Community, Authenticity, and Cyberspace

Communities

Life in Cooperative Culture

Technology: Friend or Foe?

From the Virtual to the Real

Social Media or Social Isolation?

Technology in Service of Community

Snapshots from the Pre-Post-Digital Age

Using the Internet, Questioning the Internet

Network For a New Culture

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

www.NFNC.org

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

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

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

Communities

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2014 Camps

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NFNC Summer Camp East July 11–20
New Culture Summer Camp East is an extended experience of building a sustainable, violence-free culture through intimacy, personal growth, transparency, radical honesty, equality, compassion, freedom of choice in interpersonal and sexual relationships, and the power of community. Camp takes place at a shady campground with a delightful stream alongside, about 3 hours west of the Washington DC area. nfnc.org/camps/east

NFNC Summer Camp West August 1–10
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New Culture Hawaii Winter Camp February 2015
New Culture comes out of examining every aspect of our existing cultures and experimenting to find out how to create a world based on love and freedom, rather than fear and violence. In our explorations we have looked at everything from inner aspects of one's self-experience to global consequences of our societal choices. nfnc.org/camps/hawaii

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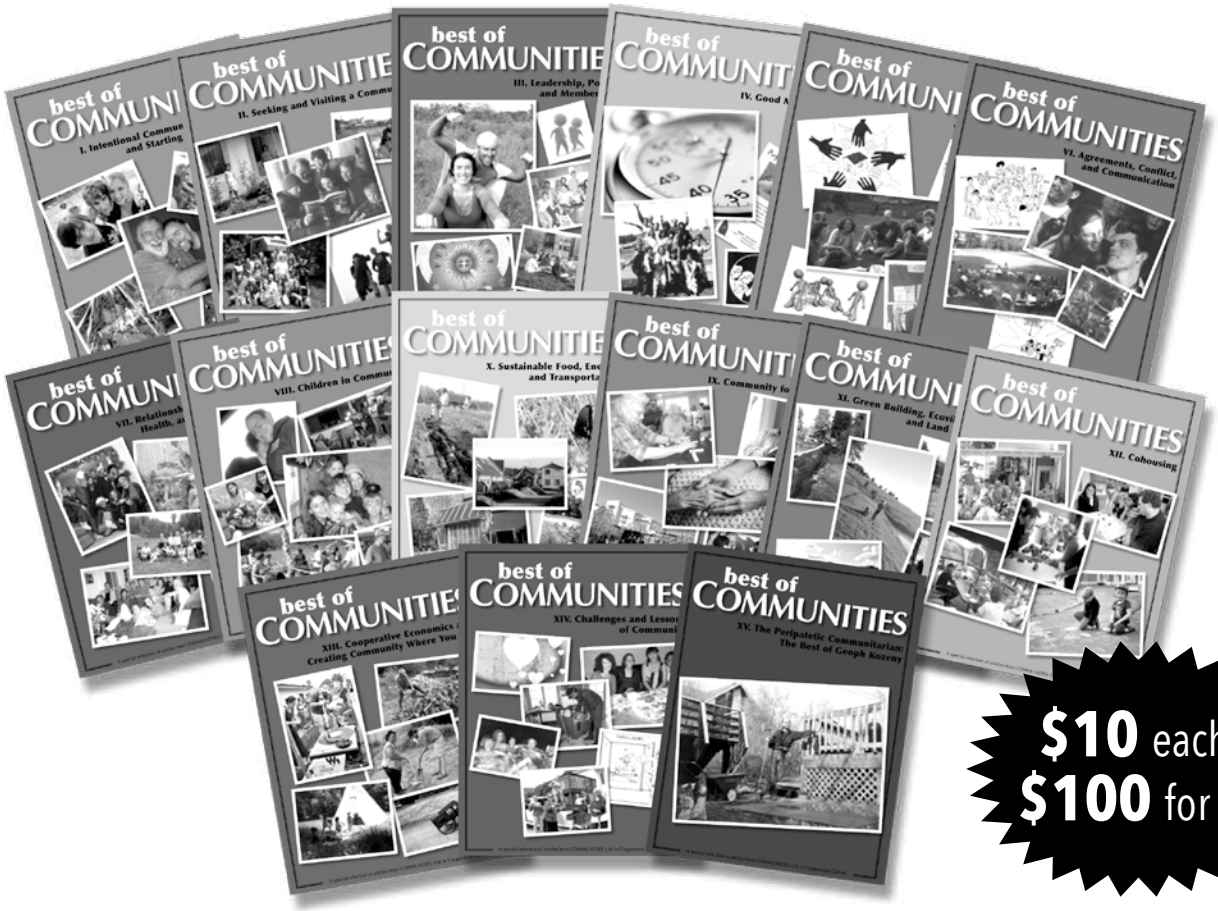
The Fellowship for Intentional Community is pleased to offer you the cream of our crop–the very best articles that have appeared over the last 20 years in our flagship publications: COMMUNITIES magazine and Communities Directory.



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- **X. Sustainable Food, Energy, and Transportation**
- **XI. Green Building, Ecovillage Design, and Land Preservation**
- **XII. Cohousing**
- **XIII. Cooperative Economics and Creating Community Where You Are**
- **XIV. Challenges and Lessons of Community**
- **XV. The Peripatetic Communitarian: The Best of Geoph Kozeny**

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Please support the magazine and enhance your own library by taking advantage of these new offerings!

ic.org/products/communities-magazine/best-of-communities

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Janel Healy, Online Communications Project Manager for the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (oaec.org), uses technology to tell stories of local, community-oriented ecological living. Here, she writes an e-newsletter while sitting in the community's North Garden. Photo by Janel Healy.

COMMUNITIES
Life in Cooperative Culture

EDITOR
Chris Roth *(Lost Valley/Meadowsong)*

ART DIRECTOR
Yulia Zarubina-Brill

ADVERTISING AND BUSINESS MANAGER
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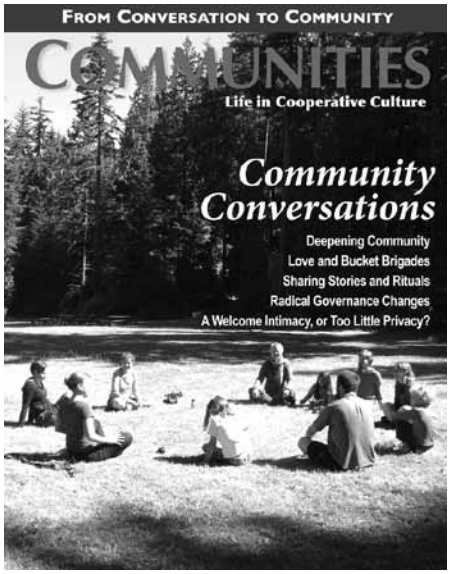
LETTERS



Fox Watching the Utopian House

WHY is the $50 million dollar investment into CoHo social experiment "UTOPIA" by FOX Studios not mentioned in this issue (COMMUNITIES #164)?

Helping promote such a massive investment with the potential to create the needed paradigm shift in the US should be a major focus of your group.

Please jump on the train now before the ratings cut the show and the project is canceled.

Tim Frentz
via email

The Editor responds:

Thanks for your message. We're past deadline and this appearance in the Letters section is the best we can do. A while back, we forwarded a casting call for a show that was probably this one to community contacts around the country—but other than that, I hadn't heard of it until your letter. (There are no televisions in my daily life.)

As a side note, it does occur to me that a mere five percent of Fox Studios' one-year investment in this project would generously endow COMMUNITIES **in perpetuity**.

FIC Executive Secretary Laird Schaub responds:

FIC receives a steady stream of inquiries from television producers hoping to profile intentional communities in a variety of programs. We handle them all the same way, explaining that many communities who have agreed to participate in such programs have ultimately been dismayed with how they have been portrayed and have learned to be chary of promises of even-handed and respectful treatment.

We explain this backdrop to producers and tell them they are free to approach whatever communities they like (using our *Communities Directory*). FIC does not broker deals; producers make arrangements directly with individual communities.

It's important to understand that editorial control lies solely with the television producers, and is not in the hands of communities or FIC. While the Fellowship is always looking for ways to promote community living to the wider culture, we've learned that it's prudent to see whether a program portrays intentional communities fairly (rather than sensationally) before "jumping on the train."

In the case of *Utopia* (which debuted this past September) the construct is that 15 men and women with no prior history with each other have been placed together in isolation for a year. They are filmed around the clock, and have been asked to figure out how to organize a functioning society. Matters are further complicated by participants being periodically eliminated from the society, presumably because they have not been "utopian enough," which creates the oddity of people competing to be the most cooperative. While we are dubious that this set-up will produce valuable insights into cooperative culture and community living, we'll be pleased to promote the program if it turns out to do justice to intentional communities.

Update: As we went to press, we learned that *Utopia* had just been canceled, due to poor ratings.

Not the Same Thing

Regarding the editor's and Sam Makita's responses to my letter to the editor "Gender Issue a Roller Coaster" (COMMUNITIES #164), there is one point I must make: Sam Makita, you do NOT get to

say [and clearly do not have any idea] what I would say, or what I think. Of course a child biting an adult is defined as a violent act. But that fact does NOT make your letter of response or your original article valid. We do not live in a world in which the context of anyone's actions can be removed from how they behave. A "small child who's being beaten daily by co's [its] adult custodian" is NOT the same as the adult who is beating it. If you truly believe that an adult beating a small child every day is the SAME THING as a small child biting that adult in an attempt to escape, you are in great need of some education on human relationships. And women choosing women-only space is NOT the same thing as men excluding women. Self-chosen women-only space is a place where women can be physically and psychologically SAFER, and may feel more respected, because men aren't in it. That is currently how the real world IS, no matter how much anyone wishes it to be different, because the context we all inhabit is the reality we live within. If some women choose to take a vacation from worldwide misogyny by being in a man-free space, we have every right to do so, and to have that choice and that space respected. Because we get to define our choices FOR OURSELVES, without Sam Makita or anyone else telling us what should be.

Trina Porte
Canaan, New York

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!

It's Done!

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The long-awaited Part Two of
Geoph Kozeny's *Visions of Utopia*
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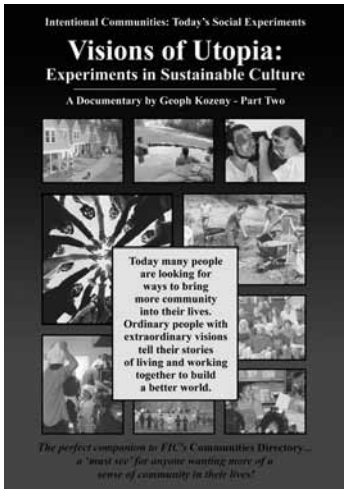

124 minutes profiling 10 contemporary communities:

- Catholic Worker House (San Antonio, TX)
- Community Alternatives & Fraser Common Farm (BC)
- The Farm (Summertown, TN)
- Ganas (Staten Island, NY)
- Goodenough (Seattle, WA)
- Hearthaven (Kansas City, MO)
- Miccosukee Land Cooperative (Tallahassee, FL)
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The bookend companion to Part One (released in 2002) which features a 2500-year overview of community living, plus profiles of seven current groups. Get 'em both!

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COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

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

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

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

Submissions Policy

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

Advertising Policy

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

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

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

Please check ic.org/communities-magazine or email ads@ic.org for advertising information.

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

QUESTIONING TECHNOLOGY

Do you ever wonder about how much technology to embrace in your life? I do. I figure the answer lies somewhere in the gulf between ball point pens and nuclear power plants, but where *exactly* should we draw the line?

I realize that we're not likely to stuff any genies back in the bottle, but having a genie on hand does not necessarily mean we should request wishes from it. What is the intersection between a sustainable life and a technologically abundant one? What technologies make sense?

This requires some discernment.

First, we can cross off the list those things that are flat-out too dangerous, such as automatic weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles. And it's not much of a stretch to go a layer deeper and eliminate nerve gas, crewless aircraft, and genetically modified organisms (such as tomatoes spliced with fish genes).

Next we can knock off technological advances of dubious utility, such as electric knives, fake seafood, and stretch Hummers. In some cases, we've just taken a good thing too far: vacuum cleaners are useful, but who needs one with variable speed suction?

Of course, some choices are far more nuanced: table saws are dangerous (accounting for half of all woodshop accidents) yet also very useful—not many carpenters can approximate the precision of a machined straight line cut with a rip saw.

One of the most important lessons I learned from doing construction was to figure out how to build things such that I could repair them when they failed—not *if* they failed; *when* they failed. It occurs to me that that wouldn't be such a bad way to assess technology either. If I can't reasonably repair a thing myself—or at least locally—how dependent do I want to be on it? How confident am I that I'll have access to replacements? What will I do instead if that technology is no longer available? It may make sense to use it until it's gone, or it may not. Sometimes dependency on new technology

leads to an atrophy of the old technology—the one you'll need to rely on when the new one is no longer available.

For example, I suspect we're losing a generation of farmers who understand the intricacies of crop rotation and green manure cropping in the post-World War II era, where mainstream agriculture has come to rely on anhydrous ammonia for nitrogen and pre-emergent herbicides for weed control. These are things to ponder.

What about computers? Leaving aside the obvious fact that no is going to be manufacturing microchips in their basement, to what extent is computer technology anti-relational? Are email, texting, and Facebook becoming a substitute for face-to-face conversation, and at what cost? To what extent are people increasingly holed up at home at a keyboard (like I am right now) instead of visiting the neighbors? For that matter, how often do you encounter people fully engrossed with their laptops and smart phones even when they're in social spaces like coffee shops and restaurants? I'm not convinced this is a good trend.

Google is able to track what kind of information you're seeking and then display ads for products and services related to your search. Amazon suggests titles similar to the one you asked about. On the one hand this is smart advertising. On the other it's encouraging us to reinforce our opinions rather than seek a variety of viewpoints. Is the increasing sophistication of information technology reinforcing the trend toward polarization that currently plagues political discourse in this country?

These are not simple questions, but the most dangerous choice of all is not asking them.

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. This article is adapted from his blog entry of October 11, 2014.

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Chris Roth

Technology, Nature, and Community

What does it mean when a two-and-a-half year old can identify more wildflowers, shrubs, trees, and birds than at least 90 percent of the fourth- and fifth-grade students I took on school nature walks this fall?

The first child's senses seem alert to every sound and sight—he notices every bird call, squirrel scurry, daisy blossom, oak gall, mushroom, animal scat, and celestial body. And he points them out to me.

By contrast, the older children seem almost incapable of being quiet, unable to simply observe and listen—either to the natural world or to each other—except in brief spurts. They seem possessed by noisy internal voices and nervous energy. They are excited to be outdoors, but they know very little about what they are encountering, and they approach it more like bulls in a china shop than like Native American gatherers or hunters.

Why?

One fourth-grader offers a candid explanation, in response to my vain attempt to have even one of them identify our most common conifer, the Douglas fir. "I don't know anything about plants. I stay inside all day and play video games."

The two-and-a-half year old lives in a rural intentional community, mentored by adults for whom ecological literacy is a primary value. Most of his daily life experience is unmediated by technology. The fourth- and fifth-graders live in a small city, their lives shaped much more by the human-created technological artifacts that surround them. They live mostly indoors, and even when they are outside, they are usually not far from a small personal electronic device.

The community-raised toddler interacts with other people in the same spirit he interacts with the natural world—with awareness, sensitivity, curiosity, and caring. Many of the older kids seem to have much less social sensitivity, many fewer of the skills and ways of being that are essential to community living. Apparently high technology and high levels of community skills do not automatically go hand-in-hand (or finger-in-finger—perhaps the digital analog).

We learn the languages and ways of being in which we are immersed. I would never expect myself to learn Spanish without hearing the language spoken, or to learn about gardening without ever doing it. On the other hand, it would be difficult not to absorb and learn these things if they were shared by everyone around me.

I wonder: is the modern technological landscape now immersing us in a kind of language, a way of being, which drowns out some of the awareness, skills, and qualities that are essential to our nature as humans? And if technology has a monopoly on modern attention, can this trend by slowed down or reversed if enough people question it, intentionally divorce themselves from its hold on their lives, and set out to learn *different*, non-technologically-mediated languages and ways of being?

• • •

As always, there is another side to this coin. These words are coming to you via a computer (actually, multiple computers), even if you're reading our print edition. Many people now engaged in community living or other progressive social change movements would not have found their current situations without the internet (including resources like ic.org). And, bucking the trend of "nature deficit disorder," some of the second-graders I guided this year (who were much more nature-attuned and knowledgeable

than the older children mentioned earlier) had learned some of what they knew, and stoked some of their interest in the actual living world, via nature documentaries watched via DVDs and computers.

It's no surprise, then, that our articles in this issue span the entire spectrum of attitude and opinion, from the technological optimist to the technological skeptic. Compare Christopher Kindig's "Technology: Our External Thumb" to Ethan Hughes' "Back to Life: Returning from the Virtual to the Real" to get a taste of just how wide the range of sentiment can be. (For additional reading on both ends of the spectrum, check out www.hopedance.org/blog/2747-a-meditation-on-using-facebook-as-a-village-gathering-space by Bob Banner—a greatly shortened version of which almost made it into this issue—and *The Round Table* from Winter 2011 at karenhousecw.org/RT2011Technology.htm, in which an earlier version of Ethan's article appeared.)

In truth, the theme of this edition could have generated several books; this 80-page magazine can hardly do it justice. But we've delved into at least some of the many dimensions of Technology and its relationship to Community. A few that came up but that we didn't explore in depth herein include: technology's ability to help bond together "leavers" from various restrictive religious communal groups (a recent thread on the Communal Studies Association's listserv); the increasing economic viability of rural community living through "techie" telecommuting and "mass digital nomadism" (highlighted by an inquiry from a journalist writing for *Factor* magazine); and the impacts of many non-computer-based modern technologies (we'll explore some of those in more detail in our Summer 2015 "Food and Community" issue).

Thanks again for joining us!

Chris Roth edits Communities *on his laptop computer and also spends as much time as possible with his computer closed, nature guiding at Mt. Pisgah Arboretum, participating in community life at Lost Valley and at Mandala Sanctuary (all outside Eugene, Oregon), and mentoring and being mentored by two preschoolers.*

"Appropriate" Technology and Community on the Path to Resiliency

By Janel Healy

Is a renaissance in land-based living possible without the technologies that empower us to design more sustainable, regionally based societies and economies—or the online technologies that help us instantly fan the flames of this movement? At the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC), where I live and work as Online Communications Manager, appropriate use of technology is constantly on my mind.

OAEC is a sustainability demonstration center and intentional community on 80 acres of mixed forest, woodlands, and coastal prairie in western Sonoma County, California. Our work revolves around researching and modeling how to design healthy, beautiful place-based communities. In response to a global economy that has caused environmental and cultural degradation of epic proportions, our goal is to inspire and empower change-makers with community influence—from tribal citizens to schoolteachers to activists representing marginalized urban groups—to envision how they could design local systems for providing for their communities' needs. We call this work "community resilience design": helping to develop regionally based settlements and economic systems that depend far less upon the global economy to thrive.

Appropriate technology plays an important role in our work. For instance, we are currently supporting a Haitian nonprofit called Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods (SOIL) to design modern humanure composting systems. These will improve health and provide jobs for marginalized communities of Haiti, where human "waste" has been a huge problem—but is now being transformed into a resource with the properly designed systems.

My job is to continue to grow OAEC's influence using tools of modern technology. As Online Communications Manager, I have spent much of the last year and a half on a computer, rebuilding a more effective, impressive website and expanding our social media network. My work ideally captures the attention and imaginations of the community change-makers we seek to inspire and empower, as well as attracts the funding we need for our financial sustainability.

But I sometimes find myself questioning just how "appropriate" my personal use of technology is, feeling guilty about the amount of fossil fuel required for nine-to-five computer use. Or I'll think about the "big picture" and feel hopeless, finding it difficult to see the point of what I'm doing day to day. In the face of rising sea levels, or a drought that threatens to destroy California's powerful industrial agriculture complex, does what I'm spending my days doing *really* matter? Sure, maybe Facebook helped the masses organize during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, but does it have the power to restore biological and cultural diversity at the speed that it needs to happen for our species to continue to thrive for, say, another few thousand years?

Plus, if there really is to be a massive transition away from the global economic system—whether by design or by disaster—being "plugged in" every day is absolutely not preparing me for it.

After months of reflection, however, I have come to realize that my deep entanglement with modern technology allows me to play a necessary role in my community. The mainstream emphasis on individualism has caused a generation of idealists to define "sustainability" as heading back to the land to homestead in an effort to provide for all of their own needs—perhaps rejecting modern technology in the process. While well intentioned, this approach does not take into account that humans are fundamentally tribal and community-based. At OAEC, I've learned that sustainability isn't about learning how to provide for all of your own needs; it's about understanding and accepting what your skills are, then building alliances with people around you who have complementary skills to develop a more sustainable regional economy. Some of us are Farmers, others Builders. When I zoom up out of myself, I see that I am Story-

Photo by Janel Healy

Photos by Jim Coleman/Occidental Arts and Ecology Center

teller for a group of people who are spending their days researching and educating about place-based resilience.

So, although I am not personally a model of ecological sustainability, I'm the communicator for a group of people who are "living in truth" about the ecological crisis together. I'm heralding the stories of the work my colleagues are doing in order to inspire community leaders and funders to emulate and believe in OAEC's vision of a more resilient future. Though my use of technology might be considered resource-intensive if looked at from an individualist standpoint, I believe it is "appropriate" and necessary when viewed through a community lens.

In the end, I think the combination of appropriate use of technology with community—characterized by deepened relationships between people and between people and place—is the key to human resilience. I was reminded of this a few weeks ago when citizens of a local Native American tribe with which we are allied spent a weekend at OAEC, reflecting upon their interrelationship with this land, their ancestral home. Staff and residents were invited to join the tribe for an evening of stargazing facilitated by a renowned cosmology historian. As we all lay in a field beneath a vast, starry sky, learning about how land-based people throughout history have interpreted and utilized the stars, I was overcome with a sense of joy. There we were, celebrating a technology as ancient as time, with the quiet understanding that—although from a myriad of backgrounds—we are all ultimately land-based people who must unite in community to take care of Home once again.

Janel is Online Communications Project Manager for the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (oaec.org) in Sonoma County, California. She is a graduate of USC's Annenberg School of Communication. From 2010-2012, Janel lived at the Twin Oaks Community in Virginia, the largest and arguably best-known secular commune in North America. There, she honed her outreach skills as Manager of the Twin Oaks Communities Conference. Janel has worked as an editorial assistant and staff writer for a marching band magazine, a casting intern for Nickelodeon Animation Studios, and a cruise ship lounge singer. She is passionate about human connection and intimacy, intentional community, expressing herself through writing and singing, nature adventures, and envisioning more sustainable human societies and systems.

Technology: Our External Thumb

By Christopher Kindig

Is technology our friend or foe? To me this is like asking, is food good or bad for us? Generally yes, sustenance is essential, but it also depends on what we are eating, how it is produced, frequency, cultural context, lifestyle, and more. Technology depends entirely on one's relationship to it and how it is used. It is inert in itself, as it exists only in the context of our use.

Outside of making a value judgment, I think it is impossible to separate humankind from our use of technology. Technology is the modification of the environment in order to achieve some goal. Without forging tools of various types, throughout time, we would not have survived.

Fire, agriculture, computers, clothing, currency, even recipes, language, and culture, are all forms of technology. We share the planet with other species who also use it to survive and to thrive. Examples include nesting and hive making, ants growing fungus to provide for grubs that they feed off of, elephants communicating by sending and receiving stomping vibrations through the ground with their giant sensitive feet, and apes using thin branches to extract termites. Researchers have even spotted great apes sharpening sticks for hunting and attacking rivals.

So if technology is a foe, then an essential part of our nature and many other animals' nature is also a foe. I do not choose to ascribe to such an "original sin" sort of view, that we are inherently flawed in our makeup. Instead we could more constructively choose to see ourselves as active and creative participants in the use of and development of technology. We can choose responsibility, forward thinking, and mastery, instead of acquiescence, complacency, and fear.

Being Friends with the Future

Some people, including some on the hippie spectrum, are against using the internet or technology, believing that it separates us from others, nature, and the "real world." First of all, it is strange to me to arbitrarily draw the line at just new technologies, while most people continue to use and exalt older ones. Second, in my experience and for many, devices and the internet can instead bring us even closer to other people, places, opportunities, and truths.

When the telephone was first invented, many publicly opined that it would lead to the downfall of face-to-face relationships and ultimately to human intimacy. In actuality it gave people the ability to talk to one another at a moment's impulse, to reach out at any hour to share close feelings, brilliant ideas, and to collaborate.

Long before phones there was a similar story with the printing press. Printing books was also decried as a tragic loss of the old ways by those who believed that people would lose their memory skills and ability to tell stories. On the contrary, widespread printing of books eventually greatly multiplied and democratized educational pursuits, the sharing of ideas, and the offering of new perspectives, enjoyment, and inspiration.

Remember when you had friends who said they would never get a cell phone? (Then that they would never get a smart phone?) What started in the mid-'80s as a $4,000 brick that allowed very few to talk for just 30 minutes while hauling around a briefcase-sized battery, now is many

Overview of Port de Nice, France.

Bike rides in Czech Republic.

Chris and Karen with Pavel and Martina.

Photos courtesy of Christopher Kindig

orders of magnitude more portable, powerful, accessible, and multifunctional. Now over six billion people on Earth have access to cell and smart phones—right in their pockets. For most people in the developing world the smart phone is their very first access to the worldwide web, allowing brand new opportunities for connection, education, creativity, entrepreneurship, and so on.

While the nature of technology is that it will always change, technology itself is obviously not a fad. The internet is not going away anytime soon. It is a language that the world now natively speaks, and a world we now naturally inhabit. Instead of fading away, it will become an even deeper part of our lives. The "internet of things" will bring new intelligence to physical objects and communication between them and the places around us. Sensors in wearable devices will monitor and improve our health and stress levels. The projection of information on heads-up displays, like the nascent Google Glass, or sophisticated holograms, will give us brand new ways to perceive and interact with the world. Willfully opting out of these things is resisting reality, and at some point is like saying it was better before the existence of electricity, books, and fire.

Instead of asking whether technology is a "friend or foe," which could deny or damn our nature, perhaps we should be asking how to better help friends and reduce foes through the use of technology. Paraphrasing Einstein, "With our increasing ability to destroy the world comes an equal opportunity to save it." Our culture and the choices we make, individually and collectively, are responsible for the negative effects of technology; the fault is not in the technology itself.

So let us proceed responsibly and mindfully, and be not afraid. Using tools does not necessarily make us into tools. Use what works to help you learn anything, get inspired, start a company, grow an organization, work remotely, make new friends, fall in love, start or join a community, build the future, travel, and change the world. ❧

Christopher Kindig grew up near and now lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Christopher studied Psychology, and founded an online green technology company, OrganicMechanic.com. He now serves as the Business and Advertising Manager for Communities *and the Fellowship for Intentional Community. Christopher loves growing, cooking, and eating fresh food, traveling, yoga, hiking, nature, good people, intellectual inquiry, stimulating conversation, and long walks, especially with his lovely wife.*

Picking blueberries in the Alps in Ivrea, Italy.

Travel Technology

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

—Mark Twain

I am in love with seeing the world. There is so much diversity, little differences you didn't realize existed, and major differences which put life and history into sharper perspective. Seeing the world enriches one's ability for understanding and appreciation. And it is a blast!

So as an investment in adventure and cultural education, before settling into a homesteading and family-building mode, my lovely wife and I decided to journey on a three-month honeymoon trip around Europe: 100 days, seven countries (10 if you count ones we traveled through), about 30 beds, and over a million cherished memories, inspired thoughts, hearty laughs, new friendships, tasty dishes, and beautiful visages.

To take this trip to ancient places, we made heavy use of modern-day technologies. In addition to portable Apple devices, we used the internet to research and plan, to read advice, and to interact in a number of online communities to scout out what we could see, who we could meet, where to stay, and how to get there.

We dove into the sharing economy, which refers to "peer-to-peer" services on the web which connect you to a good or service from another person or group instead of from a company. This wonderful evolution in technology and culture not only brings once-in-a-lifetime experiences and relationships to your fingertips, it also weaves a new fabric of trust throughout humanity. Once-strangers are now comrades in common pursuits.

We used ic.org's communities directory to research and contact ecovillages with strong like-minded missions. There was a welcoming invitation from the Peace Factory in the small town of Monteliou, France, where they are inviting volunteers to visit or to join them. They are rehabbing an old factory to now include apartments, common areas, and luscious edible gardens. They host monthly courses over the summer and a big conference every August to teach peaceful nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, and group problem-solving skills.

We used GEN.Ecovillage.org (the Global Ecovillage Network) to get in touch with Ravenwood, an ecovillage at the base of the Alps in Ivrea, Italy. There, a positive group of people inspired by the Anastasia writings about harmonious living with the Earth have founded an ecological mountainside haven. They use solar electricity and solar water heating, drink refreshing spring water, and use composting toilets. We used a hand crank to mill flour, giddily collected wild blueberries, greens, and mushrooms from the forest, and made tinctures and delicious meals.

We used WWOOF.com (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms), and specifically wwoof.it/en/, to connect to an organic winery and olive orchard called Podere Vallari in a small town called Riparbella, in the Tuscany region of Italy. We traded a few hours each weekday trimming olive trees (while listening to audiobooks!) in exchange for free room and board.

We used Couchsurfing.com to connect to natives of cities we visited, as well as transplants who fell in love with the place. This is a wonderful way to meet people who are generally open-minded, fun, and engaged in life, who share interests in traveling, learning, and exploring new cultures and experiences. We made new lifelong friends from Milan to Munich this way!

We used AirBnB.com to fill in gaps for last minute accommodations. This brilliant site allows you to rent rooms or entire apartments from people, typically at one third to one half of the going hotel rates, in prime locations! (For $25 in free credit, go to www.airbnb.com/c/ccorsaut.) We also used expedia.com, hostelbookers.com, and kayak.com to compare and book accommodations, and these sites are also options: globalfreeloaders.com, bewelcome.org, hospitalityclub, and workaway.info.

We used BlaBlaCar.com to arrange most of our rides around Europe. This is a website where you can search rides being offered and request ride alerts for specific trips and dates. You end up meeting interesting, good people to chat with on the way to your destination, all while paying typically only one third of the cost to ride the train. Carpooling is also an ecological option.

If you plan to do some hitchhiking, hitchwiki.org was recommended as a way to learn about the best spots and advice for nearly every city in Europe (and around the world). There are also peer-to-peer taxi services like Uber, Lyft, and Relay Rides, and sites to rent people's car directly, like Getaround and Buzzcar. Some of these are only available stateside, so far.

We used FlightFox.com to help us find the best rates for airplane tickets, which were about half as much as the going rate. We used TripAdvisor.com to research which attractions in each town were the highest rated, and which restaurants were worth checking out. There is a big difference between places you want to see and tourist traps!

We also found that veteran traveler Rick Steve's guides and website were very helpful, and that typing "what to do in _____" into YouTube will find interesting tips and historical backgrounds. For information and philosophy about traveling lightly, working remotely, and the like, I recommend the books *Vagabonding* by Rolf Potts and *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Tim Ferriss.

The world is brimming with experiences awaiting you. There are still secrets to learn about yourself, historical riddles to solve, foreign tastes to delight your tongue, and humorous tales of triumph that only adventuring can unveil. Get out there and soak it all up!

—C.K.

Back to Life:
Returning from the Virtual to the Real

By Ethan Hughes

Ethan Hughes

Stillwaters Sanctuary, a project of the Possibility Alliance, is an electricity-free, computer-free intentional community located on 110 acres outside La Plata, Missouri. A partner project, the Peace and Permaculture Center, sits on 20 adjoining acres; and another allied group, White Rose Catholic Worker Farm, sits on 30 neighboring acres (both also electricity-free). Here, the group's cofounder reflects on their choices about technology.

In 1999 I declared to my family and friends that I was going to attempt to live car-free. I was already living without personal computer use, emails, airplanes, and movies. Some of the strongest resistance to this new choice came from my grandmother. She feared a disconnect in our relationship as a result of spending less time together.

My first car-free visit to her home required a half-day of bike and train travel instead of a one-and-a-half-hour drive. The lack of an evening train made it necessary for me to spend the night at her home after our dinner together. Had I still been driving, of course, I would have driven home afterward. Instead we enjoyed a wonderful meal together, played some cards, and stayed up late as she told me stories about my dad (her son), who had passed away when I was 13. In the morning, we breakfasted on the second-story back porch while the birds sang. Suddenly, she reached across the table with tears in her eyes, put her hand on mine, and confessed, "I am so happy you do not drive anymore!" It turns out that I had been the first adult grandson to ever spend the night at her house.

As a result of this and similar experiences, I began to learn that often love is most easily nurtured when we slow down and remove everything that can get in the way of two human beings or a human being and nature interacting. I now believe that movie screens, computer screens, private automobiles, TV screens, cell phones, and other modern technologies simply create a wall between the human-to-human and human-to-nature encounters that can awaken us to love, meaning, and connection.

I also know that another way of living is available to us: a life that emulates the harmonious connection we see in natural ecosystems, a life that lives out the permaculture principles in full integrity. A tree creates zero (unusable) waste, enhances the ecosystem, and supplies a myriad of gifts to hundreds of species. I invite you to believe that humans, you and I, can do the same, that we can shed the trappings of this technological age by conscious choice and once again take our rightful place in the circle of creation.

The Impacts of Modern Technology

Let us evaluate the impacts of modern technology on the earth, creation, society, and our hearts. I believe the greatest conspiracy of our time is the belief that we must kill, enslave, injure, and oppress nature and/or humans to get our needs met. I also invite you to consider that the greater costs of such technology to the living world far outweigh any benefit we may gain from its use. Charles

Eisenstein writes: "All of our systems of technology, money, industry and so forth are built from the perception of separation from nature and from each other."

I propose a movement away from the Age of Information into an Age of Transformation—an age where we are empowered to act on what we have learned and on the calling in our hearts. This great leap and even the thought of it may awaken overwhelming discomfort and turmoil in us. In the face of climate weirding, addiction, species loss, depression, toxicity of the environment, war, and destruction of the last old growth forests, coral reefs, and other climax ecosystems, we must apply an incredible amount of imagination, creativity, love, grace, spirit, and perseverance as we never have before. In fact, to solve such problems, we need a complete paradigm shift.

Some say modern science will catch up and modern technology will become green. It is important to consider that a utopian world through modernization has been promised since the onset of the industrial revolution. In fact, the hard-to-face reality is that no amount of green technology, free energy, or touch screens will heal our disconnection from the natural world; rather they will continue to maintain the barriers that divide us from it. It does not matter if modern technology is clean or has a neutral footprint; it will never bring us back into contact with the earth and universe. We are living in a human-created virtual reality, a technological dreamscape that shelters us from true nature and one another.

As a culture, we are truly frogs in boiling water, indoctrinating each successive generation earlier and earlier into our exponentially accelerating disconnect from nature. According to the *New York Times* there has been a 69 percent decrease in the time children spend outdoors. This is directly linked to the use of social media, with the average child spending eight hours a day on the computer, watching videos, playing video games, and listening to recorded music. Adults and children are so disconnected from the natural universe that birthed us we do not even consciously miss it. The average American now spends more waking time on a screen than in real life. An infinitesimal amount of people in our society would even *consider* living with their hands, consuming only what their local bioregion provides. Most could not imagine a full, meaningful life without road trips, stereos, digital music dance parties, coconut, chocolate, movie night, electric lights, and Google searches.

But all of these well-accepted forms of entertainment, communication, and transportation are not as benign as we would wish. In fact, they are cumulatively destroying our planet. Even many mainstream publications now recognize humanity's disregard of our planet's natural limits; *USA Today* recently published an article stating that we are in the sixth mass extinction episode to occur in the five billion year history of planet earth, and that the extinction is human-caused.

In his book *The Ascent of Humanity*, Charles Eisenstein defines technology as "the power to manipulate the environment." He goes on to define "progress" as the accumulation of technology. The history of human progress has resulted in our modern industrial society, which Eisenstein states "can remake or destroy our physical environment, control nature's processes, and transcend nature's limitations."

I believe that this kind of progress, essentially an alienation from nature, passed to us through culture, has not only caused the sixth mass extinction and threatened the climate systems of earth but has also jeopardized human beings' physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health. Can you truly convince yourself that any of your social media, road trips, imported foods, or documentaries are worth this cost?

Photos by Chris Roth

Using Technology Appropriately

We find ourselves in a challenging predicament, because the technologies that negatively impact the living earth are the same devices upon which we currently depend for connection, information, livelihood, transportation, food, shelter, clothing, entertainment...almost everything in our lives. How can we do without them? I say we must find another way, for no matter what noble need they fill, no matter what measurable good they create, their use will always keep us disconnected from life in some way. Audre Lorde writes, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." There must be another way to fulfill these needs, or humanity would never have made it to the current era!

This leads us to another important question: Is there such a thing as an appropriate technology? Our definition of appropriate technology at Possibility Alliance's Stillwaters Sanctuary is:

1. It maintains the health and integrity of the biotic and cultural communities it is made in and/or used in. An appropriate technology can enhance the life, vitality, and diversity of these communities.

2. All people have equal access to the resources and skills to make the appropriate technology, as well as to use and master it.

3. Appropriate technology brings us closer to each other and the ecosystems and species we live with. Appropriate technology promotes relationships with living things.

Here at Stillwaters Sanctuary we live without electricity, use no combustion engines on site, and use no power tools. Even so, almost nothing we use, including most hand tools, beeswax candles, bicycles, and solar cookers, truly meet the criteria of our definition. Yet we know it is indeed possible. Some of us here have visited nearly intact indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, islands of Indonesia, and forests of Africa. Almost all their clothing, tools, and shelter qualify under our definition of appropriate technology. We in the modernized world have a great mountain to climb. Skills have not been passed down to us; most of us are not living in our bioregion of birth nor were we taught how to live bioregionally; ecosystems today are more toxic and compromised; and private ownership and widespread division of land make it difficult for modern-day humans to access enough land to live in full self-sustaining relationship with it.

The Computer Reconsidered

If a tool as simple as a brace-and-bit hand drill does not qualify as appropriate technology, how do we begin to assess the impacts of a more complex technology such as a computer? Jerry Mander, in his book *In the Absence of the Sacred*, proposes a holistic analysis of technology. "The analysis includes political, social, economic, biological, perceptual, informational, epistemological, spiritual impacts; its affect upon children, upon nature, upon power, upon health."

Let us run the computer through a partial holistic analysis as an example:

- It takes 500 pounds of fossil fuels, 47 pounds of chemicals, and 1.5 tons of water to manufacture one computer (in a world where one third of the human population does not have access to clean drinking water).
- 93 percent of the global population does not own a computer and of the poorest one billion, only one percent has access to one.
- The US military is the #1 financial source for computer science research in the world.
- 70 percent of the heavy metals in landfills come from e-waste.
- Paper waste has increased 40 percent with the spread of the personal computer and printer.
- The highest number of Superfund sites (extremely polluted locations) in the US are in Silicon Valley, where computers are manufactured.
- Computer-run systems are cheaper than hiring people, so more money is concentrated in corporate hands, unemployment increases, and the poverty gap widens.
- Computers increase surveillance, used for concentration of power and control by corporations and governments.
- The manufacture of one computer chip contaminates 2,800 gallons of water.
- More than 700 materials and chemicals are used to make a computer. One half of these are known to be hazardous to ecological and human health.
- The entire process from raw materials to the computer in your hands requires minimally 200,000 miles of transportation (almost to the moon) with resources extracted from up to 50 countries.
- Simply by the process of its production, a computer is the antithesis of decentralization and bioregionalism.

• Each year between five and seven million tons of e-waste is created. (The majority of this is sent to China, India, South Asia, and Pakistan.)

• The people who build our computers have up to 3,000 times the rate of certain cancers. These workers also have a much higher rate of respiratory diseases, birth defects, miscarriages, and kidney and liver damage.

• 70 percent of all people affected by e-waste (lead, phosphorus, barium, dioxins, furans, etc.) are poor and marginalized people.

• 40 percent of all computers on the planet are owned and operated in the United States.

• Computers are efficient at accelerating consumption, development, advertisement, etc.

• The main Google server in the Columbia River Gorge uses more electricity in one day than the City of San Francisco.

• The computer is a product built for profit. The industry's imperative is growth and profit.

• The computer is rearranging our brain chemistry and functions, in addition to creating psychological patterns of addiction to its use.

• 90 percent of human communication is nonverbal. Thus we use only 10 percent or less of a person's capacity to communicate when we do so through computers.

This is less than five percent of the information on the negative impacts of computers that I have collected in the last decade and a half. Please do your own analysis and research and let me know if you find new or differing information. As Jerry Mander urged us, I am focusing on the negatives in our holistic analysis. We all are familiar with the benefits—they are why many choose to use the computer.

The simple fact that we can exist without a computer seems like an impossibility these days, yet for 100,000 years we have—we did so even just 50 years ago! Wendell Berry quips that "If the use of a computer is a new idea, then a newer idea is not to use one."

Shaking Our Addiction

How can we change our habits, and shake our virtual addiction to modern technology? First we must truly understand, see, and feel the painful costs of the disconnected choices we have made. Bruce Ecker states, "Change occurs through direct experiences of the symptom, not from cognitive insights. Cognitive insight follows from (rather than leads and produces) such experiences." Whenever I meet people who are living electricity-free, not flying, biking everywhere, sharing their home with the homeless, refusing to use the computer, eating locally, giving their money away, or fearlessly risking arrest for a cause, I ask them what led to these choices. Their answers share two common aspects:

They came into direct contact with some form of destruction caused by their lifestyle choices—for example, they witnessed mountaintop removal, met brain-damaged Latino children living downstream from Silicon Valley, visited Black Mesa on the

Navajo Reservation and saw the destruction caused by Peabody Coal, or witnessed families tenting on the Mississippi in zero degree weather.

The exposure was sometimes less than an hour, yet all of these people said their lives changed instantly from the direct experience. There was no thought in the decision to change their lifestyles; it arose naturally from their being.

So this is the good news. When directly exposed to suffering, humans will most often respond and take great risks of which they would not otherwise think themselves capable. I myself began experiencing these shifts when I lost my father to a drunken driver. At age 13 I directly experienced the cost of cars and alcohol. All the facts in the world—like this one: the leading cause of death in the US for 18-25-year-olds is car crashes—would not have changed my behavior or choices. Yet one direct experience of the cost of these things led me to live car-free and substance-free. I also stood on the banks of the Aguarico River in the Ecuadorian rainforest as more oil than spilled from the Exxon Valdez rushed downstream, covering everything. Since witnessing that event, I strive to live without depending on petroleum.

I invite you to go expose yourself to a direct experience of the cost of your lifestyle choices. Let the truth of what you see transform you. For example, go witness the dumping of the elephant-sized amount of toxins, contaminated water, and waste created for your laptop. Visit the poor, marginalized town or village that has to deal with it. What if you visited the Superfund site downstream from Silicon Valley and met children with brain damage from computer industry waste? Could you make the same decisions?

This is not a loaded question. It is an honest question I ask myself if I am imagining a truly just world, with equality and opportunity for all life. I acknowledge that it is also very challenging and difficult. When I recently asked a friend to consider doing his world-impacting, beautiful, personal growth work without the computer or airplane, he said he would be "ripped to shreds." I know from my own experience that such feelings of devastation are real and necessary, *and* I believe we are called to cross this threshold in order to heal ourselves and this earth. We must be ripped to shreds to enter a new paradigm.

Making the Transition

We have very imperfectly begun the transition back to the living world at Stillwaters Sanctuary, at its neighboring Peace and Permaculture Center, and on the adventures of the Bicycling Superheroes, three projects of the Possibility Alliance. We are constantly learning how to embody our individual and collective vision. We have observed during the course of our 7-1/2-year-old experiment at Stillwaters Sanctuary that people must have time, space, love, compassion, inspiration, and support to transition and integrate a new way of being. Heartbreak, grief, tears, joy, disappointment, despair, laughter, gratitude, grace, and fear have been part of each of our transformations. There is also hypocrisy, paradox, and failure daily.

Just in this moment, for example, I realize that what I write by candlelight with pencil on scrap paper someone will soon type into a computer. What can we do? We are not an island of purity. We choose to interface daily with the society that each of us was born and raised in, and of which we are still a part, albeit a dissident part. This interface involves compromise, but we don't want to use this rationale to console ourselves into passivity. Step by imperfect step, we must keep marching toward the goal of transformation—of ourselves, and in tiny increments, of that same society. For example, our last newsletter at Stillwaters Sanctuary was hand-drawn and photocopied. One step we're taking is to commit to print our next newsletter on an antique printing press, as did our friends at La Borie Noble in France, and as did *Plain* magazine, which printed 5,000 copies each run using typesetting and woodblocks!

I invite you to go expose yourself to a direct experience of the cost of your lifestyle choices. Let the truth of what you see transform you.

With every choice—even if it's to write an article for a magazine or be interviewed for a podcast—we are trying to create a culture and container where it is easier to live with-

out industrial society. One successful paradigm shift has come from our choice to burn hand-dipped beeswax candles as our only light source at night. Not only do we create a way to have lighting using resources within a 10-mile radius, but we instantly make obsolete nuclear, coal, wind, solar, or any other industrial power source that requires mining, resource extraction, and the old industrial paradigm to create. Our use of candles also makes us more mindful, both in movement and activity. We must move carefully when using an open flame. We reap the gifts of beauty, calmness, human connection, and connection to nature. What began as an environmental choice has become a spiritual one. Living this way brings us closer to the world: bees, hands, fire, spirit, and life.

Although we celebrate any movement that lessens impact to life, we do not consider "green technology" to be the "end all, be all." For example, shifting from coal power to solar power is a meaningful step, but it may not be enough. As Bill McKibben pointed out in an *Orion* article, hybrid cars, fair trade goods, wind power, and trains only slow down the process of destruction; they do not end it. Our transition must be an unceasing journey toward a fully healed relationship with the Earth.

Lanza del Vasto offers a gauge to know when we have reached the goal: "Find the shortest, simplest way between the earth, the hands, and the mouth. Don't put anything in between—no money, no heavy machinery. Then you know at once what are the true needs and what are fantasies. When you have to sweat to satisfy your needs, you soon know whether or not it's worth your while. But if it's someone else's sweat, there is no end to our needs. We need cigarettes, beer, cars, soft drinks, appliances, electronic devices, and on and on.... Learn to do without.... Learn how to celebrate...prepare the feast from what your own hands have grown and let it be magnificent."

As I continue to simplify and align my life with creation and nature, I am discovering a true and deep wealth: having very little, being happy within the limits of a non-industrial life, remembering that "joy is not in things, it is in us." Joy is also in connecting with each other and nature with nothing in between. No inanimate thing is needed for the human experience of love, justice, equality, joy, aliveness, and meaning.

This change in my own life has taken 30 years of transition and integration...step by step I am moving toward the goal of living, creating, and enjoying in a way that takes care of and honors everyone and every living thing. My experience with life is increasingly more direct: walking to the orchard composting toilet in a snow storm or under shooting stars; sitting face to face with friends and strangers night after night by candlelight; creating music; storytelling; collecting wild foods; listening to the silence and cricket song that come when there are no combustion machines, no canned music, no white noise; slowing down. In the age of industrial technology it has become a radical act to be completely present with the person or lifeform you are with, with no screens, distractions, intoxicants, or anything else in between.

Many of our friends in communities and projects around the US are shutting off the electricity, shifting to the gift economy, closing email and Facebook accounts. The Downstream Project in Virginia, Be the Change Project in Reno, Loving Earth Sanctuary in California are just a few. This article is an invitation for whoever feels the calling to begin to unplug and plug into What-Is-Alive. We at the Possibility Alliance want to try to support any who would walk this path, by sharing any insights, skills, or resources we have. Let us access more fully the oldest and ultimate technology: community, love, nonviolence, and spirit. It may just blow our minds and hearts wide open. ❧

I am discovering a true and deep wealth: having very little, being happy within the limits of a non-industrial life, remembering that "joy is not in things, it is in us."

Ethan Hughes enjoys watching dragonflies, luna moths, and the wonder in the eyes of his two young daughters. He has a long-standing love affair with Gandhian nonviolence and enjoys puddle fights, board games, and jumping into any body of water. He has gotten arrested with nuns three times to resist the war machine (police seem to be much more polite to you when you are with a nun). Contact him at 660-332-4094 or 28408 Frontier Lane, La Plata, Missouri 63549.

Grand Theft Utopia:

What Can Video Games Teach Us about Community?

By David Leach

It's Friday night. I'm cruising toward the highway that leads out of Los Santos. The sun is dropping behind the mountains as I flip through radio stations to find the perfect soundtrack for an evening drive.

Suddenly, I spot a woman waving in distress at the side of the road. I pull over to help. Her friend is in trouble, she urges me, and so I hurry toward an old clapboard house. Bad move. From around the corner, three thugs brandish pistols. My heart rate spikes. They shout at me, take aim, and—*bang! bang! bang!*

I slump back in my sofa. Game over.

I've just been beaten by *Grand Theft Auto 5*, the infamous video game. My act of virtual altruism only got me wasted. As I drop the PlayStation controller on the coffee table, I wonder: *What kind of lesson is that?*

The moral of the video game industry tends to be that mayhem makes money. In 2013, the latest of the *GTA* franchise earned a billion dollars in its first three days. Video games have surpassed Hollywood blockbusters as the most profitable—and influential—mass entertainment on the planet. So, you're not alone to worry about a generation weaned on shoot-outs and car-jackings, even if it's "just" pixels on a screen. Even if it's "just" a game.

Is there anything more to video games' popularity than violent fantasies and mindless escape? Can they ever teach us about who we are as a community and how we can be better? As a father and a teacher struggling to instill values in my kids and my students—who were all born, it seems, clutching video-game controllers—I wanted to find out.

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Stereotypes can be hard to break. Ask outsiders to imagine an "intentional community member," and they likely picture a neo-hippie in a graying ponytail or peasant dress, passing the kombucha around the talking circle. The same prejudice applies to "video gamer," a phrase that conjures visions of pimply-faced teenagers killing zombies in their parents' rec-room. Both caricatures miss the variety of people who care about community or are passionate about video games.

Video games have come a long way since I played Pong and Pac Man at the suburban arcade. Today, 95 percent of young people play digital games—on consoles, computers, tablets, or smart phones. They campaign in *World of Warcraft* for hours at a stretch. They snack on *Words with Friends* or *Clash of Clans* in snatches of downtime. Games are everywhere.

Games have evolved, too. From crude two-dimensional origins, they've become sophisticated high-def simulations that immerse players in virtual worlds. Games have also become social. Kids once played their Atari alone or with a buddy in the basement. Now the internet connects gamers around the world for massive multiplayer online tournaments.

Aside from superficial socializing, though, what do virtual games share with real communities? Wouldn't kids be better off learning how to garden than tending digital crops in *FarmVille*? Probably. Still, a good game and a good home share the same philosophy. To live "intentionally" requires hacking the operating system of conventional society. It means being conscious of how our choices affect the people and environment around us. It means embracing interactivity. It means learning from failure and always aiming higher. The same values are hard-wired into how video games reward success.

So-called "simulation" or "god games" tap into our human instinct to build a better world. Back in 1981, Mattel released *Utopia*, in which players micro-managed private islands, from backwater to paradise, by adding farms, houses, schools, hospitals—and

surviving random hurricanes. Simulation games later took off when players could manage urban growth in *SimCity* or virtual families in *The Sims*. Millions of gamers got hooked on the strategy of Sid Meier's *Civilization* games, now used in classrooms to teach world history. The rise of European "resource" board games, like *Settlers of Catan* and *Agricola*, satisfies that same desire to cultivate a thriving community. The takeaway? Creating utopia isn't easy.

The most popular video game, in fact, is a giant sandbox for world building. Launched in Sweden, *Minecraft* has become a global phenomenon. (Try calling a 10-year-old boy to dinner during a *Minecraft* session.) Online players collaborate to construct virtual castles and elaborate edifices that would awe any architect. Millions of young *Minecraft*'ers are learning to work together for a common goal. It's no wonder tech-savvy teachers integrate this co-op "game" into classrooms, too.

There is now a rich subculture of alternative games with a social conscience. Educational games, serious games, health games, newsgames, games for change—these forward-thinking games are to a shoot-em-up like *Call of Duty* what an ecovillage is to suburbia. These games provoke thought and solve problems. They help players make scientific discoveries (*FoldIt*), reflect on economic injustice (*Spent*), address mental illness (*Depression Quest)*, learn Middle East diplomacy (*PeaceMaker*), question military policy (*September 12*), or stay fit (*Zombies, Run!*).

And they are the medium through which our next generation of leaders often thinks about the world.

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Video games appeal to our inner hero. Games lead young players on epic quests, even as their real lives get boxed-in by overanxious guardians. Teens like to play *Grand Theft Auto*, one friend told me, because it's their only chance to explore a city without adult supervision. Video games should remind us of the importance of imaginative free play—a dirty word to type-A parents who fret about kids' "wasting time" instead of burnishing pre-college CVs.

Play, however, is fundamental to psychological development and community building. We dismiss it at our peril. Already, we have banished play from our streets and even our playgrounds, redesigned as danger-free zones by liability lawyers. Then we push our kids into organized sports—the fastest way to vacuum fun from play. (It's happening in video games, too, where "e-sports" offer cash prizes.) Games join disparate individuals into what Bernie De Koven, the guru of the New Games movement in the 1970s, calls "communities of play."

Two summers ago, I witnessed the power of play at Findhorn, in northern Scotland, where a non-competitive board game, called The Transformation Game, complements the ecovillage's spiritual practices. A few hours playing shed more insight on my life and relationships than months of therapy could. Every year or two, Findhorn turns its Universal Hall into a giant board for a multi-day, community-wide "planetary game" played with props and costumes.

I know of no other community that integrates a game so deeply into its social fabric. (Football in Texas doesn't count.) While you can download The Transformation Game's famous Angel Cards as an app, I doubt the designers will launch a version for the Xbox or Playstation. Findhorn remains proof that a community who plays together stays together.

If you worry about the messages in the medium of video games, you should pick up a controller to sort the good from the bad. I did that recently with my seven-year-old son. He watched me play *Journey*, an artfully animated game with a moody Grammy-nominated soundtrack. I navigated a faceless avatar in a flowing robe through desert ruins and dark caverns. The game felt like a metaphor for life—a lonely sojourn towards a distant peak of enlightenment. Via the internet, I was joined by a second player, whose identity, age, and even gender remained shrouded in mystery. We could only communicate through spiraling dance and wordless song. Should I follow this enigmatic figure? Or go my own way?

I couldn't decide. Frustrated with my dithering, my son told me to tag along with the stranger. "Sometimes," he said, "you just have to trust other people."

Out of the mouths of babes. And of games.

Ultimately, I realized, the hard line between our "real world" and our "virtual playground" has blurred—and that's fine. If we want to build better communities, though, we also need to build better games. In the 21st century, the two will likely go hand in hand. ☙

David Leach is a professor in Victoria, B.C., a board member of the International Communal Studies Association, and the author of the (hopefully) forthcoming Who Killed the Kibbutz: Searching for Hope in a Divided Israel. *He is designing an interactive game to accompany the book.*

Original version of The Transformation Game.

Planetary Games played with the Findhorn Communty.

Photos courtesy of Findhorn

Using the Internet, Questioning the Internet: Multigenerational Perspectives on Community, Authenticity, and Cyberspace

By Susan Jennings

The Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions in Yellow Springs, Ohio was founded 74 years ago as Community Service Inc; in 1940 it began the organization that eventually became the Fellowship for Intentional Community. For the last 10 years, Community Solutions' main focus has been to educate people about the necessity to reduce their fossil fuel energy use and CO_2 emissions as a way to mitigate the climate crisis. Much of our research has been on the false technological solutions touted by government and industry, including quantitative critiques of the LEED building system and the electric car.

So the vexing questions of community vs. technology are embedded in our personal and work interests, habits, and output. While all of us working at Community Solutions have been television-less for years, we routinely use the internet to communicate, to source information, and to post our research and writing. We work with the local community on energy projects, but still spend a large part of our time on the internet, oftentimes in conversation among colleagues through blogs and Twitter posts, or learning through alternative news sources. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine a 21st century organization doing without the internet.

We remember what life was like before the web, using card catalogs to find information in libraries and relying on magazines, newspapers, and broadcast news for current analysis. Now there's an almost miraculous amount of information about the planet available instantaneously. It's hard to overestimate the importance the web plays in the spread of information in a time of rapid environmental, political, and economic changes. Photos and commentary about the damage wrought by climate change and the quest for fossil fuels—including the damage from fracking, tar sands, and mountaintop removal—is visible on your desktop if you are tuned in to the right sites. Citizen journalists with smart phones offer an immediate alternative view of current events—and sometimes the only view. The seeker of historical truth can go down rabbit holes of information, unearthing ideas and facts that might have been hidden at another time.

But by its very nature, information technology is a masterful tool of ideological control and manipulation. In the past decades it's been at the forefront of the globalization of culture.

Even a brief survey of recent articles about the internet should give the most avid user pause. From the health impacts of wifi, to copyright and speed issues, to the consolidation of media providers and the ecological impact of information technology, battles over the use and control of the web seem to be just beginning.

How can we navigate these dichotomies? Pat Murphy (75), our Research Director and author of several books, including *Plan C: Community Survival Strategies for Peak Oil and Climate Change*, uses the internet for some of his research. His work involves the accretion of detail and analysis of data—looking at longitudinal trends, especially on the kinds of technologies that have been proposed to deal with energy depletion and climate change. Over the last several years he's followed the hopeful predictions surrounding technologies like biofuels, carbon capture and storage, and the electric car—seeing them peak and then stall. He's also watched the predictions about climate change and how the reality has progressed much more quickly than scientists feared.

Pat says: "None of the stuff about climate is easy to learn. If you're trying to find something on the internet, it takes a long time to find what you want and you have to look at the options and decide what's useful to you. Like with any field, you have to separate the wheat from the chaff and that just comes from hard work. There are billions of documents on the internet and there's no way that a person could ever go through all the urls to judge the quality. So it's very important to develop qualified sources."

Pat has learned to trust some of the data that government sites like the Department of Energy and The Environmental Protection Agency produce and post, but still finds he needs to do his own analysis on the data. He's seen writers and researchers with agendas who will cherry pick

data to show that, for example, solar power or the electric car are going to save us. He also turns to books. "Most of the philosophy or higher perspective on the situation I learn from books. Books are less susceptible to corporate manipulation and control than the internet. They have better quality control, a longer life, and a much higher density of information than magazines or electronic communication. Books are associated with communities of writers, printers, proofreaders, and a host of other people. A good book comes from this kind of human interaction between qualified people."

Besides using the internet for research, we also use social media for communication and for getting the word out on issues that concern us, even though most of us don't use it in our personal lives.

Faith Morgan (65), Media Director, says: "If I weren't in the organization I wouldn't be using Facebook or Twitter and I probably wouldn't be on the internet. I have lots of interests—painting and gardening and interacting with people, folkdancing, reading, building brick ovens—I have so much that I want to do that I would feel it's a waste of time using the internet unless there is specifically something I want to do such as research for my next film."

That leaves it to Julia (21), a junior at neighboring Antioch College and an intern at Community Solutions, to help us with Facebook and Twitter. Julia reads articles and blogs about energy and climate change and abstracts them into paragraphs and sentences for posting. Julia uses the internet for many more activities than the rest of us do.

Julia says: "As a student, I end up in front of a computer for 50-60 hours per week. We need computers for class, homework, and communication with friends and family. It adds up. On top of that—I grew up with the computer. From an early age, I have become accustomed to using it for entertainment, communication, and education. I might go online to research for a project, but I often get distracted—by interesting articles, pictures, conversations on Facebook, pins on Pinterest, facts about other places in the world, house prices in towns I may live in one day, how beehives are built in India, or even researching the ingredients in vegan marshmallows. It is wonderful to have so much information at your fingertips, but at the same time it can be easy to spend too much time on the internet.

"The urge to get on the computer at any boring moment is inevitable. Just check your Facebook real quick! Someone may have messaged you. Go look on Pinterest, you might get an inspiration for this paper you're writing. Whenever I sit at a computer, I have access to a source of personal communication, silly videos, endless information, creative photos, crafty DIY ideas, vegan cupcake recipes—endless entertainment. Sometimes I literally have to turn off my internet accessibility in order to focus when I'm working on homework. As well, I grew up with the internet. It's difficult to imagine how I would get along without it. It is my friend when I feel alone, bored, sad, and distracted. Indeed, I cannot remember a time in my life when the internet was not somehow accessible, except in some of my travels."

It's precisely the amount of material on the screen that is disturbing to Pat: "A move from the original scientific orientation to an advertising orientation is one way the internet has deteriorated. For example, some of the Department of Energy sites are using more of a merchandising approach, using too many graphics—their site is more like an advertising vehicle and it makes it harder to get the information. There's an overlay of social media that gets in my way."

Nowhere is the phrase *the medium is the message* more true than about the internet. The way that information is presented to the viewer can skew their sense of history, and their sense of the relevance of what they are reading. If you weren't aware of the immensity of the issues facing mankind you could spend days clicking through sites without recognizing the realities of climate change. You can get millions of hits on certain topics and still not have any insight into them—it's a reminder that information is not knowledge and knowledge is not wisdom. The web is also all-encompassing and multi-sensory—huge parts of our population suffer attention deficit. People who imbibe media regularly also tend to be more fearful. News and compassion fatigue can lead to a sense of helplessness—there are so many wolves (or terrorists) that readers are unable to discern the real dangers of climate crisis or the fact that they can contribute to its mitigation.

Some of these issues arise from the nature of the medium, but there's a sense that much disinformation is by design rather than by default, a view that has been confirmed a thousand fold over the last few years of revelations from Edward Snowden and others. Twitter feeds designed to take down the Cuban government; Wikipedia articles written or edited to reflect a government's desired view; and studies by Facebook and others trying to manipulate their users' emotions seem to be the tip of an iceberg many

Susan Jennings, Faith Morgan, and Pat Murphy.

Julia Navaro.

Photos courtesy of Susan Jennings

of us who depend on the internet don't want to acknowledge. Yet we've seen information that was previously posted made more difficult to find, or simply disappear. The recent passage of the Right-to-be-Forgotten law means that the revisionist history that's practiced could make the web more Orwellian still.

Faith says: "So much can be made up and posted on the internet. The ability to perpetuate propaganda on people has been intensified. Hold back the facts and send out the propaganda."

Pat adds: "You have to remember that technology is really the province of corporations, particularly mass technology that deals with selling products. We are inundated with a level of advertising that is 10 times that of other countries."

Snowden's revelations remind us that whenever we are connected electronically, others can also connect to us. We've also read of people getting arrested or losing jobs over supposedly private communications via email or social media.

"So much can be made up and posted on the internet. The ability to perpetuate propaganda on people has been intensified. Hold back the facts and send out the propaganda."

Pat says: "The year-old Snowden Affair may be the death blow for the dream. We are also becoming more aware of ubiquitous surveillance cameras, GPS in our phones, and the ability to track our cars. Smart meters, smart smoke alarms, smart thermostats, and smart appliances extend this concept into the home. Car, cell phone, home, and office are now set up for continuous surveillance by governments and giant corporations who provide the technology. Snowden exposed the collusion of internet suppliers.

"It was a great shock to find out that this was done without the consent of the people. It increased my disillusionment with my government. I thought that they were protecting me but it's not true. Gathering up this data is a step toward a totalitarian state."

Have the revelations changed his behavior on the web? "First I understand that everything I search on the internet and everything I say or write through electronic means is recorded. If I want to read anything on Cuba I assume I'm flagged as a suspect but I'm not going to stop searching in hopes that I won't be noticed. Every social activist needs to know now that it will be easy to be picked up; they won't have to search your house. The internet may be the most totalitarian device ever invented as we can be monitored so easily."

It's a concern shared by most of us, but within our families and workplace, there is a generational difference to the concern.

Julia, our intern, says: "The Snowden revelations don't bother me, although they probably should. I remember in third grade learning that if I say certain words, the government would be able to track my conversations. However, I have never known anyone personally to be affected by that, so it's hard for me to imagine that the government is really reading everyone's emails and listening to everyone's phone calls. Perhaps I wrote it off because it just did not feel real to me. It is still a disconcerting thought, and I hope our tax dollars aren't used for things like that."

Our ecological concerns make internet use even more complex. In his essay "Why I am Not Going to Buy a Computer," Wendell Berry noted that he'd "hate to think that my work as a writer could not be done without a direct dependence on strip-mined coal." Pat adds, "the answer to a lot of this is to really understand that what appears to be benevolent technology has multiple downsides to it and we're now seeing that other great benevolent technologies like air conditioning are heating up the planet. All technology has a price to it that can be measured in climate impacts."

So is it time to turn off computer screens the same way we turned off our televisions? It's clear that we need to have boundaries around their use. We recognize that internet research needs to be tempered with other forms of communication with each other and with the world around us. But we also recognize our own role in contributing to the body of knowledge that others can access from the web.

Not only older people but younger ones seem to be pulling away from information technology, and specifically the internet. Although Julia notes that she's heard students say things like "My computer is my life," and "I would die without access to the internet," one third of

Antioch students are not on Facebook and are otherwise moving away from the internet.

Julia says: "When I survey the amount of time I spend doing meaningless, distracting things on Facebook—as much as I love those random Buzzfeed quizzes—I am embarrassed because that time could have been spent reading a good book, meditating, walking in the woods, volunteering on the farm, finally starting a craft project I've been wanting to do, having a nice conversation with a friend, or even napping.

"In many ways I feel the internet greatly impedes me. For one, the internet is a safety net for entertainment and boredom—I am almost never forced to find creative ways to entertain myself. Further, it encourages a constant work day. I feel there is a cultural expectation to always be accessible and able to work. There is an expectation that you will see an email and respond to it promptly and that you will be able to do your homework by tomorrow even if it was assigned that evening. At one time, people were done with their work because the sun set. Now, we can work until the break of dawn if we need to. That capability coupled with my own procrastination results in just that. I have lost balance with the natural rhythms of nature. As I begin to look critically at our society and culture, I'm seeing our inherent separation from nature and the terrible things that have resulted."

Faith says: "I don't get on my computer on the weekend unless if have to. If I have a big project I will be on it researching, I get really involved, otherwise I turn it off on Friday and not back on until Monday. This is disconcerting for people, that they can't reach me by the internet."

Pat adds: "If we think we can substitute face-to-face with tweets, I don't think so. The feedback mechanisms are quite different. It's not good for your mind, like eating bad candy, to take in so much information. People are not changed for the better. Nor can you do any contemplation or deep thinking. Face-to-face opportunities stimulate memories of the environment. There's a great deal of communication in tone, body language, and very powerful conversation."

In fact, it is in community and away from our screens that we often rediscover balance. In our own work community we bounce ideas and information off one another and often come to a more nuanced sense of the truth than we can come to individually. We have also found that, when in other communities where we can't have immediate access to technology, we learn unexpected things.

Faith says: "Last year I was at Twin Oaks, an intentional community of about 100 people. They did not have internet access in every building and you had to be at a land line phone location to use your cell phone. I asked about the restriction. They said that they didn't want their everyday life to be interrupted by phones ringing everywhere and anywhere. It was a little frustrating and very refreshing."

We need to continue to tell stories of the way things are and the way things have been so that the only stories that are told are not through the corporate media's eyes.

Julia says: "Every time I'm away from technology I feel my identity is fuller. Spending time with people, being outdoors, meditating, praying, or making something with my hands all give me so much more life than time on the computer can. My greatest moments of creativity, connection with others, and peace are away from the computer. Yet it is still hard to break away from at times. It can be an easy source of familiarity and comfort, especially in unfamiliar or uncomfortable moments."

In trips to Costa Rica and Cuba, Julia and other travelers had their internet usage curtailed. "In that specific scenario I was at times uncomfortable, not having access to the familiarity of the computer which could easily connect me to my family and friends—but not having it was so very beneficial in the development of our immediate community. We had more conversations, shared more freely with each other, and relied on each other more for comfort and strength in difficult times."

Faith was shocked by the discrepancy between her meeting Cubans face-to-face and a mainstream media-driven sense of reality. In her travels to Cuba, she found that her expectations of a poor uneducated populace were totally overturned when she had conversations with farmers and others whose literacy, sophistication, and openness made her realize: "They're just like us." Her admiration for what the Cubans endured after the fall of the Soviet Union and the United States embargo contrasted with the way Cuba was talked about by George Bush Jr. as part of the "Axis of Evil." Faith says: "The reason I did *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* was because I thought that what Cubans faced and came through was very important for the world to know about." *The Power of Community* has been seen by hundreds of thousands of people in film screenings across the planet and also on the web. Faith is currently working on a sequel about Cuba's Energy Revolution called *Earth Island, Energy and Community.*

Like our film work, our critiques about the futility of finding a techno-fix to solve the planet's climate crisis also are posted on the internet. We are committed to contributing wherever we can to a holistic and fact-based view of the planet and the issues we face as a global people. Just like the alternate news sites that inform and sustain us, we feel it's important to be part of a dialogue about the human future. Abandoning the web to corporate giants is like abandoning agriculture to GMOs.

At the same time, we continue to question the ubiquity of the web and whether its use by others for power and control outweigh its benefits. As our built infrastructure preferences the family car over walking or bicycling or taking trains, so the information superhighway can take us away from books and conversations and storytelling. We know we need to keep other kinds of conversations and communities and knowledge bases alive. We need to make sure we continue to tell stories of the way things are and the way things have been so that the only stories that are told are not through the corporate media's eyes.

Susan Jennings is Executive Director of Community Solutions, PO Box 243, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387, 937-767-2161/866-767-2161, info@communitysolution.org. See www.communitysolution.org.

Technological Musings of an Apocaloptimist

By Paul Brooks

I fell asleep the other day with my hand and head on top of my smart phone. Maybe 15 minutes after I woke up I noticed that I had what looked like a sunburn on the back of my hand. I wondered at first if the Sun had shone in the window onto my hand while I was napping. In the end I decided that this was actually created by my telephone.

I have never had this happen to me before, nor had I even heard of this phenomenon. Now, for me, this was just something that happened—another experiment in the laboratory of life. I know that I have been burned as well by the Sun, and although it's quite proven that the Sun does cause cancer, I don't feel that it is appropriate to raise my flaming sword of justice against it proclaiming that we should abolish the Sun. In the same way, I feel this is no reason to abolish one little smart phone for one little, shall we say, phone burn. Not to mention that there seems to be far more evidence that the Sun causes cancer than there is evidence that our phones do.

It seems to me that the case against technology is generally grounded in the ideas that "I like things simple, the way they used to be" or "I am unfamiliar with that, what if it turns out to be harmful?" One perspective is in the past and the other in the future. I myself take the stance of an observer. "What is here now and how can I direct it to create the change I wish to see in the world?"

I imagine a technological protagonist and a technological antagonist standing on some railroad tracks. One is arguing that technology is going to save humanity, and the other arguing that technology will destroy humanity. All the while a bystander on the sideline is watching a freight train labeled technology roaring down the tracks. The noise of their dispute is so loud that neither hears either the train or the observer's wailing attempt to call out to them, "It doesn't matter who's right or wrong! Get off the tracks!"

EMFs

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there." These words are of course the poetic prose of Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Rumi, and perhaps we are lucky that the field he speaks of is not an electromagnetic one. Whatever the case, it is from this field that I like to approach technology.

I have seen the photos of German soldiers during WWII cooking franks in front of a parabolic dish emitting EMFs. I am not arguing that they are harmless, and at the same time, I find them to be incredibly useful. They unlock cars and pop the trunk with the push of a button. They allow me to have contact with friends and family 24 hours per day. I have the Grand Oracle, Google, in my pocket most of the time thanks to those frequencies. My mom can track me with GPS (Google latitude) wherever I am in the world and see that I'm OK. I can share music and other files with friends via Bluetooth, and the list goes on.

Paul Brooks' burnt hand.

So what do we do about electrosensitivity? I can feel EMFs. I don't label them as evil, I just notice that they can be a nuisance. A rainbow emits seven different visible electromagnetic frequencies that we call colors. I don't label them as good, I just notice how they can inspire joy. Either way works fine for me, as if life were an experiment.

The father of our modern EMF technologies, Michael Faraday, created what we call a Faraday room nearly 200 years ago. An example of this is a microwave oven. In the same way that a microwave oven keeps EMFs inside, we can easily create, with window screen or foil, rooms in our houses that keep the EMFs outside. For a more complex solution, some are redesigning our EMF devices to emit frequencies that resonate in more harmonic Pythagorean sorts of ways with nature (www.biogeometry.ca). Also, If we Google search "emf protection," we find there are many New Age products on the market as well that could be fun to experiment with, just for the fun of the experiment. Faraday himself was asked by an important governmental figure, "Of what use is all this experimenting?" He replied, "Of what use is a newborn baby!?"

Conflict Minerals

Another burdensome piece of the technology puzzle is that of what we call "conflict minerals." Although gold and diamonds are best known for their roles under this heading, tungsten, tin, and tantalum are the minerals associated with electronics, primarily mobile phones. Militant rebel groups most famously in the Congo are using mineral revenues to

fund their murderous regimes.

What can be done to stop this? Should we boycott telephones? Congolese activist Bandi Mbubi says in his TED Talk, "Don't throw away your phones yet, because the incredible irony is that the technology that has placed such unsustainable, devastating demand from the Congo is the same technology that has brought this to our attention." He goes on to explain that "we are faced with a paradox. The mobile phone is an instrument of freedom and an instrument of oppression.... Why should we allow such a wonderful, brilliant, and necessary product to be the cause of unnecessary suffering for human beings?... It is time to demand fair trade phones."

The awareness that we have raised on this issue is moving this vision forward. The Securities and Exchange Commission passed a regulation obligating companies that utilize these conflict minerals to file a report on where and how the materials were acquired. After a June 2, 2014 deadline, over 1000 companies filed their reports. Things like this, and companies like www.fairphone.com, are leading us into a more favorable stance in regards to conflict minerals.

The Community behind the Screen

Many people, it seems, are weary of time spent by young people on their phones and tablets. But when we are on our devices we communicate, learn, teach, or share in other ways. Not only does this seem healthy to me, it also helps organize and promote more face-to-face interaction. It seems that in the past we spent some of our time in community, and some of our time in-between community. Now, in this digital age, if we so choose, we can spend all of our waking hours in community—some of it through a cyber portal, but community nonetheless.

If not from our grandparents or great grandparents, we perhaps learned from Gandhi about what we call appropriate technologies or cottage industries. I have learned rope lashing, basket weaving, roof thatching, and a lot more on my phone. This has given me so much to share and has created valuable exchange and engagement in community functions outside of my phone. I missed a fair amount of community functions in the past, especially birthdays. Now in the age of Facebook, I have no excuse.

Saving Resources

Another issue that comes up in the technology discussion is waste. Despite my sub-poverty-level income and my lack of possessions (pretty much just my phone and my mandolin), the amount of sparkling water bottles and power bar wrappers I consume per year far outweighs my cell phone consumption, and I am sure most can relate in some way.

There are companies however that are taking on the social responsibility of creating less mobile phone waste. Companies such as phonebloks.com/en are helping reduce mobile phone waste by allowing us to upgrade parts of our phone one piece at a time rather than disposing of the entire phone for a whole new one. There are also companies that recycle electronics to retrieve used conflict minerals. These recycling programs are not the most efficient endeavors, albeit they are better than nothing at all.

On another note, my phone actually helps me to reduce my waste and preserve the environment. I have a giant record collection, a huge library, and more movies and videos than I could ever watch, all in my pocket and all made of light! If seven billion people could say the same, what would that do for third world education? How many trees would we save on paper? How many CDs and DVDs would we save from landfills?

Community Resources

I believe most of the planet would have missed out on the Occupy movement if it were not for Facebook, where it started and where it still lives on. (Of what use is the Occupy movement? Of what use is a newborn baby?)

I see an economic revolution happening through technology too. It has been called the sharing economy. The global economy and the local economies are merging together. Any community or individual now has Etsy for cottage industries; Neighborgoods for sharing yOur stuff; Yerdle and Timerepublic for a moneyless economy; Openecology, ubrlocal, and Urban Edibles for food and farming. There are so many new resources being invented all the time, we can only guess at which ones will catch on.

Watching this Main Street, information revolution replace the Wall Street, industrial revolution becomes more beautiful to me every day. Perhaps I'm an apocaloptimist, and although I don't know for sure where it is taking us, the technology train has arrived and I'm on board hoping we can all steer it in the direction that best suits all of us.

P.S. This article was written and submitted from a used open-source smart phone. ☙

Paul Brooks has traveled to dozens of communities of various forms in many countries around the world. His primary interests in intentional communities are social structure, governance, and community economics. He currently lives on Kaua'i, Hawai'i, where he is involved with intentional communities there as well as with a community garden and Kaua'i's Food Forest at WaiKoa Plantation.

Photos courtesy of Paul Brooks

Technology and the Art of Discrimination

By Michelle Wheeler

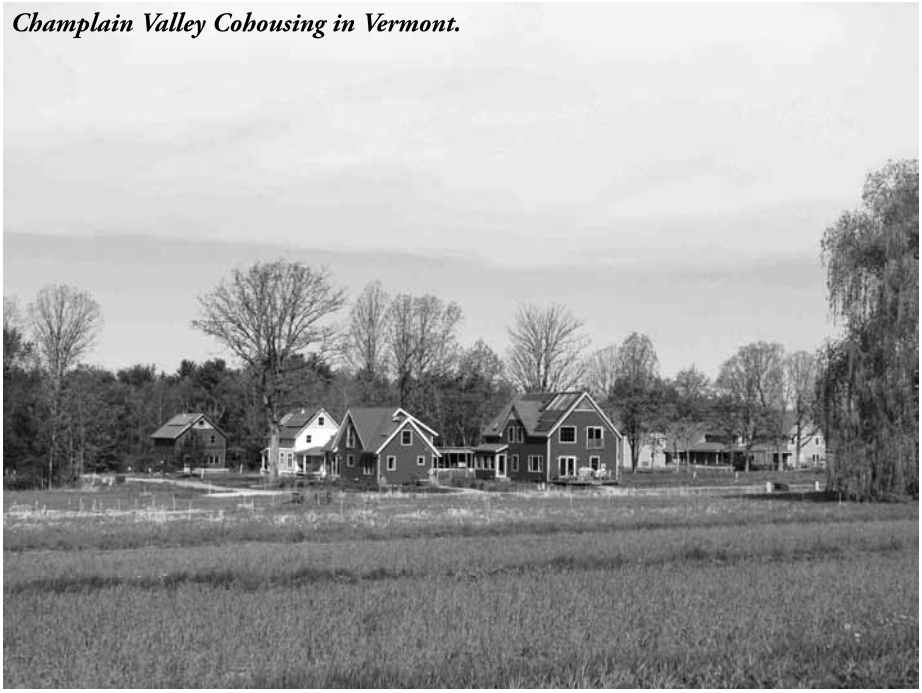
Most of us probably don't make a regular habit of discriminating among our cultural artifacts, stepping out of our own contexts long enough to contemplate the content of our lives, how it came to be, and the ultimate value of it. (Don't we, in fact, call it "crisis" when we do?) The consequences of inheriting a culture usually include succumbing to at least a few unconscious behaviors and harboring at least a few unexamined attitudes. As long as collateral damage isn't too much in our faces, it's easy enough to live on autopilot, becoming addicted to immediate gratification, short-term pleasure, and gain delivered through modern technologies.

I've certainly used industrial products for purely selfish reasons—unnecessary motorized transportation, mindless media entertainment, processed frozen foods shipped from thousands of miles away. I've known what it's like to want so-called efficiency, escape, and convenience, and I've known what it's like to want more of it, sometimes just because I've thought I deserved it, especially after spending 50 weeks a year in high-tech jobs that were less than inspiring. Ironic.

But then sometimes things shift (crisis time) and we have no choice but to stop living unintentionally. It's a ripe time for rationalizing that the overall payoff for using high tech will compensate for any messes we might be leaving behind. For instance, had it not been for the internet and modern communications technology and all the flotsam and jetsam the industry has created to get us to this point, I wouldn't have known about Champlain Valley Cohousing in Vermont, over a thousand miles away from where I made my first call of inquiry in Georgia. Six years later, I am thankful for that bundle of high tech so instrumental in my family's landing in community. Believing our lives now all richer and more balanced, I can tell myself that the computer, the phone, and the network lines were all tools utilized to raise our sights to the potential of cooperative living.

But then we have to know when to stop when we're ahead. We have to know when enough is enough.

Champlain Valley Cohousing in Vermont.



Photos courtesy of www.champlainvalleycohousing.org

Even within our intentional communities, it's still all too easy to go down the slippery slope of convenience and lose sight of original intent and the bigger picture. A recent situation in cohousing comes to mind. A working group met to discuss an upcoming visioning meeting for which we were seeking input from community members. Some had previously suggested using Survey Monkey to distribute the list of items on which we needed feedback (it might have even been me!). Luckily, I grew impatient while others tried to figure out how to use the tool (including determining the costs) and suggested I simply type up the questionnaire and deliver it by hand to each of 17 households. The rest of the working group agreed to my method and the next day I had four lengthy and satisfying face-to-face conversations that never would have happened had I used the higher-tech alternative.

With a seemingly endless supply of toys in the world, what helps me to remember that I relish being able to look into people's eyes, hear the timbre of their voices, and interpret their gestures and expressions on their faces? Who knows, but maybe an invisible energy transfers from their body to mine. Where is the toy that helps me to remember that I don't have to be content by flattened experiences online when the nuances of face-to-face human communication offer so much more?

The beauty of simple pleasures in the film *The Hundred Foot Journey* has been my most recent source of inspiration. In the movie (low budget, hopefully?), an automobile breakdown lands the main family in a little French village in which they decide to stay to open a restaurant. The action quickly shifts from traveling over distances to living locally. Cars give way to bicycles, providing characters more opportunities to actually interact with one another. In the meantime, they are slicing and dicing locally grown vegetables in all their many colors, adding aromatic arrays of spices, and rolling their eyes with pleasure as they taste and savor the flavors of their creations. It all makes me wonder how we so easily allow this kind of richness—good food, good work, good company, beautiful and natural surroundings—to leak out of our lives and communities? I'm thinking the indiscriminate use of tech has a lot to do with it.

Over and over again, we have the classic "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" conundrum. For instance, high tech and boredom. New gadgetry relieves boredom until it doesn't anymore, at which time new gadgetry is sought to relieve the boredom. And then there's high tech and debt, financial and otherwise. Debt too often leads to desperate measures, including adopting industrial solutions that in other circumstances might have been avoided. And what about high tech and the lack of solid foundational community support? If we don't have real places where our gifts as individuals are valued and respected, we all risk becoming more machine-oriented and disconnected from one another.

A constant barrage of newer and better has kept products and services fresh while blinding us to the hidden costs or externalities stemming from our technological embrace.

And so what are we to do?

First of all, we need to bring the concept of appropriate technology to the forefront. Critical masses need to realize that "appropriate" suggests alternatives, which implies the need to hang onto more basic skill sets though they may seem primitive. We have to remember that much high-tech research and development initially addressed extraordinary circumstances. It doesn't mean the rest of us should later adopt consumer versions just because they are marketed to us, often at much higher costs than what just appears on the price tag.

Second, we need to set aside some sacred time for reflection and inspiration, turning into a religious act the practice of being discriminating in our use of technology. Though the sheer pace of modern life makes it hard to break free from unconsciousness, we need to regularly question whether the way we spend our time is balanced and in accordance with our values. (I now understand why traditional churches and religious organizations meet weekly, to remind congregants of their missions in an uplifting hour or more of music and messages to keep the masses moving forward or at least from slipping backward. It pays to be proactive.)

Third, we need to nurture creativity and critical thinking within community. A very practical tradition might be to focus annually on community contingency plans when and if there are breakdowns in high-tech systems, as we did in the small West Virginia town I called home in 1999. Months before the official turn of the century, I joined a small group that gathered regularly to discuss emergency plans for the chaos that might ensue at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. We organized into groups focused on local food supplies, communications channels, healthcare access, and more. We researched alternatives and connected with others whose products and services would be crucial in keeping our town humming. We compiled information and finally held a low-tech fair for the entire community, altering Y2K to mean "Year To Kindle" local relationships. No matter what one's core motivation or driving force—peace of mind, intimacy, empowerment, or just plain fun—it was a winning event for all.

If we really wanted to get serious about community and ecological sustainability, as many intentional communities claim, we might just do as Ben Falk suggests in the title of his essay "When the Ecofads Fade, Ditch the Carbon-Footprint Calculator and Pick up a Shovel." He wrote, "No doubt this movement toward no-VOC paint, ecotourism, green building, CFLs, organic foods, fair-trade goods, low-flow fixtures, hybrid vehicles, and more stringent regulations slowed the rate of cultural- and natural-resource obliteration, but it has not reversed the trend… These progressive consumer and political movements of the late twentieth century failed to change the underlying structure that gave rise to massive human-ecological unsustainability in the first place."[1]

With so many people and places suffering the not-so-pleasant consequences of extractive and laboratory economies, I do feel increasingly guilty as a consumer. Whether I want to think about it or not, my modern American lifestyle has been complicit in environmental atrocities like mountaintop removal, climate change, and water contamination. With industry capitalizing on an increasingly chaotic world and inherent human inclinations to seek

(continued on p. 73)

1. Falk, Ben. "When the Ecofads Fade, Ditch the Carbon-Footprint Calculator and Pick up a Shovel," *Vermont Commons*, Spring 2010, p. 5.

Black Oak Down:

On Chainsaws and Mortality, Denial and Acceptance

By Shepherd Bliss, with photos by Scott Hess

A loud, crashing sound startled my young farmhand Emily Danler awake in the dark of the night. She was camping out in order to start picking berries at sun-up—preferring to sleep among the community of the land, under the stars, rather than inside. My dog barked. After a physically demanding day farming, I slept through it all.

At dawn I looked down the boysenberry field to the bottom of Kokopelli Farm—named after the low-tech wounded healer who walks the ground from village to village. Tears came to my eyes. The tall, old black oak had split down the middle of its deep, wide trunk. I would never again see its crimson leaves announcing Spring.

Though on my neighbor's farm, it anchored my farm. It now lay slit down its center, broken, crashing across the fence. It evoked fear of my own death. Being old myself, 70, I lamented the loss of yet another old creature. I never imagined that I could outlive this grandmother oak. It felt like the loss of a family member from another generation.

"Doesn't everything die," the poet Mary Oliver reminds us in her poem "Summer's Day." She concludes, "Tell me, what are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?" Mourning was my first response, having lost this oak, a vital member of the community within which I dwell. "Heart rot" is what a neighbor diagnosed as the reason for the death.

"It's a fearful thing to love what death can touch," writes another poet.

"Burn, Baby, Burn"

My next response to the fallen oak was to remove it. My anger exploded—"Burn, Baby, Burn." Its death now blocked the path to the wildland at the bottom of Kokopelli Farm. I like to walk down there—alone and sometimes with guests on eco-tours. Oak makes good firewood, so I sent out a notice for free firewood.

Then the artists Scott and Karen Hess, with their six-year-old son Lukas, came to pick up their weekly berries. We walked to the fallen oak; Scott was soon taking photos. "It's beautiful," he said. "I don't think it should be reduced to firewood. It's better to keep this black oak down intact."

"Sonoma County oaks spend a century being born, a century living, and a century dying," Scott quoted a botanist friend.

Lukas climbed to where the trunk had split. Scott took pictures of him, while he used the opening as a playground. Watching them play, my grief began to lessen.

"The way the tree opened is artistic," Assumpta Ortiz said. "It seems more an opening of the heart than a death." This mother added, "When a child is born, it opens a channel inside the mother. Symbolically, the opening of your tree is also the opening of a shell to allow your heart to be expressed."

The first two firewood cutters arrived. My next-door neighbor also showed up. "It makes good habitat for wildlife," she noted. I began to realize that I needed to deal with my grief around a changed reality without further interrupting nature's natural processes. Perhaps the fallen oak, my friend Diana Badger later reflected, "heralds a time of great change for you, a break from the past."

The "chop it up, clean it up" mentality would not honor this fallen oak. I decided against a quick-fix technological "solution" to what I came to see as no longer a "problem."

Chainsaw Culture

I let the firewood-craving men cut a path through the fallen oak with their loud chainsaws and take some wood, leaving most of the fallen oak. Having them here with their chainsaw mentality was difficult—clean it up fast, meet human needs, see nature as merely a resource for people. It felt as if I was back in the military, being assaulted by the loud sounds that gave me Post Traumatic Stress.

The chainsaw culture contrasted with nature's wisdom of living and dying. An addiction to power tools, such as some of my neighbors have, can be to a technology that blinds us to natural processes. In contrast, the oak tree has knowledge that supports natural processes while both alive and dead, now nourishing the smaller oaks around it, letting the sun shine more brightly on them.

Technology can obscure the natural world's nurturance. Speed, expedience, efficiency, and utilitarianism can replace approaches to life that connect us more deeply with each other, ourselves, and the natural world. The "chop it up, clean it up" mentality contrasts with honoring oaks, both in their upright and fallen states. I decided against a quick-fix technological "solution" to what I came to see as no longer a "problem."

My friend in this situation is the fallen oak and my adversary is the chainsaw culture, which can degrade rather than enhance the community of the land. However, I appreciate our appropriate, minimal use of the chainsaw to create a pathway and how its limited, rather than excessive use, can be beneficial.

After the Fall

What was once a straight path into the marsh has now become a crooked way, which humans, quail, and many nocturnal creatures walk, crawl, and even fly through. The slight clearing also makes for a good space for humans, as well as other critters, to camp out. In its fallen state, the oak continues to enhance connection.

"That path and the surrounding limbs leave a legacy for that giant oak," Emily commented. Wildlife has already started visiting and even living in the protective downed oak. Transition Sebastopol's Elder Salon organizer Alexandra Hart described the situation as "the continuing life of a dear old friend...even in its demise."

A few days after the fall, Emily took me on a tour of our fallen ancestor, noting, "Here's one room and another over there. This is a work in progress." She had woven together some of the still flexible branches, which she had done in previous months with the boysenberry vines. "This reminds me of being a kid," added farmer Jan Grumich. "We used to make forts." The old oak has provided a living and play space not only for humans but for wildlife.

"As I walked into the oak tunnel," reported my dog-sitter Pam Sears, "I heard a quail call out. Then I saw him on a branch in the fallen tree. Before I could move my two puppies away from the tunnel, they cavorted into the black oak. Small baby quails suddenly exploded up from ground under the oak onto the higher branches, along with a few grown females. Some of the grownup quail flew away from the tree. But not far. The dogs tried to thrash their way back into the oak, but the oak branches were too thick and tangled."

"The fall of this tree is an addition," noted farmhand Amanda Bloomfield, "not a subtraction. At first it seemed like it would be a big and costly hassle, but now it has become an asset."

The Land as Community

The land on which I have been the only human living for the last two-dozen years has been my primary community. Trees abound, many visible and unseen animals, and the soil itself. I live on the Pacific Flyway, so birds soar, some migrating South seasonally from Canada and then back. Only a thin veil exists between the inside and outside of my redwood writer's cabin.

Karen came back a few days after the fall to harvest lichens to make dyes. She also began harvesting the wasp galls that form on valley oaks, of which we also have many. We informed some mushroom growers, because fresh oak makes good logs from which to sprout mushrooms. They have taken some dead branches in which mushrooms can grow.

This fallen black oak also split previously. Some 10 years ago about quarter of the trunk fell to the ground when it became waterlogged after a winter storm. A plum seed ended up there—perhaps dropped by a bird or squirrel—producing a young tree. Emily climbed up to nourish the plum tree with compost. Now that it will get more sunlight, perhaps it will flourish in the split stump. Life can sprout out of death.

"The fallen oak has become a portal from your farm to the wildland beneath," photographer Scott noted. Indeed. The human habitation and its lifeblood agriculture reside on one side. Then the curvy passage opens to the wild Cunningham Marsh, where a mountain lion, bobcats, badgers, hawks, eagles, coyotes, deer, a rare plant, and other wildlife wander around and prosper.

The medium-sized oaks benefit from the sun that used to shine on their elder-now-ancestor, as they absorb the life-giving light. I become more comfortable with my own mortality.

The once-green leaves become brown within days. I regularly visit the fallen grandmother oak, which once spread many acorns, and plan to observe carefully how it evolves. The medium-sized oaks at its side will benefit from the sun that used to shine on their elder-now-ancestor, as they absorb the life-giving light. Our goal now is to help keep this oak intact, rather than use power tools that destroy its natural destiny. Through this process I become more comfortable with my own mortality. ❧

Shepherd Bliss, 3sb@comcast.net, has operated the Kokopelli Farm for two dozen years in Sebastopol, California, teaches part-time at Dominican University, and has contributed to 24 books. He is one of the organizers of Sebastapol's Village Building Convergence (VBC), modeled after the City Repair efforts in Portland, Oregon; it aims to beautify the town while bringing people into the streets for mural-painting, into places like the Permaculture Skills Center for fireside chats, and into the Grange Hall to hear music.

Scott Hess, scott@scotthessphoto.com, is a commercial and arts photographer based in Petaluma.

Technology on the Path to Reality

Snapshots from the Pre-Post-Digital Age

By Chris Roth

My body is aware, before my mind is, that something essential to me is missing. I have the increasingly loud, nagging sense that I've left something behind. The anxiety rises, along with a constricted, empty feeling in my chest. I want to turn around, retrace my steps, get back whatever it is I've lost. I fear I'll be lost, myself, without it.

I've left my cell phone on my friend Suzanne's table, and now we're speeding away from her house, headed to the ferry off Vashon Island. I realize for sure what's happened once we're on the ferry and I'm able to check my daypack pocket, where I usually keep the phone. I'm about to drive five hours south, and Suzanne herself is leaving the island for a few days. In the best-case scenario, I won't have that phone back for a week. What if I have car trouble on the return trip to Eugene? What about my weekly phone call with my parents, with which I'd planned to break up the drive? What will I do back home at Lost Valley, where I often keep in touch with the co-parents of my community "kids" via phone message or text, especially when a change of clothes, a peanut butter sandwich, or comfort from a biological parent after scary encounters with large dogs or knee-scraping gravel patches is in order?

I lived nearly five decades without a cell phone, and never missed it. Now losing it can bring up feelings for me akin to separating from close friends or family. What happened?

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In reality, after a few minutes, I do adapt to the absence of my cell phone. I actually enjoy feeling more independent, less tethered to the world of instant communications, in which everything can seem urgent and nothing is fast enough. I am happy to trust my car's ability to get me back home, and to not cram in a phone call on the way. I slow down internally to a pace more reminiscent of a long hike in the backcountry than of a sprint in a crowded stadium.

Back home, I am happy to not be answering phone calls about how to place ads in Communities (not my department; I refer them to Christopher Kindig)—and I find that Terra's and River's parents and I manage to communicate just fine, as we did before I regularly kept my cell phone on, through systems of old-fashioned voice signals, animal hoots, and intuition. In the worst case scenario, I need to sniff out the peanut butter (and whether it's an appropriate choice right now) by relying on my own senses. The following week, I almost don't want my cell phone to arrive in the mail—but it does, and I feel the background stress in my life notch up just a little bit. Its absence was instructive.

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More than three decades ago, Suzanne, about 20 others, and I climbed onto a bus to join a traveling experiential-education school, where for nine months we attempted to untether ourselves as much as possible from "Mother Culture." Not only were cell phones unknown to us (or to anyone else at the time), but we were also usually inaccessible by land lines. Ten days or more could pass between encounters with phone booths; our mail pick-up stops ("General Delivery, Homestead, Florida," etc.) occurred every two to four weeks. Our parents would wait for snail-mail letters and occasional phone calls. In the grand scope of history, our communication with our families as we trekked around the country was remarkably frequent and rapid; but by 21st century standards, we were almost as good as lost and unreachable in deep ocean trenches, sometimes for weeks on end.

While our engagement with one another was intense—students and guides typically met and talked as a whole group for several hours every day, in addition to traveling, camping, cooking, hiking, and doing almost everything else together too—we strove also for intense engagement with the natural world and intentional disengagement from technologies that could come between us and it, or us and each other. "Canned" entertainment of all kinds was banned; we entertained ourselves and one another without electronic assistance. This meant that we all learned songs and picked up instruments—many of us for the first time in our lives. We watched no television or movies, and had zero engagement with computers. We spent many hours talking with people directly; many days hiking in the wilderness; many hours on "solos," each in our own spot, directly experiencing the natural world around us, often without mediation of even pen and paper.

We deliberately "did without" and sought experiences that would allow us to explore our relationships with other living beings, with the planet, with the cosmos—rather than solely with the predominantly human-centered, human-created world in which we had been raised, where most choices and experiences were defined and dictated by people. Constant communication with other human beings, constant emphasis on *human* community, constant reliance on tools of comfort and convenience that our species has developed—all of these were seen as interfering with our most primary community, our most important communication, our greatest security and comfort: our connection with Mother Earth.

We learned many things on the bus, but among the most essential were how to slow down, how to be alone (away from not only humans but human artifacts), and the much deeper connections to ourselves, each other, and the earth community that could result from those things.

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As I drive away from Vashon, it isn't just my cell phone I am leaving behind: it is the feeling I've had over the past week, first at our Ecobus reunion and then while staying with Suzanne and her housemate for four days. Over that time, Suzanne and I seemed to rekindle that feeling we had on the bus, when (to paraphrase a book title by the program's founder) "our classroom was wild America." Back in those days, we had time to explore neglected cultures and landscapes, disengage from what society expected of us, contemplate the "underbelly of the beast," seek the truth to be found in listening to the earth as best we could. Saying "no" to the dominant culture and the technologies which facilitated it was necessary to say "yes" to everything else.

And we said a lot of "yes"es. Collectively, we learned hundreds of traditional songs and tunes during our time on the bus; many dozens of those songs were shared and known by all of us. Suzanne learned more songs than perhaps anyone else. Thirty-plus years later, she still remembered them—or was able to recall them after (by her own account) having forgotten their existence for decades. We spent evenings on Vashon singing those songs again, remembering the old days, enjoying the shared bond created by the inarguable "reality" that we'd experienced during our years on the bus. Those unmediated experiences still seemed more present to me than any number of movies I might have watched in the interim; and those songs were still more emotionally potent than any recorded music I'd discovered since then.

My missing cell phone, I realize, is not the source of my distress at all. Rather, I am mourning the loss of that shared reality, re-experienced during my time on Vashon, but now becoming subsumed in the onrush of daily life. My cell phone has become a security blanket, a way to hold onto my identity as I re-enter a world in which I feel more alienated (or at least temporarily re-enter it, as I drive down the highway back to the refuge of my home community).

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The laptop computer on which I am typing this article is a much more significant security blanket for me these days. Because it is, for all intents and purposes, the "editorial office" of this magazine, it's especially important to me, as it allows me to do the work that I feel is part of my calling. After leaving Vashon, it also allows me to keep in touch with Suzanne, at least initially. And it is an important tool for com-

Photos by Chris Roth

munication within my home intentional community. On all three counts, after returning home, I am thankful to be living in the age of high technology. Mostly.

I also notice that the more emotional weight I give to communications via computer, the more distress it is capable of generating in me. Why didn't so-and-so respond to my email? Where is the article that author promised to send me a week ago? Why hasn't Suzanne either emailed or called in weeks, since our initial nostalgic flurry of messages? Why, instead, am I receiving endless petitions about causes I've already signed petitions for? And why do I have a sinking, off-balance feeling every time we in the Lost Valley community lose our internet signal? Why do I feel I so stymied when I can't get online?

And when I do get online, why do I allow myself to get thrown off-kilter by the occasional inflammatory, emotionally-charged, non-NVC (nonviolent-communication)-compliant email sent to the community email list? (I already know the pattern: despite our group living agreements specifying email etiquette, a resident will either not realize their importance in maintaining healthy communication and community dynamics, or not care. When "things don't work out" with someone in the community, the sending of inappropriate emails is often a key element either leading to or foreshadowing that person's departure.)

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Midway through a visit to the midwest later this summer, I leave the internet and cell phone world behind entirely. I enter Stillwaters Sanctuary (the Possibility Alliance's home base in La Plata, Missouri), where community members maintain an environment free of computers, cell phones, and electricity. I am caught up on magazine work, satisfied with the state of my electronic communications with family and friends, and relieved to be taking a vacation from the internet-connected world. I have twinges of apprehension as I power everything down—part of my sense of purpose/identity seems to have become associated with these technologies and how I use them—but I am also excited to simplify, to live more fully in the here and now in a group of people committed to doing the same.

Within a few days, I am so thoroughly comfortable with the less-driven way of life that this disconnection allows that I am convinced I could keep living this way indefinitely, given sufficiently copacetic physical surroundings and a supportive social situation. Come to think of it, I've done that (lived computer- and cell-phone-free, sometimes even grid-electricity-free) for many years of my life; it should come as no surprise that I could do it again. I imagine that it might even feel more fulfilling, at least in the short term, than being on what can seem like an electronic-communications hamster wheel while simultaneously engaging as much as I can in the "real world" as well.

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When I reenter internet and cell phone land, I find that Suzanne called me four days ago, just as soon as I went into radio silence, apologizing for letting emails slip and asking me to call her back as soon as possible. She is now kind of wondering why I haven't responded for four days ("You could have waited at least 10 minutes to call me back!" she jokes when she hears my voice). Three weeks later, I am the one wondering why, in the midst of planning a possible mini-expedition—a joint road trip from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest later this year—she has suddenly stopped responding to cell phone or email, and I haven't heard from her for more than two weeks.

It turns out this time *she* has lost her cell phone—also, like mine, in her house. She has also lost my phone number, which was stored in her cell phone but nowhere else.

Ironically, in attempting to recapture and reinvigorate real-life connections cultivated without these technologies, I've put faith in these technologies, and been let down. Good old-fashioned telepathy seems a lot more reliable.

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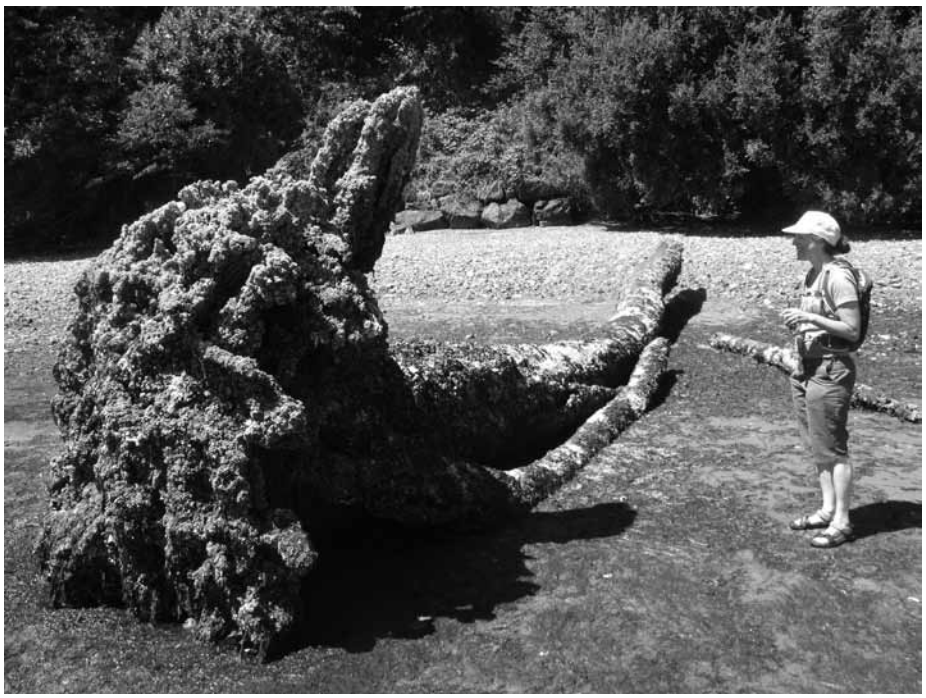
I feel ambivalent, at best, about these technologies. If it were up to me to create any of them—to acquire the materials that go into them, to put them together, to create the infrastructure that supports their use—I would certainly not do it. I know that the creation, distribution, use, and disposal of these devices have significant environmental and social impacts; they're dependent on rare earth metals and resource-intensive global systems. I need to stay in a certain amount of denial in order to feel good about my use of any of them. But in the world as it stands, in my life as it stands, they are tools I feel I need to use; using them, judiciously, seems a better choice for me, at least for now, than not using them.

At the same time, I don't want to feel attached or addicted to them. One thing protecting me against this is the fact that I do get sick of them—after a certain number of hours, I can't be on the computer any longer, or talk on the phone any longer. To restore my own physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual equilibrium, I need to do something else.

Also to my advantage in staying in relative balance with these things is the fact that I've lived without them; I know that the realities that they connect me to generally pale in comparison to the reality that I find in present, tactile life, directly experienced. I can live without computers and their kin; but without the more direct reality that feeds me daily, my soul would wither.



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Where do I find that reality, if not in modern technology?

Among other places, I find it in long runs through the woods, which bring me into occasional random encounters with bears, owls, and even cougars, but more commonly just immerse me into ecological communities of plants and animals, rocks, soil, water, and sky that now seem like family to me.

I find it in unstructured play time with young children in my community, whose sense of adventure, imagination, curiosity, and wonder encourage me to keep my eyes constantly open to what is around me, and to trust the beauty and naturalness of all of our feelings.

I find it in intentional community life, where countless daily interactions help us weave new stories of what groups of people can create together; where conflicts allow us to learn and grow in cooperation; where we each discover how to keep balance between stillness and motion, constancy and change, compassion and "justice," order and productive chaos; and where, if one maintains awareness, there is never a dull moment.

And I find it in personal relationships with friends, family, and others who are also exploring how we can better relate to one another, how we can be authentic and present, how we can strip away the impediments to fully experiencing and appreciating life.

Thankfully, nothing in the list above is computer-dependent.

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Often, "real life" becomes so engaging—or daily activities so involving—that articles like this one, already written in my mind, never make it out of my fingers. I need to discipline myself to disengage, to separate myself—which is what I've done to write this. I'm sitting in a park several miles from my home community, undisturbed by anyone, enjoying a breezy, pleasant, overcast day, visited by myriad birds, surrounded by oak, ash, maple, fir, cedar, with my laptop plugged into the power outlet located conveniently in the middle of the picnic area.

For now, I'm at peace with the world, even as I type into this very manipulated, processed, and rearranged conglomeration of earth elements that came at a cost to both earth and people. I am hoping that I can create some benefit to counterbalance that cost. And ultimately, I also realize that I *can't* know causes and effects, or the ultimate reasons for things—including why I ended up in this park. All I know is that it's beautiful, maybe reason enough in itself for me to tote my laptop here.

Chris Roth edits Communities.

Loving Earth Sanctuary

Two Women's Quest for a Low-Tech Life

By Gloria Wilson

A newly forming community and innovative rural homestead in the hills of California's Central Coast, Loving Earth Sanctuary is based on the principle of "nourishing ourselves in a way that nourishes all life." Members will reside in their own simple dwellings and together work to pursue a life of land-based sustenance, inner growth, and service/sharing with the broader community.

A central tenet of this project is "radical simplicity," the effort to become more independent from fossil fuels, industrial mining, sweatshop labor, and other modern production systems that harm the Earth and people's health—while also cultivating a sense of abundance and contentment with life's simple joys. A rural life of material simplicity is also intended to free up more time for personal spiritual practice (of any faith or background), creative expression, and voluntary service to others in need. The project's two main founders, Gloria and Dori, are excited to build an egalitarian, consensus-based community on the land, and are open to new prospective members interested in this lifestyle.

In the following article, visionary and cofounder Gloria Wilson shares her own journey and reflects on the decision to live mostly free from modern technology.

My partner and I had a natural inclination toward Luddism from the start. We spent our childhoods dreaming about the "old days" of hand pumps, hen houses, and candlelight. While enamored with stories like *Little House on the Prairie* and *Caddy Woodlawn*, we also were motivated by our own sensitivities to modern life. We both recall how, as children, it was tragic for us to watch stars being consumed by street lights or to see a television replace jovial family dinners; we connected the dots early that technological advancements came with costs.

Nevertheless, culture has a way of ensnaring even the best-intentioned budding visionaries. In spite of our childhood fantasies, it didn't take long before we relied on computers and the internet for networking, information, creative outlet, and to some degree entertainment. Although we hadn't yet met each other, our ideas about technology were evolving on a parallel track. What had begun as hardcore "Amish" sensibility was now morphing into a more conventional reliance on modern gadgets. Although still aware of the detriments posed by industrial life, we found momentary solace in the neo-environmentalists' solution for a greener future: solar panels.

At 15 I moved with my family onto 40 remote acres in the hills, where we put up a yurt and, after a year of mostly electricity-free living, set up a photovoltaic system. Living off-grid in a rural setting, I came into young adulthood optimistic about solar and other high-tech solutions to the myriad of current problems spiraling about my awareness. Convinced that solar provided the only realistic answer to climate change and peak oil, as well as a viable form of resistance to violence in the Middle East, I was able to reconcile my new-found love of internet chat forums and indie movies with my desire for world harmony.

It was, however, a tenuous relationship. On quiet nights in the crevices of time, when cricket sounds oozed through window screens, when I felt whole and complete simply being, I sometimes wondered

if I really needed the modern world at all. I contemplated the losses: the mental fluster I felt from an overload of information, and the time spent in a virtual reality rather than the vibrant world around me.

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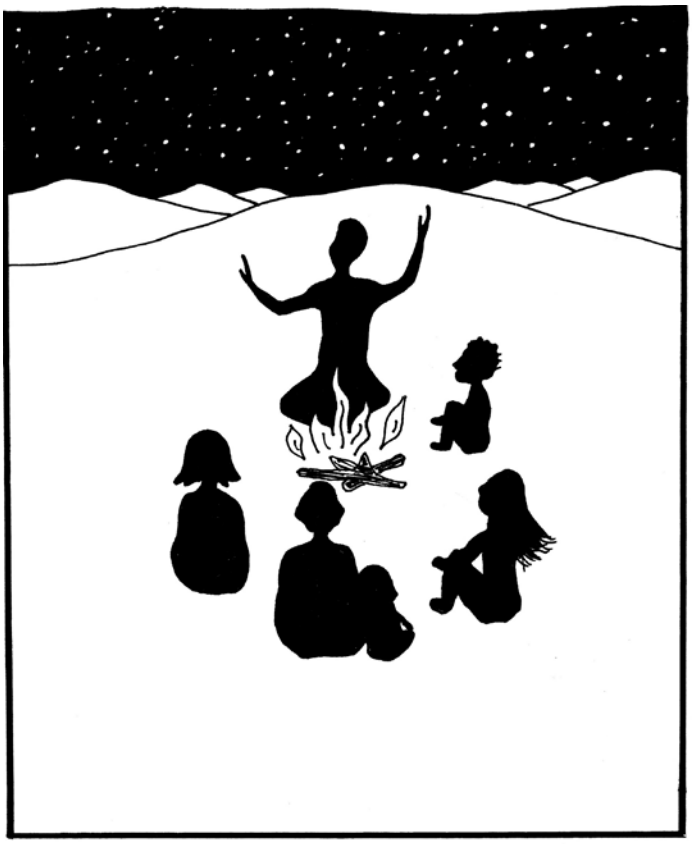
While I spent balmy nights in the hills writing poetry by candlelight, my future lifemate was going on a journey. After graduating college with a degree in International Agriculture, she went in search of sustainable alternatives to the American Dream. Based on experiences at small farms across the continent, Dori was reaching the conclusion that small-scale local sustenance was one of the most effective means of resisting violence, whether in the form of sweatshop oppression, warfare, or environmental devastation.

But it wasn't until visiting Stillwaters Sanctuary (a project of the Possibility Alliance) in northeast Missouri that she began to question more deeply the role of technology in society and in her own future. Greatly influenced by Ethan and Sarah's commitment to a petroleum- and electricity-free sanctuary, she discovered that independence from computers, electric lights, power machinery, and all the modern appliances we take for granted was not only possible but also deeply gratifying.

At Stillwaters, Dori learned that even solar panels take a toll on the planet, from the mining of raw materials and routine dumping of toxic sludge, to the discarded batteries that store solar energy. She also learned about high cancer rates among computer factory workers, and how the mining of coltan (a component in nearly all electronics) is contributing to regional wars and environmental destruction in Central Africa.

This information was hard for Dori to confront. As a passionate writer, her relationship with computers was a strong one. Not only did the computer serve as an artistic medium, but she also relied on it as a tool for communicating important messages to a world in need of change. Like myself, she had come to believe that the benefits of using such technologies could outweigh the costs.

But after a seven-month internship at Stillwaters, Dori emerged



Illustrations by Dori Stone

with a different perspective. She'd witnessed a community of people living a beautiful, abundant, deeply meaningful life without using any electronics at all. Dori returned home to the Central Coast of California with a vision for founding a similar project in the region where she'd grown up. It was here, after over 20 years of living in the same circle of progressive local artists and activists, that our paths finally crossed.

By this point, I had started thinking seriously about living in a self-sufficient intentional community. Inspired by Gary Snyder's *The Four Changes*, I began to envision a self-sustaining village model for human life on planet Earth. I was already aligned with Dori in her effort to cease consumption of fossil fuels, but it wasn't until hearing about her experience at Stillwaters that I began to question my own views on "green technology." We discussed the impacts of solar panels and computers, from the depletion of rare earth metals to the hazardous e-waste resulting from planned obsolescence (products designed to break down and be replaced).

Ultimately, as much as we both appreciate the value of high technology for art and activism, we had to confront the fact that the "green tech revolution" is just another guise of the industrial revolution, a sly mask for the same oppressive system. Together we reached a shared conclusion that creating a life as free as reasonably possible from electricity is essential to our pursuit of a gentler life—one that not only enriches ourselves but nourishes the health of the planet and other people.

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We know what our ideal looks like: using only materials we can acquire ourselves sustainably from the land where we live, harvested by our own hands. We feel that any system in which resources are extracted in far-off places or assembled by laborers obscured

behind factory walls is too vulnerable to corruption to be preferred over localized production, where we can truly know what we live on.

You may be wondering what I mean by "as free as *reasonably possible*." The truth is, we aren't sure yet ourselves. Having recently bought land (with the help of generous collaborators/supporters John Powell and Aron Heintz) in the Santa Lucia Mountains of coastal California and now on the verge of building community, we've been asking ourselves this very question: What exceptions to the low-tech ideal (if any) are reasonable, appropriate, or necessary for our lives?

Like our friends at Stillwaters, we face unique challenges posed by our land and local region. The criteria for affordable property, near our families and without strict building code enforcement, meant that any land we found would also have certain drawbacks. Our 40 acre parcel is beautiful, off-grid, and has usable wells, but unfortunately is located 35 miles from the nearest substantial town (Paso Robles) and 13 miles from the tiny community of Lockwood.

This presents a transportation conundrum. My parents and brother live up the road and carpool to Paso Robles five days a week for work. Although Dori and I use bicycles and public buses for getting around town, we've been hitching a ride there and back with my family about once per week. (With the exception of this trip between Paso Robles and our land, Dori is basically "car-free" and abstains from riding in personal vehicles, and I only accept rides when the driver is traveling to a particular destination already and has extra space in the car.) It burdens our hearts to be dependent on anybody's ongoing expenditure of fossil fuels, so we're actively considering alternatives. How can we engage with people in the nearest sizable population center, where many of our close family members and friends live, while also staying true to our deepest values?

Determined to try, we recently attempted a bike trip to Paso Robles from our land. The typical car route is 35 miles and takes an hour, but we've deemed that road too dangerous for cycling, so we took the longer but safer 52-mile route. After more than half a day pedaling over rugged terrain and country roads, we stopped 10 miles short of our destination due to a flat tire and intense summer heat. Although it was a fun adventure, we realized that bicycling as our sole form of transportation between the land and town (even just once per week) may not be realistic on an ongoing basis, especially when we consider long-term knee health and other factors in the equation.

This left us to contemplate more creative options. We've pondered the idea of riding to Paso Robles on motorized bicycles fueled by our own homebrew ethanol. We also could pedal from the land to Lockwood in just under two hours and catch a bus there. (Of course we're aware that public buses do run on fossil fuels, and this weighs on our consciences. However, we still consider public transit an acceptable "transition technology" during the shift to more sustainable and localized communities. In spite of its drawbacks, we believe that public transit could reduce modern society's ecological footprint substantially if utilized by more people.) We're also considering a team of mules to carry us to the rural community hall six miles away, and for picking up visitors in a mule-driven cart from the bus stop in Lockwood. One way or another, we're committed to be creative and adapt our lifestyle as necessary in order to live in a rural place with minimal reliance on gasoline or personal vehicles.

Another drawback of our region is the aridity. With no summer rainfall, the only way to establish fruit trees or grow warm season crops is by pumping groundwater for irrigation. Our property's main well already had an electric pump (to be powered by a generator), which we've reluctantly used a couple times for our initial work to restore and clean the well. This summer, we plan to build and install a simple hand-pump and windmill, in order to obtain water with no further use of fossil fuels. We're also eager to set up rain catchment barrels for the roofs of our house and barn.

An additional challenge of our location is that it's completely

off-grid, which means no phone lines. (The folks at Stillwaters, although virtually electricity-free, still use a basic land line telephone.) Like our friends in Missouri, we feel that a telephone is a reasonable exception—in lieu of a computer—for coordinating logistics, connecting with others, and getting help in emergencies. Unfortunately, we don't have the option of a land line on our property, so we've resorted to a cell phone instead. We plan to build a cob phone booth with a small salvaged solar panel (and no batteries) to charge the community's phone during daylight hours.

Our phone calls are already kept in moderation by the steep hike to our call-spot, the only area on the land with phone reception, which helps keep the rest of Loving Earth a true sanctuary where people can remain present in their surroundings without the distraction of text messages or ringtones. While owning a high-tech, factory-made cell phone doesn't sit well with us, it's the best way we can think of at the moment to meet our needs for safety and for staying in touch with the broader world.

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Despite the obstacles I've mentioned, the land is full of blessings. Every day I am joyfully reminded of the popular permaculture saying, "the problem is the solution." The fiery heat of the sun cooks our food in a homemade cardboard box solar oven. We've also been utilizing the waste of modern society by cooking on a fuel-efficient rocket stove made from salvaged aluminum cans, which can quickly boil a pot of water by using just a few sticks. Areas of dense brush on our land provide a source of rocket stove fuel, plant medicine, and good fodder for honeybees and native pollinators.

Our rural isolation has also allowed us to develop a more intimate relationship with the land. Recently somebody on the bus advised us to get a TV, unable to fathom how we could be content living "in the boonies" without one. We explained that our land is so rich in beauty it isn't necessary. At dusk we rush to the ridge to catch our favorite evening show—the sun flaming as it sets in a swirl of pinks and amber over the mountain tops. And every night we lie beneath the cinema of the night sky, fading into sleep amidst meteor showers and moonlight.

Yet even in this place of pristine natural beauty, the struggle to define our relationship with modern technology is an ever-present reality. It's a challenge each of us must face, exploring our values and setting our own boundaries. Throughout history the adoption of technology has happened without much thinking; new innovations merely get absorbed into a culture for the convenience they allow in daily life. I believe it's the responsibility of all thinking and compassionate human beings to question the ways we convenience ourselves, deeply considering the costs and benefits each new tool presents.

We live in a time when the benefits are far more discussed and championed than the costs, especially when it comes to "green technology" like electric cars or solar panels. A culture that forgets to watch its own progression is like an elephant with a bag tied over its head, bound to be a force of destruction, not by ill-will but by ignorance. This is what gives me courage to engage in the ongoing struggle for a better way. Like a salmon pushing against the weight of its stream, this struggle is one for life, a struggle we make for future generations. ❧

Gloria Wilson is a philosophy student, writer, naturalist, and cofounder of Loving Earth Sanctuary. To get in touch or request further information, please call 805-235-5547 or write to PO Box 2813, Paso Robles, California 93447.

Kindista:
Technology for Living More Freely

By Benjamin Crandall

Today I gave a tent to someone I don't already know. That in itself is somewhat unremarkable. People give away free stuff all the time on Craigslist, Freecycle, or on the side of the street.

But this gift tells a story about using technology to build community. My friend Lal gave me the tent to offer up on Kindista, an online gift economy network that I helped create. I fixed the broken zippers and posted it as an offer on Kindista. Within a day, six people had requested to receive it. I logged onto Kindista and drafted a group message to everyone who had replied. I asked if someone would be willing to be the caretaker for the tent. They would keep it and use it whenever they wanted. But I requested that they leave it posted on Kindista to lend out to others as they saw fit. That way it could serve everyone who replied instead of just one person.

I ended up giving it to Belle, a young lady I had seen posting somewhat frequently. I looked at her Kindista profile and saw that we have a number of mutual connections who would probably vouch for her if I took the time to contact them. I could also see that she had already shared with someone I knew. Turns out Belle was going to be WWOOFing in California and Hawaii during the winter, a time when the tent was unlikely to get much use in cold and rainy Oregon. She was deeply grateful for the tent and happy to lend it out upon her return to Eugene in a few months.

As with most Kindista transactions, I received nothing material in return. But the appreciation I experienced from Belle felt far more valuable. She also posted a deeply touching statement of gratitude on Kindista; an indication to others that she has received from the community and that I have given. The gratitude shows up on my Kindista profile, so others can see my contributions to the community when deciding to share with me in turn.

Gift economy is nothing new, of course—quite the contrary. Before money, most of the economy was gift. Communities were small. Everyone knew each other's contributions to the whole and shared their abilities and resources freely. Cooperation, not competition, was the norm.

Eventually society grew to the point where people wanted to exchange resources with people they didn't already know. Money was created to facilitate these exchanges. Over time, money came to dominate our economy to the point that we forgot how to share freely with each other.

But now, with the internet, we can have the best of both worlds. Kindista enables people to share freely with those they already know and trust. And its social reputation system enables trust between people who don't already know each other.

The tent example gives a taste of what is possible when we bring gift economy online. Tools and equipment can be shared by whole neighborhoods instead of everyone having to own everything themselves.

But Kindista isn't just for sharing tools. Kindista means "one who practices kindness"; and kindness takes many forms. In addition to lending out my wheelbarrow and ladder, I also use it to offer T'ai Chi and meditation classes, saxophone lessons, computer programming mentorship, help with natural building projects, and a variety of household goods I no longer need.

Kindista is also great for group collaboration. I recently used its event calendar to schedule a work party to spread earthen plaster on the walls of the wooden yurt my partner and I are building in our back yard. It also has group accounts for intentional communities, businesses, neighborhood organizations, and faith communities. Group accounts enable their members to see what is available from each other, what is needed, and the sharing that is happening between them. Groups can also use Kindista to share with other groups. In time group

accounts could even be used to coordinate supply chains so that, for example, solar panels could be manufactured, transported, and installed on rooftops by a variety of groups of people, all coordinated through reputation.

Speaking of collaboration, all the preexisting software we used—the operating system, programming language, the webserver and mailserver—is open source. Decades of work and countless hours spent by thousands of programmers went into the software we built upon. And it was all given freely, for the benefit of all.

In the same vein, Kindista is open source and run as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. We will never have advertisements or sell data; it will always serve the interests of its users first. Although we do need monetary gifts now to grow, Kindista has been given as a gift. We've spent thousands of hours on it and no one has made any money from it.

I do hope that my work on Kindista will eventually support my basic needs, monetarily or otherwise. But it is my devotion to a vision of what I see as possible, along with the gratitude I receive for my contributions, that sustains my work.

Although Kindista prohibits barter and commercial transactions, gift relationships naturally encourage a desire for reciprocation. Tara, another Kindista member in my neighborhood, has been keeping our house stocked with kombucha. And I am happy to lend my car out to her when she needs it; not out of any sense of obligation, but because I appreciate what she gives me and my community.

If anything, Kindista encourages more time interacting with people, face to face, in the real world where gifts are actually given.

I know many folks are apprehensive about adding yet another website into the routine of their lives. But Kindista isn't designed to be a time suck. I go on Kindista when I need something or I have something to offer. Then I post gratitude after I have received something; usually just a quick note of thanks from my smart phone.

If anything, Kindista encourages more time interacting with people, face to face, in the real world where gifts are actually given. And many times these interactions happen between people who don't already know each other. With each positive interaction, trust is built. And that trust is the fabric that weaves true community.

Kindista is still pretty new. Unless you live in Eugene, Oregon, you may be the first one to sign up in your community. If so, no worries, it's pretty easy to get a network going where you live. Just post what you can offer, request what you want, invite your friends, and spread the word to groups you are a part of. Let it come up naturally in conversations and in no time you'll have access to a wealth of latent resources hidden within your community.

No technology, Kindista included, will save humanity from itself. Humanity must evolve, and that comes down to each of us. If we can become inspired enough to see that change is possible, then we can apply technology intelligently towards the changes we wish to see in the world.

We can move from an economy of debt, obligation, and entitlement to trust, appreciation, and giving from the heart. A global culture of sharing is within our reach; let's work together and we can all live more freely!

Benjamin Crandall is a computer programmer, social entrepreneur, community organizer, musician, and martial artist. He founded CommonGoods Network, an Oregon 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and co-authored Kindista, an online gift economy network (kindista.org). He lives in Eugene, Oregon, with his partner Christine.

Social Media or Social Isolation? Or is there a third way?

By Devon Bonady

I remember the first time I felt a strong aversion to the computer communication hype. It was the mid-1990s and I had just arrived at college. Each and every student was required to have a computer. To me, this seemed completely unnecessary. To most everyone else, it seemed to be completely normal. I had never been a particular fan of computers, having drafted all of my work in high school on paper and note cards, avoiding the computer until the final product. I certainly did not want to be encumbered with my own computer. And these things were big—a huge monitor, a keyboard, and a computer box that I could hardly lift by myself.

Besides the uncomfortable feelings of owning a computer, I felt socially awkward; I was a teenager just starting out on my own, thousands of miles from home. On top of this, I now had to adjust to an entirely new form of communication: a campus-wide email system called Blitz, on which the college prided itself. Not only did every student have it installed on their computer, but each building had empty computers sitting out, ready for any of us to step right up and check our Blitzmail as often as possible. This was how students, professors, and administration communicated. For some, it became an obsession.

I was most flabbergasted by the realization that our phone never rang. Instead, my roommate and I would sit at opposite ends of the room, staring at screens, our heads turning to attention whenever we heard the beep sound that alerted us to a new message. It seemed to me that more laughter was directed at some words on the screen than at a joke between us. I was disappointed, missing phone calls and tea houses. And yet, as a young person desperately wanting to find friends and community, I joined into Blitzmail. I must admit it was nice to avoid some awkward teenage moments by sending email. Luckily, I soon found great friends who preferred, like me, to spend the weekend hiking and camping in the forest, telling stories and singing around a campfire, instead of staring at a screen.

Today, many of the behaviors I mentioned above may seem very familiar to Communities readers. Social media and other communication technologies are extremely popular with people of many ages throughout the world. I continue to feel conflicted about the choice to use communication technology, and at times I have chosen to avoid email and social media, and then again chosen to participate. It is often a choice between connection or isolation.

After graduation, I donated my computer to a community service project and was computer-free once again. I was happy to spend all of my time learning to farm, hiking in the forest, moving across the country, and getting to know people through conversation. In my youthful idealism, I imagined that I would never again choose to rely on a computer.

Thanks to intentional community, I sailed through the next five years with very little computer use. In the shared houses and communities in which I lived, in-person interpersonal communication was a high priority. We chose to live together for social interaction and we did not need to be in touch with people far away as much. I struggled to keep in touch with friends who stopped replying to my paper letters and chose to become e-pals instead. It was easier to knock on someone's door than to get a hold of a long-distance friend. I certainly did not need computers and email to maintain a rich social life.

This began to change for me when, in the mid-2000s, I decided to start a business. Family, friends, and business coaches tried to convince me, a self-proclaimed Luddite of sorts, that I needed a laptop to succeed in my business. I hoped to avoid it, but I also wanted to succeed. Suddenly I was faced with the reality of marketing, which had begun its journey to email and websites. I argued with myself that I did not need a website for my local-only business, but a friend made me one anyhow, and so I posted only a logo and phone number. I thrived with word-of-mouth and in-person marketing. I appreciated the benefits I gained from minimal email and internet use for the five years I stayed in business, and was happy to have kept it

to a minimum. That said, like Pandora's box, once it's opened, it's hard to stay away from the email inbox, especially when people begin to expect it of you.

After these years in business, I made a shift to graduate school. That's when computer technology and social media hit me hard. Ten years out of college and suddenly everyone did everything with computers, email, and the internet. I felt angry and old to observe college students watching YouTube videos during a class lecture. I felt conflicted about grading papers on the computer. By this point, everyone had a cell phone, except me. I recall a conversation I had with a student who told me, "If you don't have a cell phone, you don't have a social life." College students rarely plan ahead; they simply call their friends and get together in the moment. If they can't call you, you're out. Luckily for me, I went home every evening to my husband and neighbors with whom I socialized when I wasn't grading papers. Even so, the student's comment struck me, and reminded me of the ways in which I had begun experiencing social isolation.

I did not have a cell phone, and I still don't (these days, not having one seems like an act of rebellion). I chose not to engage in Facebook or any other social media. Call me old-fashioned but I really just wanted to walk to my neighbors' house to chat or call my friend and invite her to dinner.

The choice between using social media or feeling social isolation has most recently become more poignant for me. My best friends and neighbors moved far away, and so now I cannot just stop by and visit them, but must call or email them. One way I can keep up with their busy lives is by reading their blog. As a mother of a young child, I do not spend as much time going to social events and large gatherings. Where word of mouth was once my main avenue for news about social events, I must now work harder to get my information directly from friends, or choose to subscribe to email lists and Facebook invitations.

My land-based community is sparsely populated right now and I have seriously considered using some social media again. As a mother, I have difficulty making phone calls while my son, attached to my hip, is wailing to hold the phone. I have discovered that modern mothers communicate via text, email, and Facebook on smart phones and when their kids are sleeping. Yet, I am still fighting this choice, choosing to avoid email and keep computers out of my daily life. Sometimes, it means that I lose out on connecting with others at a time when I am desperate for connection, feeling isolated as a new parent living in a rural place. That's when I consider making a different choice. I will never get a cell phone, but what about doing Facebook occasionally to learn about events that I am invited to? I appreciate more opportunity to connect with others through email, but using a computer doesn't fulfill my need for human connection. I want to lead a rich social life that eliminates the computer altogether. Living in community has been the best way for me to continuously choose a third option: not social media, not social isolation, but close-up personal community connection.

Often I pine for the old days and the old ways, and I'm not even 40 years old. I simply hold in-person connection moments as precious: the scent of my grandma's perfume as she tells me stories of her life, the smell of warm bread at a birthday dinner, a funny story shared with a gleam in the eye, and the warmth of a good hug. These moments are what I live for. It may be true that, thanks to technology, we can now have it all if we choose—both hugs from our neighbors and live chats with people in Asia—but I want to focus on quality, not quantity. I'll keep choosing in-person community first. ❧

Not *Devon Bonady.*

Devon Bonady lives with her family in a cabin in the treetops of the Oregon forest. She is thankful to Communities *for sending her a magazine four times a year that she can sit and read on her couch.*

The Virtues of Off-Line Communication

By Sam Katz

I can't count how many times I've asked the question, "What is my community trying to be?" As my experiences in college pointed out, the tenor of a community and its platforms (how people communicate) affects who can speak, and who is willing to listen. Let me tell you a little bit about myself and technology in my community, about an experiment I conducted in my community to do only in-person contact, and why I think that technology is an imperfect social mirror and is ultimately dangerous.

I myself am not a Luddite. I help with the technology necessary to keep my community online, including the internet amenity and the website. I help maintain my community's website, which automates meal signups, has an automated event calendar, etc. This is a virtual bulletin board, if you will, for the community. Not everybody uses it. They don't see the need, and now, after my experiment, neither do I.

When I took an anthropology course, they talked about going "native"—spending quality time with unfamiliar people and getting to know them. The problem with Facebook is that neither of those things can happen, and it is destroying my involvement with both my friends from afar and my community. I think Skype may be the exception to this rule, but let's do an experiment. I decided for the purposes of this column that I would only communicate with my intentional community in person.

I noticed that I talked longer with people than I intended, and that I was generally well-received. I talked to Oscar about sustainability and solar road panels. When I went to ask our treasurer what the meeting agenda was, I ended up talking about yoga. When people were rushing out the door, they were still fascinated, but it wasn't the right time to be chatting about educational pedagogy, and what made a good but hard class vs. an impossible one. One of my neighbors said that the face-to-face contact was "wonderful" and made the issue easier to resolve.

All of these were good conversations, and good discoveries. So: in-person conversations tended to be deeper and longer than email, they were not possible when people were rushing, and people were genuinely interested in what I was thinking about.

My conclusion is that when we enter intentional community, we have a sacred obligation to nurture it, to get to know our friends. If we do this, then when we fall on hard times or joy, we will be happy to celebrate, mourn, or simply cry with the best of them.

I have to credit Laird Schaub, a friend of a family relative, for making the observation that I, the author of this piece, have low contextual sensitivity. This is an idea further made popular by Ritchie Davidson in his book *The Emotional Life of the Brain*. I am a thinker. I am a reader. Facebook, though, has low emotional intelligence. When green dots are in charge of telling you whether it's OK to talk to someone... sometimes it's actually not, no matter what the color of the dot. The other person doesn't know when I'm tired, or when I'm leaving a delighted comment rather than a surly one. I can't pick up on the contextual cues either.

I must tell my readers one more thing: I figured out how to archive both my Facebook and my Gmail data, and to then obliterate it. People are people. But computers? Mark Zuckerberg said that he was going to create a messaging system that never forgot a single conversation. Gmail wants to make it so that you never delete a single email. Maybe I'm not actually socially disabled; maybe, instead, Mark Zuckerberg's version of the world where every conversation and email thread can be recalled is dangerous for our social fabric, especially in community, but also in our broader lives.

Sam Katz is a member of Arboretum Cohousing in Madison, Wisconsin. Sam majored in sociology, was awakened to the need for sustainability, loves consensus process, meditation, yoga nidra, and helping others. For Sam's "day job" he helps people with their IT solutions, both in web development and in computer networking, with a little intuitive sauce on the side.

Technology in Service of Community

By Lindsay Hagamen and Walt Patrick

In the world of intentional communities, Windward has taken some paths that are different from the norm, and our relationship to technology serves as a good example. From the beginning, we've embraced technology as a way to fund the community through the creation of value.[1] But we've also been mindful of the principle "Technology in service of community, not community in service of technology" as a guide to how to use technology without letting technology use us.

When Windward was founded more than three decades ago, gasoline was 53 cents a gallon; today a gallon of gas costs about four dollars. We've come to see this trend in energy costs as an existential threat for communities like Windward that are located in deep country. We believe that developing technology capable of providing for our core physical needs is an essential part of ensuring Windward's capacity to survive and thrive in the future. As a result, the transformation of low-value materials into value-added products has become the central theme woven into the role that technology plays in the fabric of our community.

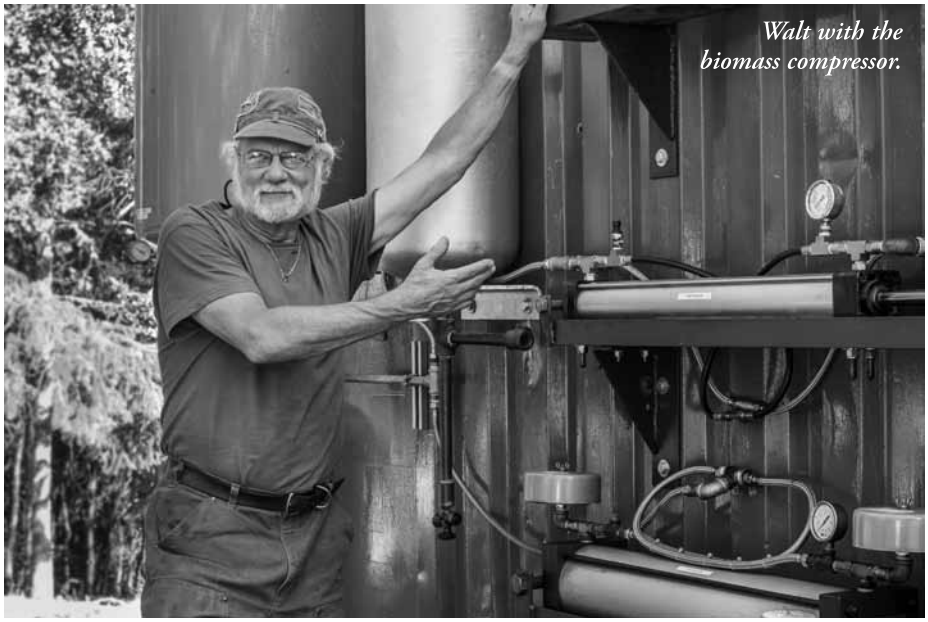
Windward's Relationship to Technology

We've come to see sustainable community as something that happens at the intersection of a set of carefully balanced systems. In order to keep that delicate equilibrium in play, we've learned how to weave a suite of technologies into our community's financial and life-support systems. Over the years, we've integrated key forms of social technology into Windward's culture, concepts such as representative consensus[2], freedom of conscience[3], and polyamory[4]. In a similar way, we embrace biological technology in our work growing gardens, raising animals, and stewarding the forest.

The Biomass-2-Methanol[5] process ("B2M" for short) lies at the heart of the community-scale energy technology we're developing. We believe that the on-site conversion of biomass into energy is a rural community's most credible route to achieving a high degree of energy sovereignty.

We've come to see energy sovereignty as a first level community priority for multiple reasons:

- Energy sovereignty protects us from rising energy costs as fossil fuels become more scarce and expensive;
- Access to energy ensures our ability to produce value-added products so that we have things to sell other than our labor;
- On-site fuel production gives us a competitive advantage in getting our products to market and something valuable to trade with our neighbors;
- A solar-based energy system will help shield us from corporate-driven fluctuations in the global economy;
- Developing a local, renewable energy technology manifests our commitment to being responsible stewards of Earth and tribe; and
- Producing our own energy will lessen our complicity in resource wars and economic imperialism.



Walt with the biomass compressor.

To elaborate on that last point, we see energy independence as a matter of both ethics and economics. Windward grew out

of the anti-war protests of the 1970s and still embodies a deep desire to avoid being complicit in the resource wars that plague humanity today. For far too long, humanity has been digging coal from the bottom of its grave. We want to be part of creating a future in which energy comes from collecting the rays of the sun[6], not from mining down into the heart of the Earth.

We live in a rural county that produces large amounts of renewable energy[7], and our local power cooperative currently sells us the energy we need to power our washing machine for about a dime a load. Motivated by our long-term quest for energy independence, we take them up on the offer so that for now we can focus on developing the technology that will expand and strengthen our economic foundation.

Windward's Technological Lineage

Windward is no stranger to technology. In the 1980s we operated a foundry in southern Nevada where we transformed metal parts from junked cars into new products. In a sense, we were avid recyclers long before it became fashionable. We have a long-standing tradition of repurposing discarded resources, and it's a calling that we take great pride in. While our work here in south-central Washington State now-a-days revolves around technologies such as permaculture and sylviculture[8], we've learned how to operate our own sawmill, make bricks from our soil, use six different types of welders to maintain our heavy equipment, mix concrete for our buildings, and lots of other useful things. Essentially, we've learned how to use the technologies that best serve our vision and goals. In the process, we've found that most every project we get involved with brings with it an opportunity to expand our technological skill set, and each accomplishment builds our willingness to take on ever greater challenges.

For Windward, the concept of integrating appropriate technology into community life goes way back. Our community drew its initial vision from Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress.*[9] In turn, Heinlein drew from Upton Sinclair's EPIC Project and John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida Community[10]. Both Sinclair and Noyes were able to fuse cooperative association and technological enterprises in ways that have informed our effort to build on what worked for them. We proudly follow the path they blazed, paying close attention to what they did because it can be fairly argued that their successes created their greatest problems.

Too great a focus on technology—making it a priority over community—can lead to organizational collapse when political and economic conditions change.

We're especially sensitive to the adverse impact that too great a focus on technology can have on a community. Pioneers such as Nancy and Jack Todd of The New Alchemy Institute[11] developed technologies that materially advanced the sustainable community tool set. Others such as Anna Edey of Solviva[12] demonstrated how sustainable food systems can open up profitable new markets in challenging climates. Yet perhaps the most important lesson their experiences drive home for us is how putting technology ahead of community can lead to organizational collapse when political and economic conditions change.

Biomass to Methanol: Growing a Sustainable Future

The role that energy plays in community was summed up quite well by E. F. Schumacher: "It is impossible to overemphasize its centrality. It might be said that energy is for the mechani-

Ruben converts a dead tree into lumber.

Claire preparing wool using a cyclocarder.

Photos courtesy of Walt Patrick

Ruben with a battery box made from a freezer.

cal world what consciousness is for the human world: If energy fails, everything fails."

The historical record shows that the crash of even one core system will threaten a community's survival, something which is especially true for its energy system. The landscape of the American West is littered with ghost towns that once prospered but then crashed when they exhausted some key non-renewable resource. As the age of cheap fossil fuels draws to a close, we believe that developing energy independence is a challenge that communities of all sorts must face.[13]

To ensure that Windward has the ability to meet its future energy needs, we are working through the challenges of converting the dilute energy stored in woody biomass into the concentrated fuels that a rural community like Windward uses and currently needs to buy. Throughout this research and development phase, we are committed to using open-source concepts to show others how to do the same. Each Earth Day, it's become a Windward community tradition to haul some biomass gasification equipment into Portland, Oregon, to show that there really is a homegrown alternative to relying on fossil fuels for energy, and to describe why our research is important to those who live in the city too.[14]

The first step of the B2M process takes advantage of the natural alchemy of photosynthesis: we use self-replicating solar collectors (a.k.a. trees) to capture sunshine, rain, and carbon dioxide in the form of woody biomass. We then process that biomass into wood chips which are versatile, compact, and easy to store.

The next steps are more involved. Gasification of woody biomass produces a fuel called wood gas[15] which can function as a replacement for natural gas and can be used to power our homes and tools. It's fairly straightforward to use wood gas to generate electricity and hot water that are used in the community. However, the subsequent transformation of wood gas into liquid fuels capable of operating cars, trucks, and tractors is more technologically challenging. So we're busy researching and building a prototype for the next step: converting wood gas into fuels that are more concentrated, portable, and biologically safe. Each type of liquid fuel has its pros and cons, but our studies indicate that the production of methanol as a replacement for gasoline[16] is the safest way to fuel community vehicles.

Describing the physical chemistry involved in the B2M process is beyond the scope of this essay.[17] However, this technology will enable Windward, and other communities like it, to produce its own vehicular fuel for community use and barter. The technology is also capable of generating other fuels such as dimethyl ether which can replace the propane and diesel that rural communities currently have to buy.

The B2M process is closely tied to forest stewardship. A forest is a living entity, and liv-

ing closely with nature drives home the point that living things die. Each spring some trees die when they lose their grip on the saturated soil and blow over. Each winter some trees are killed when freezing rain snaps even full grown trees in half. Some trees die because of insect damage or from disease, and some of that material needs to be selectively cleared out in order to protect the forest's health. Responsible stewardship for our dry-land forest, or for forests that have fire as a natural part of the ecological cycle, also generates a substantial amount of woody biomass as low hanging branches are removed to minimize fire danger, and young trees are thinned out to encourage healthy tree density.

Removing the surplus biomass minimizes the fuel load and reduces the likelihood of a catastrophic forest fire. Instead of just piling it up and burning it, as many do, we're choosing to convert this forest fire hazard into wood gas and other more concentrated fuels that can be used to serve the visions and goals of the community.

Scale and Scope of B2M Technology

The sustainable production of methanol is an ambitious project, but fortunately, we're able to build on time-tested technology.[18] Indeed, little of the work we're doing involves inventing new technology, since gasification of coal was understood and widely used more than a century ago. Back then, most cities used gasification to convert coal into the gas that lit their street lights and cooked their food. Gasification was abandoned when a tsunami of petroleum swamped the world's energy systems, but with the rising cost of oil, gasification is poised to make a comeback. Much of the work that needs to be done now involves figuring out how to use woody biomass instead of coal, and then how to scale down and automate the production of methanol.

Gasification was abandoned when a tsunami of petroleum swamped the world's energy systems, but with the rising cost of oil, gasification is poised to make a comeback.

Still, it's a matter of scale. The gasification of woody biomass is limited[19] in ways that prevent it from being expanded into some desperate mega-system in order to replace oil in hopes of keeping the industrial-consumer complex going a bit longer. We're happy that B2M is a local-scale technology that's inherently limited to keeping an intentional community's lights on, its homes warm, and its goods moving to market.

Another benefit is that good stewardship results in a healthy forest that produces lots of biomass. That enables increased methanol production as a reward for good stewardship. Modern logging practices involve cutting down and hauling away whole trees including the vital micronutrients bound up in the wood.[20] That practice effectively strip mines the forest of the minerals trees need to live. On-site gasification retains those minerals on-site in the form of wood ash, a potent fertilizer[21] that is then returned to the forest to support new growth.

People who live in the city are impacted by the state of rural economies too. For example, rural people who abandon their land and move to the city because they can no longer afford the costs of rural life end up competing for jobs, housing, and all the other resources that support city life. Urban life is further impacted because life in the city depends on the resources produced by people living out on the front lines of land stewardship. B2M allows rural people to be the start of the fuel supply chain, instead of being stuck at the tail end—transforming the state of rural economies.

For city people to prosper, rural people need to be able to continue living with the land and sending food, fuel, and fiber into the city. Without country-grown food, the city starves. Without the fuels country people supply, the city goes dark. Without the watersheds rural people protect, the city's water becomes unfit to drink.

We are aiming to address these concerns by creating a localized village-scale energy system that can be replicated in service of rural communities around the world. Lots of people want to go back to the land, but are stymied by the challenge of figuring out how to meet their core needs. We're working to lower that barrier in anticipation of the day when solitary consumerism necessarily gives way to a new generation of intentional communities.

B2M is being developed as a well documented, open-source technology that can be copied wherever people have biomass to utilize—whether it's in the form of rice hulls or beetle-killed trees, logging waste or water hyacinths. Gasification is a process that separates the nutrients derived from the atmosphere[22] from the nutrients derived from the

Andrew with his home-built seed ball maker.

land[23] so that the former can be converted into fuel and the latter can be returned to support the next cycle of growth.

An Invitation to Support the Research

It's fine with us that this technology is not suitable for commercial exploitation.[24] We're not in this for the money—what we want is a reliable way to be able to meet our energy needs without doing harm. So rather than pursue government grants or bring in venture capitalists, we've embraced open-source funding. This path enables Windward's True Fans to accelerate our open-source research by providing recurring donations of as little as $10/month. We liken this funding approach to drip irrigation in that the money comes in at a steady rate, funds that we can use to purchase the parts needed to build the prototype. If you find the work we're doing to be worthwhile and you would enjoy having a front-row seat as it unfolds, we invite you to become a True Fan.[25]

In closing, we want to emphasize that technology is not a substitute for sound communitarian principles and sustainable ecological practices. Indeed, we see love, affection, and commitment as the qualities most essential to building a working model of what we think of as Love Based Living. But we also understand that it's much easier to manifest those qualities in a community that's well-lit and comfortable. We know that the future will not be simple; serious challenges lie ahead. But we also know that a hot bath, clean clothes, and a warm bed will help us face that future with deeper compassion, greater persistence—and more joy.

Claire getting firewood ready for winter.

Lindsay Hagamen is the President of the Windward Foundation and spends her time caring for the land and the people who tend to the land. Lindsay teaches permaculture and social permaculture in the Pacific Northwest and is a co-editor of an upcoming book on Ecosexuality. She is also the co-creator of the the EcoSex Convergence, an annual event that builds community around loving the Earth and one another (www.ecosexconvergence.org).

Walt Patrick is a founder of the Windward community with more than 30 years of full-time involvement in studying and creating intentional community. Since stepping down as Windward's lead director in 2011, Walt has focused on ensuring the community's long-term energy security through the conversion of woody biomass into the heat, power, and fuel a sustainable community needs in order to thrive (www.biomass2methanol.org).

1. Instead of striving to make money, our experience is that our long-term security is better served by focusing on ways to create value.
2. Representative consensus is a system of governance in which the members choose a committee that then develops a working consensus. For more details, see Windward's By-Laws at www.windward.org/windward/bylaws.htm.
3. The spiritual path which each member follows is a personal matter; nature is the only "higher authority" the community recognizes.
4. Many, but not all of our members practice polyamory, the practice of loving more than one person.
5. For detailed information, see www.biomass2methanol.org.
6. Using natural collectors such as trees instead of industrial products such as photovoltaic panels.
7. Deeply rural Klickitat County, home to 20,000 people, draws hydroelectric power from the Columbia River, has a string of wind turbines 26 miles long, and generates 27 Megawatts of power from its state-of-the-art landfill. Currently one third of the county's tax base is comprised of giant wind turbines.
8. "The cultivation of forest trees for timber or other purposes." (www.thefreedictionary.com/sylviculture)
9. End Poverty In California; see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_Poverty_in_California_movement.
10. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneida_Community.
11. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Alchemy_Institute.
12. See www.solviva.com.
13. White's Law, one of the core concepts of human ecology, tells us that, other factors remaining constant, culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year is increased.
14. See www.biomass2methanol.org/earthday2014.htm.
15. Wood gas contains carbon monoxide and hydrogen; natural gas contains methane.
16. Methanol contains 60 percent as much energy as gasoline, so more is required to go the same distance.
17 For loads of technical details, see www.biomass2methanol.org.
18. During World War II, more than a million vehicles ran on wood gas.
19 The energy density of woody biomass is so low that the energy required to transport it any notable distance exceeds the net energy in the biomass.
20. The mineral content of wood runs around four percent by dry weight.
21. Prior to the development of fossil-fuel based fertilizers, wood ash was the primary fertilizer available.
22. Carbon, Oxygen, and Hydrogen.
23. Magnesium, Calcium, Potassium, Phosphorus, Sulfur, Nitrogen, Boron, Copper, Iron, Manganese, Molybdenum, and Zinc.
24. Woody biomass lacks the energy density needed to justify the cost of long distance transport.
25. See www.biomass2methanol.org/support01.htm.

Life with the Solar Kitchen

By Frederick Weihe

A few years ago, we prepared ourselves for a radical experiment in energy sovereignty here in the Tamera Solar Village (Portugal). We had everything we needed to take our Solar Kitchen off-grid. With a group of people committed to live from food prepared only by a combination of solar thermal, biogas, and human labor, we entered into a period of discussion and communitarian decision-making—and all the nerves and excitement that accompany such a revolutionary step.

When there was nothing left but to go for it, we took a deep breath and...it was easy. In fact, it's hard now to remember what the fuss was all about, and the "experiment" never stopped. The Solar Kitchen is open to the elements and doesn't operate during the rainy winter season, but otherwise it is now simply one of our community kitchens, preparing food for up to 50 people every day. When people think of the Solar Kitchen today, they think of the tasty vegan food; the quirky, charming chef; the airy and comfortable seating areas for meals and gatherings. Guests in Tamera love to join the cooking team, not for a chance at the noble suffering of low-tech food-prep, but because the Solar Village is a nice place to be. The Scheffler mirror and biogas systems are beautiful, easy-to-use technologies with personalities.

These technologies are a success in our decentralized energy research. They *work*, and not only in the technical sense. As I'll describe, they support human beings living in cooperation with one another and with the cycles and rhythms of nature. These tools are firmly established in the life of the community, and they bring joy.

One of my jobs every day is to collect organic material to feed the biogas system....and already this puts me into contact with the logic of nature, in which nothing is wasted. What might otherwise be "trash"—kitchen scraps, leftovers, garden cuttings—have become valuable resources, wanted for the animals, for compost piles, and for our biogas system. I see, first hand, how this challenges the *buying, using, then throwing away* system of consumerism, and turns it into a flowing, regenerative cycle that supports the garden, the community, and the environment.

This job also brings me in contact with the other kitchens in Tamera, from which we get a lot of the raw materials for "Hulda" (the name of our biogas digester). I visit the large Campus Kitchen a few times a week, with its changing team of community members and guests. The biogas-food containers are well-labeled but look a lot like trash-cans; I am constantly reminded—when I find cigarette butts and plastic wrappers in with the precious, energy-rich organic material—how deeply entrenched are the unconscious behaviors of disposable consumerism. The biogas system and I are educators, inviting people to participate in building a culture in which we take responsibility for everything we produce and consume...a world of closed natural cycles; a world without bottomless, throw-it-away-and-forget-it dumpsters; a society without hidden landfills on the edge of town full of toxic waste.

Jessica the cook, at work in Tamera's Solar Kitchen.

The Solar Kitchen interacts in a deep and dynamic way with the cooks and their helpers, too. New cooks typically think of the menu first, and then try to figure out how to make it. Often this is possible: thanks to the big mirror and Hulda, hot stoves are available almost all the time. But the Scheffler and the biogas do encourage some adjustment of styles; what ends up on the tables depends on the weather, the time of day, and Hulda's feeding schedule and changing gas levels. Some cooks experience this as a limitation; for others—for example our main "kitchen chief" Jessica—it is a part of the natural rhythm of life, like the seasons that bring different fruits and vegetables from the garden.

These are some of the reasons why the Scheffler mirror and the biogas system are such success stories in our research: not merely because they work well on the technological level, but because they fit into a more holistic picture, of sustainable community life in cooperation with nature. In fact, they don't only fit this new picture; they encourage and create it. They don't just let people feel ecologically righteous; they help people feel happy. They represent, for me, a step towards a kind of spiritual ergonomics, of which engineering and efficiency are only a part.

Our work includes the engineering and efficiency too, but that work can be done anywhere. Here we have a functioning

community with a commitment to peace and sustainability: we can experience how the technology fits into our daily lives, in a meaningful human, ecological, and political context. We see and experience how people use the tools, and then we can go back to the lab and workshop to make refinements. The result is relevant for communities throughout the world. What we learn about these relationships between people, community, and technology can further inform our active research in other technologies, such as Stirling motors, heat-energy storage, innovative solar collectors, and resilient systems combining these different elements. Other groups are doing good and important work, but few are doing *this* work, of developing community technology in community.

By the way, I don't use the word *spiritual* lightly. For our aboriginal ancestors, it would have been natural for human-built objects to be inhabited by unseen beings, in the same way spirits lived in trees, stones, and streams. But the ancient creators of wells and fireplaces, hearths and spring houses, gardens and stone circles, would not have acknowledged the distinction between technology and art, between doctors and shamans. I don't know if I believe in nature-spirits literally; what's important to me is the idea that objects made by clever human hands remain part of the natural world, fully in the flow of the cosmos. The fashioning of tools would not have been labeled or compartmentalized as "technology," but was rather a natural community activity. The ancient Celtic builders of Stonehenge—with all its marvels of stone-moving and astronomical precision—would not have been called astronomers or masons, but *druids*. Or probably just *people*.

This spiritual question is often with me, but I have to confess that the answers are still a long way away. I cannot claim to sense an invisible presence in the Scheffler mirror, the way I feel such a presence in a grandfather oak, or at our Oracle Spring pool. With its living, gurgling bio-mimicry, Hulda comes closer for some people; they sense it as alive. For my part, I can say that the question remains as a compass point, a question to walk with: How can we overcome the separation between human beings and the things they make? Sometimes I think we need to create rituals of inauguration, as our ancestors would have done, but I have a hard time really picturing what these would be. We are so deeply conditioned by industrial culture—in which people make tools to exploit nature—that it's hard to imagine how anything else would feel. Technology has become so fundamentally violent that sometimes I have real doubts about my profession.

My goal as a technologist is not to extract energy or exploit resources, but rather to intelligently and gently participate in the natural flows of energies, to serve life and my community.

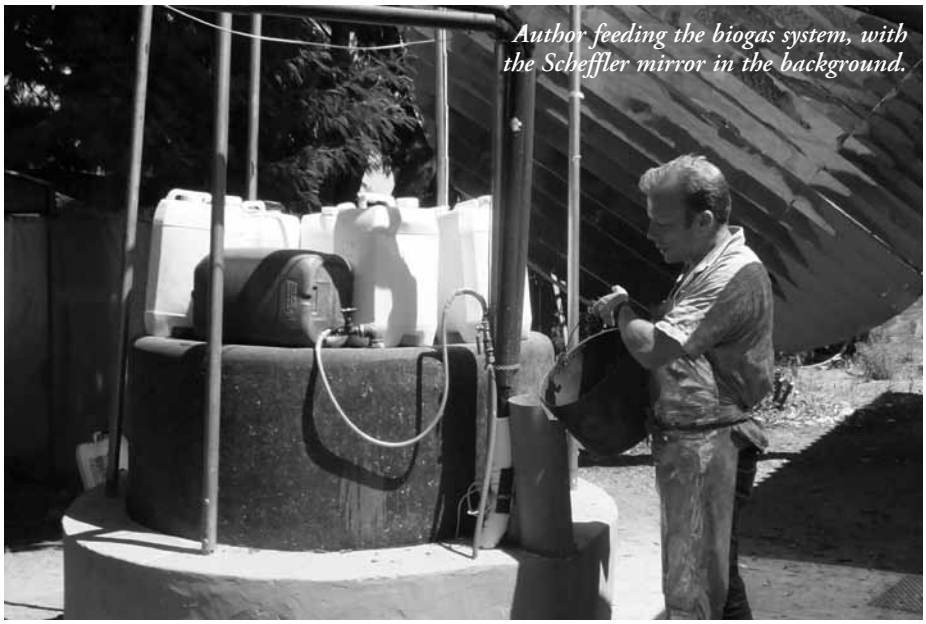
But there are positive role-models: gardeners for example, and more specifically the Permaculturists, who do not exploit living systems but instead cooperate with them, in a way that makes those systems more alive and abundant while better serving human needs. My goal as a technologist is therefore not to extract energy or exploit resources, but rather to intelligently and gently participate in the natural flows of energies, to serve life and my community. We can and do talk about the kilowatts per square meter of sunshine, the UV resistance of fluoropolymers, how to get the hydrogen sulfide out of the biogas, and so on, but these discussions can lead to real, sustainable solutions only if we get the human and spiritual basics right.

To put it another way: technology carries information. All technologies, and the ways we use them, emerge from specific beliefs and narratives. Unless the tools and techniques are

(continued on p. 75)

Collaborators and Resources

Much of the technology used in Tamera has been developed in collaboration with cooperation partners. For more information about the Tamera Solar Village, please visit www.tamera.org/project-groups/autonomy-technology. For details about the Scheffler Mirror, see www.tamera.org/project-groups/autonomy-technology/scheffler-reflector, and visit the innovators behind it at Solar Bruecke: www.solare-bruecke.org. For more about our biogas system, see www.tamera.org/project-groups/autonomy-technology/biogas. For even more information about biogas as an energy solution for communities around the world, visit T. H. Culhane at www.solarcities.blogspot.com.



Author feeding the biogas system, with the Scheffler mirror in the background.

Photos courtesy of Frederick Weihe

Tiny Houses as Appropriate Technology

By Mary Murphy

The tiny house movement has been growing exponentially in recent years, both in communitarian circles and beyond. In an age of ballooning real estate prices, building a tiny home can seem like the only achievable path to home ownership for many people, especially for those who choose a livelihood outside the conventionally profitable professions.

In June of 2013 I moved into my own tiny house, which I had designed and built entirely myself using many recycled components. It cost me around $5,000 to build and the footprint of the house fits on a 72-square foot trailer that I can tow with a medium-sized pickup truck. The house has very simple systems (greywater, humanure, no electrical wiring) and I've lived in it in two different locations: one with electricity and one that is off the grid. In this article I intend to explore tiny houses as a form of appropriate technology, whether you live on or off the grid.

What Is a Tiny House?

First, let's define the term "tiny house." Usage varies throughout the movement, but in this article, let's say a tiny house is a house built on a wheeled trailer that conforms to the maximum trailer sizes that govern shipping containers and RVs. In the United States that means it must be no more than 8 feet wide, 13.5 feet tall, and typical lengths are 16, 18, and 20 feet. A classic tiny house would be 8x16 feet with a sleeping loft, giving it a footprint of 128 square feet.

My own tiny house is 5.5x13 feet, with a footprint of 72 square feet, with no loft. I built it so small for reasons of economy: the cheap (but small) trailer from Craigslist is what enabled me to afford the project. Many of the observations I make here will also apply to other forms of small housing, whether they are on wheels or not.

The reason so many tiny house dwellers build their houses on trailers is not just mobility, it is also a legal loophole: most towns have zoning that includes a "minimum dwelling size" which is much larger than some people need or want, and building codes requiring broad hallways, wide doorways, and a host of other details that make it difficult to design a small space that works well. By putting the house on a trailer, you are suddenly governed by RV laws instead, which stipulate a maximum trailer size rather than a minimum. Also, in many cases you will not have to pay property tax on the tiny house, since it is not attached to a foundation. The property tax loophole can be very appealing to intentional communities that want to add housing capacity without increasing their tax burden. Some municipalities have zoning that outlaws parking an RV or tiny house in your yard, so check with the authorities before you start building.

Tiny houses are customized to the needs of their owners, sidestepping the waste of installing conventional systems just to meet building codes.

The primary reason that I consider tiny houses a form of appropriate technology is that they are customized to the needs of their owners, sidestepping the waste of installing conventional systems just to meet building codes. Most tiny houses are owner-built, and even if the owner uses purchased blueprints, they inevitably customize the interior to meet their unique set of needs. Those needs can differ vastly depending on what other facilities are available at the tiny house site. Tiny houses are a perfect fit for communities that share bathing facilities, a laundry, and perhaps a kitchen: the smaller dwellings can

Photos courtesy of Mary Murphy

be outfitted with fewer utilities and those needs can usually be met more efficiently by sharing the necessary systems with the community as a whole. For my own tiny house site, I rent a spot at a small organic farm. The other dwellings on the farm are two yurts.

Let's take a look at some of the systems tiny houses can have, and the range of choices available. Each person can customize their house with the systems that are important for their particular needs.

Tiny House Systems: Electricity

Some tiny houses are hooked up with full wiring for grid-tied AC power (or take the less technical option and run an extension cord in through a window). Others have a solar system for the whole house, while still others just charge a few batteries to run small lights and simple electronics. Needs will vary depending on whether the occupant(s) work at home or in another building, whether they like to stay up late or go to bed with the sun, whether they have medical needs that require reliable electricity, and a host of other factors. It is fairly easy to start with a simple system and upgrade over time, as funds become available or needs increase.

My own tiny house used to have extension-cord power, but in my fabulous new

mountain-view site my house is off the grid. I light my little house with candles and super-efficient battery-powered LED lights. I charge my smart phone and computer in a nearby barn or in my car as I'm driving. This winter I'll need more indoor computer time to work on my business, so I'm researching small battery packs that can run a laptop (the Goal Zero Yeti 400 looks promising).

Telecommunications

Telecommunications are an important part of most of our lives these days. Since I'm running a small wilderness business from my home, these connections aren't optional for me. At a past site I ran both phone and ethernet wires from a nearby building into my tiny house, but at the current site cellular service was my only option. A smart phone gives me reliable phone and email access in my little home.

Heating and Cooling

I enjoy long cold winters in my home state of Vermont, and a serious consideration when building a house is "How much is it going to cost to heat all this space every year?" In hot climates, cooling costs can be just as significant. My house was built to be lightweight so it wouldn't exceed the weight limit of the single-axle trailer on which it sits. My R-10 foamboard insulation isn't made of sustainable materials and doesn't offer a top notch insulation factor, but the small 72-square-foot size makes the house extremely efficient to heat nonetheless. In its first winter I heated it with an electric space heater I got at a thrift store for $15, and even in an unusually frigid January my heating energy bill was only $80/month.

This year I am upgrading to a super-efficient, clean burning micro-woodstove (a technological improvement which is costing me over $3,000) that will allow me to use a local and renewable fuel source. I will sleep better knowing that my heating dollars are going to a local sustainable logger instead of fueling the perpetual conflicts in the Middle East. It's also great to know that, in a pinch, I could gather all the fuel I needed in my own backyard. Wood costs about $200 per cord around here, and the two cords I'm purchasing this fall should last me through this winter and much of the next. Also, I've built my house to be able to freeze when I go away for more than a day (it has no water pipes), so I don't have to heat it when I'm traveling, which saves even more fuel.

On a grumpy day when living this efficiently can seem like a sacrifice, the beauty still speaks to my heart and makes the decision to live small feel worth it.

Water

Water is a basic need, and we need to have enough for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and bathing. Some tiny houses are hooked up to a pressurized water supply and contain on-demand hot water heaters that provide hot showers and warm water for cleaning. However, insulating the intake and outflow pipes well enough so that they don't freeze is a big challenge in cold climates when you don't have a foundation. Since it would require buried lines and a super-insulated (and possibly heated) water line between the buried pipe and the

house floor, it isn't a good option for tiny houses that may be moved frequently.

My own system is super-simple: a $30 five-gallon water container sits above my tiny bar sink. I fill it up at the pump in the farm's greenhouse and haul it up the hill about twice a week to use for washing dishes and general cleaning. The bar sink drains into a two-gallon bucket greywater container (free food service waste). Since I use only very small amounts of biodegradable soap in my sink, I can safely empty this bucket in the high grass near my home. In the summer I use a solar shower, and in the winter I'll shower occasionally at a friend's house or at the day-shelter in town. I do laundry at the laundromat. For drinking and cooking water, I keep several BPA-free water bottles filled up and at the ready.

Cooking and Food Storage

Heating and cooling food can take a lot of energy in a typical house. Some folks choose to install a small fridge, but then they must provide the electricity to run it. I avoid the electrical needs of a refrigerator by cooling my food in a large cooler (I re-freeze my ice packs in the farm's large meat

freezer). I cook on a small burner that runs on denatured alcohol (theoretically a renewable fuel, although I'm told that current ethanol practices are agriculturally unsustainable). In the winter, my new micro-woodstove offers a second cooking burner.

Transportation

Transportation costs hinge on the location of one's home, and tiny house dwellers have the option to relocate their house as their transportation needs change. When used as an "urban infill" housing strategy, tiny houses can offer an affordable place to live in neighborhoods that are well served by public transportation systems. When tiny houses are sited in intentional communities, the option for car-sharing or even just occasional carpooling with fellow community members helps reduce the carbon footprint of rural living.

My tiny house is nine miles from Montpelier, Vermont, where I can do almost all of my errands in one compact town. Gas is one of my biggest housing-related expenses, but since I primarily work from home running my on-site wilderness skills business, I don't have to commute every day. Once my business grows enough to support leaving my supplemental job, I will be able to reduce trips to town a lot more.

Limiting "Stuff"

Another impact we have on energy use involves how much "stuff" we consume. Manufacturing, shipping, and displaying commercial goods takes a huge amount of resources. Most tiny house dwellers find that living in a small space encourages them to consider carefully before making a purchase. After all, there's not much room, so buying another possession often means letting go of an older one. This helps prevent habitual engagement with the consumer economy, and limits purchases to things we truly need and want to have in our lives.

I'll admit that not all my possessions fit in 72 square feet, so I rent a room in a barn down the road to store most of the outdoor gear that I use in my wilderness business and a few of my personal possessions. Nonetheless, I pass by many potential purchases every month purely out of the knowledge that I don't have the space for them!

Inspiration and Beauty

Finally, I believe that truly sustainable forms of technology not only conserve resources, they also inspire us. Our dutiful awareness of the need for resource conservation fuels some of our lifestyle decisions, but the excitement of beauty and empowerment can prove to be a much more sustainable motivation for lifestyle change. In my experience people love tiny houses because they are beautiful expressions of their owner's aesthetic and values. Many people take the time to make their tiny houses beautiful, and the small size amplifies the effect of their efforts by drawing the eye to all the thoughtful touches.

Personally, my curved vardo-style roof was the biggest aesthetic choice I made about the exterior of my house, and that is what gives it such a fairy-tale appeal. The bold colors are also fun, and it's easier to make unique color choices when you can paint the whole house in one day with one can of paint! When the investment of time and money is low, people feel free to experiment.

When you're living in such a small space,

you want it to be beautiful and cozy—that's part of what makes it work. Inside my house, I spent a little extra money to get lovely honey-colored pine paneling from a local saw mill, and took the extra time to build windowsills and install nice trim. I've hung my three carefully chosen ceramic mugs from hooks by the kitchen window, and baskets made from natural wood and vines hang from hooks on my high ceiling, providing both extra storage and a simple charm. In a house with so few spaces and objects, it is worth it to make each one beautiful.

On a grumpy day when the resource-efficiency of my home no longer seems to outweigh the sacrifice of ample space and hot running water, the beauty still speaks to my heart and makes the decision to live small feel worth it.

Empowerment

Tiny houses are also incredibly empowering. When I tell people that I live in a tiny house that I built myself for $5,000 and with no building experience, their eyes light up. They start thinking, "Well, if she can do it, I could probably do it too…" I can certainly attest that waking up each morning in a house I built with my own hands has changed my perspective on the world. I start each day with a sense that anything is possible and dreams really can come true.

Sometimes we really can find simple, homemade solutions that solve a problem, increase our sustainability, and add a little more beauty and fun to the world. That's what makes tiny houses such an appropriate technology for solving housing problems both inside and outside of intentional communities.

Mary Murphy lives in cheerful community with the other residents of Good Heart Farmstead in central Vermont. From her tiny house she runs Mountainsong Expeditions, a small wilderness company which offers spiritually-based wilderness trips and classes on The Sacred Hunt. You can view more photos of the tiny house on her website: www.mountainsongexpeditions.com/tiny-house.html. You can read more of Mary's writing in the book Stepping Into Ourselves: An Anthology on Priestesses *and in previous issues of* Communities. *Feel free to drop her an email through the "Contact Us" page on her website.*

My Favorite Tiny House Resources

The Small House Book by Jay Schaffer. A philosophical and practical introduction to the tiny house movement, including many photographs and floorplans of the original Tumbleweed home designs.

Tiny Homes by Lloyd Kahn. A beautiful photo tour of hundreds of owner-built small homes.

The Very Efficient Carpenter by Larry Haun. Whlie not specifically about tiny houses, this book taught me all I needed to know to design and frame my house.

www.tumbleweedhouses.com. This company sells blueprints and kits for building your own house (if you don't want to design it yourself).

www.tinyhouseblog.com. Great articles from all corners of the tiny house movement, with many guest posts by owner-builders.

www.rowdykittens.com/our-tiny-house. Tammy Strobel's blog on simple living with her partner in their tiny house.

littleyellowdoor.wordpress.com. The cheerful and refreshingly honest blog of a young woman who built the tiny house of her dreams in California and transformed her life.

—M.M.

Who Can Live in a Tiny House?

Tiny houses do a fabulous job of solving the dilemma of the limited, excessively large, and overly expensive housing options for single people by creating an affordable and flexible housing option. If the owner's life outgrows the tiny house, it can be re-purposed as a home office, meditation room, guest house, or kids' playspace.

Many tiny houses are designed with a sleeping loft, which requires a decent amount of physical mobility to access, but others have floor plans that are all on one level and thus more accessible. I've yet to see a tiny house plan that is wheelchair accessible, and the wide clearance requirements of the wheelchair would be a big limiting factor in the design.

Are tiny houses a practical solution for a housing a couple? I know several happy couples living in tiny houses, others who tried it and the experiment failed (one relationship never recovered), and many more couples whose differing values about housing clash too much for them to ever try it. Both people must really WANT to live small for the idea to be worth trying. You should also consider each person's cleanliness standards, daily schedule (does one person go to bed early while the other is a night owl?), need for privacy, need for quiet time, and storage needs. The impact of all these differences will be more keenly felt in a shared space. Polyamorous relationships with more than two co-habitating partners would increase the complication and space-crunch significantly—I'd love to hear from people who are trying it!

What about tiny houses and kids? Single moms have been enthusiastically involved in the tiny house movement since the beginning, and I know one couple who was raising a toddler and an infant in their 18-foot tiny house (they moved to a bigger space after a few years). It all depends on the parenting style, personalities involved, and the family's ability to creatively solve the need for a balance of privacy and togetherness. I've heard of several older teenagers building their own tiny houses in the family's backyard. What an amazing gift to become a homeowner before you even turn 18!

Personally, I know I would not want to live in my 72-square-foot house with a partner. I love being king of my own castle and setting everything up just the way I like it. I built my house during the end of a relationship with a previous partner who thought tiny houses were a little crazy, and having sovereignty over my own tiny space felt very healing at that time, helping me affirm my own core values in a concrete way. When I moved into my tiny house I did worry a bit that the women I would want to date would think it was weird, but instead it has turned into an effective litmus test: if you don't like my tiny house, our values are probably too different anyway!

My current partner and I don't live together full time, but she often stays at my little house for long weekends and we love sharing the nest-like space: when I have company my single bunk folds out into a double bed that takes up an entire half the house, wall-to-wall. It is especially nice in the winter, since we don't feel guilty turning up the heat enough to be truly cozy in a state where many people are keeping their houses very chilly to save on heating bills. The small space also encourages us to take more walks outdoors in all seasons. If I ever get involved in raising children I won't want to do it in my ultra-tiny house, but I'm sure I'll love parking it in the backyard as a quiet personal retreat from the bustle of childrearing.

—M.M.

Why No Tyranny of the Minority in Sociocracy: How Sociocracy Can Help Communities, Part IV

By Diana Leafe Christian

In Sociocracy, a "circle" is a committee or team. *(See "Self-Governance with Circles and Double Links,"* Communities *#161, Winter 2013.)* Every circle has an "Aim"—a statement of the things the circle produces and/or provides and delivers to the people it serves, stated as an overview. For most communities "the people it serves" are the community members themselves. So a community's Finance Circle, for example, provides financial services—collecting funds, paying bills, and so on. If the community also has an educational mission, "the people it serves" include the visitors who take the community's tours, classes, and workshops. In this case, the community's Education Circle, for example, provides workshop trainers and services and logistics for the workshops and classes for the public.

As described in the last article in this series, "Consent Decision-Making and Community Vision, Mission, and Aim" (Communities *#163, Summer 2014)*, all of a community's circles are guided by Sociocracy's three values: equivalence, transparency, and effectiveness.

The six steps of Consent Decision-Making are: (1) Presenting the Proposal, (2) Clarifying Questions Round, (3) Quick Reactions Round, (4) Consent Rounds alternating with, (5) Resolve Objections Rounds, and (6) Celebrating the Decision.

Step Four, the Consent Round, and Step Five, the Resolve Objections Round, are repeated until there are no more objections and the proposal is "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try." There are at least six legitimate reasons to object to a proposal *(see box, p. 63)* and at least nine ways to resolve an objection *(see box, p. 63)*.

Objections must be reasoned and "argued." This means the objection is based on observable facts and the reasonable conclusions the person draws from those facts, and other circle members can understand these conclusions. Usually objections don't stop a proposal, but flag the need to modify the proposal to improve it in needed ways. [Some Sociocracy resources say that reasoned, argued objections must be "paramount," meaning significant, not trivial objections. However, several Sociocracy trainers suggest not using that potentially confusing word.]

Not every proposal must be consented to, since responses in the Quick Reaction Round can show that there's little to no support for the proposal, or it has substantial deficiencies and needs more work, or is written unclearly, and it's dropped. But usually the circle members themselves create the proposal (in Sociocracy's Proposal-Forming process), and they don't spend time making proposals about issues they're not interested in.

Practicing Consent Decision-Making at an IPOEMA Permaculture teaching center in Brazil, April 2014.

Some communities use what I call "consensus-with-unanimity" as their decision-making method. This is when everyone in the meeting except those standing aside must approve a proposal for it to pass, and there's no recourse if someone blocks. When communities use consensus-with-unanimity, sometimes the same few community members can consistently block some, or many, proposals. These members thus control the community by virtue of what they won't let it do—the so-called "tyranny of the minority." However, when a community uses Sociocracy and practices Consent Decision-Making correctly, tyranny of the minority doesn't happen.

Jack's Many Objections

Let's say a member of a circle, Jack, objects to a proposal. And let's say it seems to one or more circle members as if the objection may really be Jack's personal preference about how we carry out the Aim and not a reasoned "argued" objection. Or his objection may not necessarily be tied to the circle's Aim at all, or to the aim of the proposal. The facilitator or any other circle members could point this out, and could ask Jack a series of questions designed to help him understand the process better and clarify his thinking.

Only the person who is objecting can withdraw their objection. This usually happens in the Resolve Objections Round, or when they say "No objection" in the next Consent Round. (I was mistaken in the third article in this series, in Communities #163, when I wrote that the facilitator can declare an objection invalid.) If Jack objects to the proposal but can't seem to show how his objection is related to the Aim, there are several things the circle can do:

The facilitator and/or other circle members can ask Jack, "Can you show how your objection is related to our Aim?" Hopefully he can, and his reasoning is clearly understood by the other circle members. If not, the facilitator or someone else might ask Jack this question again, gently and courteously, perhaps changing the wording of the question.

Someone might ask, "Is this your personal preference—something you'd personally really

like to see happen? And if so, how does it also relate to our Aim?" Or, "How does this proposal directly affect you?"—a question which might bring out new information. Or, "Can we resolve your objection in another way—for example, in a future proposal?"—helping Jack understand that this proposal is confined to a certain scope, and another, future proposal can address the issues he's concerned about.

Maybe Jack cannot show how his objection relates to the circle's Aim. Or maybe he believes it relates to the Aim but other circle members don't see how it does, and Jack is not willing to remove his objection.

As noted in earlier articles in this series, every proposal includes criteria for later evaluating and measuring the proposal after it's implemented. So someone could ask, "If we added the criteria 'X' to the proposal, we can evaluate it later to see whether the problem you're concerned about might be starting to happen—if so, we could change things then. If we added this criteria, do you think the proposal would be safe enough to try?"

If these questions help remind Jack that he has recourse for his concerns—that new criteria for later measuring and evaluating the proposal can be added—he might agree that it's safe enough to try, and withdraw his objection.

An Experienced Facilitator Responds to Repeated Objections

Earlier this year Sociocracy trainer Gina Price from Australia and I led a workshop in Brazil. Gina asked these kinds of questions as she played the role of facilitator in an exercise on Consent Decision-Making. A workshop participant objected to the proposal in the exercise but it wasn't clear how his objection related to the circle's Aim. Gina gently asked if his objection was based on a personal preference or whether it might be specifically tied to the circle's Aim. His response didn't convince the others that his objection was in fact related to the Aim.

So Gina, still playing the role of facilitator said, "What if we added a criteria to the proposal that specifically addresses your concern? So that when we evaluate the proposal after it's implemented, we can find out whether your concern is happening. And if it is, we can change things. If we added this criteria, would you find the proposal safe enough to try?"

The man still didn't believe the proposal would be safe enough to try by adding this new criteria. Gina repeated this question, gently and courteously, a second time.

He still didn't believe the proposal would be

Consent Decision-Making

1. Present Proposal

2. Clarifying Questions

"Do you understand the proposal?"
"No questions." Or, "Yes. What about. . ?"*(In a round or popcorn-style)*

3. Quick Reaction Round

"What do you think of it?" *(Brief!)*

4. Consent Round

"Do you have any reasoned objections to this proposal?"
"No objection." Or, "Objection." "What is your objection?"

Six Reasons to Object:

1. One or more aspects of proposal conflict with circle's aim.
2. One or more obvious flaws, or important aspects left out, re circle's aim.
3. There are no criteria or dates for later evaluating implemented proposal.
4. Potential unintended consequences of implementing proposal, re circle's aim.
5. One or more aspects are not well thought out, or expressed in confusing way.
6. One or more aspects would not allow you to carry out your tasks, re circle's aim.

5. Resolving Objections:

1. Add concern as new criterion for evaluation, and/or make first evaluation date sooner.
2. Facilitator amends it.
3. Proposal originator amends it.
4. Person(s) objecting, one or more others, or everyone in circle amends it.
5. Round: "How would you resolve this?"
6. "Fishbowl" of two-three people in middle.
7. Refer to Research Team.
8. Refer to Resolution Team.
9. Refer to higher or lower circle.

6. Announce Decision and Celebrate.

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Participants at the IPOEMA workshop in Brazil in a discussion of the Resolve Objections Round.

Photos by Diana Leafe Christian

safe enough. Gina then asked, "If we added this criteria to the proposal and we *also* moved the first evaluation date up sooner, do you think it would be safe enough to try?"

At this point the participant believed the proposal *would* be OK to consent to with these changes. He was convinced by Gina's suggested proposal modifications: (1) adding his concern about a potential negative consequence to the proposal's criteria for later evaluating it, and (2) moving the evaluation date up, so the evaluation would happen sooner. Finally he understood how it was possible to resolve his objection in a way that seemed reasonable and safe, and he withdrew his objection.

As you can see, the facilitator and other circle members do everything they can to help the person find ways to resolve their objection so the proposal seems "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try."

Time-Sensitive Proposals

If all of these methods for modifying the proposal did not result in Jack's withdrawing his objection, and if the proposal is not time-sensitive, it could be saved until the next meeting. In the meantime a few circle members in a smaller "helping circle," or Resolution Team, could meet with Jack before the next policy meeting to help him find a reasonable resolution to his objection. Sometimes all a person needs is a little time and some psychic space away from the issue; time to "sleep on it," so to speak.

However, when a member like Jack repeatedly objects to a time-sensitive proposal in a community and is not willing to withdraw his objection after circle members offer multiple ways to modify it to resolve his objections, I recommend that someone propose that the objection is invalid. And if everyone except Jack consents to this, they regretfully and courteously declare his objection invalid and move on.

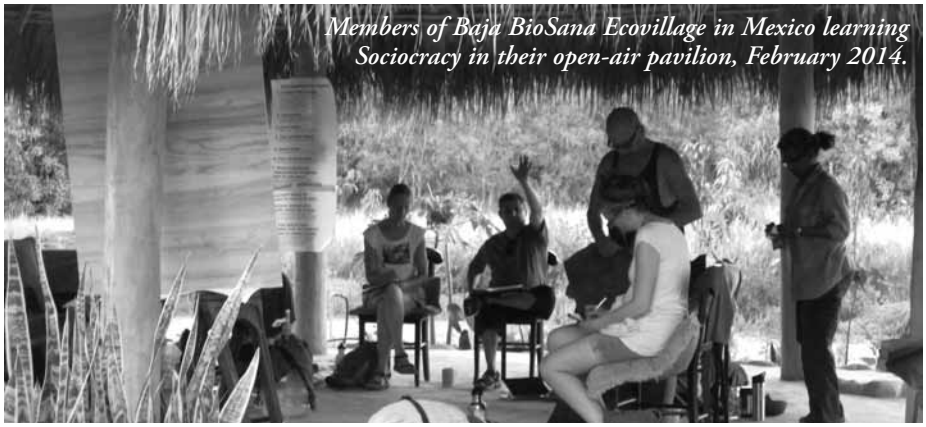
As Sociocracy trainer and *We the People* co-author John Buck points out, this procedure is like temporarily removing Jack from the circle, but only for the duration of this specific proposal. While many Sociocracy trainers may not recommend declaring an objection invalid and moving on for time-sensitive proposals, I recommend it because I've seen what often happens when any one community member has complete decision-making power over everyone else: they can delay or even stop the group from making a crucial decision. This is one more protection against "tyranny of the minority."

Consistent, Repeated Objections by a Circle Member

Why would Jack object to proposals often, and no proposal modifications seem adequate enough for him to withdraw his objection or help come up with a modification that will work for him? I see at least three possibilities:

(1) Jack may not understand that Sociocracy and Consent Decision-Making work quite differently than consensus. And he may be, consciously or unconsciously, trying to stop the proposal—using an objection as a "block," rather than seeing the proposal as an experiment, something that can be tried and perhaps later modified further or thrown out altogether.

A remedy for this is for circle members to arrange to get Jack additional training. If he is not willing to get more training, or he believes he understands Sociocracy well enough, or he argues about it, the circle could also ask for advice from their Sociocracy trainer to help Jack understand better. (If this doesn't help, however, there is a recourse. See "The Remedy of Last Resort—Asking Someone to Leave the Circle," below.)



Members of Baja BioSana Ecovillage in Mexico learning Sociocracy in their open-air pavilion, February 2014.

(2) Jack may have a different interpretation of the circle's Aim than other circle members do. A remedy for this is for circle members to discuss the issue—through free-form discussion, a "fishbowl" process, or any format they like—in order for everyone to understand the circle's Aim better. And they could perhaps revise the description of their Aim so it's more easily understood, or change the Aim itself. They would do this with the consent of the next "higher" circle, such as the General Circle, since the General Circle sets the Aim of each functional circle, at least in classical Sociocracy.

(3) Jack may have an unconscious emotional pattern that compels him to stop or disagree with what other circle members want. Doing this, consciously or unconsciously, may meet a need he may have to feel seen and heard, or a desire, conscious or unconscious, to rebel against perceived authority figures and "not be pushed around."

A remedy is for circle members to talk openly and compassionately about this possibility. Jack may feel quite uncomfortable, since the group is talking about the possibility of his having psychological issues compelling him to object for personal reasons, rather than for one of the six reasons to object. *(See box, p. 63.)*

When using Consent Decision-Making a circle must face and deal with the issue of someone repeatedly objecting to proposals no matter how the proposal may be modified to meet their objections, or how diligently others try to help the person understand Consent Decision-Making. The circle must deal with the issue directly, because of its mandate—its Aim—to deliver certain physical things and/or services to the community it serves. And one circle member's personal issues can't be allowed to stop them. So what can a circle do?

The Remedy of Last Resort—Asking Someone to Leave the Circle

What if nothing seems to help a circle member understand the process better, or differentiate between personal preferences or unconscious motives and objections based on the circle's Aim? After trying everything else first, another option is for the circle to ask the person to leave the circle, either for a specific period of time, or indefinitely.

Any circle member can propose that Jack leave the circle for a specific period of time, or indefinitely. And if everyone except Jack consents to this proposal, he must leave the circle. Jack wouldn't have consent rights in

this proposal because it's about him. Please note, this process does not ask Jack to leave the community, just the circle. And it doesn't mean he cannot apply to join another circle.

If not everyone in the circle consents to the proposal, though, then Jack stays in the circle, and the group keeps dealing with the issues. Jack may change, in which case the problem is resolved. Or, if he doesn't, sometime later someone can propose this again. And by that time, enough other circle members may believe it's best if Jack *does* leave their circle so they can move forward to accomplish their Aim.

In my experience leading workshops and as a consultant to communities, I've seen, over and over, that most community members are loathe to take actions like this to improve a difficult situation if it means another community member might feel discomfort, no matter the amount of discomfort that member may have triggered in others—and even if that member did and said things that caused other people to feel so much discouragement and demoralization they quit their committees. Many community members would rather suffer in silence than believe they had caused someone to feel hurt.

And Jack probably *would* feel hurt if he were asked to leave the circle. When he understands that other committee members find his behavior too difficult to continue working with, he may react with hurt feelings, shame, anger, or blaming. Yet being asked to leave a circle is feedback—and getting this feedback may be crucial in Jack's own conscious or unconscious quest for self-awareness and knowing how to live a better, more satisfying life. It's a wake-up call, a "request from the Universe" that he do some course-correction.

Ideally, Jack would learn from this, and benefit. But let's say he doesn't, and continues to feel hurt, and withdraws from the community for awhile, or for good. Even so, I believe it's better to be real and authentic with him—with kindness, compassion, and empathy, if possible—than for the circle to continue to limp along in a stuck, dysfunctional manner. Doing so could even be considered as creating a codependent relationship with Jack, unintentionally preventing him from learning from the natural consequences of his own actions.

If the circle asked Jack to leave, temporarily or indefinitely, other circle members would feel bad for Jack too, and they might be tempted to believe they *caused* his feelings. However, most likely they would soon feel relieved as well, if not uplifted and energized as they experience themselves moving forward toward their circle's goals without disruption, conflict, or being repeatedly slowed down.

While I certainly have compassion for a community member like Jack, I also have compassion for the community as a whole, and for its potential to become healthy and thriving. I want community members to feel the satisfaction of moving forward towards their community's goals, and their committee's goals. This can feel wonderful—and this is why I recommend Sociocracy to communities. While I realize some communities may not want to use the option of asking to someone to leave a circle, I want to let people know this option is built into Sociocracy governance, and can be used if needed.

The next article in the series will cover giving consent to circle members, and the Proposal-Forming process.

Diana Leafe 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. This article series will be part of her forthcoming booklet on using Sociocracy in Intentional Communities. See www.DianaLeafeChristian.org.*

Six Legitimate Reasons to Object to a Proposal

(1) One or more aspects of the proposal conflict with the circle's Aim.

(2) The proposal has one or more obvious flaws, or important aspects are left out, re. the circle's Aim.

(3) There are no criteria or dates for later evaluating the implemented proposal.

(4) There are potential unintended consequences of implementing the proposal, re. the circle's Aim.

(5) One or more aspects of the proposal are not well thought out, or are expressed in a confusing way.

(6) One or more aspects of the proposal would not allow a circle member to carry out their tasks, re. the circle's Aim.

Nine Ways to Resolve Objections

(1) Add the person's concerns as a new criterion for evaluation, and/or move the first evaluation date earlier so it happens sooner.

(2) The facilitator amends the proposal.

(3) The originator of the proposal amends it.

(4) The person or persons objecting or everyone in circle amends it.

(5) Do a round: "How would you resolve this?"

(6) Organize a "fishbowl"—two or three people sit in the middle of the circle and discuss how to resolve the objection while the other circle members observe.

(7) The proposal is referred to a Research Team—several circle members who will get needed information for modifying the proposal.

(8) The proposal is referred to a Resolution Team—several circle members who will work with the person objecting and modify the proposal in order to resolve it.

(9) The proposal is referred to a "higher" (more abstract) circle or a "lower" (more focused and specific) circle.

The Proposal-Forming Process

Sociocracy has four major meeting processes: (1) Consent Decision-Making, (2) the Proposal-Forming process, (3) Selecting People for Roles (Sociocracy elections), and (4) Role-Improvement Feedback. Consent Decision-Making forms the basis of the other three meeting processes.

Proposals are created with the Proposal-Forming process and then considered using Consent Decision-Making. Most Sociocracy trainers teach the two together as one long process, from the first step of the Proposal-Forming process to the last step of Consent Decision-Making. This is called the "long format." Practicing Consent Decision-Making only, after a proposal was created earlier, is called the "short format."

I teach these two processes separately, however, because I've found it makes each one easier to learn. A circle can first create a proposal and then consider it immediately with Consent Decision-Making, or make a proposal and consider it in another meeting. Or someone could propose that their Representative take the proposal to a higher circle, and if they all consent, it goes to a higher circle.

—D.L.C.

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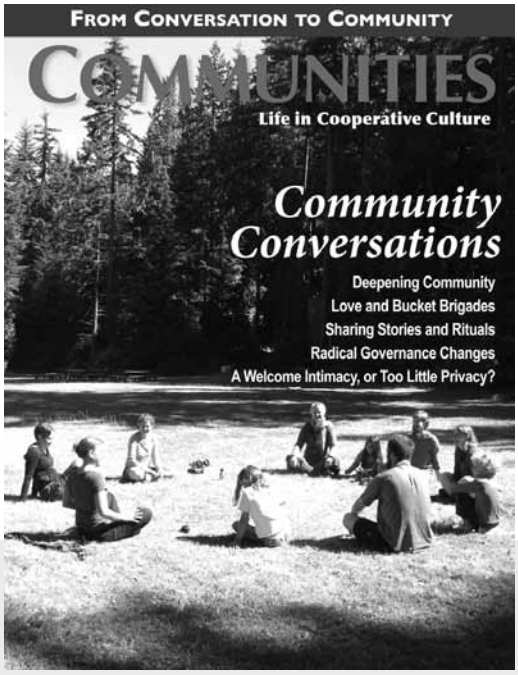

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THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #166 - Spring 2015 (out in March) is January 24, 2015.

The rate for Reach ads is Up to 50 Words: $25/issue or $75/year; Up to 125 Words: $40/issue or $125/year; Up to 350 Words: $60/issue or $175/year If you are an FIC Member you may take off an additional 5%.

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Intentional communities listing in the Reach section are also invited to create a free listing in the online Communities Directory at Directory.ic.org, and also to try our online classified advertising options. Special prices may be available to those who wish to list both in the magazine and online.

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multi-modal garden/ playground/ cultural/ green science area @ Crispus Attucks and establishing an IC farm component easily accessible by bike from the urban Art Farm property & with opportunity to create earth shelters. Seeking individuals & families to join with us: -Permaculture experience & engineering skills a plus. -Openness to permaculture style gardening, consensus-based decision making, & willingness to use primarily human power transport a very high priority. -Creativity, personal responsibility, & progressive/enthusiastic spirit deemed of high value. Feeling the love? Contact Francie D or Vince Hedger @: fdrecycles4community@gmail.com OR 717-495-8576

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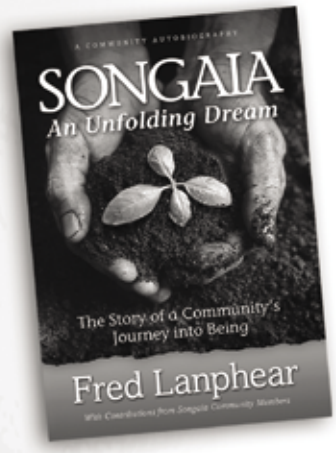

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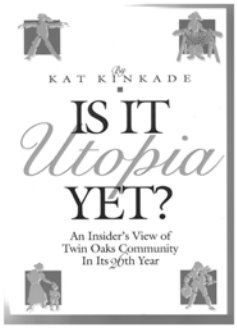

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We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

- Aldo Leopold

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ART OF DISCRIMINATION

(continued from p. 29)

adventure, find shortcuts, and exercise independence (not to mention maintain addictions), a constant barrage of newer and better has kept products and services fresh while blinding us to the less obvious burdens, the hidden costs or externalities, stemming from our technological embrace.

Naturally, I appreciate research and development in service of easing suffering, but when new technologies starting out as novelties and unnecessary conveniences for most of us insidiously turn into those perceived as essential, red flags go up for me. Major industries now, for instance, take full advantage of the economic efficiencies wireless telecommunications bring to business, making it nearly impossible for the domino-like rest of us to keep opting out. With no precautionary principal in place to safeguard longer-term individual and community health, not to mention that of other species, it's hard to tell what the future holds in store for our bodies, minds, and very souls.

In Vermont, some of the kids call me Miss Grass Cutter because they've seen me trim the yard with scissors. It's true that I find using simple tools and technology richer experiences and much more satisfying. While I usually clip our postage stamp-sized yard with a reel mower that burns no noxious petroleum products and leaves my hearing in good shape, I do frequently pull out my uber-durable scissors to get to tougher spots. Some mornings are sublime as I stoop over individual blades and see all kinds of little critters up close. What the kids don't realize is that some people pay big bucks for similar experiences elsewhere calling it a workout or meditation or therapy.

I can only hope that in time the children have enough of their own low-tech experiences, and that they learn how to judge for themselves and find the courage to be different if need be. Some say there's no turning back on the trajectory that technology is taking us, but that implies a passivity that is difficult for me to accept. It can be done as long as we are reminded of the rewards when we do so. For me, the ultimate reward is being present in my own life. I can only hope that I continue to find others desiring the same.

After completing all coursework for a Ph.D. in Computer Science, Michelle realized that the question she was really fixated on was whether or not people were really happy, and why? She currently lives at Champlain Valley Cohousing in Charlotte, Vermont.

Find more resources at
ic.org/communities

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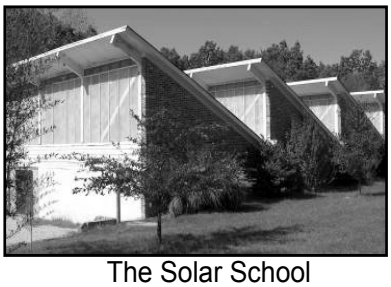
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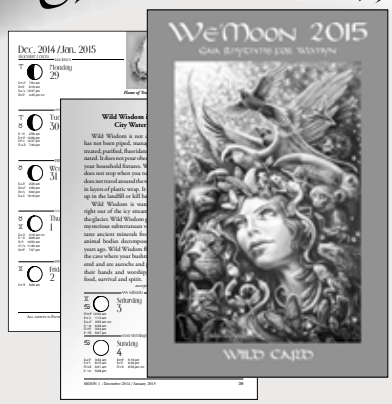

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LIFE WITH THE SOLAR KITCHEN

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chosen carefully, they will tend to reinforce those unconscious beliefs and narratives. An individual family kitchen with plug-in appliances and a fridge full of grocery-store food is like a guide to a particular lifestyle, and a library of information about Western culture. Whether we are aware of it or not, technology contains a culture's answers to specific questions: What are the basic social units of civilization? What is energy and where does energy come from? What is the role of food in human relationships? What is the relationship between the human being and the living earth, from which all water, food, and energy come? Improving a technology that supports a lifestyle of alienated consumerism, to make it more energy-efficient for example, may be better than the alternative...at least in the short term. But it is not truly sustainable, because the lifestyle it serves is not sustainable.

The Solar Kitchen carries different information. It is a community kitchen, and this already is a revolutionary choice: we work together, cook together, share meals together. Our cooked food is prepared with the sun; we feel the immediate connection between our lives and the sky. Through the biogas system, we are in contact with the flowing rhythms of growth and decay. The tools can all be made with local materials and skills anywhere in the world, without relying on a globalized system of money and control. And simply by having our energy sources in our own hands, we are automatically more conscious of how we use energy.

My goal as part of the Technology Group is to support the emergence of a sustainable way of living which is not only more ethical, but truly more joyful and attractive than consumerism, with pleasures and luxuries that everyone on earth can have. And beyond this, we want to create awareness...through outreach and education of course, but also simply by sharing the technology itself. This automatically carries information: a community can build a kitchen for sure, but the right kitchen can also help build a community.

When I make morning coffee on the biogas, and watch Jessica elegantly swing the big gleaming mirror into place at the beginning of her cooking shift, ready to prepare lunch for gardeners, guests, students, craftspeople, technologists, and other community members, I know that this kind of kitchen can protect resources and nourish community anywhere. There's still a lot to be learned, more work to be done. But we have already created something that we love, and something we can share; we are on a good path.

Frederick Weihe lives in Tamera, a community in southern Portugal. Born and raised in the United States, he has been living and working in Europe since 2000. He blogs occasionally at www.physicsforpeaceworkers.org.

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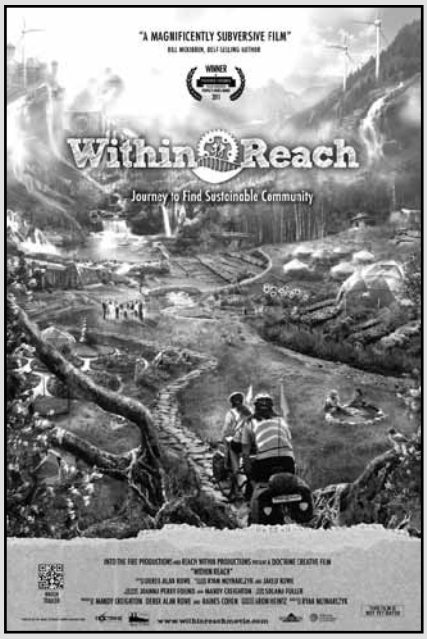

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have not noticed among them any better-than-average understanding of how to work emotionally, which makes me wonder how much this is getting across.

To be fair, I rarely find *any* groups have done much work on this. It's hard and tends to be scary. While I find it heartening to hear the claim that skill in working emotionally is a standard feature among Sociocratic trainers, I wish I saw more of it in the field.

Further, I don't buy the theory that if you focus on problem solving (or policy making) then emotional distress will diminish as a byproduct of productivity. If anything, I believe the reverse: I've found that once distress reaches a certain level it's not possible to do good work because of all the distortion that's associated with high distress. You have to attend to the reactivity first. Most groups don't handle this well. Lacking an agreement about how to engage with this dynamic, they are either paralyzed by distress, or seek ways to contain or marginalize those in it, who tend to be labeled disruptive.

I don't buy the theory that if you focus on problem solving (or policy making) then emotional distress will diminish as a byproduct of productivity.

2. Double Linking of Committees (or "circles" in Sociocratic parlance)

When a group is large enough (probably anything past 12) it makes sense to create a committee structure to delegate tasks. While people can serve on more than one committee, it's naturally important to have a clear understanding of how each committee relates to each other, and to the whole.

While the above paragraph is Organizational Structure 101, in Sociocracy there is the added wrinkle that committees regularly working together (as when one oversees the other, or when two committees are expected to collaborate regularly) are asked to place a representative in each related committee. These reps (one each way) serve as liaisons and communication links from one committee to the other, helping to ensure that messages and their nuances are more accurately transmitted.

While this sounds good in theory (and may work well in practice in the corporate environment for which Sociocracy was originally created), it runs smack into a chronic problem in cooperative groups that are highly dependent on committee slots filled by volunteers: too many slots and too few people to fill them well. In all my years as a process consultant for cooperative groups, I don't recall ever having encountered a group that reported being able to easily fill all of its committee and manager positions. Sociocracy asks groups to add an additional layer of responsibility to what they already have in place, which means even *more* committee assignments. I don't understand how that's practicable.

Advocates have responded that there is a distinction between "circle meetings" (at which policy is discussed) and "operational meetings" (at which work is organized and accomplished)—and that double linking only need come into play at circle meetings, and that these need not happen that often.

While I can certainly understand the claim that if there are fewer meetings at which double linking is expected then there is less of an additional burden on personnel, there is still *some* additional burden and I wonder where the energy to fill those slots will come from.

3. Selection Process Calls for Surfacing Candidate Concerns on the Spot

One of the trickier aspects of cooperative group dynamics is handling critical feedback well. That includes several non-trivial challenges:

- Creating a culture in which critical feedback relative to group function is valued and encouraged.
- Helping people find the courage to say hard things.
- Helping people with critical things to say to sort out (and process separately) any upset or reactivity they are carrying in association with the critique, so that they don't unload on the person when offering feedback.
- Helping recipients respond to critical feedback openly, not defensively.

Even though the goal is worthy, none of these is easy to do, and my experience has taught me the value of giving people choices in how to give and receive critical feedback. (For some it's absolutely excruciating to be criticized in public.)

In the case of Sociocracy, the model calls for selecting people to fill positions (such as a managership or committee seat) in an up-tempo process where you call for nominations, discuss candidate suitability, and make a decision all in one go.

While that is admirable for its efficiency, I seriously question whether that promotes full disclosure of reservations, complete digestion of critical statements (without dyspepsia), or thoughtful consideration of flawed candidates. While I can imagine this approach working fine in a group comprised wholly of mature, self-aware individuals, how many groups like *that* do you know? Me neither.

4. The Concepts of "Paramount" Concerns, and "Consent" versus "Consensus"

Sociocracy makes a large deal out of participants expressing either a) preferences about what should be taken into account or b) reservations about proposals *only if* they constitute "paramount" concerns. While "paramount" is not easy to pin down (what is paramount to me may not be paramount to you), I believe that the concept maps well onto the basic consensus principle that you should be voicing what you believe is best for the group—as distinct from personal preferences—and that you should speak only if your concern is non-trivial.

In addition, Sociocracy is about seeking "consent" rather than "consensus." I believe

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that the aim in this attempt it to encourage an atmosphere of "Is it good enough?," in contrast with "Is it perfect?" or "Is everyone happy with it?"

To be sure, there is anxiety among consensus users about being held hostage by a minority that may be unwilling to let a proposal go forward because they see how bad results are possible and are afraid of being stuck with them. This leads to paralysis. While it shouldn't be hard to change an ineffective agreement once experience with its application has exposed its weaknesses (something that's true in consensus as well as in Sociocracy), I believe a better way to manage tyranny-of-the-minority dynamics is by educating participants (read consensus training), developing a high-trust culture characterized by good listening, and proposal development that takes into account all views.

If "consent" is basically the same as "consensus" then we needn't worry the terminology so much. If, however, they are meant to be substantively different, then I can make sense of this only if "consent" is a weaker standard than "consensus"—one that allows the group to move forward (it's good enough) when it would still be laboring to find consensus.

Let's see where that leads. The interesting case is when there are reservations among the group that would not stop consent, yet would stop consensus. I expect the spirit in which Sociocratic advocates favor consent is an attempt to address the dynamic where individuals are stubborn about allowing a proposal to go forward because of personal reservations. While this undoubtedly happens, the question becomes whether the dissenter is acting out of a what's-best-for-the-group perspective (that others are missing or failing to weigh appropriately) or solely out of a personal preference—which no groups want to be burdened with.

What environment will best lead to an open (non-entrenched) exploration of what's happening? In my experience the key to accessing whatever flexibility is possible with a dissenter is first making sure you've heard their viewpoint *and* why it's important. While this can be delicate work regardless of the group's decision-making process, I'm worried that if Sociocracy is about crossing the finish line faster, that engagement with a dissenter may come across more as "Is your concern *really* paramount?" with a view toward asking them to let go, rather than "Let me make sure I understand what you're saying and why it matters," with a view toward finding a bridge between that person and others.

When cooperative groups fail to connect the dots between cooperative processes and cooperative culture, the main issue becomes energetics, not structure.

Now let's take this a further step. Sociocratic advocates often make the point that consent (it's good enough) shouldn't be such a big deal because you can always change agreements later if they're not working. Maybe. If an agreement flat out doesn't work then I agree that changing it probably won't be hard. But what about an agreement that's working well in the view of some and not so hot for others? Or more vexing still, an agreement that's working well for most members of the group, but not well for the dissenter—the person persuaded to let go because their concerns weren't paramount enough? Uh oh.

5. Rounds Are Not Always the Best Format

Sociocracy is in love with Rounds, where everyone has a protected chance to offer comments on the matter at hand. While it's laudable to protect everyone's opportunity for input, this is only one of many choices available for how to solicit input on topics (others include open discussion, sharing circles, individual writing, small group breakout, silence, guided visualization, fishbowls, etc.). Each has their purpose, as well as their advantages and liabilities.

While Rounds are great at protecting air space for those more timid about pushing their way into an open discussion, and serve as an effective muzzle for those inclined to take up more than their share of limited meeting time, they tend to be slow and repetitive. If you speed them up (Lightning Rounds) this addresses time use, yet at the expense of bamboozling those who find speaking in group daunting, or are naturally slower to know their mind and be ready to speak.

If you have only a hammer (one tool), pretty soon everything starts looking like a nail. Reality is not nearly so one-dimensional and who wants to lie down on a bed of nails anyway? You need more tools in the box.

While I've been told that it's OK for Sociocratic groups to use formats other than Rounds—which relaxes my anxiety—what I've seen among Sociocratic groups to date is a heavy reliance on Rounds, and I'm concerned.

6. Starting with Proposals

In Sociocracy (as well as in many groups using consensus) there is a tendency to expect that items come to plenary in the form of a proposal ("here is the issue and here is a suggested solution"). In fact, in some groups you won't get time on the plenary agenda unless you have a proposal.

While this forces the shepherd to be ready for plenary (a good thing) and can sometimes save time (when the proposal is excellent and does a good job of anticipating what needs to be taken into account and balancing the factors well), it can also be a train wreck. Far better, in my experience, is that if something is worthy of plenary attention, then you refrain from proposal development until *after* the plenary has agreed on what factors the proposal needs to address, and with what relative weight. If the manager or committee guesses at these (in order to get time on the agenda) they may invest considerably in a solution that just gets trashed.

Not only is this demoralizing for the proposal generators, but it skews the conversation about how to respond to the issue. ("What needs to be taken into account in addressing this issue?" is a different question than "Does this proposal adequately address concerns?") In essence, leading with the proposal is placing the cart (the solution) before the horse (what the solution needs to balance).

In response to the above, I was told that Sociocratic groups don't always start with proposals. While I'm glad to hear that, it doesn't match what I've encountered so far. If it turns out that I've just been unlucky and found only those groups that have been confused about the model, I'll be happy to be wrong.

7. Governance System or Decision-Making Structure?

Some advocates have taken the position that Sociocracy is a governance structure while consensus is a decision-making process. Other advocates have stated that Sociocracy is both.

As Sociocracy has definite things to say about how meetings are run, it's clear to me that it delves into decision-making. More accurate, I think, would be to describe Sociocracy as a governance system and decision-making process that offers a particular, highly structured approach to consensus. It's about doing consensus a certain way.

While I'm not sold on that model, I'm fine with its being put forward for consideration as a way to operate. At the end of the day, the proof is in the doing, and if groups like what they're getting with Sociocracy then that trumps everything.

8. A Structural Response to an Energetic Challenge

My final uneasiness is on the macro level. My sense is that a lot of the motivation for coming up with an alternative to consensus is that groups are frustrated with it. They struggle with obstinate minorities, working constructively with dissent, effective delegation, engaging productively with distress, and a sense of overwhelm and slog. These are real issues.

Over the years I've come to the view that the key problem is that most groups commit to using consensus without a clear idea *that it requires a commitment to culture change to make it work well*. The vast majority of us were raised in a competitive, adversarial culture and we bring that conditioning with us into our experiments in cooperative culture. When the stakes are high and people disagree, people tend to respond from their deep conditioning—rather than from their cooperative ideals. That is, they fight for their viewpoint and feel threatened by those who see things differently.

In broad strokes, Sociocracy appears to offer a structural response: Rounds even out access to air time; the standard of voicing only paramount concerns protects the group from getting bogged down in personal agendas; double linking and open selection of managers and committee slots ensure transparency and information flow; starting with proposals streamlines plenary consideration.

All of these objectives are worthy, yet I'm questioning whether that package is the best way to get there. To the extent that I'm right about cooperative groups not having connected the dots between cooperative processes and cooperative culture (where people learn to respond with curiosity when presented with different viewpoints, rather than combativeness), the main issue is energetics, not structure.

Naturally enough, high-structure folks are going to like structural solutions. Unfortunately, cooperative groups also include low-structure people. They also include people who are not quick thinkers, or comfortable voicing their views in front of the whole group. I'm wondering how well Sociocracy will work for them.

Laird Schaub is Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and cofounder of Sandhill Farm, an egalitarian community in Missouri. (After 39 years at Sandhill, he has now joined his wife Ma'ikwe Schaub Ludwig at neighboring Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage.) Laird is also a facilitation trainer and process consultant, and he authors a blog that can be read at communityandconsensus.blogspot.com. This article is adapted from his blog entries of August 18, 2014 and October 7, 2014.

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Reflections on Sociocracy

Over the last decade there's been rising interest in Sociocracy as a decision-making and governance system for cooperative groups, especially ones depending on voluntary participation. As a long-time observer of cooperative group dynamics, I have a number of reservations about it.

As background, I've had personal conversations with or read materials from a number of Sociocracy advocates, including John Buck, Sharon Villines, Jerry Koch-Gonzalez, John Schinnerer, Sheella Mierson, Nathaniel Whitestone, Barbara Strauch, and Diana Christian.

That said, I have had limited experience with Sociocracy *in action* (attending workshops that outline the theory and demonstrate the techniques is not the same as dealing with real issues in live groups) and it's important to acknowledge that if the *practice* of Sociocracy turns out to have solid answers for my concerns then that deserves to be honored. The fact that I haven't yet heard answers to my reservations that satisfy me, or seen Sociocratic groups perform as claimed, does not mean that there aren't groups doing well with it.

With that prelude, here are the things that bother me, accompanied by responses (where I received or am aware of them) from Sociocratic advocates. I am paying particular attention to how this contrasts with consensus, which Sociocracy is often compared with as something similarly collaborative.

1. Does Not Address Emotional Input

One of my main concerns with this system is that there is no mention in its articulation of how to understand or work with emotions that arise in the context of meetings. As I see this as an *essential* component of group dynamics, this is a serious flaw.

Of the advocates who offered responses to this point, one admitted that working emotionally is outside the scope of Sociocracy. Another agreed that this is important yet assured me that all certified trainers are experienced in working emotionally and that it's being taken care of just fine. Others claimed that Sociocracy works so well that there is much less distress (obviating the need to cope with it) and that the important thing is problem solving (getting the work done); if that's being handled well—Sociocracy's specialty—distress will fade into being a minor irritant.

For my part, I believe strongly that we need an integrated model of working with the whole person (rational, emotional, intuitive, kinesthetic, spiritual) and it bothers me when this is not addressed. When I've worked with groups that have embraced Sociocracy, I

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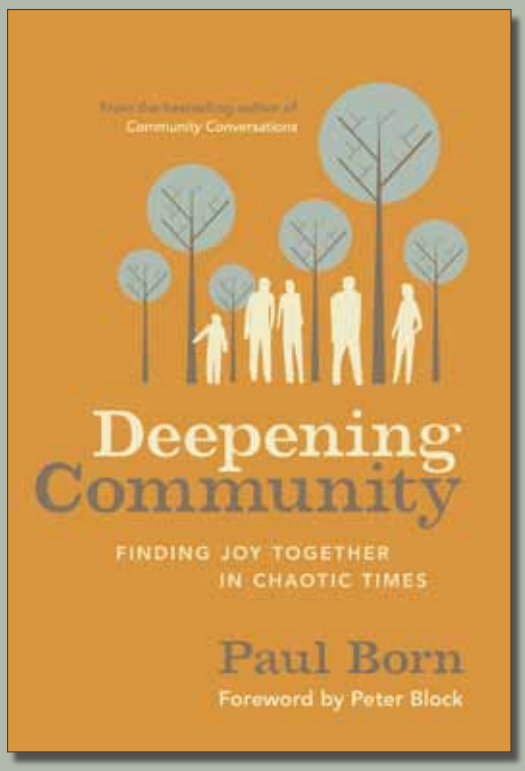

Paul Born is the cofounder and President of Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement, a global leader on issues of place, collective impact, and community innovation. The author of four books, including the bestseller Community Conversations, Born is internationally recognized for his community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

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