and documented across Canada. We've developed a conversation guide to provoke meaningful conversations amongst faith communities, students, schools, seniors, neighbourhood organizers, government groups, and not-for-profits. (If you'd like to be sent the conversation guide, email sylvia@tamarackcommunity.ca.)

We encourage those who host the conversations to document them on seekingcommunity.ca, so that they can contribute to the pool of data. We've been tracking the themes and patterns that have emerged so far and have been sharing them back to those involved and to the larger Seeking Community platform through quarterly newsletters. (For more

information about the overall themes, patterns, and stories, see Derek Alton's article on page 15.) Ultimately, we hope that this data can be used to help shape programs and policies that enable our communities to be more caring, connected, and vibrant.

Seeking Community has been and continues to be a space to document these conversations, analyze them to see what patterns emerge, and engage the learning community in co-generating insights from this data. This campaign is a vibrant and crucial thread being woven throughout all of the Seeking Community learning agenda. The online platform takes the impact of this campaign to a national level, by making the knowledge gleaned and stories shared accessible to everyone.

Recently Peter Block said, "Community has a job to do." By asking others what they believe this job is and how we can work together to accomplish it, we can start to take steps in the direction of transforming our communities—showing people that everyone has a role to play in creating places of caring, trust, belonging, and vibrancy. Everyone has a role in bringing these ideas into a reality...into a movement. Join this movement by creating a profile and sharing your ideas on www.seekingcommunity.ca today. 🐦

Rachel Brnjas has been the Community Animator for Seeking Community, one of Tamarack's three learning communities. Contact her at rachel@tamarackcommunity.ca.

Photos courtesy of Tamarack Institute



Community Conversations Campaign: Final Thoughts and Next Steps

By Derek Alton

Almost two years ago Tamarack launched its *1000 Conversations* campaign (now called *Community Conversations*) to explore people's experiences of community across Canada. This journey has introduced us to many incredible people who shared beautiful stories of communities coming together in times of need and opportunity. These stories, and the insights they have generated, have been shared as blogs on www.seekingcommunity.ca and through quarterly newsletters.

Into the future Tamarack will be continuing to explore and deepen our understanding of community and will also continue to partner with local communities to host Community Conversations as part of *Deepening Community*, a movement focused on building a shared understanding of the unique role of community as a driver for social change. The learnings gleaned from the Community Conversations campaign will inform and shape this work. You can learn more at www.seekingcommunity.ca.

Insights for Deepening Community

Self-Awareness and Self-Care

Virtually all the community conversations documented in this campaign have focused on the experience of coming together as a group. A recent conversation with an intentional community in Guelph highlighted a new dimension to consider in how people come together: the impact of the individual's relationship with self. One individual shared specific examples of how he had witnessed communities that he has been part of fall apart, in part because people within the community had not (in his estimation) paid adequate attention to creating space for self-care. As a result he believed that personal issues led to conflict with the larger community that ultimately could not be overcome.

The importance of self-awareness and self-care was also highlighted in a conversation with one neighbourhood group who observed that community thrives when people are clear about their boundaries, needs, and capacities. Setting such boundaries requires individuals to have a strong sense of self-awareness and understanding as well as enough trust to share honestly with others in a group. Within this particular neighbourhood group, this insight led to several people within the neighbourhood participating in the same self-discovery program. This enabled them to create a common language and lens to use to keep each other accountable to this important task.

This insight evokes an important question for us all: In the busy-ness of our daily lives, how are we enabling time and space for self-reflection and taking care of ourselves?

The Need and Value of Storytelling

In his most recent book, *Deepening Community*, Paul Born writes about how sharing stories with each other helps bring us closer together, and fosters feelings of empathy and caring for each other. This sentiment was echoed in many of the conversations we gathered as well. Specifically we noted that these stories served two primary roles: building identity and sense-making.

- **Identity Building:** The stories we share about ourselves help to shape and reinforce how we see ourselves and interact with the world around us. A conversation hosted at the Bennett Health Centre explored the role of storytelling within the context of people with dementia. One staff member shared how he used storytelling to help people with dementia retain a sense of identity.

Just as individuals have stories about themselves, so, too, do communities. The stories that a community tells about itself help to shape a collective sense of identity and citizens' shared beliefs about what is possible. The telling and retelling of community stories help residents to build and maintain their shared sense of identity. In our increasingly transient world, where people move in and out of communities all the time, recognizing the importance of capturing

and sharing community stories is particularly important.

• **Sense-Making:** At Halton's community celebration to wrap up its community conversations project, one member highlighted the importance of storytelling for helping people to make sense of life and the different curve balls it throws at us. This insight is echoed in the *Spiral of Experience* visual, which Christina Baldwin shares in her book, *Storycatcher*, which she describes as a "map for making sense out of life that can be applied to any life event we work with in story over time."

Another participant in Halton's community conversation, who shared her experience of leading the emergency response to the 2013 Christmas Day Ice Storm on behalf of the region, illustrated this same idea. She was quickly inundated with community members stepping forward wanting to help. She stated that it was an intense experience but also a time when she experienced the greatest sense of community. Afterwards there was a need among the volunteer team to share stories with each other about their experience. The act of sharing stories about what happened was really cathartic for the volunteers, helping them make sense of it and harvest insights and learning from this intense experience.

How can we incorporate storytelling more deliberately into our regular practices and rituals? How can storytelling be used to nurture a shared sense of identity within our communities?

Community Conversations Wrap-Up: Where to from Here?

Tamarack's Community Conversations campaign was originally created as a learning journey to help us find a sense of direction and energy from community builders across Canada and beyond to help us develop the then-fledgling *Deepening Community* movement. It has succeeded in doing this. Now as Paul's book *Deepening Community* has been launched we are getting ready to move into the next phase of this movement. As such we are wrapping the Community Conversations campaign up. The learnings from all these conversations are compiled in a report released this summer. The community engagement model that was developed from this learning will now become part of the *Deepening Community* Movement.

Here are just some of the ways that you can be part of Tamarack's *Deepening Community* Movement:

• **Communities of Practice:** Join citizens and neighbourhood-builders across Canada, the US, and beyond in peer learning networks focused on: Neighbours; Policies that Build Community; Programs that Build Community; Community Conversations Local Campaigns; and the *Deepening Community* Book Club. Learn more and join at tamarackcommunity.ca/events.html#CofP.

• **Deepening Community Thought Leaders:** Join Al Etmanski, Vickie Cammack, Jim Diers, Milton Friesen, Paul Johnson, John McKnight, Peter Block, and other leading thinkers as they share their newest ideas on www.seekingcommunity.ca.

• **Deepening Community Webinars:** Join us for regular webinars profiling the latest thinking and ideas on building and nurturing deep community. Check out our events page for a schedule of upcoming, free webinars at tamarackcommunity.ca/events.html.

• **Deepening Community Workshops:** Paul Born is traveling across the continent sharing insights from his new book and working with local groups to deepen community. To learn how you can invite Paul to your community, contact Caroline Mills at caroline@tamarackcommunity.ca.

• **Host a Local Community Conversations Campaign:** Tamarack is now partnering with interested communities to co-host a series of local Community Conversations campaigns across Canada. To learn more contact Sylvia



Photos courtesy of Derek Alton

Chey at sylvia@tamarackcommunity.ca.

We are very excited about this next chapter in Tamarack's ongoing work to make community a central organizing principle and a guiding force for positive social change. Join us and become a member of the www.deepeningcommunity.ca Learning Community.

Campaign Animator Closing Reflections

As my role as the Campaign Animator of Tamarack's Community Conversations campaign comes to an end, I want to share some personal thoughts and reflections. It has been an incredible privilege for me to interact with close to 2000 people and participate in more than 150 community conversations as part of this campaign. I have

been inspired by hearing people's stories and ideas and have made many beautiful friendships.

This campaign has been an important part of my own personal learning journey. Being part of such rich community conversations has challenged me to explore my own thinking and experiences of community. Two of my most significant personal insights from this campaign are:

Community Is Radical

Community is a radical concept. It is counter-cultural. If I choose to make community a priority it may mean I will need to completely reorganize my life. This includes working less so I can spend more time with family, friends, and neighbours, and really nurturing these relationships. It means carving out more time for meditation and journaling so that I can be more present, authentic, and empathetic with those I interact with. Working less may mean I have less money, which could mean less travel, less eating out, and higher levels of financial insecurity. If I make community a priority it may mean laying down roots in one location and staying put, which could impact potential career opportunities.

Making community a priority for me means packing fewer events into my life so I have more time to really enjoy the activities and people most important to me. This may result in less involvement with boards and committees, fewer sports teams, and, possibly, fewer friends.

At the same time, I recognize that it is possible that what I may lose in terms of money, career advancement, or breadth of a social network I may gain back and then some through the richness of deep and meaningful community. I gain a deep contentment from belonging to a community that I care about.

It Is All About the Little Things

"When eating an elephant take one bite at a time."—Creighton Adams

It is easy to get overwhelmed with the immensity of something as radical as a choice to deepen community. Where do I even start? Rather than making some grand gesture, ultimately I am realizing that building community is very much about the everyday actions that I take which, over time, become rituals and eventually norms of behavior. And so, I tell myself to "find the low hanging fruit" by looking for the easy opportunities to build community into my day-to-day life, through something as simple as a smile.

I am coming to realize that in a society where individualism is the norm, being a champion for deep and meaningful community is a radical calling. For those of us who have chosen this path, it can be a hugely rewarding one. How can you contribute and join the movement to deepen community? 🐘



Derek Alton has been Campaign Animator for Community Conversations to Shape our Future. See also his article "Digging into Community: A reflection from Tamarack's 1000 Conversations Initiative" in COMMUNITIES #163.

A Community Conversation at Whole Village

By Sylvia Chewy

I recently had the opportunity to host a conversation about community with a unique group of my neighbors: the residents of Whole Village (www.wholevillage.org)—an intentional community and ecovillage located in Caledon, Ontario—whose residents have a shared commitment to creating a community that is dedicated to sustainable living. The members of Whole Village own and operate a 190-acre organic farm. The farm's produce is sold through the Whole Village CSA as well as at several local area farmers markets.

About Whole Village

Greenhaven is the beautiful, cooperatively-owned home that sits at the heart of Whole Village. It includes 11 private apartments/suites that are all built around a common living, dining, and kitchen area. The home's design incorporates many eco-friendly design elements. In addition to making the space welcoming, comfortable, and functional, Greenhaven's design helps realize residents' shared commitment to shift to "living lightly on the earth" by incorporating renewable energy elements and encouraging less consumption by living together.

Whole Village residents share leadership, community responsibilities, housekeeping chores, and financial commitments. Decisions are made within the community using a consensus-based decision-making process that includes weekly house meetings and annual retreats where all aspects of community life are discussed.

Eating together is the norm at Whole

Village and communal dinners are held most evenings. Most of the vegetables that are consumed are produced on the property. Responsibility for cooking and clean-up is shared by residents according to a rotating roster of cooks and clean-up crews.

Whole Village residents nurture connections with the broader Caledon community by hosting concerts, seasonal celebrations, and educational events—such as permaculture workshops—for school groups as well as the general public. They have also collaborated on specific environmental stewardship projects with the Credit Valley Conservation Authority, and community members also actively participate in local fairs and eco-educational events throughout the region.

Exploring the Meaning of Community at Whole Village

As the host and documenter of this conversation I was curious: how would the experience of being part of an intentional community and ecovillage lead to experiences of community that are similar

or different from my own, more traditional, experience of community? Highlights from this rich conversation are shared below.

Community: A Sense of Belonging

After members recalled and shared powerful personal experiences of community with each other, we were able to identify several commonalities across this rich diversity of individual experiences. One dominant theme that quickly emerged was that of feeling connected and understood: a sense of belonging. People noted that this sense of belonging was a source of real inspiration which could be strengthened when it also included a commitment to a common goal that people were willing and able to work towards together.

Living Cooperatively: A New Paradigm for Happiness

Whole Village members noted that living in community creates different opportunities for happiness than what is often the norm. They felt that most people's experience of community is rooted in the dominant North American culture of consumerism and individualism. This paradigm suggests that personal happiness is something that can be purchased through material things or experiences. Whole Village members shared that being in community offers an alternative route to happiness. As one resident noted,

For some, becoming a Whole Village member involved embracing a new mindset and an alternative way of living that requires considerable "un-learning."

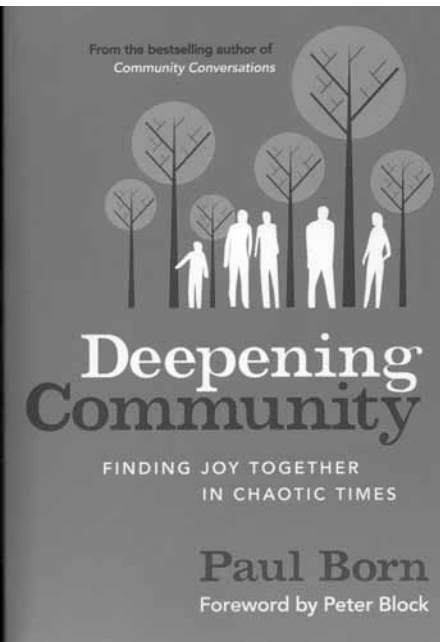
"There is much more available to me when I'm living in community than when I am isolated," and another commented, "Being in community eliminates that sense of greed and encourages us to rely on

others. Living with others returns us to the good. Happiness and fulfillment come from finding a shared way of being together."

Beyond the simple joy of being together, members stressed how happiness in community was also linked to working together to achieve shared goals, "not in a hierarchy, but united by a shared vision." The joy of discovering and benefiting from the knowledge and ability of others and appreciating the education that comes from sharing knowledge was also seen as one of the real benefits of living in community.

Community: Not Always Utopia

In spite of the benefits of community, living together is not always ideal or a utopia. Because the members of Whole Village farm together—which can be exhausting—and also live together, they noted that they can "bump up against each other" and that their diversity can lead to conflicts. This can make it challenging for "everyone to stay in heart." As one member noted, "We all join the community and bring our own baggage...and we can react to this. We also have to address these dynamics in the community."



Photos courtesy of Whole Village

Intentional Community's Unique Perspective on Community

Reflecting on the unique experience of community for Whole Village members, some noted that the decision to become part of an intentional community created specific challenges. For some, the move to Whole Village meant leaving an urban centre and adjusting to life within a rural setting. For others, becoming a Whole Village member involved embracing a new mindset and an alternative, more ecologically-friendly way of living that requires considerable “un-learning.” As one member said, “I had to fight my own cultural programming in order to embrace living communally.”

Another unique dimension of choosing to live in an intentional community, and adopting the alternative lifestyle of the Whole Village ecovillage, is explaining and managing the range of reactions that this decision generated within members’ extended families.

Members also spoke about the multiple commitments that they each needed to juggle in terms of their obligations to living in intentional community. For those who were working outside the village, it was sometimes challenging to manage professional job responsibilities alongside their commitments to the community. One person explained, “There is a need to always find the balance between advancing community projects versus our own one-off projects.” As well, the day-to-day complexities of maintaining Whole Village—as both an intentional community and an ecovillage—requires Whole Village members to pay attention to several important dimensions of work simultaneously. These include:

- **Commitment to a Shared Vision**—Members must share and maintain a commitment to living and working towards sustainability;
- **Assembling the Right Mix of Residents**—Having a shared vision is essential but not sufficient to sustain an ecovillage; it is also important that members have a diversity of skills, knowledge, and resources;
- **Tending to Interpersonal Dynamics**—Attention must be paid to how members are with one another, and learning how to work with each other’s idiosyncrasies; and,
- **Ensuring Financial Viability**—Members must also pay attention to the economics of the community and ensure that adequate financing has been secured to sustain the community.

These complexities were articulated in a comment from one member who said, “As we learn more about permaculture it is difficult to reconcile the long-term plans this requires with the time and energy that goes into orienting new people about how we work and the rules we’ve set for how to work and live together.”

In spite of the bigger commitment to relationship-building that living within an intentional community requires, members noted that living this way also creates opportunities for more in-depth learning. One member observed, “I’ve learned to talk more and I have been able to build relationships; before, I didn’t really know anyone.”

The Purpose of Community: Realizing that More Is Possible Together

As this conversation drew to a close, time was spent reflecting on what people discerned as the purpose and job of community. One point of consensus is that “we are happiest when we are altruistic” and that in community, “we have the ability to achieve a higher standard or quality of life.” One person noted, “I believe that we are all interconnected, and so the more I help and care for others, the more I am contributing to a positive change and can ‘get the ball rolling’ towards a better life.”

The group agreed that another central job of community is its unique role in supporting each of us to discover how to live more holistically and more authentically. One way that members observe this happens is that “living in community makes it harder to live behind masks.” Several people shared that “in community, when people accept you as you truly are, it challenges you and holds you accountable to strive to be authentic.” And “when you discover that people love you in your authenticity, it enables you to be more present.” A metaphor offered some time ago by Laird Schaub was shared to illustrate this central role of community: “I remember him (Laird) saying that the work of community is the work of world peace. This reminds me that when we are able to create peace between us today, in our relationships with one other, we are making a contribution towards our deep hope for shared peace in the world.” ☺

Sylvia Cheuy is a Director with Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement. She is a resident of Caledon, Ontario and a neighbor to the folks at Whole Village.

The Community We Built

By Carly Fraser

We are on our way home from an impromptu day at the farm. The back of the van is filled with sleepy children, half of them wearing their dress-up princess dresses. As we turn the corner onto the street, a small group of people waits on the road between the apartment complex and the big stone house. There are parents waiting for their children, other children ready to play, and new tenants with familiar faces. All of them are friends and community members. As soon as the van door opens, the children scatter, pulling adults into their world of play and storytelling. Later, around a crowded dinner table, this simple story is retold and described as being a magical moment.

This story captures the beauty and spirit of the community that is continuously forming, growing, and evolving in our neighbourhood in Guelph, Ontario. We are a group of engaged people going about the building of an intentional and environmentally conscious community.

Our community is different from a lot of the communities that are typically written about in COMMUNITIES. We live on suburban streets that are like so many others in urban centres. The physical presence of our unique community might be landmarked by the chickens on the roadside hill, or the stone house with the giant park-like backyard that people tend to congregate around and its network of adjoining backyards, but the community spreads down the streets and through the backyards of so many others. Some of us own houses in the area. Some of us rent houses or rooms within houses. Some of us rent apartments, or rooms of apartments, or even beds of apartments! And some of us are WWOOFing, travelling through and trading our time and work to stay

in this community.

There is a place for everyone, no matter the stage of life or financial circumstance they are in. We have found this to be a great strength in the creation of a unique dynamic in the community and for building resiliency. Over time the community expands and contracts as people move in and out, but it does not collapse because it is not dependent on a single space or specific people to keep it going.

A contributing success factor to the community is that it has been built over time in an existing neighbourhood. Slowly the landscape is beginning to change and capture the unique set of characters and personalities that make up the social fabric. Although the physical structure of the neighbourhood existed, the building of community has been sought out intentionally. Community members seek out and find shared experience, connection, and recharge in their neighbourhood.

To do this in a sustainable and successful way, communication is first priority. There are meetings to discuss larger happenings, for voicing concerns and sharing visions. This is the broad-scale communication that occurs. To improve one-on-one communication many members have taken or are currently engaging in a training course that is more personal. Having open lines of communication and a shared language and awareness around the unique needs of others helps this community thrive. Communication ensures clarity and builds trust.

One strength of our community that is continuously brought up is the fact that everyone has some space that they can call their own and define the rules within. Common issues in communal houses include tension over welcoming children or pets into the space, and having to come to consensus over household



Photos courtesy of Derek Alton

rules. Since everyone owns or rents their own space, there is enough separation to allow rules to be set to meet personal needs. For example, in certain spaces children are permitted to run freely from home to home. In others it is expected that children would ask permission before entering. The children understand this and the boundaries are respected. It is possible to have community with personal boundaries that meet individual needs; it is important to remember that these boundaries can still allow for connection.

There are spaces and times created specifically to bring the community together. For example last year we started a weekly potluck. Typical attendance ranged between 80 and 100 people! With so many people biking in and children running loose, the street was closed to traffic, essentially making the potlucks a weekly street party. The potlucks also created a pick-up spot for community supported agriculture (CSA) farm boxes and acted as a networking event for all the amazingly skilled people that live in the area. The potlucks will continue this summer.

With so many people to reach, in winter-time it is a challenge to maintain the same level of connection that seems to happen naturally on the streets and in backyards come summertime. But still the intention of maintaining community keeps the spirit alive as people seek opportunities for getting together.

Another thing that unites us is our children. It is very easy to see how it “takes a village to raise a child” living in this community. All of the regular challenges of parenthood still exist—finding child-care for the kids, getting the kids to bed, coordinating the comings and goings of daily activities, balancing work and family time—but working together makes it all doable. Parenting is hard work, no matter what, but parenting together makes it possible to still be energized at the end of the day and to always be present and giving when you are with the kids. The children learn so much from all of the different adult role-models in their lives and it is such a privilege to watch them grow and explore together.

We are creating a functional model for people to live in suburban community wherever we are, in a way that meets and challenges a variety of social, economic, and ecological values. To learn more about

us check out our blog at junctionng.wordpress.com or email us at thejunctionng@gmail.com. 🐦

Carly Fraser was introduced to the benefits of community while living with four wonderful roommates in her undergraduate years at the University of Guelph. She is now giving intentional community a try as a “WWOOFer” at Two Sisters River Urban Farm in Guelph, Ontario (and loving it!). Carly likes to spend her days outdoors learning to garden, playing with children, sorting and thinking about garbage, playing ultimate frisbee, and chasing after escaped chickens. She is very excited to begin studying food waste this fall as a master’s student in the Department of Geography at the University of Guelph. You can reach Carly at carlyelizabethfraser@gmail.com.



Village Conversations: Delburne's Story

By Nora Smith and Karen Fegan

“In 10 years our community will be...on the top 10 places to live in Canada list!”
—A vision statement taken from a community conversation with a group of community leaders in Delburne, Alberta

In late October 2013, the Village of Delburne (specifically with the guidance of Nora Smith of Family and Community Support Services) and Tamarack Institute began a partnership to gather a series of community conversations in Delburne, Alberta. The process was planned to unfold over a four-month period and would be implemented by a diverse local leadership team and with the support of the Tamarack team. During this time, 20 conversations have taken place and 245 surveys have been completed, thereby providing solid foundational data.

A unique spin on the Delburne Community Conversations initiative was the incorporation of the “Belonging: DELBURNÉ” photo project which intentionally and effectively employed art as a medium to increase community engagement and build social capital through deep heart-level connections. While participants were promised a copy of their own portrait captured by international photographer John Beebe, the hook was that everyone was asked to bring with them an object that represented a personal sense of “belonging.” Audio clips were also recorded of each person telling their story of their thoughtfully selected item and its heartfelt significance. These art elements can serve as a striking touchstone for future community development work and will become increasingly precious over time.

When this segment of the project concluded, more than 400 people (48 percent of the village population) from “all sides of the street” had participated in photos and conversations. The range of participants was exceptional, with the oldest participant being 94 and the youngest five months old. The next creative step will be installing gigantic Belonging: DELBURNÉ photo collage murals on high-profile exterior building surfaces throughout the village.

At the Stone Soup Celebration event which wrapped-up this foundational part of the process, approximately 90 participants identified seven opportunities for

shared action from the themes and conversation synthesis presented. Initial action planning conversations around each opportunity took place and all participants then prioritized the action plans based upon their own personal energy to contribute and move forward effectively towards transformational community change.

Project organizers have noted five clear and important early measures of success:

- The number of “new people” (beyond the existing volunteer base) who became engaged in the initiative, some of whom had never previously demonstrated leadership capacity.
- The level of cross-population agreement with the themes and patterns emerging from the conversation data, and the project’s ability to focus the entire community in a collective direction.
- The degree of shared community ownership/responsibility around identifying vital projects and collaboratively action-planning for results. One fear was that community members would turn to the Municipal Council of five individuals and say, “Okay, so now how are YOU going to make this all happen?”
- The extraordinary uptake of the Belonging: DELBURNÉ art component, which gave community members an equal opportunity to be heard and seen. Because it involved personal portraits and stories, it was strongly moving and participants automatically became deeply connected to the process and data.
- The identification of new potential provincial partners/funders who are eager to also become involved and contribute to advancing specific aspects of work flowing from this process. 🐣

Nora Smith’s facilitation work at Family and Community Support Services is centered on the development of a vibrant community via locally-driven preventative social initiatives that enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and groups. Building community capacity and empowering individuals beyond their self-imposed limits delights her heart.

Karen Fegan is the Chief Administrative Officer for the Village of Delburne, Alberta. Karen has a keen sense of community, so when the 1000 Conversations project came to Karen’s attention, she felt that it was a great way to get more people involved and have “buy-in” from the community in a heartfelt way that would leave people feeling more of a sense of belonging.





Photos courtesy of John Beebe

Input from the Group

1. Why was the 1000 Conversations Campaign a good fit for Delburne? Why was this time appropriate?

- We needed to get the community to go in one direction and focus. 1000 Conversations brings that focus to a single point.
- It provided the right leadership with a strong vision and willingness to hold onto and support that vision.
- We needed something to jump start/bring together people from all sides of the street.

2. What did you learn during this process?

- There are more people interested in the same thing; I didn't realize that so many people were thinking similarly.
- The photography gave everyone an *equal* opportunity to be heard and seen as part of this project. That message was exceptionally important in sending a message that this project is for everyone in the community.
- Bringing in an outsider, willing to listen and inviting participants to share something about themselves, helped participants be more open to sharing.
- People love to have their voices heard, stories told, and thoughts listened to. This community comes together and makes things happen.

3. Did anything surprise you along the way? What were the greatest successes of this process so far?

- You got more community participation than thought and the process is good. I appreciate Tamarack's willingness to continue on the future to guide us towards achieving our goals.
- The greatest success is the exceptional number and range of participants in the process.
- I did not believe that the picture component part would be as strongly moving as it has turned out to be. This facet really motivated people to become engaged in telling their stories.

4. What were some of the challenges?

- Even more participation would have been better.
- Sharing leadership of the project.
- While it was clearly open to all, not all were interested in participating in a project that required participants to share something authentic and vulnerable about themselves. After seeing the first round of photography, there was not an overwhelming interest in participation by everyone in the community.
- Logistics for sure. Where to house that many people at one time. Again, many people stepped up to find solutions.

5. What do the next steps forward look like?

- Take the number one priority (voted on at the Stone Soup Gathering) and go forward and see what we can accomplish.
- Create a documentary about the process and installation of photographs.
- Put the pictures up around town!



Sharing Stories and Rituals

By SILC Guelph

Over the last two years a core group of people have been working together to explore building an intentional community in Guelph, Ontario. Affectionately called SILC (Sustainable Intentional Living Community just seemed like too big of a mouthful), the group has grown to a core membership of 16 with a listserv of over 60 interested people. Lately we have been caught up in more of the details as we get ready to move forward with purchasing a property and designing our new home, so it was nice to step back for an evening and reconnect with why we are doing this together. The community conversation, part of the 1000 Conversations Campaign, gave us the perfect chance to do this.

We started our conversation by sharing our own stories of community. It was surprising to hear that all of us had experience being in a close-knit community, whether it was an intentional community in Latin America, a small town where everyone knew everyone, or a church family.

Common themes that came out of these stories were the idea of doing things together, whether it was sharing food, chores, or even organizing music festivals. Community seemed to be active.

Mike shared how community was not something that he had been seeking or trying intentionally to build. For most of his life it is just what happened. In contrast we are now intentionally trying to create community with SILC. Some fear that it will feel artificial.

We draw inspiration from the natural world and how systems organically ebb and flow.

We then had a discussion about the role of boundaries in establishing community. The boundaries are not tied to us as individuals; we can cross them at our leisure, but when we are in these boundaries we feel connected to the community that they define. Bill talked about how this was a natural outcome of our need to relate to our village.

Vicki discussed how some people can be paralyzed by the overwhelming selection of people, which is the case for many people living in urban centers. They are people without community, because they do not have a context to draw a perimeter. Boundaries allow us to build a sense of identity.

We discussed how community enforces conformity. Bill talked about how communities push us to not act in a manner that is detrimental to self or others. He discussed how there are certain limits that you have to stay within to stay a part of the community. Things get off track when those limits become hidden or arbitrarily applied.

Sustainability is a major focus of the Guelph SILC group; we draw inspiration from the natural world and how systems organically ebb and flow, new things are added, old things are discarded. We see the same pattern in a healthy community. When this does not happen, when a community clings on to staying the same, then it starts to become dysfunctional. Despite this necessary dynamism, it is still important to have a central gravity that holds everyone together and keeps a community grounded. We all agreed that this is the role of a set of common values.

Vicki described community like water. She said growing up in a small rural community people did not always get along; sometimes people would fight or not talk to each other for years at a time, but like water they got where they needed to go. People would share farm equipment because that is just what you did, what you had to do to survive. When a disaster struck, the community would band together.

Melanie shared how some communities are about celebrating and having fun together, while others are about getting things done. As long as everyone is clear and on the same page with what type of community you are, then you should all be able to get along.

Mike countered that community does not mean that everyone gets along. It is a group of people who live and do things together and who can more or less rely on each other when things are needed. He described it as the difference between like and love. When you love people you do things for them because they need it. It is not about the warm fuzziness, it is

simply a way of relating. It is just what you do.

We then talked about how communities form around needs; but what if there is no obvious need? Can we create a common need? One need that was brought forward for SILC was sustainability. We debated about whether this was truly a need or an ideal. Is it strong enough of a need to pull us together and help form this community?

We see SILC as a way of enabling us to live the values we believe in. But is the fact that we hold more or less the same values sufficient to make a community that works? Bill shared how it comes down to our personal needs and how they will or will not be fulfilled. If they are being fulfilled, then the community can work.

At this point in the conversation, we asked: Why SILC and Why Now? To our surprise the answers varied widely. For Melanie it was a desire to live out her values of a sustainable lifestyle that she felt she could not do on her own. Derek similarly said it was a chance to be fortified in living with integrity to the values he wants to embody. For Bill it was a chance to build more meaningful and lasting relationships that could support him as he got older. For Vicki it was an opportunity to preserve the beautiful garden that she had spent decades making. (Mike and Vicki's property is going to be part of the site for the intentional community.)

Finally we shared ideas of actions that help build community. Bill laid out beautifully how there are three levels for people living in community:

- Personal: Things (ideas, emotions, objects) that lie within ourselves.
- Impersonal: Things we own.
- Interpersonal: Things that lie between/with others and us.

Bill discussed how in community our interpersonal things are on display but our personal things influence it. So in community the personal is really important. We need to develop mechanisms to work on the personal—rituals like meditation. Bill talked about how these practices help communities indirectly deal with issues.

We also added sports, or creativity like art and music, as other spaces to release pent up energy and work on the personal. These activities also create space for us to come and play together. In our hectic life it is often easy to let these things slip away.

Derek talked about rituals, the idea of setting aside a certain time to do a certain set of behaviors that have a deeper meaning. We are able to fall back upon these rituals during times of stress and uncertainty.

Melanie discussed governance as another action that helps build and maintain community. It does this by building a pattern of behavior for decision-making. She noted that governance is not about strict rules but rather an understanding of processes. The metaphor she used was a trellis on which we (the vine) can grow; it helps us keep form but we are free to grow through it the way that is natural and organic.

We also discussed having a common communication method. In the case of SILC we expect that everyone takes nonviolent communication training. This provides a norm of communication.

This proved to be a very rich and rewarding conversation that left us feeling closer to each other. Beyond the emotional experience we were also able to bring forward lots of interesting ideas that forced us to dig deeper into how we are building our community. It will be exciting to see how SILC grows in the months and years to come. 🐦

SILC is a Guelph-based group that is in the process of creating an intentional community within the heart of the city. Their values include strong authentic communication, sustainability, and being a community action hub for the residents of Guelph. They have been meeting regularly since the autumn of 2011, and have 16 core members and growing.



SILC members Bill, Mike, Melanie, and Vicki participated in their group's community conversation.

Photo courtesy of Derek Alton

Kawsmos: The Unintentional Community

By Mary Wharff, Elizabeth Schultz, and Deborah Altus

In 2003, a couple dozen people were invited by Doug Hitt of Lawrence, Kansas to watch and discuss Brian Swimme's *Canticle to the Cosmos*, a video series about the connection of humans to the Universe and all living things. Hitt didn't set out to do anything more than that. But now, 11 years later, that gathering has evolved into Kawsmos: 15 people who meet monthly to deepen our knowledge about life, to celebrate being part of the cosmos, and to understand our place along the Kansas (Kaw) River.

In March 2014, Kawsmos devoted an evening to participating in the Tamarack Institute's conversation about community. The conversation fit neatly into our planning process for the immediate future: in fact we had just begun to discuss whether or not the term "community of practice" fit us. Our conversation revealed appreciation for the community we've gained from Kawsmos, as well as some resistance to any term which would define what we are. Resistance to definition is just one of the ways our group has avoided structure, guidelines, and rules so common in many organizations. But as we talked about community, it became clear that this resistance, as frustrating as it can sometimes be, is a key part of the organic structure that keeps us interested, connected, and coming back for more.

"Community" was not the goal

When our group first convened, some of us had known Hitt a long time, but others were relatively new acquaintances. Some of us knew each other, some of us knew no one but Doug. We knew we would meet once a month that year and be exposed to new thinking about science, ecology, and theology.

But we did not know we would decide to keep learning together after the first year ended, and that our gatherings would give new shape to our calendars with celebrations for each solstice and equinox. Nor did we dream we would sing together, write poetry

together, dance together, tell stories and paint together, walk through woods and wetlands together, perform "science theatre" together, sled together, and watch the sunset in the rain together. We didn't know that we would bring food we had prepared to every gathering and break bread together before we began the evening's activity.

The more we talked about our shared experiences during our community conversation, the more obvious it became that "community" has happened to us, whether we planned for it or not.

"No rules" was the rule

We've come to where we are today with no mission statement, no set goals, and no set rules. Why? A partial answer is that we are a diverse and rebellious lot—we wouldn't be attracted to a new story about life if we weren't! We range in age from 16 to 78, are married and single, gay and straight, humanists and scientists, members of faith communities and atheists.

We couldn't talk about community without remembering the rebellious participants in our early years who felt strongly that even a name would lead us down a slippery slope to mission statements, formal rules, and obligations. As a result, our first years were name-free, leader-free, and expectation-free. We chose our yearly program by consensus. We took turns, voluntarily, planning program content. This planning process was, and is, extensive and time consuming, but it is not governed by rules.

Like the cosmos, however, we evolved. The name nay-sayers moved away, and at about the same time, we added new participants from a second group that Hitt had introduced to the *Canticle to the Cosmos*. Suddenly, the make-up of our group changed, and interest in a formal name grew. Up to that point, many of us had developed nicknames to write on our calendars—"cosmology," "earth literacy group,"



Kawsmos members enjoying the outdoors before their Community Conversation, March 22, 2014.

Jerry Jost

“eco-lit,” and creative combinations of the Native American name for our region, *Kaw*, in combination with the word “cosmos,” such as “beKAWS” and “Kawsmonauts.” But no particular name had stuck.

After six years of avoiding the issue, we were ready for a real name. We wanted consensus, as usual, which meant discussions about the value of names, along with the limitations. Why, we considered, is *Echinacea* called “coneflower,” but not “purple-petal thistle head”? Is “Mars” made less wondrous by its name? How could our group find a name that would be spot on tomorrow as well as today?

We joined hands and experienced unity like never before...until someone suggested we have a logo to go with our new name!

Rather easily, as it turned out. One of our new participants suggested “Kawsmos,” and right away, we loved how this name captured our reverence for the cosmos and our attachment to our Kaw Valley home. We said yes. And in a ceremony that was mentioned repeatedly during our community conversation, we took turns smudging the cheek of the person next to us with mud we had made with Kansas soil and Kaw water. We added glitter to represent stars. We joined hands and experienced unity like never before.

Unity, that is, until someone suggested we have a logo to go with our name! A banner was suggested, too, which led to T-shirts which led to mugs which led to... *dissent!* And, once again, we chose to back away from any more organized organization. A name was enough. Perhaps it still is.

Organic evolution deepened our connections

Openness and flexibility were mentioned again and again during our community conversation. We have proceeded from year to year in the same way that cells and more complex organisms have evolved—trying this, trying that, learning from failure, sticking with what works. After our initiatory year, Kawsmos embarked on exploring Water, The Sun (Fire), Air, and Earth,

allotting an entire year to study each of the Four Elements. During each year, we engaged in activities which illuminated our understanding of these elements from the cosmic, planetary, and Kansas perspective.

During the Year of Water, we not only toured our local wastewater plant and took a canoe trip down our lovely and badly polluted river, but we also each created art expressing our need for and love of water. During the Year of the Sun, a Kawsmos artist allowed us to take over her studio floor so we could imagine in colors and design the creation of radiance. To study Air, we considered wind globally in mythology, poetry, and fans! We also discussed a video on wind farms and engaged a local dancer to lead us in breathing exercises and wind-tossed dances. In our year about Earth, we returned to the artist’s studio, this time seeing it as a cave and ourselves the first visual artists. This year also involved a trip, led by a professional geologist, to a beautiful local woodlands area, marked by a creek and stunning limestone cliff.

We enjoyed remembering many of these activities during our conversation and we discussed the value of shared learning and celebrating community. We also became more mindful of how we have helped each other take action. In the Year of the Sun, for instance, we agreed to reduce energy in our individual homes. One of our group designed and built a stunning three-dimensional model, using miniature coal cars, so we could visually demonstrate our energy usage and its reduction, month-by-month. Naming our experiment “Lighten Up,” we brought our model to our city’s Earth Day celebration to demonstrate the impact of reducing energy consumption.

Our conversation also took us to memories of shared grief. One time, we gathered around an immense hole, dug on prime agricultural land ostensibly to create sewer facilities for an existing airport, but probably to initiate a development project. We brought bouquets of wild flowers, grasses, feathers, and bizarre debris found near the construction site and set up cairns of resistance as well as of repair, restoration, and reverence along the rim of the hole. We also grieved together in the Wakarusa Wetlands, a wild area seething with infinite animal and plant life within our city limits and under threat from the development of a massive highway project. In 2010, we met there to mourn the loss of life caused by the Gulf of Mexico BP oil spill and to honor the ongoing life in all watery

Kawsmos holding a Council of All Beings at a beloved local wetlands.



Doug Hitt

places in the world.

Mourning together is just one of the ways that Kawsmos offers spiritual support to many of us. In learning a new world view, we have also been learning new ways of expressing that view. And to be able to do this with others has been illuminating and moving.

We once met at the wetlands for the Mirror Walk, in which one person guided another who was blindfolded into the breathing, sensual world. When the blindfold was removed, we “opened our eyes and looked in the mirror,” seeing ourselves in the prairie grass, cattails, red-winged blackbirds. On another occasion at the wetlands, we held a Council for All Beings, with each of us creating a mask of a beloved and respected fellow being.

Many of us also cherish the memory of our Cosmic Walk in the Hitts’ outbuilding. There we walked a spiral, illuminated by candles marking the significant developments in the cosmos’ 13.7 billion-year history, moving outward from the Big Bang in the center to our solar system and planet, cells, plants, animals, and humans on the periphery. The Cosmic Walk allowed us to experience, body and soul, the wondrous journey of creation.

Now, after two years of monthly meetings and intense engagement with Mary Evelyn Tucker’s and Brian Swimme’s *Journey of the Universe* series, Kawsmos continues to feel our collective way forward, examining and questioning in a mindful way. With a deep shared memory of journeys, rituals, experiences, actions, conversations, discussions, and celebrations, we are a community in process, a community evolving.

Flexibility has its downsides

We would be disingenuous if we were to pretend that Kawsmos has been all smooth sailing. The organic and flexible nature we love about Kawsmos, that which provides the glue that binds us, also makes us vulnerable to conflict. While we do invest much energy each year as a group in planning our topics for the next year, and we have a volunteer subset of participants who devote significant time and effort to prepare content for monthly gatherings, we do not have formal policies or procedures for governance, planning, hosting, and participation. As a result, we have had to rely on communicating often and well in order to address needs as they arise.

Several times we have had to discuss whether to add participants because we do not have a set policy for selecting new members. We also do not have an agreed-upon way to ask members to leave. Nor do we have a set rotation for hosting gatherings or for ensuring that work is shared equitably. While we sometimes use a talking stick at gatherings, we don’t have a consistent method that ensures voices are heard in equal measure. And as result, some of us have felt misunderstood or ignored at some point. Mostly, our hurts and misunderstandings have been processed individually or in small groups. Occasionally they surface at a full group level, usually on our email listserv. Yet we don’t have an agreed-upon method for addressing these issues as a whole. As a result, hurts have sometimes lingered.

Our absence of formal structure, then, both helps and hurts us. We are loath to formalize rules for fear of being constrained in our creativity and hampered in our pursuit of new ways of being. Yet our recent community conversation helps us see that greater attention to group process may be valuable—or even essential—to our future together.

Community is a journey

Our recent conversation about community was a new experience for us despite our 11-year existence. Somewhat paradoxically, discussing community allowed us to focus on each other as individuals—our wants, needs, and desires—in new ways. We learned that some members want more community in their lives while others have plenty. We discovered that many of us desire more group adventures and additional time for communal art and theatre. We found that one of us continues to have a deep need to grieve the loss of nearby wetlands. We learned that another wants gatherings

of a more practical nature—how to parent, how to engage in financial planning, how to plan for retirement, how to plan for death. Several expressed

a yearning for more shared silent time. Yet another wants more opportunities to eat together. In typical Kawsmos fashion, this discussion led to ideas for future programs and adventures together.

And so here we are, 11 years into a fascinating journey—a journey that has been about the universe and, unwittingly, about community. We are grateful to the Tamarack Institute for providing the impetus to explore what this journey has meant to us. Through this exploration, we see more clearly that our “no rules” approach is not why we come together. Rather, this approach allows us to change the “why” into new and different questions. It allows a group of individuals to retain a fair amount of that individuality, and at the same time, to come together in community to share knowledge, strengthen convictions, and discover new ways of being—not only with each other and other humans, but also with the much larger community of beings with whom we share this planet.

From being strangers to one another, through time, work, thought, disagreement, imagination, exploration, experimentation, Kawsmos now creates and mourns and celebrates together as a community, caring for each other, our bioregion, and our planet. ☺

Mary Wharff writes short fiction. She lives in Lawrence, Kansas with her husband and their adopted four-legged family.

Elizabeth Schultz, retired from the Kansas University’s English Department, now enjoys life as a poet and an arts and environmental activist in her adopted community of Lawrence, Kansas.

Deborah Altus lives, loves, and plays in Lawrence, Kansas. She is a professor at Washburn University in Topeka and a member of the FIC’s editorial review board.

Greater attention to group process may be valuable—or even essential—to our future together.

Love and Bucket Brigades, Interdependence and Evolution A Community Conversation at Lampa Mountain Community

By Sara Donna

I'm part of a small communal family who've come very far toward solving many of the challenges people face when considering or attempting to live closely with others. We started out as a core group of three people (David Truman, Francine James, and me) over 30 years ago, and others joined in time. Our unifying principle has always been our desire to learn to love and commit to each other, and to serve the world together. In the beginning we were held together largely by David's personal friendship with each of us, and his unusually deep understanding of human nature, which helped us resolve our inevitable difficulties with greater compassion and grace than we could have mustered without help. We've all grown a lot in those abilities since the early days.

As a community, we're smaller and more interdependent than many. But we've been able to explore the inherent potentials and benefits of community quite deeply, due to our commitment. So we feel our experience is relevant to all.

We recently heard about COMMUNITIES magazine and its request for conversations, so we gathered one night to talk about our experiences of community. We had a fabulous discussion! Here are some excerpts.

How We Got Good at Cooperating

Sara: It's great that people here really have the willingness and desire to jump in and do *whatever* is needed—as opposed to “what I'm good at,” or “what I feel like,” or “what I want to do,” which is where most people (including us) start from: “*That's* not my job; *this* is. I'm not good at *that*; I'm good at *this*.” It's very preferential. Over time we've outgrown that attitude, and now when people come here, they integrate readily into that because it's so strong in our culture.

Eva: It's interesting that in our group people became *specialists in what's needed*. Like noticing that something was needed and then developing expertise in that, so that's how we now have experts. It wasn't a preference, but it became a true professionalism.

Sara: We've seen how people can actually develop aptitudes they didn't have.

Dyana: Yeah, and I remember the precursors to that. When we still lived in California and we were getting ready to move up here to Oregon, we had what I fondly remember as “the warehouse days.” It was a *huge* coordination project for a bunch of people who weren't that good at getting along, who had trouble doing even the simplest things like cleaning the house together without getting into arguments. And suddenly, we had *all* of this stuff to organize and move.

When that happened, I remember us perfecting the art of the bucket brigade. It's a real coordinated effort, like a choreography. The first few times we did that, we irritated each other, we dropped things. You really just wanted to go pick the thing up and



*A great oneness of spirit:
Sara, Dirk, and Jay.*

carry it over there yourself, because you didn't want to sit there between all these other idiots, trying to get them to pay attention. We finally got good at it, but it took a lot of reps! Remember?

Dinari: Yeah, those days were hard.

Dyana: Yeah, we were really not good at coordinating and communicating well amongst each other. But we didn't feel like we had an option, we had to keep going. That's learning how to cooperate at its best. We couldn't have learned that from somebody telling us about it, or giving us all the theories or anything. We had to actually get in there and irritate each other and have words with each other and deal with it.

Powered by Love

Sara: You know, there isn't really any amount of expertise in "group processes," or communication, or power-sharing, that could possibly hold a candle to the willingness to love. Because time and time again, our love-commitment to each other has allowed us to make decisions and do things that were impractical, or even seemingly in our worst interest, because there was a people-value involved.

A good example is Mana [a young woman who had joined the community right after high school] going to Portland to have the experience of getting a job, having her own place, and finding out what it's like to live in the world. She was an integral part of a lot of things here. And the day she announced her desire to do that, we couldn't imagine getting along without her. Yet we all intuitively realized, "This *has* to happen. And it can't happen without us wholeheartedly supporting her in many ways."

And so many other examples like that have happened over the years, where people come first. I really appreciate about our community that we've been able to change everything, and take all kinds of risks, because we stick together, and are committed to making it work and taking care of the people. We've really done a good job of proving that you *can* prioritize love and human values above all else. It does actually work.

Mati: I've often wondered how people can function in the world without feeling like they have any place to stand, any relationships they can count on. I remember, before being in this community, having a lot of fear about that. And now, so many years later, I really appreciate the fact that we all have that with each other, and that our commitment to one another is very deep. None of us wonders how they're going to have friendship, stability, community, family, love, purpose. People who need you, and people who are there for you when you need them. Sustenance, and spiritual upliftment. We have so many things that are luxurious by common standards, but they are the basics.

Alex: Yes, the crucial elements.

Paving the Way for Others

Sara: There's something interesting I've observed: In the beginning when it was just me, and Fran, and David, it took us a long time to make increments of progress in

getting along and learning stuff. But the more people came, and the more solid and strong the community got, the easier it became. Each person coming in learned *much* more quickly the things I spent *years* learning. And I think that's a benefit of living in community...

Alex: You have role models.

Sara: More than just a role model—you can absorb or blend with any quality that you admire in someone else. You can take it into yourself.

Mati: I can see, too—I've been here 15 or 16 years—most people coming in go through similar processes: discovering elements of their own egotism, which they learn about in relationship and by screwing up in different ways, and gaining con-



Dirk and Ish, a community friend, plant baby trees in the orchard.



All hands on deck: members turn over an aluminum castamaran they're building, in preparation for painting it.

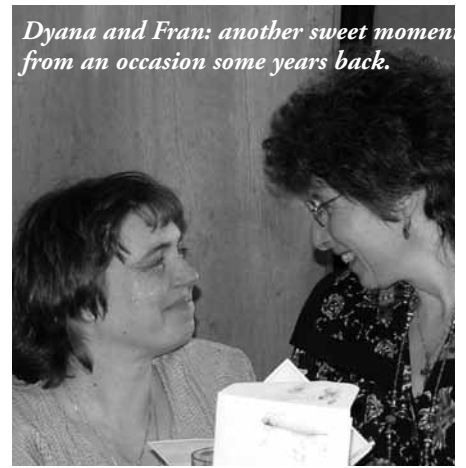


Dyana and Pada pause during a work stint at one of the community's ponds.

Photos courtesy of Sara Donna



The group gathers around the dinner table.



Dyana and Fran: another sweet moment from an occasion some years back.



Sara and Francine (two of the group's original members) laugh about something!



Group effort: Pada, Wilson, and Dirk push a heavy cart together.



sciousness about that. But I've noticed that the grosser elements of that don't linger in people as long now, and I attribute that to the fact that there's less of it around in general. So there's a higher moral and love environment for everyone to be raised in, and it helps clean up that stuff faster.

Dirk: Right, there is a big support for it so you're not working against something, you're working with something.

Mati: That's true, you're not reacting so much to other people's rampant egotism. That makes it easier to get through it.

Alex: And yours is a lot more apparent, too. And that's the other part, you got all those mirrors in the community. Your spouse might say something to you, or a coworker might say something to you, but when *all* your friends tell you the same thing...

Mati: ...in separate conversations *and* together...

Alex: Yeah! You're going, "Well..."

Dirk: "...maybe they have a point."

Alex: So that's part of the beauty of community: it really is a village raising the adult into...

Mati: Into morality really.

Alex: Into morality, that's a good way to put it. 🐦

Sara Donna is one of the founders of the Lampa Mountain Community, located south of Coos Bay, Oregon. You can meet her and other members of the community at the Body, Mind, Spirit Expo in Portland, Oregon, November 1-2, 2014, where Sara will speak on "What's Enlightened, and EnlightenING, about Community?" You can connect with the community by email (lampamountaincommunity@gmail.com) or through the Lampa Mountain Community page on Facebook.

A WELCOME INTIMACY, OR TOO LITTLE PRIVACY? Community Conversations at Lost Valley

By Macy Osborne

The most important elements in any community may be the relationships amongst individuals. The strong bonds needed to keep a community functioning well, and to create an atmosphere where members experience a sense of well-being, strengthen through conversation and constant communication. Each community has its own ways for members to keep in touch with one another and the group as a whole.

Residents at Lost Valley Education and Event Center/Meadow-song Ecovillage (Dexter, Oregon; www.lostvalley.org) take part in a host of meetings, announced via the community white board and email and attended by all who are able to be there and be present. These meetings include Community Petal (the residential community's biweekly logistical/policy meeting), Stewardship Council (which handles the activities of the nonprofit education/event center), and Well-Being meet-ups in the Sacred Yurt.

What do community members talk about that brings them close enough together in mind, body, and spirit so that they can function in unity as a productive, happy whole? The simple truth is, everything and anything. Meetings can center on specific topics or, especially in the case of Well-Beings, can simply be get-togethers where people check-in with feelings, what's going on in their lives, and if all needs are being met.

For the sake of writing this article a handful of Lost Valley members got together to talk. Those participating read over a list of questions and picked whichever they felt most comfortable and compelled to talk about. We scheduled two meet-ups, a week apart, each attended by different members who were drawn to different topics.

Conversation #1: What Brought Us Here?

At the first session we had Ananda, Anna, Catherine, Chris, Colin, Simon, and myself. A few children were also present. Anna and Simon were interested in listening but did not take part in conversing. I took notes. The first, most appealing question to this group was "What brought you to community?"

When you have a group of excited individuals who are more than satisfied with their situation and at peace with one another, a question such as this proves words, thoughts, and feelings can flow effortlessly, freely, and sometimes a little too quickly for the note taker. (With the participants' permission, I often paraphrase their words in this article.) With tougher topics people tend to talk more slowly and ponder more. Each person is given the chance to speak and the "conch" goes around in the circle.

Our gentle Ananda was the first to speak at our Well-Being meeting. "What brought me to community? A lot had to do with age and my family circumstances, and the conditions of the world. I'm 65, semi-retired; being in a community keeps me from becoming isolated. Now I'm with my family of choice on a daily basis. Being that I'm an empty nester, orphaned, and single, I could quickly be led to isolation. By living in this community I'm choosing not to

settle for a community filled only with elders. Here I have a sense of belonging."

Next to speak was our sweet Catherine. "Coming from a small family meant I never felt part of a group. To me a family of choice means a family of understanding; I have a need to feel tribal. There is nothing about mainstream culture that I like. Everything about Lost Valley, I like! I spent years at the Lama Foundation and lived in three or four other communities, some of them more spiritually-focused and/or hierarchical than this one. Now, I believe we need to be equal among equals. If you just see the spiritual side of life, it's just one wing of the bird; the other wing is our human mental and emotional individual selves. There are basic reasons to evolve with other humans; we do that together. A certain level of truth comes up in community, revealing what our true needs are. This doesn't happen in mainstream competition. In a competitive environment, someone has to lose."

Then our hardworking Colin spoke up. "Lost Valley is the first intentional community I have lived in. The values of the community blend well and line up with my ethics and personal needs. Social and psychological health and more environmentally responsible ways of being belong together. I see us evolving beyond immature culture."

Our plant master and longest-standing member of the community, Chris had a lot of reasons for living in community. "Humans are social animals but some of us feel alienated from 'normal' life in the modern world. Our strong social needs can be suffocated within mainstream culture. I'm guessing in a community there is a larger proportion of introverts than one might expect. Some people may expect mostly extroverts in an intentional community, but extroverts



Chris Roth

may be more able to forge through mainstream life. Community provides a safer place for introverts and some people who are more sensitive.

“Here we are sharing with people in our day-to-day lives, instead of just encountering them. Encounters do not have the same feeling as, for example, cooking together. A big factor for me wishing to live in community is not having to drive a car so much to interact with others. I can meet more of my social, work, and other needs on foot, without boundaries created by street separation and traffic.”

Colin agreed with this. “Here, things are also less commodified, with less money involved. We do not need to carry money on us at all times.”

Catherine is an elder of the community and mentioned liking not having to do everything yourself and being able to rely on others for help or trade. “I find it tremendously relieving not having to do everything for survival, or to personally own everything I need to live. My equivalent of a suburban house is all over this campus.”

Ananda, also an elder, agreed. “People jump in and are ready to help. There isn’t always a need to ask; everyone has an ‘of course’ attitude. We are all valued and have our needs met. I don’t feel alone or without help when I need it.”

Colin stated a simple fact: “Community is a synonym for insurance.” Chris agreed. “All sorts of fancy security systems aren’t needed; we aren’t worried about things being stolen.”

Chris continued: “Another thing I value is the multigenerational aspect of community. Extended family that was normal throughout most of human evolution and in tribes has broken down on larger scales, so different generations are not living together anymore. It’s rare that a grandpa lives with his kids and grandkids. People act like it’s a burden and hassle to care for or even live with older generations. In community the young are not cut off from the elders. Children experience having many ‘aunts’ and ‘uncles’ around on site. This really enriches everyone’s experiences of different decades of adulthood. Relationships with others change as age drops away and people experience each other simply as other human beings.”

Colin added: “Age variation is important, as it is hard to be over-

serious when there is a one-year-old or a four-year-old around. Kids who grow up in community develop faster. They seem to be better adjusted and ahead of the curve.”

Ananda laughed as she remembered her visit to a community for seniors: “They looked like they were at camp. Hanging out, spontaneous potlucks, but there was no diversity and I didn’t want to be surrounded by people who were all just dying off at the same time. It did look like fun, but the reality was all of your new friends were just going to start dying off. The feeling around here is different, comfortable, and there is acceptance all across the spectrum. I’m accepted without makeup, in sweat suits. In cities and towns there is a feeling of not being accepted. In this community I can be myself without needing approval. There is no support for Maybelline.”

Chris asked aloud what Maybelline was and a hearty chuckle went around the circle. [For those equally not in the know, it’s a brand of cosmetics.]

Challenges of Moving to Community

We decided to switch the topic to challenges that people have after making the move from mainstream life to an intentional community. Catherine mentioned finding it difficult to lose her own personal agenda. “I had to learn to let go of my sense of control and need to clean everything. I came with expectations, and community for newcomers can include a process of ego softening that leaves one more patient and flexible in addressing both personal and community situations. This was the only aspect of community life that was difficult for me at first. Otherwise, my time here has been consistently meaningful and nurturing.”

Colin continued: “Slowness to reach decisions can be difficult. At times I feel too much bureaucracy. I do understand slowness and am less critical than those who aren’t ‘plugged-in’ to our community process. People who aren’t as involved in the community are less patient and less understanding. Collective decision making versus individual decision making is what makes a community a community. I don’t feel my voice is under-represented, because I am always involved from day one.”



Macy Osborne



Chris Roth

Chris spoke: “The patterns in outside culture bring in people who are used to the ‘culture of complaint.’ People are used to feeling powerless and complain and want to change things because they are used to feeling oppressed. Some have come in and said they can do better, and tried to take apart and replace policies and bylaws. In some cases they’ve done that, but not followed through with replacing them, or have left, dissatisfied, even after the change they said they wanted was made.

“Some people do not like consensus because it slows radical change. Group process can be a conservative process because we don’t want to just throw things out. This is a paradox, because we are experimenting with different ways of doing things, and also trying to be cautious. People come in and sometimes inherently want to rebel, even against our alternative ways of doing things. Ultimately, though, I feel at home here and have confidence in the group process because people who live here have common sense.”

Chris brought up another common community phenomenon: “It’s also difficult for me when people I’m close to leave. There are times when rich connections I feel are lost. Ultimately, we have to deal with loss and change. Living in community can be like living many lifetimes because there is so much change. You really learn to live in the moment and deal with change and loss frequently, as people come and go. There is no escape.”

Ananda spoke of the personal challenges she faced when coming into the Lost Valley community. “I used to be a teacher and took courses in leadership. I strove to be a good teacher when I entered community—a place where identity doesn’t look the same as it does in the outside world. People here want to consult; they do not want a leader. I had to do a lot of adjusting when I first moved here. For me it was about learning to be a part of a collective and still have a voice. Leadership also looks different in community. I felt I needed to tame my passion, ambition, direction, and focus. That previous model doesn’t seem appropriate. People here have watched me mellow out.”

We all agreed that Lost Valley is not a place for those who wish to be led and that there is a collective here that makes the decisions. No one person can swoop in and change everything or “take over.” We live in a safe community with level-headed individuals who mostly share the same values and enjoy sharing the same spaces. There is a desire to have even more of the community participate in decision making and be more involved in community meetings and activities. It is a blessing to get to see different sides of each other. Chris

has appreciated seeing the various sides of people in the kitchen, the garden, community gatherings, and nonprofit business activities. “In a community,” he observed, “it’s hard to remain anonymous.” Our first group seemed pleased with the idea of truly knowing what is going on with other community members—how they are feeling, and what is happening in their lives.

Conversation #2: A Different Take

The new attendees in the second group were unaware of anything said in the first Well-Being meeting we hosted. Ironically, one of the first complaints was the idea of lack of privacy and others wanting to be in the know of the latest gossip. Concern about the rumor mill was expressed.

Our second group was much smaller. Chris was the only person other than myself from the first to attend the second Well-Being. Joining us was “bee” Steve, who has since moved out, and a lovely Anonymous.

Anonymous had a specific topic she wanted to bring to the circle. “It seems the general population in the Lost Valley community has real misconceptions about what the cause of mental illness is—the effects, the symptoms, the challenges—and what is mental health. As a mental health patient, I find it challenging to live among people who seem ‘behind the times’ to me in their concepts about mental health and things like schizophrenia, OCD, ADHD, ADD, bipolar, and schizo-affective to list a few.

“I feel I personally have a balanced view and approach to mental health. I see a lot of judgment here and the stigma of what comes along with mental health concerns. There is an imbalanced view at times. For instance, if someone takes over-the-counter or prescription medications there is a lot of judgment that I perceive others to have. Someone who may take these drugs and wish to remain open about it may experience shame, grief, loss, despair, and confusion. Many of those shadow emotions come up around the subject. It could lead someone to want to live in the city versus in community. In Eugene, Oregon it may feel safer to ‘come out of the closet’ about a mental health issue.”

Chris asked: “Do you think this could be because in Eugene not everyone is so involved in everyone else’s lives? I do think people have judgments here, maybe more than they do in the city, about the role pharmaceuticals play in people’s lives (too great) and the role that natural remedies and more holistic approaches play (too small). At the same time, it is also easier to hide things from neighbors in a city than it is to hide things from each other here. If everyone in Eugene knew everyone as well as we know each other here, do you think you’d encounter the same thing?”

“We are so transparent in actions and words, and everything is so out in the open at Lost Valley,” Anonymous responded. “I could see how someone dealing with a mental health concern would feel less despair, shame, and guilt in a city. Here I feel there are so many misconceptions surrounding mental health and mental health treatments that it would be difficult to find the love and support needed to deal with something as huge as being diagnosed with a mental health issue.”

We heard from Steve for the first time: “Sometimes alcohol and drug abuse are indicative of a mental health issue. A person uses these to self-medicate.” Anonymous: “Yes, and this self-medication can do a lot of harm, whereas the pharmaceuticals prescribed by a doctor may be healthier for the person. But I find people can be



Chris Roth

more judgmental about prescribed pharmaceuticals than they are about self-medication.”

We observed that seeking alternative mental states through substances—whether natural or synthetic—is not part of our essential community culture. This is reflected in our Community Living Agreements, which ask residents to refrain from public intoxication, illegal drug use on site, etc. Permaculture, spirituality, and a desire for holistic living are widely-shared values here that make escaping via drugs or alcohol something that many people here don't even want to do. We also want to protect the land from any danger of illegal-drug-related seizure.

In general, plant-based medicines seem to be more accepted than any other kind in Lost Valley culture, but at the same time, “altering consciousness” in ways that interfere with our work as individuals, as a community, and as a nonprofit is not condoned at Lost Valley and can lead to a staff member's or resident's departure. Although the legal pharmaceuticals used by Anonymous are prescribed for her own well-being, she still feels the stigma of what she considers ill-informed “purer-than-thou” thinking from those who don't understand mental illness issues and treatments.

More Challenges

Steve then talked about what he found to be challenging living at Lost Valley. This is the first community he has ever lived in. “No matter how hard you try to stay out the the rumor mill and gossip mill, everyone always seems to be exaggerating the facts. It causes me to want to withdraw at times. The result of this is people saying ‘Oh no, what is wrong with Steve?’ I find an imbalance: I want to interact, but I feel I am on stage and have to say the right things. It can be limiting and makes me feel that I can't be myself. I didn't come here to be gossiped about. I'd rather have someone come and check on me versus launching into gossip.”

Chris, who's been in the community the longest, said that gossip has not always been a problem. “It used to be that if someone said something gossipy it would be talked about at Well-Being. In effect, there was no gossip, because we all knew each other well and talked directly with each other. We had established a level of trust and openness with each other that meant that we wouldn't talk behind backs—or if we did, we'd follow up by talking directly with the person involved. We were all accountable to each other for our communication patterns. I personally don't usually hear ‘gossip’ even now. But if people are experiencing it, then I'm not sure if the gossiping is due to the growth in the community's size or a loss of culture.”

Steve suggested: “It has to do with our turnover rate. Trust is not developed right away and it becomes easier to gossip. Someone who has been here a long time may unload on an intern who is staying for three months, who may in turn unload on someone else.”

Chris responded: “Even in those earlier days, people came for short periods—but if they acted that way, we told them that wasn't how we operated here—that we all needed to communicate with integrity, and speak directly with people we had issues with. Naka-Ima [a personal

growth workshop that opened up communication among community members] was taken by everyone when they first arrived.”

Steve again: “There are few people here I feel I can trust. I have said something to someone in confidence and found out they were not trustworthy. Some people understand confidentiality when there is a private conversation. When you ask to speak to someone in private, confidentiality is implied. But I heard about that private conversation later, from someone else.

“Another challenge I have found here,” he continued, “is it is difficult to make a living so far from the city, and living here is expensive. You have to drive 20 miles to work at a menial job. People come here

with great ideas, then can't afford to stay. I'm fortunate enough to have an onsite job, but if sales drop I won't be able to afford the meal plan.”

Chris asked the group if they could

end the conversation with what they loved about the community. Free hugs, the meal plan, and having children running about were all mentioned.

Variety: the Spice of Community Life

These two circles were excellent examples of how community conversations can vary so greatly depending on the week, the group, and the attitudes of those present. The first meeting had a much more positive, light tone, but that doesn't mean that anything at the second meeting could have been skipped. The tone of the gatherings always varies and the goal is for everyone to express themselves and be heard. While Steve has left the community since our conversations, the others who spoke all expect to stay. ☺

Macy Osborne became the visitor coordinator at Lost Valley Education and Events Center in Oregon in May 2014. She is a permaculture student and full-time mom. Macy loves to spend all her time outdoors, whether it be biking, hiking, yoga, swimming, or rafting. She loves to read, write, study homeopathy and aromatherapy, and dance. Her motto is “don't worry, be happy!”



Macy Osborne

“Living in community can be like living many lifetimes because there is so much change.”

Meta-Conversation: an Exercise in Whimsical and Critical Facilitation

By *Melanie Meltzer and Mollie Nisen*

We were sitting in the Dacha, a whimsical Russian-inspired cedar building, participating in a healthcare design workshop. When it became time to share our projects, we, Melanie and Mollie, simultaneously revealed papers bisected into regions of “theory” and “practice.” This was the beginning of our “soul sisterhood,” which has been a mess of ideas, organizing, and true, deep friendship within the community of the Gesundheit! Institute.

We are best friends and organizers—Melanie is both a philosopher and teacher, and Mollie is a cook and medical student. As young, zany intellectuals and communitarians, we find ourselves experimenting with age-old community questions like: “How do we make sure all voices are heard?” “How do we quickly facilitate temporary community?” “How do we maintain the whimsy in long-term communities?”

The Gesundheit! Institute is a project seeking to reclaim the idea of what hospitals and healthcare are. The project began as a group of activist doctors who opened a clinic in their

home, experimenting with the coalescence of communal living and radical medicine. After 10 years, the group realized that they needed a larger site to address the need they saw in the community.

That larger site is the place we now hold educational programs on topics ranging from humanism to designing healthcare systems. As a process-oriented project, we have realized that, in order to be a model for ideal care, we also have to educate care providers toward constructing their own radical healthcare practices. We currently lack the funding necessary to support the project of providing clinical care, so we have chosen to focus our energies on this educational component of the mission.

We host seven annual education programs on 320 picturesque acres in West Virginia boasting a waterfall, a lake, and innovative, intellectually designed architecture. Like many of the concepts we teach, community is something that we are teaching and learning simultaneously. We experience the unique phenomena of “temporary communities” with long-term staff and community members facilitating oscillating groups of educational participants.

Community concerns such as quiet and loud, dirty and clean, inclusion and exclusion arise in temporary communities just as they do with more traditional forms. We utilize meta-conversation sessions (or, conversation about conversation) as a “living laboratory” to reflect upon and experiment with group dynamics.

Meta-conversation is a tool to explore the ways we are designing community while living in it. The traditional format of meta-conversation is a daily one-hour group session with participants seated in a circle on the floor. One teacher “passively” facilitates (very little prompting, more focused on making sure people are being heard) and the group begins with a social sweep (eye contact with each participant around the circle) and ends with a communal “hum.”

The problem with this structure, however,



is that we are often confronted with groups stuck in silence or meaningless, surface-level commentary. During a recent educational program for medical students on “constructing humanism,” we ran into just this problem—in the Dacha, in a room full of emotional, broiling people sitting silently and politely in a circle. As young, excited, brainy, and frankly, weird, facilitators, we had the opportunity to experiment with the way we structured meta-conversation to solve this often-present community issue.

First, we rotated facilitation duties. By Melanie, the primary teacher, stepping down, and Mollie, whose primary role was cooking, stepping up to facilitate, we disrupted some traditional hierarchies of community conversations. Now that Melanie was able to function as a “normal” group member, she had the ability to perturb the system, to stir the pot, by bringing up hot topics in a way that might have compromised her objectivity as a facilitator. She, for example, delivered a beautiful, highly dramatized “complaint” about couples forming and disrupting the community—which spurred one of the most emotional and productive conversations of the month.

After switching facilitators, we introduced an extended metaphor connecting issues of group dynamic to ripening fruit. Some issues, or fruit, are just budding and might not be ready to be “picked” or discussed by the group quite yet. Some others, however, are overripe and beginning to stink—needing badly to be discussed.

Passing around notecards, we invited participants to take five minutes of silence to articulate a “fruit” or an aspect of group dynamic that needed to be discussed. Notecards were then to be passed to Mollie *anonymously* and sorted into piles of “unripe” and “ripe.”

Mollie then reformulated the “fruit” into yes or no questions to pose to the group in a “general feelings” style recognizable from most consensus processes. By answering these questions with hand signals, group members were able to tap into their own opinions and see the climate of the entire group. Conversation easily flowed once topics were introduced in this way.

A particularly interesting moment arose when five group members answered negatively to the question “Do you always feel safe here?” Again, we took the chance to change the format of the conversation, suggesting that these people start a separate conversation outside on the Dacha porch, to



Photos by Beda Muizer



discuss the ways in which we had been made to feel unsafe. This group, which incidentally included both of us staff members, morphed into a kind of solidarity group and spurred a social experiment that addressed our concerns about alcohol and consent, using one of our favorite social change tools, whimsy. We formulated an experiment dictating that when community members were consuming alcohol, they had to wear gloves and were forbidden to make physical contact with anyone. This experiment did not solve but certainly helped us begin to address the concerns of the solidarity group.

Moving forward from this particular educational program, we continue to open up experimental spaces at Gesundheit!, and look forward to more methods of quickly building intimacy and trust in temporary communities. Just the other day on our post-lunch “constitutional” stroll, we found ourselves in a discussion of the most satisfyingly deep and challenging conversations we’ve had—discovering that they all occurred either lying in bed or on a walk. We simply can’t wait to apply those formats to our next meta-conversation... perhaps at bedtime? 🐾

Melanie Meltzer is a radical theorist, teacher, and organizer. Her first experience of communal living was at circus and performing arts camp with the Hog Farm Commune. She is the Education Director of the Gesundheit! Institute (patchadams.org) and a Project Coordinator at the School for Designing a Society.

Mollie Nisen is a medical student and intermittent kitchen coordinator at the Gesundheit! Institute. She is a “graduate” of the Oberlin Student Cooperative Organization and plans to practice medicine in a cooperative structure in the future.

Conversations, Continuity, and Community

By Paul Freundlich

*D*ance New England (DNE), an experiential community, has come together for a two-week camp each summer since 1980, with local dances, weekends, and social events during the year. We mix genres of music and dance, along with ages of musicians and dancers. More than 10,000 have attended, and long- and short-term relationships have flourished. There are shared chores, a vibrant young people's program, dozens of voluntary committees, and a small staff. Leadership elected by membership forms the basis of governance.

In my chosen community of the past few decades, "Dance New England," we weave a web of connections, constructed through the many varieties of communication and action. In total, it amounts to a safety net that provides continuity, and a launching pad for our best hopes.

Recently, at a DNE event, I found myself facing off with a woman whose name and history momentarily eluded me, but we danced seamlessly.

Later, I asked my wife for a name, and was between embarrassed and bemused when she furnished it. Turns out I'd known the woman for 20 years; knew her kids; knew her ex-husband. If her ex had been present, the context would have informed her identity, and might have led to an update on how the split, a dozen years old, was working out with the kids now in college.

The incident was sufficiently provocative that it led me to a wider speculation about

continuity and community. Ex-husband and ex-wife had a period of time when they avoided attending the same events, including our intense two-week summer camp. The kids seemed to have weathered the storm, and are part of a next generation for whom DNE is simply the tie that binds. We adults look with wonder at what we have brought into being—more or less

inadvertently: it's not that we set out to create an ongoing community for our children, any more than we understood that by sharing common friends, dancing together, working together over years, we would set up the conditions for shared custody of a community we hold dear.

It's like we're surrounded by the ghosts of Xmas past and future, urging us to get our act together.

The two ex's in question seem to be more at peace with each other these days. Perhaps it's that their children are doing okay. Perhaps the bitterness of the violated trust and febrile disappointments that blew them apart have been subsumed by time. Time may not heal, but it does pass.

Conversation is a reflection of our community. It has many voices, expressed in many forms: our email listserv exchanges range from the trivial, to the procedural, to

We miss a lot if we dismiss the physical component of communication.



Photos courtesy of Paul Freundlich



the grief of terminal passages. On the dance floor of our boogies, ecstatic or not, in contact or out, we dance in dyads and triads and singularities with the ghosts of our futures and pasts made corporeal in the present engagement. We talk over food, text, phone. We visit between households. We plot and plan our future. Above all, we intuit that we are connected physically and temporally.

Human beings have been hanging out together before there was much in the way of language beyond a few grunts to express pleasure or annoyance. Even then, we danced around the tribal fires. Written or spoken is important, of course, but we still miss a lot if we dismiss the physical component of communication.

There's an exercise, "The Village," in which the participants operate within a defined space, with five possible behavioral choices: stand, sit, lie down, walk—also, if none of those does the trick, step outside the boundary and observe until you are inspired to re-enter the space.

Within the space, there is no talking and no holding. People come into visual contact and stop or not; engage eye-contact or not; turn away or stay. The slightest enquiring movement invites response. Is turning away rejection? Meaning is ephemeral and possibly projective or subjective. Intuition rules. Intensity ratchets up or down. The flow has its own magic. Time slows.

The experience is by turns personal and collaborative, mixing claustrophobia with discovery. The play goes on for minutes or hours. It could go on forever or never. Such is the choreography of our conversation; such is the conversation of our community. ♡

Paul Freundlich was an Editor/Publisher of COMMUNITIES (within our collective framework) for a decade (mid '70s-mid '80s). He is the founder and President Emeritus of Green (Co-op) America, launched Dance New England, helped found the CERES Coalition and served on its Board for 23 years, was Chair of the Stakeholder Council of the Global Reporting Initiative. Paul's novel, Deus ex Machina (time travel, a chance to correct a few major mistakes like the Vietnam War, and lots of hot personal relationships along the way), and a collection of short stories, The Most Amazing Night We Ever Spent, are available through Amazon, and many of his films and videos, dating from the early documentaries about the Peace Corps, are on YouTube.

Conversations Take Wing: The RareBirds Housing Cooperative Story

By Mary Jordan

You would be forgiven if you thought RareBirds Housing Cooperative might be a flock of exotic Quetzalcoatl living in a rookery in the Costa Rican rain forest. Perhaps that's not far off the mark as we are a unique group of lively adults who are planning on nesting together. As with any rookery, there has been ruffling of feathers, puffing up and preening for pecking order, some cawing and crowing, strange flight behaviour, and eventually a settling into a place of comfort.

As much as the analogy might fit our chosen name, we are not a rookery at all. Nor are we birds or bird-brained, although there are those who allude to that scenario (unfairly, given the proven intelligence of many birds). We are a group of nine adults, three couples, and three singles ranging in age from 48 to 71, and one beautiful Belgian Tervuren, who have consciously chosen to live differently in the world. By bringing together six typical Canadian households into one, we are able to reduce both our per-person consumption of energy and the duplication of many day-to-day household items and equipment such as household appliances.

The RareBirds can be found in Kamloops, a small Canadian city of 85,000 in south central British Columbia about 400 kilometres east of Vancouver. Kamloops is primarily a resource-based economy and, while our community has diversified in recent decades, exhibiting extraordinary growth at Thompson Rivers University as well as thriving arts and tourism sectors, our conservative roots are still evident. There are many co-op housing ventures across Canada that include both rural and urban models, but in our town, for the most part, co-op housing means government-subsidized, or "not for profit" projects. The idea of a group of mid-life professionals choosing to launch such a venture is certainly suspect.

We could say that our story begins in March 2011 when a couple of friends attended a documentary film: "How to Boil a Frog." It was not a cooking film, but rather a documentary about living more simply and sustainably. It would also be true to say the story began much earlier, through various conversations in a variety of situations about sustainability, shared living, and the realities of aging baby boomers. However, it was on that particular evening in March 2011 that this idea grew wings.

We began by inviting some like-minded friends into a conversation, and the excitement of possibilities was palpable from that first gathering. Although our current group of committed members has had various points of reconfiguration, we have always had the support of those who danced with the vision and flew in another direction. We maintained a core group who enthusiastically upheld these values. As we committed to meeting regularly, emerging ideas gained clarity and scope, further influencing the direction this journey would take.

Initially we developed our intentions and articulated a shared purpose. From this conversation emerged our Living on Purpose document, which continues to guide our decisions and communications to this day, almost three years later.

Purpose:

The purpose of our Intentional Community is to create a model that will enable us to live into the possibilities of social and spiritual transformation.

Intention:

- To create more financial freedom and emotional enrichment for each of us by living interdependently, mindful of environmental responsibilities and sustainable practices in our community living.
- To create an inclusive environment that embraces our extended families and welcomes our friends.
- To create sustainable practices which embody our values.

We spent some months of focused research discovering a variety of options for shared living; there are numerous models out there. Eventually, we settled on a hybrid: a registered self-financed equity housing cooperative, and an intentional community with shared kitchen and various common living spaces rather than independent self-contained units. Our journey has been a series of peaks and valleys; full speed, then speed bumps, and yet with a continuous movement forward. We wonder now as we move into the final stages of our build, choosing paint colours and admiring our view, how we have managed to get here.

In the summer of 2012 we purchased property near the downtown core, on the edge of a ravine with a rushing creek below and boasting expansive views of the river valley and the hills beyond.

With our goal to self-finance, three of us sold our homes, put most of our possessions in storage, and began a nomadic life of house-sitting for friends and acquaintances, who have all been incredibly generous and gracious in their sharing. One of our members recently completed their sixth relocation! Some chose travel for periods of time, requiring us to navigate through difficult decisions by internet conversation and email.

A need to rezone our property required us to garner neighbourhood support and present our project at a public hearing. This process required a long, patient dance with City Planners who initially had little idea what to do with the anomaly of this zoning application. The result was a significant delay in getting the shovels in the ground. Another unexpected and frightening event occurred when one of our members met life-threatening illness which required weeks in the hospital, major surgery, and a long recovery.

As we proceeded to the design and build stage, our desire to include features of sustainable design and sound environmental building practice led us to careful consideration in the choice of professionals. We needed to know that we could trust them with our vision and manage our budget carefully. We have not been disappointed. We know that we have been guided wisely to good choices and best practices.

For example, our home includes active and passive design elements to conserve energy and lessen our ecological footprint. We paid close attention to the orientation of the house and the best use of the land. The house is double-insulated, both within and without, the sheeting of the house reaching values of R-27 in the walls and R-50 in the roof. A solar hot water system consisting of three panels and a 120 gallon storage tank will provide an average of 75 gallons of hot water per day. There are 27 solar panels, each 250 watts, installed on the south-facing roof with an array that is built to eventually provide a total of 45 panels.

We are approved as one of about 270 BC Hydro net metering projects in the province. Our system connects to the distribution system; we receive credit for the 11¼ kilowatts of electrical energy these panels will generate. This equates to about \$1,200 (Canadian) per year at current utility rates. An efficient heat pump will be used for heating, ventilation, and cooling.

While we have attended to the business of building a house, we have not neglected the business of building a community. We have been mindful of the need to slow down. Staying on track with each other has been as vital as staying on track with the project.



Photos courtesy of Mary Jordan

Most of this process work has been done in time we have taken to retreat together. We began developing what we refer to as our “Flight Manual,” which is basically an outline of our policies and procedures. We view this as the organic document that will guide our living together. We have adopted a consensus decision-making model and use a circle practice in our meetings. This practice is built on three basic principles: speaking with intention, listening with attention, and contributing to the well-being of the group. This process of deep listening, silence, and careful practice is still evolving and fine tuning, but it has served us well.

We incorporated as a BC Housing Cooperative in January 2012, providing us with our integral legal framework. The house and property are owned by the RareBirds Housing Cooperative. We do not, as individuals, have ownership of collective or personal spaces. The cooperative holds six equity shares and each member, either couple or single, owns one share. The question of how to transfer ownership should a member die or wish to sell is a common inquiry and one with which we have wrestled. An individual or estate can elect to sell their share at market value. Any purchaser would be vetted by the community regarding ability and willingness to participate fully. If, after 12 months, the share is not sold, the co-op would assume responsibility for purchasing the share.

As we worked on our “way-of-being together” we researched further aspects of community life and fleshed out our purpose with more clarity. We also knew that if we were to be a model for social transformation, we needed opportunities to increase awareness in our community and encourage others to consider such options.

Our local media has been very keen to support our initiatives by publishing press releases, various articles, and photographs, along with some excellent radio interviews. In March 2012 we hosted our first “Conversation Café” at a local restaurant. While we featured our Co-op project, we also invited other interested groups who could offer experience or research with other models. These included faith-based communities, rural farm-based ventures, a couple with experience living in an urban co-op, and an architect with experience and a passion for intentional community design and building with green technology. We embarked on creating an internet presence—a website, www.rarebirdshousing.ca, along with the Facebook page, www.facebook.com/RareBirdsHousing—and began sharing musings on a blog which is now included as a link on our website.

Interest has built along with heaps of curiosity and questions. While people see the value of what we are undertaking, the concept is for some a large stretch. When we are describing our home, or showing the design, one kitchen is often the stopper. “One kitchen!” we are asked incredulously. “One kitchen with nine people? So, how will you cook, who will do the cooking and who will clean? How will you handle grocery shopping? What happens if you wish to entertain?”

Within this, we often sense an unspoken question: “How will I, as your friend, fit into your new home, and how can I still be your friend when you live in a ‘group home?’” We ask ourselves similar questions. How can I maintain my individual friendships? Do people now perceive us being tethered to the “The Birds”? Will my children and grandchildren really be welcome? What will happen if there is a crisis in my family? How comfortable am I with asking for help and offering what I can? How can I step into this with my lifetime of valuing independence? Do I even know what

interdependence means and if I don’t know, how can I live in an intentional community?

These are huge, exciting, and fearful questions! Not one of us has stepped into this lightly. While we hold the vision and engage in the possibilities, we have learned to wrestle together with our shared doubts and fears because we know we must. The business of building our home has taken time and energy from each of us. The decisions have seemed endless and it has not always been easy to know when to step up or step back.

Early on, one of us remarked, “This will stretch us in ways we can’t even imagine yet.” This has proven true so far. Old patterns of control and deferment, assumptions and judgments, differing needs and expectations have been wrestled with both individually and collectively. We have each retreated to our “cave” now and then but we are learning to let things go, trust the process and each other. We are curious birds! Yet we tend to prefer the word “wonder” over “curiosity.”

Curiosity is very valuable. It is a mental process of trying to know more and understand more—this is all good. Wonder, on the other hand, is more of a heart word. Wonder holds some of the mystery of life. One of our touchstones we use during group process is this: “When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.” We ask that question first of ourselves: “I wonder why I am reacting in this way to what is going on?” Curiosity and wonder have been gifts to us along the way. Communication within the group is essential. Facing miscommunication and owning it is a crucial piece. No relationship, family, or community can thrive without that, and we know it.

One of our members recently shared a reading by American writer and social thinker Peter Block, a reflection on what it means to create community. He believes that when people truly collaborate they are accessing latent resources that already exist among them. It is not just making decisions. It is an energy release, an activation of gifts hidden from view or ignored or underestimated. This has been our experience as we navigated through a myriad of decisions.

Three years ago life was first breathed into this vision. Soon we will inhabit our creation and begin a whole new way of being in the world. We still step back from time to time, shrinking from the immensity of this undertaking—bigger, more challenging, and more awesome than any of us could have envisioned. We have learned together, laughed and cried, flapped our wings and flurried about, and, at times, flown off completely.

We sometimes see ourselves as crazy birds that have learned to fly in formation like the Canada Geese. As “The Story of the Goose” tells us, as each bird flaps its wings it creates an updraft for the bird following. Their V formation adds 71 percent more flying range than if each bird flew alone. They honk from behind to encourage those in front to keep up their speed. When the lead goose tires, it falls back in the V and another goose flies point. When a goose gets sick or is wounded, falling from formation, two other geese join their companion to lend help and protection. We, the RareBirds, are cultivating this same sense and as all sensible birds know, the rest is in the rookery, that collective place where we find our perch. 🐦

Mary Jordan is a single senior, with daughters and two delightful granddaughters. She is also a counselor working part time. She loves adventures, travel, and people. She is curious about interdependence in a culture that values independence and fears dependence. The value system she embraces includes living cooperatively, sharing resources, skills, and time.

FROM CONVERSATION TO COMMUNITY: How a Bunch of Mates Bought Some Land Together

By John Hepburn

Have you ever found yourself sitting around with a group of friends saying “wouldn’t it be great to buy a block of land together in the bush?” For years, my life partner Jemma and I found ourselves having the same dinner party conversation, yearning for something more than nuclear family life in the suburbs.

Eventually, we decided that we should actually do something, or else stop talking about it. This is a story about what unfolded. I say “a” story, because each of our co-conspirators has a different one as our lives have come together to share the exciting journey and our connection to the beautiful place that we call “Black Bulga.”

Our first step in taking this idea seriously (sometime in 2006) was to organise a Sunday lunch with the friends we had been discussing the idea with. Out of that lunch came an agreement to spend a weekend away together in the country to kick the idea around. We were explicit that there was no pressure, and no expectation that this group of people would do anything together other than exploring a conversation.

After two separate weekends of staying in lovely farmhouses, eating delicious food, drinking too much wine, and traipsing around the countryside looking at properties, it was clear that this was a group of people with very different ideas and expectations. Out of the seven of us who spent those weekends together, only three of us seemed to be looking for similar things.

Michael, Jemma, and I kept the conversation going. We shared a common connection to the Hunter Valley and over the course of the next couple of years, spent a number of weekends exploring the foothills of the Barrington Tops World Heritage Area. We read books on intentional communities, visited as many communities as we could find, reached out to friends of friends who lived in the Barrington Tops area, and began to get a sense of what kind of properties were out there. All the while we kept floating the conversation with other friends who we thought might be interested in the idea.

Our friends James and Danielle decided to come down from Brisbane for a weekend of exploring places and ideas. They both had Newcastle roots and had a long-term dream of rural landsharing and intentional community. James has spent much of his life as an environmental campaigner and activist educator and had a strong vision of creating an activist training centre. Dan works as a communications professional with a passion for visual arts, and she was excited about the creative potential of this kind of project. Other friends dipped in and out of the conversation over this time but by the start of 2008 our group of three had grown to five.

Jemma and I moved up to Newcastle to be closer to her family when Rosa, our first daughter, was born. We were infected with the madness of first-time parents and bought an old terrace house in Cooks Hill, which we proceeded to renovate. During winter, when we had no bathroom, our friends Geoff and Deb came to our rescue and offered hot baths and warm soups. I had known Geoff for years through his work with the Minerals Policy Institute and Greenpeace, but it was through this



Jemma, Deb, and Rosa: first visit on the ridge.

period that our friendship deepened and we got to know Deb. Geoff had just completed his Ph.D. into how to develop a “just transition” away from coal dependence to sustainability in the Hunter Valley, and Deb was embarking on her own Ph.D., exploring the challenges of educating boys. Over the course of many lovely evening discussions (in between having hot baths and soothing a newborn baby) we discovered that they were also seriously interested in the idea of co-owning a block of land in the Hunter Valley. Our group of five grew to seven.

It was during this time that Jemma and I met a young carpenter by the name of Steve who was passionate about sustainable building. We asked him to help us with some of the structural work on our renovation and Steve and I spent a few days working together. It turns out that Steve shared a similar dream of buying land together with like-minded people, but he felt he was a long way off being ready for that kind of project.

Sometime in 2009, after Jemma and I were back in Sydney, our group of seven spent a weekend up at Wangat Lodge, near Barrington Tops, to explore the land-sharing idea and to look at properties. We shared our dreams, hopes, and fears, discussed criteria for land, and explored the kind of legal arrangements that we would need to do this kind of project. By this time, Jemma, Michael, and I must have looked at every rural property for sale in the entire district, and the local real estate

agent was starting to get pretty weary of us. But all of a sudden we found ourselves looking at a property that ticked all of the boxes. It was magnificent: stunning views, a creek, cycling distance from Dungog and the trainline to Sydney and Newcastle; it had a six bedroom house, large shed, and two rental cabins already built. The only problem was that it cost close to a million dollars.

We quickly figured out the maximum that each of us could afford and worked up a business plan. We needed 16 people to make it work financially. We put the word out to our closest networks. James called a friend and colleague from Brisbane. After hearing about the place and who was involved, John (Jmac) pretty much said he was “in” over the phone. Another friend (James A.) from Sydney did the same thing. I called Steve, who by this time had become a good friend, and he came up to check the place out. Geoff and Deb reached out to their friends Matt and Sarah who also came up to see the property.

All of a sudden we had reached critical mass—we had a vision, a great group of people, and fantastic block of land. We scrambled to make it happen. We put up \$2,000 each and engaged a lawyer from northern New South Wales who had experience setting up rural landsharing projects. We started negotiations to buy the property. Our dream was about to become reality. In our minds, Jemma and I had moved to the land and built our dream house already...until we got gazumped. While we were rushing to get our constitution in order, somebody else bought the property from right under our nose. It was gut wrenching.

In the weeks after we had found the property, we had rapidly turned an idea into a serious project with a clear vision, a legal structure, and a business plan—but with no land and a great deal of disappointment. We regrouped and kept looking.

Without a real place to ground the project, it became increasingly difficult to maintain momentum. Intellectually, it seemed far more sensible to develop the group, the legal structure, the plan, and a clear set of criteria before finding a block of land, but practically speaking, it was all starting to feel a bit too abstract. The financial model and the vision



Black Bulga Celebration.



The first garlic harvest.



Easter at Black Bulga.



Strawbaling at Black Bulga.

Photos courtesy of Danielle Nelson

Early days at Black Bulga.



Rolling the header tank up the hill.



Rosa at the garlic harvest.



Geoff and Deb.



Exploring the land together.

were invariably going to be different for each different property, depending on cost of the land and the existing infrastructure. We had a long list of agreed “criteria” but Jemma and I kept on coming back to “the vibe” as being the most important thing.

We soon found another property that seemed to fit the bill and we once again started to develop a vision for how our project could fit that piece of land. We ended up in the awkward situation of having half of our group really keen to buy it and the other half not. We spent a weekend there together (where the cicadas nearly drove us all mad) which ended with the difficult and quite stressful decision not to buy it. We began to doubt that we’d ever find another place that everyone liked.

In the aftermath of that weekend, I was up late one night scouring the online real estate listings once again and came across a new listing that looked too good to be true. Jemma, Rosa, Deb, and I headed up there the next weekend to take a look.

We arrived at the property and the real estate agent took us straight to one of the most beautiful swimming holes we’d ever seen, at the confluence of the Karuah and Telegraphy rivers. And it just got better from there. From the ridge we could see dramatic wilderness for miles and a landscape that invited us to explore the valleys and folds of the rolling mountains. The river flats of rich alluvium had an abundance of water from a gravity-fed irrigation system coming out of the neighbouring conservation area. And the rivers... oh the glorious rivers...where you could swim with your mouth open and drink deeply of the crystal clear waters.

As we left the sun-drenched ridge on that first visit, we knew we had found the place we had been looking for. An eagle soared overhead, and Rosa grinned a delicious blackberry-stained grin as the wallabies hopped away through the paddock. And so we began the journey to becoming custodians of the land that we have come to know and love as Black Bulga. 🐣

John Hepburn is a founding member of Black Bulga Intentional Community in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, Australia (www.blackbulga.org.au). Black Bulga is currently looking for new members; email Hepburn.john@gmail.com if interested. This story is adapted from an article John posted on his Facebook page in March 2014.

On the Ropes at Harbourside Cohousing

By Margaret Critchlow

Starting a new cohousing community can feel like walking a tightrope, but how many founding members expect to walk the real thing? At age 66, I had some anxiety about doing a ropes course, including tightrope walking, as a community-building exercise for Harbourside Cohousing, where the focus is on active aging.

I climbed onto the tightrope and set out, wobbling and resting my hands on the shoulders of fellow community members. OK, the tightrope was about two feet off the ground, but it felt very shaky.

I already knew that Harbourside Cohousing members love to get outside and try new activities. It is not your average retirement community in many ways. Under development on a spectacular waterfront site in the center of the town of Sooke, near Victoria, British Columbia, Harbourside is scheduled for completion in 2015. Members are planning to move into compact, environmentally designed private units with full kitchens and to share a large common house for gatherings including common dinners. The group purchased a property with a resort building that works beautifully as a cohousing common house. The seller, Captain Ralph Hull, became a founding member of Harbourside. Being able to hold meetings and potlucks in the common house from the beginning encouraged early community-building. (See “When Do We Begin to Flourish in Senior Cohousing?” in *COMMUNITIES* #157, Winter 2012.)

Harbourside is attracting active, energetic people who get out of denial about aging and commit to flourishing in their elder years. They have a certificate to prove it on completion of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society’s weekend course, *Aging Well in Community*, required for equity membership in the cohousing. By November 2013, 17 of the potential 31 equity member households had their certificates,

had made the required shareholder investment of \$20,000, and committed to purchasing cohousing units. But how many of them had done a ropes course?

Doug Dalquist, an equity member of Harbourside, assured me that the ropes course he had created for us was well within the abilities of all our cohousing members. Really? Our ages ranged from 47 to late 70s. At our monthly information meeting, new people in the same age range showed up, curious to learn more and get involved in our development process. Doug invited anyone interested in doing the ropes course to gather after the information session in a grassy area overlooking the harbour outside the common house. Eight people, a mix of members and visitors, took Doug up on his invitation.

Doug has participated in several major climbing expeditions including the 1983 Men and Women’s expedition to Everest, and a 1990 expedition to K2. He has also done many climbs on Denali. Since 1968, Doug has worked for the National Outdoor Leadership School. He knows how to create a course aimed at building community. But would we create community “glue,” I wondered, through the hospital visits we might be making to visit members injured in the exercise?

There was no need to worry. The course began with eight of us divided into two teams, standing at opposite ends of a checkerboard-like grid of rope laid out on the lawn. Doug told us to imagine that this was a steep mountain slope with only one safe route across. As team members took turns tentatively stepping into a square, Doug would calmly say “yep” or “nope.” Players learned the safe squares not only from their own experience but also from watching their teammates. One player started to give advice to a member of the opposite team. “No,” shouted her teammate, “he is on the other side!” But was he? In an “ah ha” moment, we realized that for all of us to cross “safely” we had to learn from the other team’s experience as well as our own. We were no longer two competing teams but



one community working together toward a solution.

The second element in the course was a spiderweb, a network of ropes strung between a rock wall and a small outbuilding (later moved to become a feature at the end of our dock). The trick was for each player to cross through the spider web without touching the ropes, and for each opening to be used only once. Strategies developed. People helped each other to be sure they did not touch the ropes. The less agile were assisted through the larger openings nearest the ground. Stronger players lifted lighter players through the higher openings. Planning was crucial or the light people could find they had no one left to lift them and the larger folks could be stranded on the wrong side of the web with no holes left through which they could fit. With a few hints from Doug and some lithe athleticism, teamwork developed that ensured everyone's success and safety.

Finally, there was the tightrope, taut between a low rock wall and a tree. It was reassuringly close to the ground, but tricky because it was stretchy and bouncy. As soon became apparent, the only way across was with a little help from others. The metaphor was clear: aging well in community means flourishing through mutual support. From the top of the little wall, I put my hands on two nearby shoulders and stepped out as several participants prepared to steady the tightrope. As I took a few tentative steps, I could feel that a couple of other members literally had my back. In that moment, long before we would ever move into Harbourside, I tasted the joy of community.

Many hands not only make light work; on a ropes course they make the impossible achievable. Cooperation and especially all those helping hands made the ropes course a success, turning risk into safety, anxiety into trust. We had a lot of laughter and no disasters! Now Harboursiders are looking forward to doing it again. Doug is putting his mind to designing a course that will use the natural slope of our property for some more adventuresome aging and I'm ready for whatever he offers us next. 🐦

After years of studying what makes communities work as an anthropologist, Margaret Critchlow is grateful for the opportunity to walk the talk as a founding member of Harbourside Cohousing and as president of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society. For more information please visit www.harbourside.ca and www.canadianseniorcohousing.com. A video of the ropes course is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xpVZbQFWIc.

Doug Dalquist (left) tells players the rules; "Whose side are you on?" turns out not to be a simple question!



Photos courtesy of Margaret Critchlow



Senior Cohousing in Canada

Senior cohousing is an adventuresome approach that takes the tried and true model of cohousing and introduces a focus on aging well in community. Unhappy with the choices facing their parents and not "ready for the Home," aging baby boomers can embrace the opportunities in senior cohousing for positive change and growth. As longevity increases and more seniors are staying lively longer, a sense of possibility arises similar to what baby boomers experienced in the 1960s. It is not too late for this demographic to "be the change."

The Canadian Senior Cohousing Society (www.canadianseniorcohousing.com), a nonprofit registered in BC, works to raise awareness of cohousing as a set of principles offering vibrant options for aging in place that have community at heart. Through educational outreach, research, and assistance with funding applications, CSCS supports groups to develop senior cohousing initiatives such as Harbourside, the second senior cohousing community in Canada.

—M.C.

Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing Hard at Work “Building Community, One Conversation at a Time”

By Cindy Nickles

“*The Sneetches and Other Stories*,” “*Hatchet*,” “*The Happy Hollisters*,” “*The Secret Garden*,” “*The Little House*,” “*Henry Reed, Inc.*,” “*A Child’s Garden of Verses*,” “*Paddle-to-the-Sea*,” “*Bone Games*,” “*Black Beauty*,” “*Nancy Drew* mysteries,” and “Native American chief histories.”

Were Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing members and friends at a book club meeting?

Not exactly. Reminiscent of grade school students at circle time, we were answering this two-part question: “What book did you read as a child that was important to you, and how did it affect you?”

That opening exercise served double-duty as ice-breaker and group introductions at a Communications Workshop facilitated by Anita Engle in Eugene, Oregon.

As we took turns sharing our favorite childhood books and their impacts on our lives, we were already well on our way to “Building Community, One Conversation at a Time”—the title of the workshop designed and facilitated by Engles, a local mediator and trainer.

It was also a trip down memory lane.

As individuals talked about their favorite books, we found ourselves nodding our heads in agreement as we remembered the stories too.

“I got a sense of adventure from reading those books,” one cohousing member said about the *Nancy Drew* mysteries. “I also read every *Hardy Boys* mystery there was.” Ditto for another member.

When one cohousing member was 13, he read *Hatchet*, a book about a kid his same age who survived a plane crash, left with only a hatchet to survive. He said, “I thought it was the coolest thing in the world to be out in the wilderness. Somehow he found wood, food, etc.”

Each of us in turn shared similar fond recollections.

• • •

Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing will be Eugene’s first multi-family development designed and built using the cohousing model. In April 2012, we formed a Limited Liability Company (LLC), and we expect to break ground this year. Our “new, old-

Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing members Barbara Boylan and R.C. Cross participate in an interactive exercise about their favorite communication style: accommodating.

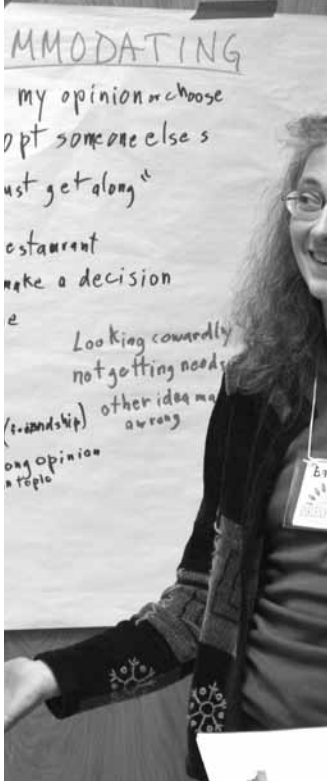


Photo courtesy of Cindy Nickles

fashioned neighborhood” will feature 28 individually owned flats and townhouses built around shared facilities, including a Common House and gardens, on 2.3 acres alongside the Willamette River and bike trail.

We’re an intergenerational community of independent households committed to finding purpose and a sense of belonging through working, learning, and playing together in a neighborhood designed to make a small and beautiful footprint on the land. Our shared values include the importance of neighbors and community as well as learning to live with a light impact on the environment.

We are currently working hard learning the ropes of cohousing, including holding biweekly business meetings and third-Sunday orientations, site visits, and community suppers. Teams—including Marketing, Membership, Landscape, and Finance and Legal—also meet biweekly.

On an as-needed basis, the Process team meets. Among other responsibilities, it is tasked with team-building activities and workshops, including the Communications Workshop that was held Saturday, April 27, from 11 a.m.-3 p.m., at the environmentally friendly Stellaria Building in downtown Eugene.

The objectives for our workshop, which had previously been discussed and aired by all of us:

- Opportunity for more full interaction than what takes place at meetings and meals;
- Welcoming and integrating membership, new, old and in-between; and
- Building communication skills and ease.

Topping the priority list was tools on how to deal with confrontation. Specifically we wished to learn how to understand and communicate with people without it being confrontational. We wanted to learn how to diffuse confrontations.

In the words of a fellow cohouser, her workshop goal was “improving my ability to receive feedback without getting my hairs up.”

Also on our “to-do” list was to learn the different styles of communication. As a cohousing member said, “There are different styles in the way we process and sometimes there’s a disconnect.”

Empathy vs. Sympathy

Anita led us on a Q&A that turned into a heartfelt discussion on what we felt were the differences between empathy and sympathy.

On empathy, our comments ranged from “feeling with the person,” “walking in that person’s shoes,” to being “open to all the different facets—to have as much understanding as possible.” This contrasted with sympathy—“pitying” or “feeling sorry for” the person.

Anita explained to us: “If we *can’t* empathize, we can say, ‘I have no idea how you must feel.’ Have the person recognize that you’re not faking it. We can certainly sense that lack of authenticity.”

“When we can empathize with people, we can make stronger, more meaningful connections,” she said.

Before asking us to pair off to practice, she advised, “When we try to listen empathetically, it’s really hard not to try to problem-solve. It’s very powerful when the other person gives you the space to solve your problem.”

When it was my turn to listen, I worked on not making judgments and not offering an opinion or interrupting, but being present by making eye contact and silently acknowledging what my friend had to say.

Positions and Interests

As a group, we went through an exercise of three case studies to glean an appreciation and understanding about peoples’ “positions and interests.”

For example, we learned how to word our questions in the best way to resolve issues and problems. “Opened-ended questions can help, so people can tell us what their experiences are,” said Anita.

Also important are self-awareness of judgmental tendencies, withholding our own judgments, using an approach of phrasing your impression as a question rather than a conclusion, and meeting the person and making the connection.

“That connection is the first thing people need,” said Anita.

Conflict-Handling Modes

Concluding the workshop was an interactive exercise about the five conflict-handling modes. We all have a favorite communication style that we fall back on.

In a nutshell, the different approaches to handling conflict include accommodating,

Different approaches to handling conflict include accommodating, avoiding, controlling, compromising, collaborating.

avoiding, controlling, compromising, collaborating.

Around the room, Anita hung up poster-sized paper for us to choose our most comfortable style of communication. Then we defined the response style we selected, gave several examples of when we might use this style, and discussed the benefits and challenges, pros and cons, of using this style.

Afterward, we gathered as a group, and shared what we’d learned.

In her wrap-up at the event’s end, Anita left us with this take-away question: “What does this mean for me as a member of the Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing community?”

In our hearts, we believe that cohousing is built by individuals in relationship with one another and we are committed to improving our communication skills. So, it’s practice, practice, practice for all of us. ☺

Cindy Nickles is moving to Eugene, Oregon, from Sacramento, California, to be part of Oakleigh Meadow Cohousing, which she joined as a full member in December 2013.

Jewish Intentional Community Building in the US

By Rachael Cohen

The Jewish Agency for Israel, Hazon (America's largest Jewish environmental group), Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (Falls Village, Connecticut), and Pearlstone Retreat Center (Reisterstown, Maryland) joined together to convene the inaugural conference for a growing national Jewish movement of intentional community building, November 14-17, 2013 (www.jewishagency.org, www.hazon.org, isabellafreedman.org, pearlstonecenter.org). The following article is adapted from a speech given at the first plenary.

My passion for intentional Jewish community building is likely a result of the social isolation I felt in my early years. I was a child of suburbia. My mother went back to her job when I was six weeks old and I went off to a babysitter each day. My father spent most of his waking hours at work. Both sets of grandparents lived out of town. My sister was five years younger and, in my opinion, an unacceptable playmate. We were minimally affiliated Jews. I went to Hebrew school, but we had no connection with synagogue life. We rarely, if ever, had guests. What if the house wasn't clean enough? The food tasty enough? We gave cursory waves to the neighbors, offered quick smiles to people we passed in the supermarket, made perfunctory exchanges with gas station attendants and bank clerks. I observed: be pleasant but detached.

I felt a loneliness and lack of connection that I could not adequately voice to my parents. As I matured, I had windows into other people's lives: friends whose families took vacations together, my large pack of cousins who all lived in the same distant town, kids who went to one summer camp year after year, families with many children. These groups were building a shared sense of belonging and I felt envious.

When I was 15 I worked at a small, rural, Jewish day camp. For the first time I felt held and supported through a sense of deeper meaning and connection to community. That fall I joined my synagogue's youth group, and again, felt the tenderness of intimate communal belonging I had never known but so instinctively craved. As I gently allowed myself to feel relevant and purposeful in these chosen communities, I saw myself defined not just by my own individual qualities, but by who I was in relation to the community. It was a revelation. Who I am is directly linked and impacted by who I am to you and who you are to me.

It took me 15 years to find that sense of belonging again. I attended five colleges, nine programs in Israel, made Aliyah [immigrated into Israel], left Israel, and was a resident of more municipalities in America than I have fingers to count. I dragged first my husband Yishai, and then our kids, around with me to numerous conventional communities, gauging the social climate, measuring, calculating, computing, and assessing all aspects of the prevailing social systems and interpersonal patterns. And over, and over, and over again I was disappointed—sometimes despondent—over the inherent lack of intention and substance. Yet I could not give up my search. I was compelled to address the insistent demand I felt within—to belong

to something bigger than myself; to define who I was in the context of something greater than my individual experience alone.

Despite finding a handful of secular intentional communities that seemed absolutely perfect for our family, when I seriously considered our ultimate life in one of them, I realized a non-Jewish community could not serve our purpose of social sustainability. We would not be able to participate fully or authentically in community life without the aspects that define a Jewish community and resonate so profoundly for us. Regular communal prayer, shared holidays and life cycle events, acknowledgment of Shabbat [day of rest], awareness and consideration of kashrut [dietary laws], and the collective consciousness of almost four thousand years of shared history are all imperative to me.

Finally, last year, when a seasonal job was advertised with Teva, the Jewish environmental education program, at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, I knew we had to seize the opportunity.

Isabella Freedman is first and foremost a retreat center, hosting transformative theme-based Jewish retreats and rentals. But for those lucky enough to find themselves a position there, as staff of the retreat center or Teva, or as participants in the Adamah farming fellowship, it also serves as a Jewish intentional community. It is a short-term, cyclical community in that most people stay seasonally, for three to four months at a time. There are approximately 50 people living and participating on-site at any given time, most of whom are single and between the ages of 20 and 30.



Communal meals provide the setting for powerful relationship-building opportunities.

Yishai interviewed for the position and was offered the job. We were met with some raised eyebrows and questioning expressions from family and friends. Were we crazy? How would we survive on so little? Where would we live? There was no on-site housing available for families. No Jewish day school for our five-year-old. No regular synagogue services. Only three other families with children.

By moving to Isabella Freedman, we have chosen a lifestyle based on ideals. Despite some very real obstacles, we are more content and fulfilled than we ever have been as a family. Our children are growing up in a social environment much larger than we alone can provide. They have many aunts and uncles who love them, teach them, discipline them, and watch over them. The depth and meaning in the relationships that they are creating is palpable, and the single most important reason we live in community. Authentic access to other human beings is sorely lacking in society today.

We have had to use savings and live frugally, but the rewards have been life-changing. We have opportunities to develop deep, authentic relationships based on shared values such as environmental stewardship, a progressive stance on Judaism regardless of affiliation, Jewish farming, mindfulness and personal improvement, and commitment to communal living. The friendships we grow and nurture with members of our community serve to strengthen and enhance our own identities, interests, and independence as individuals, and ultimately, improve our relationships with each other as family members.

I would like this type of community experience to be available to any Jew who desires it. In order to proliferate the creation of Jewish

intentional communities, my husband and I created New Jewish Communities, an internet forum where ideas and views on Jewish intentional community building can be exchanged for the purpose of 1) connecting people with existing, forming, and conceptualized projects of intentional Jewish community; and 2) establishing the first Jewish Ecovillage in America: an intergenerational community of people who are consciously committed to living Jewishly, in the same geographic location, with the intention of becoming more socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable.

As a part of a growing global movement for a more sustainable world, the communities we envision will integrate a supportive social environment with a low-impact way of life. They will aim to strengthen and repair the individual, the family, Judaism, and society by developing a system of mutual support that is becoming more difficult to achieve in conventional social systems. In this way, I believe New Jewish Communities have the capacity to change the face of contemporary Jewish life, and I look forward to being a part of that transformation. 🐦

Rachael Cohen is a big-picture thinker, captivated by social systems and social change. She believes in the process of community building as a means to remedy social disintegration and repair individual well-being. Rachael has a masters degree in macro social work and community practice, as well as a certificate in nonprofit management. She is currently working on relationship-based social change through the internet forum New Jewish Communities (directory.ic.org/23150/New_Jewish_Communities), and in Falls Village, Connecticut, both at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center and within the local community. Rachael's full-time job is raising two marvelous daughters.



Photos courtesy of Rachael Cohen

Agriculture, Wild Foods, and the Future

*a story about how changing
community changed my perspective*

By Wren Vile

I left Twin Oaks Community for a personal affairs leave last year. Twin Oaks, in Louisa, Virginia, is largely an agricultural community (www.twinoaks.org). I spent two years there building my gardening skills, and I have stood firmly behind permaculture as a solution to saving the earth. I love gardening. It calms my anxious mind, so it has made so much sense to me that being physically active and working outside with plants is my heart path.

Last summer, I showed up at Teaching Drum, a community and a wilderness immersion school set in the Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin (www.teachingdrum.org). I was permaculture certified, with my *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide* in hand, and looking for someone to teach me something, as I've done my whole life.

But no one wanted to “teach” me anything. They wanted to create the space for me to learn more about myself, and find out what I really wanted to learn and do with my time.

I knew that I wanted to gather wild food and learn practical, primitive crafts, such as hide tanning and basketmaking, so I structured my days around that.

Even now I struggle with creating my own structure here at Teaching Drum, which means figuring out what I want to focus on, and pushing myself through the fumbles of learning something new, and then not feeding the thought that's often in the back of my head that says, “You're wasting your time. Time is money, Wren. Your input is worthy only if there's output.”

Last year, we gathered hundreds of pounds of wild leeks (ramps), wild rice, black walnuts, cisco fish and sucker fish, and deer meat, and our freezer was packed full of food for the winter. Aside from this, we ate seasonal greens such as milkweed and basswood leaves, and berries here and there.

Throughout it all I wondered how wild gathering fit with gardening. I imagined having my own land in the future—hunting, gathering, and gardening.

About a month ago, I got into a debate with someone about agriculture. He shared his perspective that any type of agriculture, even permaculture, was just another way that humans play out the modern mindset of being in control of the land, and as soon as humans transitioned from hunter gatherers to farmers, the population began booming and continued to grow to an unsustainable amount.

I defended permaculture as the solution to feeding such a huge population.

Now, the population sits at seven billion people, so many people that we would need

One of the black walnuts the author gathered at Teaching Drum last fall.



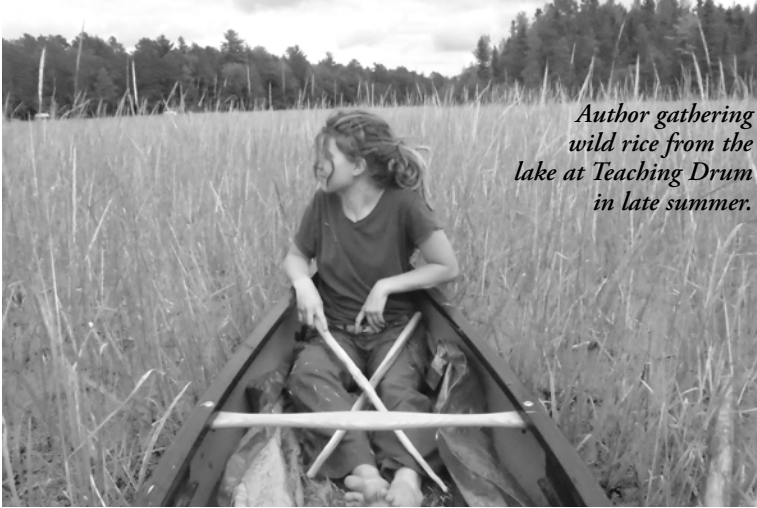
Wren Vile

Alex Breslav



Author entering a summer lodge at Teaching Drum.

Alex Breslav



Author gathering wild rice from the lake at Teaching Drum in late summer.

Edmund Frost



Scuffle hoeing in the seeds garden at Twin Oaks.

two more planets to sustain us if we continue on like we do. But the harsh reality is that humans are reproducing and destroying the earth at a rate so fast that some kind of natural disaster will most likely kill most of us. We cannot continue like this much longer. And this trend all started when we began to control the land through agriculture.

I started reading and studying this perspective more, and I realized that maybe I was defending myself in this debate. I was afraid of letting go of an easier solution, and my identity as a gardener. I was afraid of that hopeless feeling that I don't fit into the modern world anymore, and that there's no way things are going to change until they really have to. But here I am faced with it. People are jumping on the organic gardening boat, while I teeter on the edge, wondering whether to stay on the boat, or dive into the water.

And what do I do now? I could sit in fear of it all—fear that I can't do anything to help anymore. But, what if there is something I could do? Maybe it would start with

People are jumping on the organic gardening boat, while I wonder whether to stay on the boat or dive into the water.

just a small step in a big project that seems overwhelming, just like the projects that I take on here at Teaching Drum.

Maybe it would just start with learning how to make a fire—a fire without matches, with just two pieces of wood held in my bare hands.

Maybe it would start with really, truly listening to someone when they are speaking.

Or...maybe I could learn to tell a story, a story passed on through many generations, that gives a lesson about how to live life simply—a lesson that guides our children on a path that looks at the earth and sees how symbiotic the relationship really is, and that control will only destroy us. 🐦

Wren wrote this piece while on a personal affairs leave from Twin Oaks Community in Virginia. She has now returned to Twin Oaks after spending eight months living at Teaching Drum Outdoor School in Wisconsin. She also lived at East Wind Community in Missouri, and has spent time at The Possibility Alliance off and on since 2008. She's passionate about wildcrafting, gardening, running in the woods, and emotional healing work. She can be reached via email at wren@twinoaks.org.

It Is My Turn

By Marianne Gueymard

Six months pregnant with me, my mother walked the Rocky Mountains to reach a hippie community 30 miles from Vancouver, British Columbia. They were off the grid, deep in the woods, without running water or electricity. Was it too wild to give birth to her first child there? You bet! Freaked out, she decided to give birth in a city hospital—and civilization suddenly seemed better.

Not long after my birth in 1971 she found another community in downtown Vancouver. One day, exhausted, she had to politely ask her hippie roommates to move around so that she could clean the mess around them—while they were debating about women's rights... What a paradox! It is quite easy to start a new world in theory. But to live every day with real collective challenges is another story. The "Age of Aquarius" doesn't manifest that easily.

One year later, back in Quebec, my biological father fled his responsibilities—for another woman. My mother had just turned 19 and was now all by herself, without any alimony or financial support of any kind since her own parents rejected her. To survive and provide for both of us, she ended up working at a manufacturing plant whose chemicals were heavily polluting the environment. Everything around her was turning against the values she believed in.

People were pointing their finger at us because I was the child of a single mother. I was that small town's bastard child.

Needless to say, it was a rough time for her. Her dream of a better world was shattered. Adversity struck again, big time. One day when I was just four she told me, "If you were not here, I'd kill myself." I would have done anything to help her, but could not because I was so young. The burden of my pain and helplessness fell on my young shoulders and that has been affecting me ever since.

Then, fortunately, she met a sweet, quiet, and courageous man. He was strong enough to take care of us both, and became a real father for me. I was so impressed by him that he was even saving me in my regular nightmares.

Five years later, after the birth of my sister, another opportunity manifested for our family. My parents dropped everything for a new adventure because they felt they had to live in harmony with their ideal of a better world. So we arrived at what would be known later as La Cité Écologique, now Quebec's largest ecovillage (www.citeecologique.org).

With 25 other families we worked to build something different, hopefully a better kind of society. I contributed by working alternatively in the organic garden, kitchen, kindergarten,

sewing shop, glass-art company, marketing department, main office, or as a tour guide. I also enjoyed writing texts for songs, videos, poems, kid stories, as well as acting. I had the chance to perform in hundreds of theater plays, for instance. Creativity always was my true passion.

But I was also endlessly struggling with my stress. I had to cope with panic attacks every day of my life, and chose to do that without medication—or alcohol (well, almost none!). On reflection, my victory in this inner fight against depression might be my biggest achievement. It is not something you get recognition for. So I should give myself credit for that, because nobody else probably will.

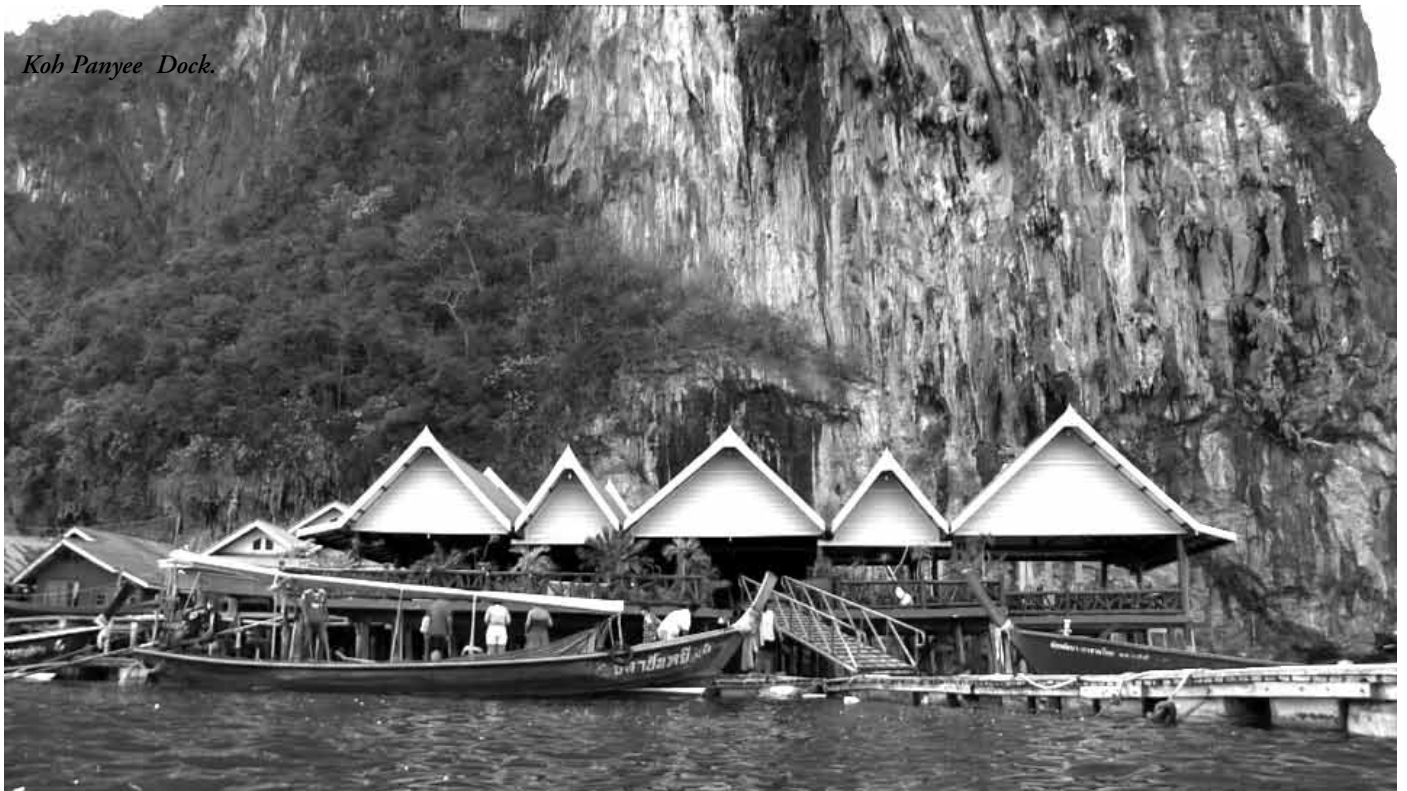
My second biggest achievement is that, after 21 years, I still live with my beloved husband! I also got two "bonus" stepchildren whom I love so much. I'm quite proud of how I used my spirituality to resolve most of our differences (well, almost always!). Now we laugh, with delicious complicity, about the occasional crappy days of life. Money can't buy what inner work, time, and patience have given us. A solid marriage is like a safe harbor of joy in one's life. And that's another victory of love you don't hear about in the news every day.

(continued on p. 74)

Photos courtesy of Marianne Gueymard



Koh Panyee Dock.



Koh Panyee: A Thriving Community, Defying the Odds

By Peter McGugan

An unlikely phenomenon lured my passion for thriving communities to a micro-speck of Asia hosting 300 families and more than 40 enterprises.

Koh Panyee is a village on stilts in Thailand's Phang Nga Bay. The surface is mostly vertical, and its length is just 400 meters. 1500 people now live there permanently. All of them are the descendants, directly or indirectly, of Toh Baboo. Two centuries ago Toh Baboo and two other ostracized Muslim families left their Indonesian homeland in small boats. The families vowed that if they found a place of abundant fish, they would raise a high flag so the others could someday see it and join them. True to his promise, Toh Baboo hoisted a flag and hence the name, Koh Panyee, the Island of the Flag.

As I heard the tires of my rental car roll to a stop on the clumpy earth of a ramshackle place they called a port, I wondered how anything could thrive if this was the place of embarkation. Among these exotic, fingery mountains made famous in a James Bond

scene from *Man With The Golden Gun*, we climbed down into a very old and leaky long boat. It thumped its way along, with the water seeping in the front and draining out the back. We passed cliffs, caves, and thousand-year-old rock drawings.

And then, there it was: a colorful string of life-hosting, stilted homes. All this without the benefit of any real kind of land.

After I've shown my documentary films about thriving through community, I've endured people speaking of things their community lacks—empty-hearted excuses for why thriving couldn't happen there, for them. Too often when a community faces the need to change, the old guard thinkers get busy finding reasons not to. They choose to ignore the possibilities of what they have and focus on what isn't.

I thought of their excuses as we set foot on this inspiring water-locked whimsical improbability. It's one of the most authentic communities I've experienced. Truly sustainable community is a palpable presence. There is a loving bond that permeates its whole

space. Sustainability isn't a conceptual goal at Koh Panyee, it's the essence of this plucky tribe's *being*.

I melted into this dreamy place and peered down through the spaces between planks worn silky smooth by generations of bare-footed soles. Their under-padding is a gently sloshing sea. They have their own mosque, school, soccer quadrangle, and teeming family fish farms adjacent to their homes.

For the past 180 years, this quirky community was an isolated secret. Then someone convinced them to invite others to come for lunch and learn about their sustainable ways. Their restaurant now serves about 200 visitors a day, and a few homes host rustic overnight stays.

We respectfully walk and explore as giggling gaggles of children run along the wood-slatted avenues of the village. These children have a joyful and knowing presence, an earthy confidence. Life here is simply good.

Further up, we see a narrow wooden lane ending on that spot that is their island. On the sand, a young boy tries to get a rooster interested in a hen. This is how eggs get inspired, or a bird becomes tomorrow's soup.

The island's bit of horizontal soil is a compact place for their poultry and cemetery.

Back on a wooden street, three generations of women chat, laugh, hum, and sing around great round baskets of fish glistening like diamonds. They will be shared as this evening's meal. The inner paths are a bazaar of local handicrafts, rustic, witty, beautiful, and sometimes with tiny tags revealing *Made in China*.

With a nod, a languidly lounging grandmother gives me permission to shoot a portrait of her radiant, comfortable-in-her-own-skin sexiness. She meets my eyes without an instant's hesitation or concern about what might be exposed. With her mother-earthly presence of oneness, she gazes through my lens and beyond, to wherever this image of the form she's inhabiting just now may go.

In the abundance of bountiful nature, within true community, people see each other deeply and universally. There is as much trust in the goodness of our human species, as in the stability of the stars. They know what doesn't matter.

This is an ostracized Muslim community of consciousness, that's been riding the tides here for two centuries. I sense they'll

Koh Panyee fish farm.



Koh Panyee harbor in Thailand's Phang Nga Bay.





manage whatever happens in the future, better than most humans—all without striving, or mortgaging their freedoms, to own a piece of dry earth beneath them.

With no mortgages or property taxes, a deep undercurrent of contented consciousness flows. Their charming and spacious homes are comfortable, weathered, reclamation art.

To a time-tested community of social refugees, survival and sustainable practices become instinctual.

My precious time with Koh Panyee reaffirmed that our hearts' desire to thrive as community defies the odds, and conscious community can blossom perennially in improbable ways. 🌿



Peter McGugan travels the world speaking, shooting, and showing his inspiring documentary films about thriving community. His latest book is Occupy Consciousness. Discover more about his Thriving Community Programs at www.thrivingcommunity.com.



Peter McGugan



The Investment's Fine—Join the Pool!

By Richard Grossman

I had my back turned but could hear a bike coming slowly up Heartwood Lane.

“Can I help?” Hutch called out.

“Boy, I’d love a hand! I’m trying to clear out this culvert.”

At nine years old, Hutch seems to have mastered the work ethic at Heartwood Cohousing. He and his parents are renting the home next to ours, and we love seeing them fix up the yard. Rob, his father, has done a lot to rehabilitate the greenhouse, and his mother, Christine, has taken a lead role on the Process and Communications team. Even though they have been at Heartwood for less than a year, it seems as though they were made for our community—and it, for them.

There is a problem, however. They rent the house next door, and it is on the market. They are first-time homebuyers, and are not certain that they can qualify for a conventional loan. What if the house were to sell before they could get all the financing together?

There are neighbors who could extend them the necessary loan. But what if, for some reason, the family were unable to make payments? Who has a heart hard enough to evict them?

This is probably a conundrum all over for communities such as ours. People need a loan, and neighbors would like to extend them the money but are afraid to do so. What to do?

I propose a simple solution: some enterprising person or small group of people could set up a pool of investors to safely catalyze the financial means to become community members. Unfortu-

nately I am not the person to do this, but suggest following a model that the Religious Society of Friends has set up. As a Quaker myself, I find it interesting that many aspects of the cohousing culture have been modeled after Quakerism. This could be another way in which Friends lead the way.

The Friends Meeting House Fund (www.fgcquaker.org/services/friends-meeting-house-fund) has helped more than 200 Quaker groups build or improve their meeting houses. It usually accepts both investments and donations, but at present its equity is large enough that it doesn’t need new investors. The loans are for a relatively short term, 15 years, and the interest is seven percent, higher than the mortgage rate. A similar fund for intentional communities would establish its own parameters, of course.

The parallel is easy to see. Rather than religion that binds different communities together, we have an appreciation of living in communities. If the Community Housing Fund (or whatever it will be called) were housed in a nonprofit, it could accept donations as well as investments. I envision that its principal purpose would be to make loans to people aspiring to be homeowners in communities. I hope that people with more business acumen than I will take this idea and run with it. ☺

Richard Grossman and his wife, Gail, moved to Heartwood in 2000. They are delighted to see some younger couples with children move to their community.

Radical Governance Changes in Two North American Ecovillages

By Diana Leafe Christian

Two North American ecovillages—Earthaven in North Carolina and Dancing Rabbit in Missouri (www.earthaven.org; www.dancingrabbit.org)—have recently implemented new governance and decision-making methods. As an admitted community governance nerd, I'm fascinated by how communities govern themselves and make decisions, and how they innovate new methods when things don't seem to be working well. I'd like to tell you what these two ecovillages did, because they exemplify a growing trend among communities internationally to innovate new governance methods or try alternative ones.

Governance and decision-making are actually two different things. Governance is *what* the group makes decisions about, how they organize their different decision-making bodies (i.e., whole-group meetings and committees), and the responsibilities and decision-making authorities they assign to each. Decision-making is *how* they make these decisions, and is *part* of governance. Consensus, majority-rule voting, and supermajority voting, for example, are decision-making methods. Sociocracy and Holacracy are whole governance structures that include decision-making methods.

Decision-Making at Earthaven

In June 2014, Earthaven Ecovillage, where I live, changed its decision-making process radically. Many community members were so fed up with too-frequent blocking and “blocking energy” (threatening to block) that we threw out blocking altogether. We kept the consensus *process* of discussing and modifying proposals—but replaced approving, standing aside, or blocking with a way to acknowledge those who don't support the proposal, followed by a supermajority vote.

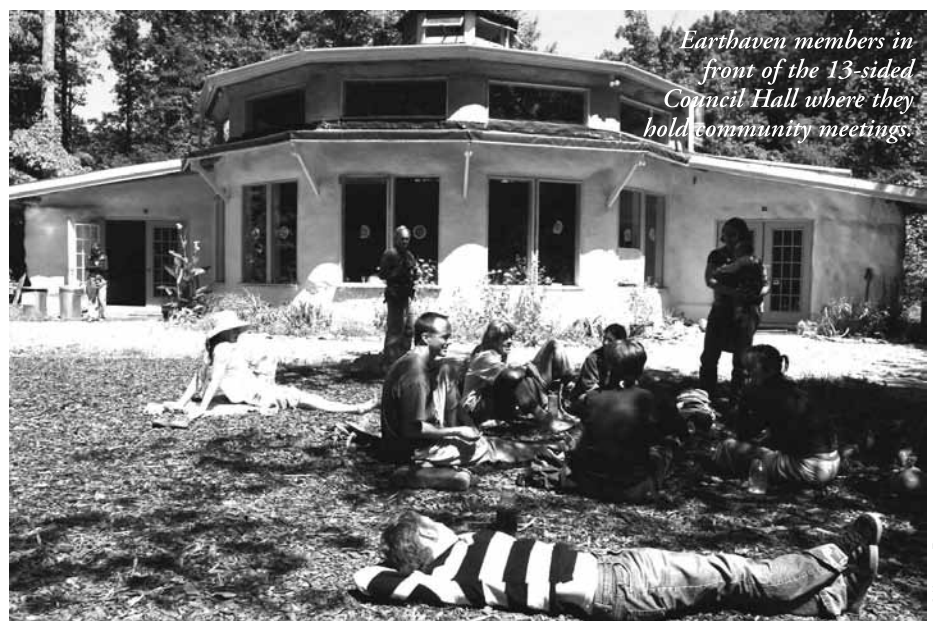
Here's how our new method works.

After much discussion and likely modifications of a proposal over at least two whole-community business meetings, when it's time to decide, the facilitator asks if anyone remains unfavorable to the proposal. If no one says they feel unfavorable to it, it passes right then and there.

However, if one or more members present don't support the proposal, each is asked, one at a time, why they believe the proposal either violates Earthaven's mission and purpose, or why passing it would be more harmful or dangerous for the community than choosing an alternative proposal or doing nothing.

Their comments are recorded in the minutes. This is followed by a minute of silence. The facilitator asks the question again, so anyone else who may now realize they don't support the proposal for either of these reasons can say why. Their comments are recorded in the minutes. This minute of silence and the request for any more non-support comments is repeated a third time.

This part of our new process is not about making a decision. It's about offering those who don't support the proposal three more



Earthaven members in front of the 13-sided Council Hall where they hold community meetings.

Albert Bates

opportunities to influence others about the proposal before the vote is taken, and to give them a chance to be heard and acknowledged.

The facilitator then calls for a vote and counts the numbers of Yeses and Nos. There are three possible outcomes:

(1) If 85 percent or more say Yes to the proposal, it passes. That's it—bang, done—passed.

(2) If less than 50 percent say Yes, the proposal does not pass. (Though its advocates can rewrite the proposal and try again in the future if they like.)

(3) But if the number of Yeses falls somewhere between 50 percent and 85 percent, the proposal does not pass—as there's not enough support for it—but it's not laid aside either. Rather, a few of the members who said No and a few who said Yes are required to participate in a series of solution-oriented meetings to create a new proposal to address the same issues. These meetings are arranged by the community's four officers, and a facilitator is appointed.

If a new proposal is created in the series of meetings it is presented at the next business meeting and we start anew.

But if the advocates for and those against the first proposal do not create a new proposal, the first proposal comes back to the next business meeting for another vote. This time it passes if 66 percent or more say Yes.

What Motivated Earthaven's Changes

The purpose of this proposal, according to its creators, was “to clarify and simplify our governance process so that it is more sustainable, fair, and effective.” They wanted to give non-supporters of a proposal a chance to co-create a new one they could live with, while preventing what they described as “the gridlock and entrenched ‘stopping’ positions sometimes expressed by a few members.”

In my opinion this new “85 percent passes” method is the inevi-

table outcome of the “fed up” factor at Earthaven—a factor which motivated two previous changes in our community decision-making processes, and without which this proposal would probably have gone nowhere.

For years Earthaven used what I call “consensus-with-unanimity”—meaning it takes 100 percent of people in a meeting (except stand-asides) to pass a proposal, and there is no recourse if someone blocks. In other words, in consensus-with-unanimity, anyone can block a proposal for any reason and no one can do anything about it.

At the same time we had several members who consistently blocked proposals most others wanted. One member's “blocking energy” in response to specific proposals in meetings (and even to various ideas mentioned in informal conversations) had the effect of preventing many people from creating a proposal—or even talking

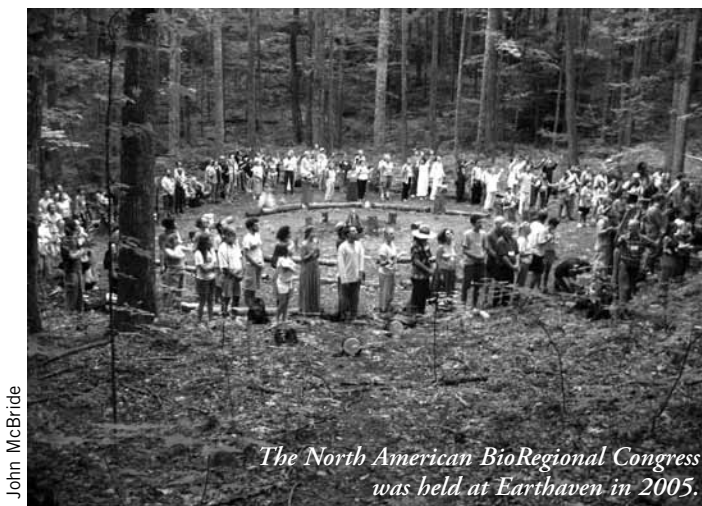
with others about a new idea—they knew this member would block. Thus, even though they didn't intend it, a few members held a power-over position in the community because they could, and did, stop some things

almost everyone else wanted. Sometimes this is called “tyranny of the minority.”

Our many attempts to engage with these members—whole-group “Heartshares,” mediations, pleas by individuals or small groups to please stop blocking or expressing “blocking energy”/threatening to block, didn't change anything—the blocking and threats to block continued. Our consistent blockers saw themselves as protecting the community and protecting the Earth from our community members. And while most of us know that people who block frequently may not be living in the right community (as renowned consensus trainer Caroline Estes points out), no one could bring themselves to suggest that these folks leave Earthaven and find another community more aligned with their values.

The result was discouragement, demoralization, and dwindling

Our first two first decision-making changes were like small levers, incrementally prying us loose from feeling intimidated by consistent blockers.



The North American BioRegional Congress was held at Earthaven in 2005.



Members celebrate Earthaven's 10th anniversary in 2004.

John McBride

Susan Patrice

Before they changed their decision-rule, Earthaven used consensus decision-making since 1994.



John McBride

meeting attendance. We especially missed the participation of our young people. When younger members first joined Earthaven they'd be eager to participate in meetings, offering high energy and new ideas. But soon they'd become so turned off that they stopped attending meetings. And so in the last few years Earthaven became a *de facto* gerocracy—with most decisions made by folks over 50.

Earthaven's First Big Decision-Making Change

In my opinion, our new “85 percent passes” method passed *only* because of the two previous changes we'd made in our decision-making process.

The first change, originating in 2007 and proposed in 2012, was to create criteria for a legitimate block and a way to test it. We said that for a block to be valid at least 85 percent or more members present should believe the proposal violated Earthaven's mission and purpose or be harmful or dangerous to the community if passed. However, if less than 85 percent believed this, the block would be declared *invalid* and the proposal *would* pass.

If we had one to three valid blocks, the next step would be to convene a series of solution-oriented meetings between proposal advocates and those who blocked, in order to create a new proposal. But if they didn't produce a new proposal, the original proposal would come back for a decision rule of consensus-minus-one. This meant that if only two people blocked the returned proposal, it would not pass.

Consensus-minus-one was not what most community members wanted—the original proposal had a 75 percent supermajority fallback, not consensus-minus-one. However, our most frequent blocker, who had blocked 10 times over a five-year period, said she would not approve the proposal unless we replace the 75 percent fallback with consensus-minus-one. So the community agreed. Why? It had taken the ad hoc governance committee two years to even come up with this proposal, as it required shifting out of the paradigm that 100 percent consensus is beneficial, and it took awhile for the committee to understand this. And, fearing the effects and repercussions of shock and outrage by the consistent blockers, the ad hoc governance committee disbanded without even making this proposal. But one of the committee members, dismayed by the

continued difficulty in meetings, proposed it himself two years later. Then came another year of high emotions in meetings when discussing it, and many proposal revisions, before the community approved even this truncated version.

The original proposal advocates and most community members figured that passing the consensus-minus-one version was better than nothing.

(Over the next year Earthaven used this new method twice, each time declaring a block invalid because only a few members present thought the block was valid. However, with no validated blocks during this period we never had the opportunity to convene any solution-oriented meetings either.)

Earthaven's Second Big Decision-Making Change

A year and a half later, in January 2014, we passed a second change—to keep this consensus method, with criteria for a valid block, but replace the consensus-minus-one fallback with a supermajority vote of 61.8 percent (*Phi* in mathematics). This fallback vote would be used rarely, only *after* a series of solution-oriented meetings in which proposal advocates and blockers failed to create a new proposal.

I believe the exceptionally low number of 61.8 percent for a supermajority vote—the lowest I've ever seen in the communities movement—was motivated by backlash against our history of blocking.

(And as noted above, our third and latest decision-making change in June 2014 raised the voting fallback number from 61.8 percent to 66 percent if after solution-oriented meetings no new proposal is created.)

In my opinion, our first two first decision-making changes were like small levers, incrementally prying our community loose from feeling discouraged and intimidated by our consistent blockers.

Our first decision-making change in 2012, while arduous and hard won, allowed us to even *imagine* we could pass proposals most of us wanted, and gave us the ability, in literal decision-making power, to do so. And our second decision-making change in 2014 gave us even more power to do this.

I imagine COMMUNITIES readers who believe 100 percent consen-



*Ecovillage members
Ben Brownlow and Cassandra Brown
at Dancing Rabbit's gate.*

sus creates (or should create) more harmony and trust in a group, and/or who have experienced 100 percent consensus working well, may be appalled at our choice to replace calling for consensus with voting. Yet, as we've incrementally changed our method over the last two years, we have reversed the percentages of people who feel hopeful and those who feel discouraged and demoralized. For years now, many of us felt disheartened about our decision-making process, while a few believed it was fine. But after this series of changes, this has reversed: just a few members feel awful—certain Earthaven has gone to hell in a handbasket—but many more are beginning to feel hopeful again.

Why Dancing Rabbit Changed its Governance

In the summer of 2013 Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in Missouri made their own dramatic change in governance—shifting from whole-community business meetings to a representational system (using consensus) with seven elected members. Their reasons for change had nothing to do with using consensus, which worked fine for them.

Dancing Rabbit began thinking about change in 2009, when they realized how their growth in membership had altered their social structure. In earlier years everyone ate together in the same place at the same time, giving them frequent daily opportunities to connect and talk informally about community issues. But as their members increased and they created several kitchens and eating co-ops, their social scene offered far less connection. They were no longer the same kind of cohesive group that could informally discuss community issues on a daily basis. As a result, their governance system didn't work as well: meeting attendance was down, people formerly involved in governance were getting burned out, the smaller number of folks who still attended meetings had more say than anyone else, and some decisions took longer than they once would have. This was partly due to the community's increasing size, and partly due to simply not knowing each other as well as they once had.

The Village Council System

Dancing Rabbit's new Village Council consists of seven com-

munity members elected by the members for staggered terms of two years each. These seven representatives now make the decisions formerly made by whole-community meetings:

- Creating and dissolving committees and approving committee members
- Approving and modifying job descriptions for specific community roles and paid staff
- Approving the group's annual goals and priorities; approving the budgets for Dancing Rabbit's two legal entities (an educational nonprofit, and a land trust through which daily community life is organized)
- Making committee-level decisions when requested by a committee
- Making membership decisions, including revoking membership, when these decisions can't be resolved by the regular membership process
- Revising group process methods; clarifying or weighing values on various topics, including covenant changes
- And any other responsibilities not already covered by a committee that Council members or Dancing Rabbit's Agenda Planners think are worthy of Village Council attention.

"It's refreshing to work with a smaller group that's been picked to be good decision-makers, and to be able to move forward despite concerns from people not on the Village Council," says Dancing Rabbit cofounder Tony Sirna. "The community seems to be adapting well to this process, with people accepting that they won't always get what they want (just like in full-group consensus but without as much time spent on the process)."

Empowering Committees with "Power Levels"

Dancing Rabbit has many committees, all of which essentially report to the Village Council. A committee called the Oversight Team provides the executive function of staffing committees and making sure they do their jobs. Committees have the power to propose policies in their area of responsibility, and implement policies.

The power to make decisions, however, depends on which of four "power levels" a committee has. The "propose" level is the power to

make a proposal, and every committee and individual member or resident has “propose” power.

Some committees also have “review” power, which means they can send a proposal to the whole community by email. This starts a two-week comment period, during which concerns can be expressed, changes can be made, and everyone has a chance to suggest changes to or buy in to the decision. At the end of two weeks, if there are no unresolved concerns, the committee’s proposal automatically passes.

Other committees have “recall” power. This is almost identical to “review” power, but the committee doesn’t need to wait until the end of the two-week period and can implement a proposal immediately. However, if concerns are expressed in the two-week period, the committee may need to modify the proposal.

“Final decision” power means making and approving a proposal immediately, without a review period. The Village Council has this power for most decisions, as do meetings of the whole community, if such a meeting were to be called. At first it was rare for a committee to have “final decision” power (the Contagious Disease Response Team uses this power to declare a quarantine, for example), but the power to make decisions has become more common as the community delegates more authority to committees.

A committee can also have multiple power levels for different types of decisions. For example, a committee could use “review” power to propose a budget, and after receiving approval could use “final decision” power to approve minor changes in it.

After creating the Village Council, Dancing Rabbit added two more power levels. Committees or individual members may be given a “Village Council review” level, in which they send a proposal to the Village Council and the whole community. Everyone is free to comment on it during a two-week period, but the final decision rests with the Village Council.

Similarly, in the “Village Council recall” level a proposal is given a two-week comment period but the Village Council can implement it immediately.

Selecting Village Council Members

While the process for selecting Village Council members doesn’t involve consensus *per se*, it seems infused with the spirit of Dancing Rabbit’s consensus culture.

Here’s how it works. The names of every community member and resident (who has lived there at least three months) are listed alphabetically on a ballot form given to everyone. (Exceptions are the community’s Selection Shepherds, who serve a one-year term to manage Village Council elections.) Each person fills out the ballot form, evaluating each person in terms of how they might serve as a Village Council member.

Evaluation choices are:

+2 “I think this person would be good in this role.”

+1 “I feel OK about this person in this role.”

0 “I have no opinion about this person re this role.”

-1 “I don’t think this person would be good in this role.”

The Selection Shepherds tally the points and the 20 people with the highest number of points are eligible to be nominated for the Village Council on a seven-member slate. A slate includes returning Council Members and the three or four new ones.

“It’s refreshing to work with a smaller group that’s been picked to be good decision-makers, and to be able to move forward despite some concerns.”

A whole-community meeting is held in which people present and discuss various possible slates of seven eligible members each, and choose from one to five of what seem like the best

slates of nominees. The nominees are considered according to the following criteria: the person knows how to consider what’s best for the community as a whole; understands the community’s mission, sustainability guidelines, and ecological covenants; has the time; is willing to participate in conflict resolution if needed; is a member in good standing (paid up on dues and fees and up-to-date with labor requirements); and preferably has the use of a computer and has had consensus training. And at least some nominees for a slate need good verbal, written, and/or financial skills.

In this meeting, ideas about people for these slates are discussed, combined, and whittled down, and the group ends up with up to



Hundreds of people visit Dancing Rabbit each year, like these folks taking a tour.



Dancing Rabbit members eat in various dining co-ops. Here’s the kitchen and dining room building of Ironweed Co-op.

five different slates, chosen either by consensus or, if agreement can't be reached for one slate by consensus, by a dot-voting system.

At that point all members vote on the slate of nominees they want, using a computer-based instant runoff system. The slate with the most number of votes becomes the new Village Council.

Consensus at Dancing Rabbit

Village Council members use consensus to make decisions, as do the smaller committees. As in many other intentional communities, the basis of Dancing Rabbit's consensus culture is the belief that people should always have a chance to share their opinions and concerns, and decisions aren't made until everyone who speaks up is taken into account. And...they expect community members to take responsibility for how their own consciousness may affect community decision-making. "Consensus requires us to make decisions that are best for the group as a whole, and being able to distinguish between our personal wants, fears, and agendas and the group's good—which is essential to making a positive contribution," they write in their Process Manual.

As advised by most consensus trainers, Dancing Rabbit members believe that blocking should be a rare occurrence if the community is functioning well and its members are in alignment with its values and process. Thus they have a clear blocking policy and a way to test for the legitimacy of a block. For example, someone objecting to a proposal is expected to stand aside, not block, if their objection is based on personal values rather than on shared common values. And conversely, it is expected any block will be based on one or more shared community values, or by the belief that passing the proposal would damage the community.

Dancing Rabbit used consensus in its whole-community meetings, and a block was considered valid if it was based in one of the stated community values and at least three other members could understand (but did not necessarily agree with) why the person felt this way. If someone were to block frequently, the Conflict Resolu-

tion Team would help the person and the whole group talk about it, with the possibility of setting up an ad hoc committee to work through the issues.

Now, in their seven-member Village Council, a block is considered valid if one other Village Council member can understand (but not necessarily agree with) the blocking person's position in relation to shared community values. It is also expected that any Village Council member who blocks has made a reasonable effort to participate in the group's discussion. It is also expected that other Council Members have been reasonable too, giving the person adequate time to consider and comment on the proposal. (Village Council decisions can also be recalled by 25 percent of Dancing Rabbit members.)

I'm impressed by how Dancing Rabbit innovated a whole new governance method in response to the social effects of their increased membership. This took foresight and pluck! While I've called the new methods of Earthaven and Dancing Rabbit "radical," Tony Sirna points out that their new method isn't actually radical (except for using consensus instead of majority-rule voting) because they intend to grow to the size of a town of 500 to 1000, and small towns typically use representative governance with elected Councils.

I hope you've found these innovative new methods stimulating food for thought. Working to shift a whole community's paradigm about governance and decision-making takes courage, energy, and time. And...it can be really worth it! 🐰

This article was adapted from a piece that first appeared in the online GEN Newsletter: gen.ecovillage.org/en/news.

*Diana Leafé Christian, author of *Creating a Life Together and Finding Community*, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops internationally. She specializes in teaching Sociocracy to communities, and has taught Sociocracy in North America, Europe, and Latin America. See www.DianaLeaféChristian.org.*

Many Dancing Rabbit members have built strawbale cabins with white plaster, like this one.





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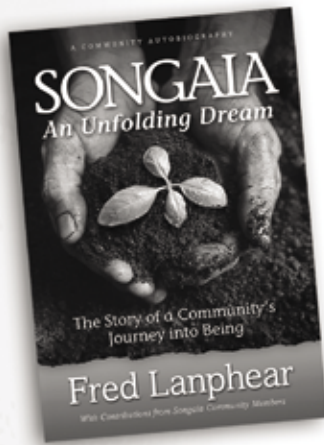
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COMMUNITIES WITH OPENINGS

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WOLF CREEK LODGE COHOUSING for Pro-Active adults in Historic Grass Valley, California is a new, exciting community. For more information check out www.wolfcreeklodge.org; email info@wolfcreeklodge.org or leave a message at 800-558-3775

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our meat consumption, or building projects that improve our way of living. Our 80-acre community thrives in the vast open spaces of the SW Idaho prairie and backs up to Idaho State and BLM land. Out the back gate of the property, there are miles of trails along the Oregon Trail to explore. Whether you ride horses or dirt bikes, you feel the 'good for the heart' sensation of being free from all boundaries. Bring your family, horses, goats, dogs and kids (not necessarily in that order), build your house and live your dream. We are about 20-minutes from the local town, Mountain Home, and about 30-minutes from Boise in the opposite direction. Day and overnight visitors are welcome, please call to make arrangements. Membership investment is \$10,000 per adult. We share the entire property and labor that is the usual for home ownership. We have barns, sheds, 80x140 garden, 80x80 building lots and a community hall. Visit our website at: www.DreamRiverRanch.org Contact: Willa at: SHetherapy@dreamriverranch.org 208-602-3265.

ECOFARM COMMUNITY - 54 acre sustainably focused farm near Tampa FL, practice principles of permaculture, vegetables, pastures, wetlands, syrup making, dairy, housing, solar systems, WAPF friendly, produce a Sustainable Living Program on WMNF 88.5 FM online <http://www.wmfnf.org/> 813-754-7374, 4321 Needle Palm RD Plant City Visitation by Appointment. Contact Jon at ecofarmfl@yahoo.com.

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We are inviting individuals and families to consider joining us in the development of our ecovillage and are especially seeking those experienced in:

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- Animal husbandry
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Contact: Irene_Perler@hotmail.com

www.goodenough.org

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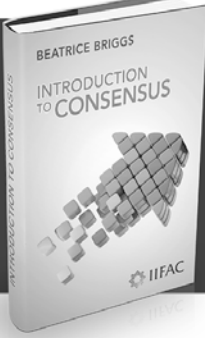
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LETTERS

(continued from p. 5)

holding the literal and timeless meaning of our choices, in action and language: so that we can see things as they really are, lead by example, and begin to heal some ancient wounds.

I want us all to be aware of what we're doing when we exclude anyone, or make any decisions, categorically. I want to inspire open, breath-filled mindfulness of the rich totality of who is being treated how and why.

Thanks again for the opportunity to examine my own thinking from your perspective. I really do appreciate it.

Sincerely,

Sam Makita
Rutledge, Missouri

Communities Using Sociocracy?

A friend and I have recently been introduced to COMMUNITIES. After reading the articles about Sociocracy we wondered whether any intentional community actually uses it. An internet search turned up one intentional community that may use it (EcoVillage of Loudoun County, Virginia).

Does the author know of any US intentional communities using Sociocracy who might be willing to answer emails about how well it works in practice?

Thank you in advance.

Roger Stube
East Haddam, Connecticut

Diana Leaf Christian responds:

I know of about two dozen intentional communities internationally (listed below) that either use Sociocracy now or have some members studying it with the intention to propose it to their community. (I'm not sure whether any of those now using Sociocracy would be willing to answer questions about it, but you could ask.)

I'm currently gathering this information myself for an upcoming article in this series. I have connections with people in most of these communities already, and I was the Sociocracy trainer for many of them. I'll share what I learn in an upcoming article in this series in COMMUNITIES.

Thanks for asking,

Diana Leaf Christian
Ecovillages Newsletter

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Here's my current list:

Lost Valley Educational Center, Dexter, Oregon
Colombia Ecovillage, Portland, Oregon
Earthaven Ecovillage, near Asheville. North Carolina (*the Sociocracy Elections process only*)
Harts Mill Ecovillage, Chapel Hill area, North Carolina (*forming*)
Green Haven Cohousing, New Haven, Connecticut
Pioneer Valley Cohousing, Amherst, Massachusetts
Champlain Valley Cohousing, Charlotte, Vermont
Cohabitat Quebec, Quebec
Montreal Cohousing, Quebec (*forming*)
Baja BioSana Ecovillage, La Paz, Mexico
Aldeafeliz Ecovillage, San Francisco (hour north of Bogotá), Colombia
Bridport Cohousing, Bridport (Devon), England (*forming*)
Ångsbacka Ecovillage, Molson, Sweden
Econids, on Atlantic coast of France
Les Chaux Lents Cohousing, Lyon, France
Kan Awen Ecovillage, Girona, Spain
Findhorn Community, Scotland (*many people are currently studying Sociocracy*)
Narara Ecovillage, Sydney, Australia

Communities (all in British Columbia) currently with study groups:

Belterra Cohousing, Bowen Island, BC (*forming*)
Vancouver Cohousing, BC (*forming*)
Cranberry Commons Cohousing, Vancouver area, BC
Windsong Cohousing, Langley, BC
Fraser Common Farm Community, near Langley, BC

Correction: Objections in Sociocracy

I was mistaken in my article on Sociocracy in the Summer 2014 issue (COMMUNITIES #163), when I said the facilitator could point out that an objection was not related to their circle's Aim (p. 60, under "No personal objections unrelated to the circle's Aim"). A facilitator does not have this power in Sociocracy. Rather, various circle members ask the objecting person questions about how their objection may relate to the circle's Aim, in order to help the person better understand their reasons for objecting to the proposal and to state their reasons more clearly. The idea is that once the person understands that the objection is not related to the circle's Aim, they withdraw their objection. But circle members can't force someone to withdraw their objection—this must come from the objecting person directly.

If it seems clear to everyone that an objection is personal and *not* related to the circle's Aim—but the objecting person does not understand this, or does not agree—he or she may not understand Consent Decision-Making well enough, and may need more training. If so, the proposal may be held over until the next meeting or sent to the next higher circle while the person gets more training.

If, on the other hand, it seems the objection *is* related to the circle's Aim, circle members have at least nine ways to resolve objections (described in the chart, "Consent Decision-Making," p. 61, Summer 2014 issue)—including modifying the proposal, getting more information before considering it again, or sending it to a higher or lower circle.

However, let's say someone consistently objects to proposals in meeting after meeting, and each time other circle members cannot help them become more clear how their objection may relate to the circle's Aim. If so, and if further training in Consent Decision-Making does not help, someone can propose that the person leave the circle. (Leave the circle, not the community.) If all circle members but the person consents to this proposal, then the person leaves the circle. This will be described more fully in "Why There's No 'Tyranny of the Minority' in Sociocracy" (Winter 2014 issue, #165).

Another correction: the chart lists five reasons to object to a proposal but there are actually six. One can also object if the proposal doesn't yet include criteria for how to later measure and evaluate it once it's implemented, and dates of upcoming meetings in which to do this.

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Acorn Community celebrates our 21st anniversary this year. Prospective members and interns are welcome to write to us to request to visit, especially during the summer months. Come learn and garden with us!

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IT IS MY TURN

(continued from p. 54)

What I find admirable in my hippie Mommy is that she did not just dream or talk about changing the world, she actually built a better life for me. Therefore, somehow, the dream of her generation became my everyday reality.

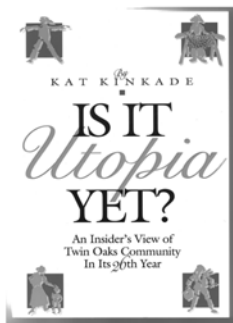
What I now find awesome is my precious relationship with friends having a similar (yet different) experience in other ecovillages. We share very differing views on improving the world. But I value their opinion highly because our life experience is, I think, ultimately much more meaningful than even the best recipe in any book on relationships. At least we do try to reconcile differences rather than just arguing or complaining about everything.

Beyond the tears, conflicts, mistakes, or failures, I somehow gained the absolute conviction that I do contribute to that better future. During my childhood I was a popular peacemaker in the schoolyard—always trying to stop the fights. Reconciliation is definitely my true soul purpose. First of all I need to reconcile my inner conflicts—on a daily basis! Then I want to resolve all the feuds around me. Am I naïve to still be hopeful about an ideal society? Sure, but by choice. I'm desperate for peace. But I also try to be the change I want to see in the world, as Gandhi wonderfully said.

My mother is such a courageous soul; she never gave up on her convictions, ever. Yes, the world is awful at times...but I hold the power to change it, starting with myself.

"I promise I will fight, Mom. Like you today with your cancer. Thank you for being so noble. Your courage is inspiring me. You succeeded, Mom. You did change the world—my world. Thank you for your legacy. It is my turn now." 🐿

Marianne Gueymard moved to La Cité Écologique Ecovillage when she was 14 years old. She now lives in Florida with her husband and organizes trips, events, and meetings for ecovillage members traveling through Florida. Her passion for communications brings her to network with worldwide ecovillagers and community lovers working toward the creation of a more collective, peaceful, and supportive world.



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

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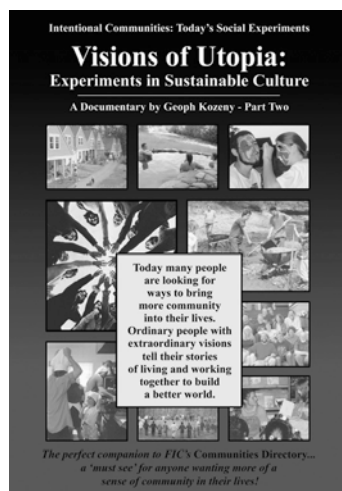
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- Aldo Leopold

SEEING THE GOOD IN THE WORLD, PART II

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT DANCING RABBIT ECOVILLAGE

(continued from p. 80)

• • •

Waking up at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage (DR) to the sound of birds singing and children shouting outside of my window had to be the most surreal morning I have ever experienced. I had only been at the village for one day and I could already feel the effects of community sinking in. As a senior at Arkansas Tech University I had not yet had a real transformative learning experience and helping with summer research at DR was just the thing to open my eyes to the possibilities for positive cultural and environmental change in the world.

Brooke, an applied anthropology master's degree student from the University of North Texas, and I would be spending the next month together at DR as part of a community-based research project. The goal of our research was to help the community put their progress toward their goals of living ecologically sustainable and socially rewarding lives into numbers and make it easier for them to establish measurable goals that they could strive to reach. While I expected to help impact the lives of some of the people living at

I ate new foods and participated in countless activities that pushed me way out of my comfort zone.

DR, I did not expect the impact that DR had on me.

Doing research at DR was a frustrating yet rewarding process. One of the first things that Brooke and I did together was collect trash and recycling from village residents so that we could compare the village's consumption patterns against the national average to make a point about the consequences of changing your lifestyle with the aim of decreasing your environmental impact. Carrying around the weight of DR's trash was frustrating; it was hot, heavy work. However, I realized that carrying the weight of my own household's trash would have been almost impossible. In one week my family produced close to the same amount of trash that the whole village produced in a week. The data collection allowed me to see how the waste I created was obviously making a huge impact on the planet. It also allowed me to see how quickly I could change my habits. In the one month that I spent at DR I was able to reduce my waste to two small bags of trash total.

Though the data collection and research that Brooke and I did made a huge difference in the way I viewed trash, eating in a co-op was definitely the most impactful part of my experience at DR. I ate in Bobolink, one of several food co-ops at DR that bring together small groups of like-minded individuals who eat, cook, and share foodways with each other based on commonly held values. Bobolink actively tries to be as eco-friendly as possible in their food choices, pursuing vegan, local, organic, and seasonal food choices to achieve that shared goal.

Being part of Bobolink was a tough transition for the first week that I was there because it was so different from my normal eating patterns. I had to think harder about what I was going to cook and I had to learn to cook for large groups of people. It also forced me to eat outside of my southern foodways. I had no idea what it would be like to eat in an environmentally responsible manner, and I had no idea that I was so far off the mark at home.

However with the help of fellow co-op members like Rae I became familiar with the kitchen, the rules of composting, and tricks to make things taste better without losing nutritional value. Seeing Tony listening to music and enjoying cooking allowed me to

let my cook shifts be more fun. Watching Rachel experiment made me feel braver, even if I did once come close to salt poisoning. Nathan, another member of Bobolink, consistently tried to help me adjust to my stay at DR. What I didn't realize at the time was that I was becoming a part of a community. Our lunch and dinner talks became my favorite part of the day. Each member of Bobolink was unique and contributed something special to the changing way that I viewed my life. In less than a week, a group of strangers had become my family. We ate together and we laughed together. I had no idea that food could unite people from different backgrounds so effectively.

Eating in a co-op immediately affected the way I looked at foodways and socializing at dinner. I realize now that many foods I eat are not only out of season, but they don't grow anywhere near where I live, thus requiring large amounts of fossil fuels to reach my plate. The way that I eat impacts the environment and I found that alternative ways of eating not only reduced my impact, but promoted community. Since coming home I've tried to carry over some of the things that I learned. I haven't stuck to the vegan diet, but I have eliminated meat from my diet that isn't locally produced. I have started to buy more organic and fair trade products. I've also dedicated more time to preparing my meals. I realize that convenience foods are a big part of my environmental impact and are totally unnecessary if a little more time is allotted to cooking and a little less time is spent on things like watching TV or playing around on the computer.

While at DR I was also able to experience the way that the community governs itself and deals with internal problems. Every Sunday the whole community was invited to the Week in Preview (or the WIP) where they all got together and talked about what was happening at the village in the week to come. The WIP gave the people of DR an open forum to talk about problems that had been going on in the village and allowed people to organize ride shares, work parties, and other ways to

help each other out. This was distinctly different from the way that my life at home is. It seemed that the people at DR were interested in working for the collective good rather than just pursuing their individual interests. Seeing how people organized their week collectively and for the benefit of the community made me realize how few opportunities I could find at home to work with my neighbors. The WIP allowed people to talk about their problems with people openly and honestly. This important characteristic of communication seemed missing from my own life.

Since coming back to Arkansas I've had the opportunity to pursue more healthy social interaction. I've committed more time towards helping a community- and student-run local farmers' market. Russellville Community Market has grown and provides more local, sustainable food choices to consumers in Russellville, Arkansas. I've been given the opportunity to help manage the market. The experience is reminiscent of my time at DR in terms of the feelings of community a locally-run nonprofit business can bring.

My time at DR was a transformative experience. Helping the community build a sustainability index allowed me to help address the lack of data the community had to communicate their mission to the wider world. Being part of their mission to educate people about the different styles of sustainability helped me to be a more experienced researcher and it helped me reevaluate the parts of my life that I had not previously considered much. The research experience required me to participate in a culture that was much different from my own. I ate new foods, I lived without air conditioner during the summer, and participated in countless activities that pushed me way out of my comfort zone. Most importantly I got to experience community on a level that I had never even seen before.

Coming home has proven to be stranger than I ever could have expected. I've changed my diet drastically and I've also changed the way I communicate with other people. DR opened my eyes to the potential for a positive environmental change at the community level specifically. Being in an intentional community gave me a new perspective and has helped me recognize the importance of that kind of change. Though I'm back to a more "normal life" of going to school and work, the impression that DR made will stay with me for life.

• • •

Clearly, experiencing the sustainable lifestyle being created by the members of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage was a profound learning experience for Morgan, one that has carried over into her daily life back home and is having ripple effects in her unintentional community. If higher education is to more effectively contribute to the transition to a more sustainable culture, these kinds of out-of-the-classroom experiences are essential. By expanding my collaborative research relationships with Dancing Rabbit and other intentional communities, I aim to provide more such opportunities to my students. In turn, I relish observing those students further these essential transitions by creating positive changes in the campus and communities that we share. ☺


Morgan "Ekho" Middlebrooks, a native of Arkansas, graduated from Arkansas Tech University in May 2014. She plans to pursue a master's degree in a social work field.

Joshua Lockyer teaches Anthropology and Ozark-Ouachita Studies at Arkansas Tech University and seeks to provide transformative learning experiences for his students outside the classroom. He can be reached at jlockyer@atu.edu.



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SEEING THE GOOD IN THE WORLD, PART II

Transformative Learning Experiences at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

In 2009, I (Joshua) wrote the following in a *COMMUNITIES* article entitled “Seeing the Good in the World: Connecting Communities and Students for Sustainability Education and Transformation”:

“As an anthropologist and environmental studies teacher, I believe that providing students opportunities to experience intentional communities is an excellent way to explore the nuts and bolts of sustainability and participate in positive social transformation.... Moving toward sustainability will require broad cultural transformations that can be brought about only as people reengage with each other intentionally in local communities.” (*COMMUNITIES* #147, pp. 31, 75)

Since that time, I’ve had the opportunity to involve my students

in an in-depth research project at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, a 70 person community on 280 acres of rolling prairie in northeastern Missouri. Through this collaborative project, we are helping the members of the community assess their progress toward their goals of living more ecologically sustainable and socially rewarding lives. The project involves several students spending between four weeks and three months in the community participating, observing, and collecting data on a variety of different themes related to community goals—energy use, food sourcing, and perceived well-being, among other things.

In the following, Morgan Middlebrooks, one of my students at Arkansas Tech University, reflects on the life-changing effects of this experience.

(continued on p. 78)



Photo courtesy of Morgan Middlebrooks

Dancing Rabbit cofounder Rachel Katz with Morgan Middlebrooks.



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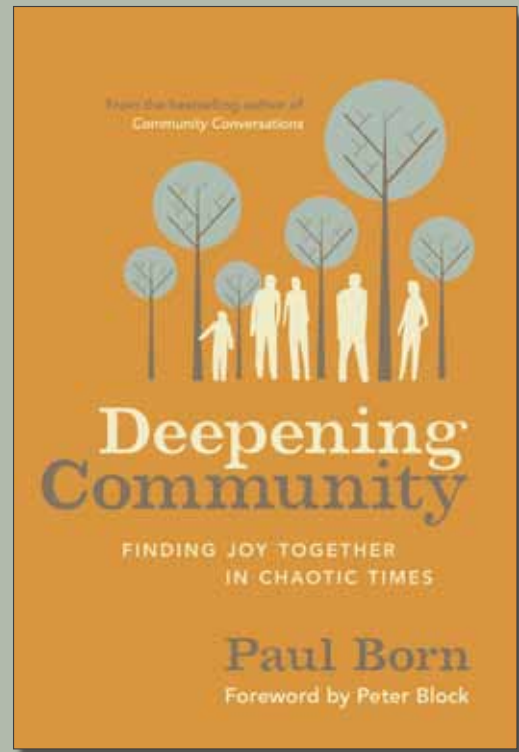
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—John McKnight, Codirector, Asset-Based Community Development Institute, and coauthor of *The Abundant Community*



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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