

**STARHAWK: FACILITATING DIVERSE GROUPS**

# COMMUNITIES

**Life in Cooperative Culture**

**Social  
Permaculture,  
PUBLIC VS.  
PRIVATE**

**Self-Care as Part of People Care  
Five Tools to Help Groups Thrive  
Ecosexuality: Embracing a Force of Nature  
Public Demolition and Private Distress  
Legal Structures for Intentional Communities**

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#### A Note to Our Readers

This issue's contents were assembled and laid out before election day in the US, November 8, 2016. As we ready materials for the printer on this "morning after," that day's developments are nowhere reflected in this issue, but weigh very much on our minds and hearts. More to come next issue...

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# Interconnectivity, Privilege, and Social Sustainability

Is it just me, or is the world going a little more crazy than usual? Does it seem as if more people than ever are extra busy, stressed out, and/or overwhelmed? Wherever you land on the spectrum, no one seems to believe that humanity's current situation is tenable. Everyone thinks something needs to be done. And there are now 7.4 billion people doing things.

Our world continues to push the boundaries of interconnectivity, through infrastructure development, telecommunications, high-speed travel, and, of course, climate change. Society is global and you cannot be unaffected by it. I believe much of the '60s communes and back-to-the-land movements, not to mention today's preppers, were escapist on some level. There is no escape. Of course, we've always been interconnected, ecologically. But it's only now, when we're threatening the stability of ecosystems on a global scale, that we're starting to realize it.

Global interconnectivity isn't necessarily a bad thing, and for those working towards a society based on cooperation, sustainability, and social justice, connecting with others around the world is necessary in order to challenge the forces perpetuating oppression and exploitation. As Executive Director of the FIC, one of my jobs is to strengthen connections, not only within the intentional communities (IC) movement, but between the IC movement and aligned movements, like worker co-ops, Transition Towns, and permaculture. Stronger together isn't just a catchy campaign slogan.

Part of my job is to help the IC movement be conscious of itself as a movement, and to help the IC movement find a mutually supportive place amongst these other movements. Guiding questions for me have been: What do ICs have to teach, and what do they have to learn? How are ICs applicable and relevant to other movements and the world at large?

Many practices in ICs are applicable to other kinds of cooperative organizations and enterprises—in particular, cooperative governance, budgeting, and decision-making, as well as conflict resolution, and how to foster the healthy interpersonal relationships that support all of this. Community is about sharing. But it's not easy to share. Sharing requires trust, and trust requires intimacy, and this is not the culture we were raised in. This social side of sustainability is essential, and is an important part of what ICs have learned. But it's not just about getting along, it's about creating the processes and agreements that support it. It's about creating a positive feedback loop between culture and structure.

ICs also have a lot to learn. Much of the IC movement, particularly in the US, has taken advantage of the privilege afforded it by the fact that it is predominantly white and middle class. The North American Permaculture and Building Resilient Communities Convergence (held in mid-September in northern California) included several formal discussions on Decolonizing Permaculture. As someone new to the permaculture world, I found this a fascinating additional frame through which to look at issues of racial and economic justice in ICs.

A huge aspect of colonization and slavery is control of land and natural resources. Owning land gives you the power to do things you can't otherwise. It gives you the ability to grow food, to save seed, to catch rainwater, to put up solar panels or windmills, the ability to provide for yourself the basic necessities of life. It makes it easier to organize, to generate wealth, and to have greater power over your daily life. The ability to own land is a privilege. Not everyone owns land and most are either barred from it or have some number of barriers. If we believe that everyone should have equal access to the resources needed to sustain themselves, land needs to be part of that; those who

have greater access to controlling land should look for ways to increase access to those who don't. For an incredibly poignant look at this, I highly recommend the documentary *Arc of Justice*, which tells the story of the first Community Land Trust in the US, New Communities, Inc., started by African-Americans in 1969 in Georgia after the end of Jim Crow.

I've heard lots of people talking about the need to create affordable housing and secure access to land; the issue of inclusivity is very much tied to affordable housing. While some groups are working on this, it's something the IC movement has addressed only minimally or incidentally. Living in an IC is usually cheaper because you're sharing a resource that people normally own individually. But communities often require buy-ins that are prohibitive to many people, even if they are lower than the local average cost of buying a home. And we have to look at who has the resources to be able to start ICs in the first place; the kind of culture they establish may not be inclusive to people of other demographics. This isn't just about race either—it's about gender, age, ableism, neurodiversity, etc. Every group doesn't necessarily need to be everything to everyone, but we need to be creating spaces that are genuinely inclusive and support the increase in access to land to all people.

When I attended CommonBound and the Worker Co-op National Conference (in July in Buffalo, New York and Austin, Texas), one thing that struck me was that every person who gave a keynote or spoke as part of a plenary session was a person of color, female, queer, trans, and/or from outside the US. It was powerful to have the center of the conversations in these spaces held by people from marginalized groups, which make up the majority of the population. As we search for positive solutions, I think it's vital that people with privilege look to those people most affected by the problems.

And boy do we have some problems to deal with. 7.4 billion people... Is it just me, or is it getting hot in here? 🌍

*Sky Blue (sky@ic.org) is Executive Director of the Fellowship for Intentional Community.*

### Erratum

Allan Butcher, author of *The Intentioneer's Bible*, has pointed out an error in issue #172's "Publisher's Note," where Sky Blue wrote, "In 1940, Arthur Morgan was also one of the founders of the original FIC...." Allen writes: "Please be aware that it was Community Service, Inc. (CSI) that was created in 1940. The original FIC was not founded until 1949 through the work of CSI." We apologize for the error, which originated in other published works from which Sky derived this (mis)information.

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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

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#### What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

# Not Rocket Science, but Just as Important



Chris Roth

With this issue, we return to Allen Press in Lawrence, Kansas, our printer for a decade-and-a-half (from issues #105 through #165). For the last seven issues we've tried a different format (including 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper throughout) with a different printer (the only one we found who could offer us this paper option), but unfortunately our idealism led to a prohibitively high cost-per-copy. With the Fellowship for Intentional Community facing significant financial shortfalls, we cannot afford to continue in that format, so we are cutting printing costs by more than a third by returning to partial-recycled-content paper with Allen Press, while still retaining full color throughout (our previous run with Allen Press included only black-and-white inner pages). The new format also features slightly heavier paper, which allows it to be self-covering—another cost savings.

For decades, COMMUNITIES and the FIC have been vital resources, both for the communities movement and for the broader effort to develop more cooperative, resilient ways of living together on this finite planet. Our publications offer critical documentation, information, and lessons from people who have been confronting “future challenges” for many years. My advice for people who, in preparation for an uncertain future on our home planet, dream of living in a colony on Mars? Read through the *Best of COMMUNITIES* collections, for starters, and subscribe to the magazine as well. Our biggest challenges as a species will always be how to live together in healthy ways, to form communities in which love, compassion, and understanding outweigh mutual exasperation, outright animosity, or worse. These arts of cooperative living are not “rocket science,” but they'll be just as important if we're to have any future in outer space, let alone on earth. And they're more important than rocket science, if we want to have any hope of keeping our own planet habitable.

You can help COMMUNITIES and the FIC return to sound financial footing by supporting us with your purchases—of magazine subscriptions, books, and other resources—and your donations ([ic.org/fall-fundraising-campaign](http://ic.org/fall-fundraising-campaign)). Every gift you give of an FIC product is not only a gift to someone(s) you care about, but a vote for the kind of information, stories, networking, and services that our organization offers and helps facilitate in the wider world. You can



help the magazine and its parent organization be more than a “still, small voice” of sanity, known to you and a limited number of others but mostly drowned out in the larger culture. You can help others discover us and the world of cooperative exploration that offers almost unimaginable potential for a brighter future, if shared broadly enough. Resigning oneself to a deadening “status quo,” in a culture that in many ways brings out the worst in human nature, is a failure of imagination. COMMUNITIES and the FIC are dedicated to reawakening that imagination—that knowledge that every human being has that we’re not here to live in a state of alienation, separation, misery, futility. We are unique, alive creatures, looking for reconnection. And to find it, we need to remind each other that it’s possible, and share our dreams, gifts, and insights with one another.

The FIC is about this kind of connection—not the “disposable” type of connection which can dominate both social and mainstream media, but the abiding connections we discover when we come together in cooperative endeavors and face hard, as well as easy, issues with one another.



This edition’s original theme, “Public vs. Private,” ended up attracting fewer submissions than anticipated. If my own experience is any indication, this may have been because it was too “hot” a topic for some, rather than too “cool” a topic. Among the questions we asked potential contributors:

- If you live in an intentional community, how accessible and exposed to the public does your group wish to be? And how protected do you want to be?
- Does your group welcome visitors, interns, and/or other short-term residents? If so, what are the boundaries around their visits and involvement?
- Does your group operate a business (for example, conference, retreat, event, or educational center) that brings in the public on a regular basis? If so, what issues arise from this within your community?
  - How much publicity does your group seek?
  - How public is your group’s mission?
  - What remains private to your group? What do you not want anyone to know?
- On another level, how “public” vs. “private” are individuals’ lives *within* your community? How much do members know about one another?
  - How are concepts like privacy and confidentiality weighed against desires for openness, transparency, and a shared emotional



La Cité Écologique is located in Colebrook New Hampshire. Our ecovillage gives priority to education, the well-being of its members, sustainable development, and respect for all living things. We also believe strongly in serving our local rural community.

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intimacy within your group?

- How much do members of your community desire or expect to become involved in one another's daily lives? Are you more like a close-knit family, a neighborhood, a village, or a collection of residences?

- On a broader social level, how do these same questions of "public" vs. "private" play out in your neighborhood, within your networks of friends, and in larger circles and communities in which you are involved?

Every community I've been a part of has wrestled with these questions, and the very nature of the issues involved means that some stories that arise out of this public/private dilemma will never be told publicly (being too private). In preparation for this issue, I myself struggled with the desire to share stories which I ultimately decided against telling for fear of the repercussions, whether through perceived invasions of privacy or revelation of information that in the wrong hands could be used against particular groups. I've lived in two communities that wrestled with major zoning issues (a topic explored more fully in "Community and the Law," issue #168), where a desire for openness conflicted with both fear and paranoia about the consequences of getting too familiar with neighbors who might turn against us and jeopardize our ability to exist legally. I've lived in several communities where the impulse to welcome in the public (and therefore maintain standards that would be relatively acceptable in the mainstream) butted up against the desire to live according to a set of beliefs or preferences that sometimes flew in the face of societal norms—or where a love of having outsiders share our home conflicted with desires for greater intimacy within the group and for protection from outside intrusion on the sanctuary provided by community-only space.

Never in my experience have all members felt the same way about these issues; the "community extroverts" and "community introverts" (in all different senses of those words) always come in a mix, and have different needs and desires. Navigating those disparate preferences is one of the arts of living in an intentional community with a public interface—a description that applies, in some sense, to every community that considers itself a part of the "communities movement." The stories herein give a taste of how some communities grapple with these issues.

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Part way through our article-gathering phase, we expanded the theme to include "Social Permaculture," for which we asked these questions:

- What methods does your group use to create *social* permaculture—where your relationships with one another are just as sustainable, regenerative, and resilient as the ecological elements in a land-based permaculture system?

- How can personal growth modalities, well-being practices, communication techniques, collaborative strategies, and other elements of shared community life help create a more permanent culture both on the small scale and on the large scale?

- How do you enact the ethics and principles of permaculture—including "care for people," "observe and interact," "apply self-regulation and accept feedback," "integrate rather than segregate," "value diversity," and others—in the design of your social systems and in your dealings with one another?

- How does your community cultivate social permaculture in your relationships with others in your region?

As we hoped, the articles in this section provide clues about how to approach not only the "public vs. private" dynamic, but also many other community challenges. As noted earlier, without cooperative skills, all the technical expertise in the world (or even on another world) will not assure human thriving or even survival. Social permaculture (by that name or any other) is critical to the successful practice and maintenance over the long-term of any land-based permaculture system, of any intentional community, and ultimately of any human endeavor whatsoever. We're grateful that some of the leading lights in the movement for social permaculture chose to share their insights in our pages.

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Thanks again for joining us...and don't forget to "shop FIC" this season so that our own social permaculture work can endure. We, and future beneficiaries of the FIC's work, thank you in advance. 🐦

*Chris Roth edits* COMMUNITIES.



## It's time to take the FIC to the next level.

Every day intentional communities and their allies work to model a better future.

And every day, the FIC works to support their development, share what they've learned, and connect them to the broader movement towards sustainability, cooperation, and justice.

Our income consists of membership fees, donations, and mission-related business income. We are grassroots organization funded by grassroots support.

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**Thank you for your support!**  
**[ic.org/fall-fundraising-campaign](http://ic.org/fall-fundraising-campaign)**

# Social Permaculture—What Is It?

By Starhawk

Within the permaculture movement, more and more of us have been looking at aspects of something we've come to call "social permaculture." But what is that?

People often think of permaculture as another system of gardening or land management, but it is far more. Permaculture is a system of ecological design that looks to nature as our model. It originated in the '70s with Australian ecologists Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, who were looking to create a "permanent agriculture." Now it has become a worldwide movement, and expanded to encompass "permanent culture."

Patrick Whitefield, author of *The Earthcare Manual*, called permaculture "the art of designing beneficial relationships." We look at plants in the garden not in isolation but in terms of how they affect one another, how they interact, how the pathways and beds determine the flow of our energy in caring for them, how they can provide fertility or protection for one another, how we can get multiple yields from each element.

But relationships between plants, insects, soil, water, and micro-organisms, complex as they may be, are relatively easy to deal with. Roses love garlic—or so says the title of a key book on companion planting. And pretty much they do. We don't have to worry about whether this particular rose holds a grudge against that individual garlic for something insensitive it said to her.

People are much more challenging. We each have our own needs and goals and complicated life histories and styles of communication. Our understanding of soil biology or water harvesting techniques is often far more advanced than our skills at making decisions together. Our needs and goals often clash, and we don't always have the tools we need to resolve conflicts.

According to Diana Leafe Christian, author of the key book on intentional communities, *Creating a Life Together*, 90 percent of intentional communities fail—largely because of conflict. That statistic represents an enormous amount of shattered dreams, personal pain, and wasted resources.

Why are human relationships so difficult? We each carry the imprints of our early experiences, and often respond to current situations with the negative patterns of the past. We hold onto painful memories and anticipate future hurts. When we come together in community, our own needs, goals, and communication patterns often clash.

Moreover, we are embedded in larger systems that do not encourage beneficial relationships. Our overarching economic system sacrifices the good of people and the earth to the goal of achieving short-term profits. It maintains itself by fostering systems of prejudice and exploitation—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism—all those constructs that separate us and elevate some peoples' good over others. Those systems affect us deeply, often unconsciously, no matter how much we might deplore them and struggle against them.

People are hard to change. Religions, psychotherapy, meditation, self-help programs, diet and ex-

ercise programs, stop-smoking campaigns, 12-step programs, and the criminal justice system all attempt to change people—and when they succeed it is often only after months or years of painful effort. Most of us have experienced just how difficult it is to change ourselves!

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What can permaculture—which began as a way of looking at food growing and land management—bring to this effort?

The key insight of social permaculture is that, while changing individuals is indeed difficult, we can design social structures that favor beneficial patterns of human behavior. Just as, in a garden, we might mulch to discourage weeds and favor beneficial soil bacteria, in social systems we can attempt to create conditions that favor nurturing, empowering relationships.

Permaculture's three core ethics are care for the earth, care for the people, and care for the future—that third ethic is also often framed as "fair share": share surpluses and reduce consumption. These ethics can serve as a guideline for weighing our decisions and actions. Before we build a structure or engage in a new endeavor, we ask ourselves—how will this impact the environment around us? What resources will it use? Will it provide for people and community, and further empowerment and equality, or the reverse?

Permaculture rejects the notion that people are separate from nature and inevitably destructive, or that destruction of the environ-



ment is justified in order to provide jobs or profits for people. Instead, the good of the people and the good of the earth go together. For example, Tony Rinaudo of Global Vision, an organization that has successfully reforested millions of hectares of land in Niger, Mali, and Ethiopia, found that involving farmers in regeneration efforts, teaching them simple techniques to protect and prune existing trees and plant new ones, and allowing them to benefit from the increased firewood and other products was the key to success.

An enterprise that is destructive to the environment is inevitably bad for people. Without a thriving, vibrant ecosystem around us, people cannot thrive. And without limits to exploitation and consumption, without an ethic of returning benefits to soil, to plant, animal, and human communities, balance cannot be obtained.

One aspect of social permaculture looks at how physical structures impact social interactions. This aspect of social permaculture has some key forerunners from the disciplines of city planning, economics, and architecture. Economist Jane Jacobs, in her classic book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, articulated patterns that make for lively and diverse urban spaces. Christopher Alexander and his group of architects, back in the '70s, compiled the groundbreaking book *A Pattern Language*, which looks at the built environment from a city scale down to the décor on your house walls in terms of the human relations that structures and spaces elicit.

Today, the group City Repair, based in Portland, Oregon, creates gathering spaces out of intersections and hosts an annual Village Building Convergence to teach natural building techniques and permaculture and collectively transform the urban environment. Founded by architect Mark Lakeman, the group models how creating inviting social spaces can influence a city, from slowing traffic to encouraging neighborhood unity and civic engagement. They have inspired similar efforts in cities all over the US and worldwide.

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**P**ermaculture has a set of principles, derived from an understanding of ecology and systems theory—guidelines for how we go about designing systems. Some translate directly into social applications. For example, in designing a garden we understand that diversity is a value. We might plant polycultures instead of monocultures, including flowers in the vegetable patch to bring in beneficial pollinators or planting multiple varieties of apples in the orchard.

In human systems, valuing diversity might lead us to value our differences instead of letting them divide us. A community that includes people of diverse ages, genders, races, sexual orientations, physical abilities, and economic backgrounds, as well as diverse ideas, cultures, and opinions, will have broader perspectives and a deeper understanding of issues and events, as well as more resilient responses. For example, in one of our recent Earth Activist Trainings—permaculture design courses with a grounding in spirit and a focus on organizing and activism—a young environmental activist ended up working on a design project with a Spanish farmer who currently uses pesticides and artificial fertilizers. Initially shocked at the farmer's use of chemicals, the activist found himself growing to understand the farmer's constraints and needs at a much deeper level, and the farmer found himself inspired and enthusiastic at the prospects for transitioning his farm to become a permaculture model.



Photos by Brooke Porter



Diversity must be functional. Planting a cactus in a redwood forest will not create more diversity—it will result in a dead cactus. A cattle rancher and a hard core vegan may never be happy farming together.

Creating meaningful diversity requires a process of self-reflection and personal growth and transformation. What are the values and practices that are deeply important to us, that we don't want to compromise? Where are there places that opening to difference might expand our horizons? Are there ways in which our community norms and assumptions are limiting our diversity? Are we responding to differences in others out of fear or prejudice, or the privileged assumption that our group norms are universal standards?

Embracing diversity also means confronting those systems of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, and all the other destructive patterns of discrimination and structural oppression that keep us divided and separate. It requires us to actively engage in efforts to change those larger societal patterns.

Functional diversity might mean bringing in women and people of color at the beginning of a project, not at the end; including diversity in the organizing committee that plans a conference and determines its overarching culture, rather than inviting one black speaker at the last minute. It might mean providing facilities that allow access to diverse participants: for example, providing childcare for a conference so that parents of young children can attend; offering translation so that non-English speakers can contribute to a discussion; providing interpreters for the Deaf or wheelchair-accessible facilities for the differently-abled. It might also mean making an organizational commitment to look at issues of power and privilege, and to engage in training and education to expand our understanding of different cultures and heritages.

Earth Activist Training, the organization I direct, offers Diversity Scholarships for peo-

ple of color and differently-abled people for our programs and trainings. We have found that when the composition of a group shifts so that a third or more of the group are people of color, the group culture also changes and excitement and learning radically increase. Diverse groups can be more challenging to facilitate, as differences sometimes clash, but the depth of learning that results is more than worth the efforts.

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There are many other permaculture principles that can inform our social designs. The principle of edge or ecotones, for example, tells us that where two systems meet, a third system arises, dynamic and diverse. Where the ocean meets the shore, the varied conditions of tides and waves create multiple niches for various forms of life. Where two human systems meet, we can expect great creativity and possibly also tension and conflict. The meeting of European and African musical cultures produced spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, rock-and-roll, hip-hop, and many other creative forms that arose in spite of the overarching system of oppression that also generated conflict and suffering. Systems change from the edge, and systems also resist change and try to maintain themselves. So when we set out to change a system, we can expect both resistance and opportunities for great creativity and surprises.

“Capture and store energy” is another principle, and its application to solar or wind energy is obvious. But there are also many forms of human energy and creativity we can benefit from that often go to waste—when young people, or women, or people of limited economic means are excluded from programs or projects, for example. And “obtain a yield” is a good principle for activists and communitarians to remember when we fall into the trap of exploiting ourselves out of our altruistic desires to serve a greater good. We also need to get something back, to sustain ourselves economically, emotionally, and physically with food and rest and beauty and yes, also money, if we are not to burn out and become nonfunctional.

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Permaculture also looks at patterns. What are the patterns and understandings that can help us structure groups in a healthy way? What tools and techniques—from ecology, but also from psychology, social science, spirituality, and the human potential movement—can help groups communicate more clearly, resolve conflicts, and function better?

In my book, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*, I examine patterns I've observed over decades of participation in groups that were organized without top-down hierarchy: spiritual groups, activist groups, living collectives, permaculture groups, and many others. Over and over again, I saw groups struggle with the same issues of power and conflict. I came to the conclusion that non-hierarchical groups are inherently different from groups with top-down authority, and need a different set of tools and understandings.

In a healthy group, power is balanced by responsibility—that is, people earn power by taking on and fulfilling responsibilities. And when people take on responsibilities, they are empowered by the group to carry them out.

But power can be many things. Power-over is command and control power, the sort we're all familiar with in top-down institutions from corporations to schools to the military. Pow-

er-from-within, or empowerment, is the personal and spiritual power we each have; creative power, skill, confidence, and courage—qualities that are not limited. If I have the power to write something inspiring, that doesn't take away from your power. In fact, it might actually encourage your creativity.

And in groups, we encounter a third type of power: social power, prestige or influence, the measure of how much each person's voice is heard. Social power can be earned, as it is by elders in tribal societies when they build a track record of good decisions and care for the community. But it can also be unearned—the privilege we might accrue from our gender or skin color or class background.

Healthy and functional groups attempt to do away with privilege, and to allow people to fairly earn social power by fulfilling responsibilities and developing a track record of commitment and service. And when people are given a responsibility, they are also given the authority—the license to use power—that they need to carry it out.

Groups fall into error when social power is hoarded—when, for example, the founders of a project cannot let go of control and new people cannot shape the group's direction. But they may also err by according power indiscriminately to anyone who shows up, at the expense of those who do have a long-standing commitment to a group. If people cannot earn power by committing to the group and fulfilling responsibilities, the most committed and responsible often become discouraged and leave; unearned power or privilege creeps in and thrives. Power may become vested in those with the loudest voice or the most ardent desire, rather than in those who truly serve the group.

Nonhierarchical groups also need good communication skills and conflict resolution tools. Many of us grew up in families where Mom or Dad would step in and say, "You kids stop fighting!" In groups with top-down authority, someone—the boss, the leader, the guru—takes that role. But in horizontally-organized groups, no one has the authority to resolve a dispute or end a conflict. If such authority exists, it is held in the group itself—but often groups have no mechanisms or agreed-upon processes to invoke that authority. So conflicts may bounce around and around, without resolution, until people get sick of it all and leave.

To prevent this, groups need to consider how to deal with conflict before it develops. They need clear agreements, conflict resolution structures, and channels of communication built into group design, as well as tools and frameworks for governance and decision-making, for group facilitation and self-care.

Many of these tools exist in other disciplines. Social permaculture draws on the work many people have done in the group dynamics, nonviolent communication, psychotherapy, self-help, and the human potential movement for skills and tools, and part of our work is to bring these more fully into the trainings, gatherings, and projects of the permaculture movement.

Many people are now engaged in bringing forward social permaculture. I regularly co-teach social permaculture and facilitation trainings with Charles Williams of Earth Activist Training and Pandora Thomas, founder of the Black Permaculture Network.

In September of 2015, I was privileged to co-teach a special course on Social Permaculture with Looby McNamara and Peter Cow from Britain, Robyn Clayfield from Australia, and Robina McCurdy of New Zealand. Looby's book *People and Permaculture* has been hugely influential in making people aware of the need for people-focused design. She and Peter Cow teach many courses together in permaculture people skills, facilitation, nature connection, and cultural design. Robyn Clayfield has developed a wealth of tools for group facilitation,

creative teaching methods, governance and decision-making systems. Robina McCurdy is skilled at community development, teaching environmental education and participatory decision-making. And many more teachers and leaders in the broad permaculture world are now understanding the need to strengthen the social aspect of regenerative design.

The ability of individuals and groups to collaborate successfully is one of the largest constraining factors in all forms of organizing, and as we succeed in creating more functional groups, all our work in every area of life will be strengthened. 🍷

#### Websites:

Starhawk: [starhawk.org](http://starhawk.org)  
Earth Activist Training: [earthactivisttraining.org](http://earthactivisttraining.org)  
Black Permaculture Network: [blackpermaculturenetwork.org](http://blackpermaculturenetwork.org)  
City Repair: [www.cityrepair.org](http://www.cityrepair.org)  
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Robin Clayfield: [dynamicgroups.com.au](http://dynamicgroups.com.au)  
Robina McCurdy: [earthcare-education.org/wp\\_earthcare/about-us/robina-mccurdy](http://earthcare-education.org/wp_earthcare/about-us/robina-mccurdy)

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*Starhawk is the author or coauthor of 13 books on earth-based spirituality and activism, including the classics The Spiral Dance, The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups, her visionary novel The Fifth Sacred Thing and its long-awaited sequel, City of Refuge. Starhawk directs Earth Activist Trainings, teaching permaculture design grounded in spirit and with a focus on organizing and activism ([www.earthactivisttraining.org](http://www.earthactivisttraining.org), [starhawk.org](http://starhawk.org)). She travels internationally, lecturing and teaching on earth-based spirituality, the tools of ritual, and the skills of activism.*



# SURFING THE NEW EDGE OF PERMACULTURE: Looby Macnamara, Robin Clayfield, Rosemary Morrow, and Robina McCurdy

*By Delvin Solkinson, Annaliese Hordern, Dana Wilson, and Kym Chi*

There was a special charge in the air and woodland gardens at the Sustainability Centre in the British Countryside. Here, under the full moon, a colourful mosaic of people from all ages, languages, cultures, and countries was woven together, representing the fabric of the World Community. We met in a circle, bright-eyed and open to a creative journey ahead.

Building on a permaculture course on Resilience with Rosemary Morrow we had just completed at the same location, the Social Permaculture Course emerged through a series of interactions between the core facilitators, a team of apprentices, and a host of participants, shaping itself like a permaculture design to the site-specific situation, elements and energies, influences and ideas that sprang out of this transformational environment. The facilitators were powerful pioneering women. Their insights and innovations into Social Permaculture shed light on the exciting new edge of this emerging field of study and practice.

When people come together in groups or communities, they are capable of being an empowered force for positive change. Permaculture design explores the relationship that we have with ourselves, each other, and the ecological communities in which we live. Social Permaculture is helping us understand how to apply permaculture to a redesign at all levels of society from the hyperlocal to the profoundly global. With a focus on facilitating transformational education which heals, empowers, and repairs culture, Social Permaculture creates agents of change and regenerative leaders to help in the redesign of our collective future.

Following are excerpts from video interviews with some of the teachers. [Starhawk, also part of the teaching team, is not included here because she has two separate articles in this issue.]

## **Looby Macnamara**

A good way to begin with permaculture is by asking yourself: What do you want to do in the world? and What do you want the world to look like? Then to really own those answers and find a way to bring them out into the world.

For a long time I was held back by my self-limiting beliefs, the need to be a perfect person in order to write about people care. Then I transformed that belief and opened to learning through the process. I recognized that it's usually the people politics or internal messages that we have for ourselves that limit and hold us back in earth care activities and community projects. With permaculture design we look to turning around those limits. Recognizing how potent and powerful permaculture is for change, we find that it's often the internal shifts that give us courage to move forward and engage. This can enable us to become more vibrant and present in the world. I wanted to share these realizations and increase these skills, making the process transparent and relevant to everyone. At the moment not everyone in the world has access to land, but we all have access to people. We all need to look after ourselves and those around us. By widening the definition of permaculture to include the people care ethic much more fully, it becomes more relevant and engaging for everyone.

Politicians are thinking about a very short time frame. Permaculture can expand our time frame to see outside of the box of our community and nation, recognizing that everything is connected and that all our actions have ripples that come back to us. This invites more responsi-

bility, not just for the people or the system that we are governing, but for a wider system. Through taking responsibility, we bring the ethics into action. With this approach there will be more sensible decisions that work for people and the other beings we inhabit the planet with.

## **Robin Clayfield**

A simple step that any community can take to help create a better world is to give attention and care to their group dynamic and how they work together for change—looking at the facilitation that is used, and how they can meet their purpose, goals, and passion as a group without having challenges or conflict. Communities can begin by letting go of egos, feeling what the planet needs and what their group needs, and working in peace, harmony, and co-creation together.

Permaculture principles help us to design people systems and decision-making methods as well as gardens, inviting us to connect better and be more sensible in our design. This can support community organization and education, creating networks and looking at the connections between things. In permaculture, people work where their interests and passions are, and each group has their own aims and purpose.

As a kinaesthetic learner who needs to do things and be inspired from my feelings, I am not comfortable with the conventional educational system where I am just sitting in a lecture situation while someone is talking at me. If we can inspire people with creative facilitation methods and get people interacting and engaging, we can empower individuals to be able to step forward with really strong confidence, passion, and intense desire to create change in the world. We can also be creative facilitators of our own life journey. When we all pool our energy together, we create this incredible synergy which combines all the gifts harvested from every person. That's what permaculture is: a harvest of diversity and wisdom that can fuel incredible growth and change. Having dynamic facilitation in our governance structures, intentional communities, and groups that work for change is the seed that can make us really successful in whatever we do.

## **Rosemary Morrow**

The capacity of permaculture to bring many issues and solutions together is exciting. It's not prescriptive, but it is site-specific and individually and communally responsive, making it far more interesting and relevant than other solutions for restoring and repairing people and Earth. Permaculture attracted me because of its multidisciplinary, integrative approaches that are adaptable to any person or society. This is exciting in a life's work. I don't want to cause problems or be part of others' problems. With permaculture, I know that I am part of the solution.

I am very impressed by the logical and beautiful model where we govern by functions. We look at the most important things that need doing and we seek people who want to do them. Government by function puts people into those places who are interested to maintain them—not someone just looking for a job, or only interested in directing. You don't have to be an expert, but you have to have a passion.

One of the keys on the key-ring for the success of permaculture is its openness to every person. Its openness, lack of restrictions, and ability to provide for all kinds of learners means it travels everywhere. The main reason it has travelled so far has been people carrying it to



extremely diverse places. It's an underground and overground movement going over fences and around barriers and into villages, cities, and organization through people teaching each other. Many people, feeling hopeless about the world's future, can join in as they seek ways to be part of a solution.

### Robina McCurdy

Permaculture is a movement on the planet today which is making a humongous impact—it's a whole systems design for these times. The more degraded the environment, the more broken apart the system, the more permaculture tools are applicable, coming in to repair with a resilient approach. Permaculture is a holistic approach which requires divergent creative thinking. It shares from the past and calls forth the future. It can create multifaceted, far-reaching solutions that are grounded in traditional knowledge, based on great tried-and-tested working examples. The creative edge of permaculture now is Social Permaculture, which applies design principles into the social sphere.

Across the world permaculture people can speak the same language and have similar methodology and tools at their fingertips, regardless of the environment or social situation. Permaculture needs more people who are trained, dedicated, and earning their living professionally through permaculture, so that they can actually put in the time and skills to meet and match the rate of degradation on this planet. We particularly need young people who are fearless and have brilliant minds, who are lateral thinkers, can operate computers, and who are up for sweating as they dig swales in tough ground. We need to prepare ourselves inwardly and train ourselves up to be holistic people, so we can meet the challenges with all-round permaculture skills to transform the planet. 🌱

### Permaculture Pioneers:

*Looby Macnamara, author of People and Permaculture, is actively pursuing effective ways people can lead to longer lasting planet repair; see [www.loobymacnamara.com](http://www.loobymacnamara.com).*

*Robin Clayfield, author, trainer of teachers, and facilitator, has pioneered creative, interactive learning methods and group work in permaculture and beyond; see [www.dynamicgroups.com.au](http://www.dynamicgroups.com.au).*

*Rosemary Morrow, author of Earth User's Guide to Permaculture, is a teacher, development assistance worker, and home gardener, as well as relocalisation and refugee advocate; see [www.bluemountainspermaculture-reinstitute.com.au](http://www.bluemountainspermaculture-reinstitute.com.au).*

*Robina McCurdy has been engaged in community development, localising food, Social Permaculture, and education on a global scale for the past 25 years; see [www.earthcare-education.org/lwp\\_earthcare](http://www.earthcare-education.org/lwp_earthcare).*

### Gaiacraft Collective Stewards (Authors):

*Delvin Solkinson has completed a PDC, Diploma, and Masters Degree with Bill Mollison and is a Field Mentor through the Permaculture Institute.*

*Annaliese Hordern is an inspiring Permaculture educator and regenerative landscape designer who sits on the Board of Directors for Permaculture Australia.*

*Dana Wilson is a media producer and permaculture designer, living in and co-creating the Forest Atrium ecovillage.*

*Kym Chi is a Permaculture educator and healing artist, working to inspire a deepened connection with nature that supports the creation of thriving habitats and communities.*

*For more information, see [www.gaiacraft.com](http://www.gaiacraft.com).*



Photos courtesy of Delvin Solkinson

# Social Permaculture: APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

By Brush

Permaculture's 12 principles apply to human groups just as much as to any other ecological system. Here are some ways we can implement them in the social sphere:

**1 Observe and interact.** No matter how much you're "starting" something, there's an existing network of patterns. See what's already happening. Participate in similar groups or processes, or ones from which you'll be drawing participants. Write down observations day after day, and take the time to trace out patterns. You want to "nudge" the existing systems, not create new ones from whole cloth!

**2 Catch and store energy.** Sometimes, energy is high: celebrations, successes, summertime! Energy in social systems is stored when healthy, positive relations are fed with joy, supportiveness, and pleasure. It can be more deeply rooted with rituals and formalized events that memorialize the experience. Later, when times are harder, these positive resonances can be drawn on to heal and sustain the social weave.

**3 Obtain a yield.** People need to feel compensated for their participation. This can be money—\$\$ or local currency—but it can also be many other things. Food, services, or simple affirmation and appreciation. Observe what people currently consider a "yield" in their lives (a necessity that they do work to obtain), and find ways for your system to obtain it for them—and you.

**4 Apply self-regulation and accept feedback.** Figure out how each part of your system can have tight, well-functioning feedback cycles: each individual looking at their own actions; each group evaluating its progress; groups interacting with each other. Giving and receiving feedback well is an art: cultivate it, recognizing that each person has their own preferred ways. Mantra: "Trust <=> Accountability."

**5 Use and value renewable resources and services.** Build recharge and renewal into your social fabric. Watch out for patterns of stress and burnout, and make everyone as accountable for them as for work product. Rely on long-lasting relationships (usually local) rather than fly-by-night cheapest deals. Fair trade! Living wage! Joyful gifts!

**6 Produce no waste.** People can be wasted, too: when they're treated as unworthy of respect, when they're discarded because no longer useful or interesting or cool. Choose your relationships wisely, and then invest in them heartily. Have a clear process for determining when it's time to separate, and do so cleanly and gently. Support people with direct feedback about what worked and what didn't, and help them (within reason) find a new place to plug-in. The whole system is interdependent: there is no "away"! It's best for everyone to find the best fit.

**7 Design from patterns to details.** Every group and close formation of groups should take regular time to explore the "bigger picture." Rather than simply extrapolating the past into the future, really step back, observe your patterns again, look at what's really going on in the world around you and how best your network can support the sustainable momenta and relations. Then, having clearly identified the patterns to work with, design back towards the specific.

**8 Integrate rather than segregate.** Make space for different kinds of work, groups, and functions to interact (formally and informally). Bring diverse work processes into physical proximity. Create pathways and spaces for communication to flow about what different people/groups are doing. (Skits? Videos?) Have liaisons between all different groups that go to each other's meetings. Etc.

**9 Use small and slow solutions.** Don't try to create big, tech-heavy, shock-inducing changes to the social system! It will revolt! Look for small tools and practices that will accomplish what's needed with a minimum of bureaucracy and hassle. Build on these once the system has adjusted.

**10 Use and value diversity.** There are many different ways people influence and learn, think, and feel. We need all of them in our world systems! Valuing diversity can mean including a variety of cultures, perspectives, and attitudes in a group in order to improve its internal robustness and resilience. At the same time, true diversity requires that particular skills and perspectives be honed for their unique values: this often means a group that is very specific in at least some of its attributes. Diversity is ensured when both kinds of groups thrive, and all of them are strongly interconnected in "a world where many worlds fit!"

**11 Use edges and value the marginal.** Bring different groups together, and explore the boundaries between them. This is where exciting conflict and synergy can happen! Support isolated, unpopular perspectives in your group: they're often bringing key wisdom to the center

**12 Creatively use and respond to change.** Change creates openings for new growth. Whether this is the departure of key participants, success or defeat at some major goal, or dislocations in the social environment: notice when change is imminent, prepare the ground, and use the space proactively to build energy from new and unexpected places. 🌿

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Photo courtesy of Alyssa Martin

# SEEKING OUT THE EDGES: A Permaculture Perspective

By Alyssa Martin

I took a blind leap in 2015, and signed up to take a Permaculture Design Course (PDC) at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage. As a long-time gardener, I had been feeling tired and burned out. While I loved eating my homegrown food, the work output was weighing on me. I hoped that the PDC would offer ideas, insight, and just plain inspiration for me to continue growing a large portion of my own food.

I didn't realize at the time that permaculture is about so much more than agricultural ecosystems, so much more than gardening. While I did find ideas, insights, and inspiration that helped me plant seeds in my garden for the coming year, I also saw the application of permaculture principles in many different areas of my life. Over the course of the PDC, I became intrigued by the concept of "social permaculture."

One of the permaculture design principles suggests the value of using edges and valuing the marginal when developing a permaculture design plan. In nature, this principle might best be seen at an edge between two biological communities or landscapes. In the transitional place where land and water meet, for example, we might find greater diversity of animal and plant species than either ecosystem could support on its own. It is thought that more action happens at these edges, these places of transition.

I wondered, though, could this concept also apply socially? What if we all chose to live by this permaculture principle and seek out the edges in life?

I noticed that, personally speaking, it can feel easier to steer clear of those edges. There is comfort in the familiar, the known. It feels safer to stay within that familiar, to stay in my own ecosystem, so to speak, than be pushed to an edge. However, living in or near that social edge may actually prove to be the most fertile and inspiring place to be.

I also see the potential for greater conflict in the edges. I may choose to hold strong to who I am and be unable to integrate the gifts brought from a different ecosystem. What if, instead, I chose to lean into that

edge with curiosity, engaging with the difference and the potential conflict in front of me? Even in the face of conflict and difference, I may leave a more balanced, whole, diverse being.

What else is there to explore on the edge?

I know that as a midwife, my work is on an edge. The beauty and rawness present when new life makes its way into this world is humbling and inspiring to say the least. I see new mothers, pushed to that edge, showing up with greater courage, presence, and ferocity than they even knew was possible.

At the beginning of the book *Earth User's Guide to Permaculture*, by Rosemary Morrow, there is a quote of a Vietnamese saying, "You can't do anything on your own." As much as I might want to do everything on my own, I am realizing that I need those edges to remind me over and over again that doing things with others and exploring that uncomfortable place of difference and transition allows for a richer life experience.

A common phrase used in consensus decision-making is that "everyone brings a piece of the truth." Permaculture reminds me to seek the places where I can better see and hear all pieces of the truth, especially the ones that don't come from me.

As I plant new seeds in my garden this year, I now see the limitless applications of permaculture in the form of my new rain gardens, a polyculture fruit orchard, my newly open heart, and the presence of new friends. I now seek out that edge. 🌱

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*Alyssa Martin has been living a rich life at Dancing Rabbit (located outside Rutledge, Missouri) since 2006. She spends her time gardening, homeschooling her son, serving pregnant women and their families via her work as a Certified Professional Midwife, dancing, playing ultimate frisbee, knitting, and loving life in a vibrant community. An earlier version of this article was published by the Center for Sustainable and Cooperative Culture at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage (see [www.dancingrabbit.org](http://www.dancingrabbit.org)).*

# SELF-CARE AS PART OF PEOPLE CARE: Social Permaculture for the Self

By Hannah Apricot Eckberg



All too often, people who practice permaculture are so busy caring for the garden or others that they forget or simply don't create the time to take care of themselves. I see this especially with parents and other caregivers. However, I would like to propose that self-care is actually one of the least selfish things you can do, and is key to not only social permaculture, but all of life. For if you are not in a state of good health or well-being, you are not able to fully share your gifts with the rest of the world. The health of individuals is important to the health of the community.

As a professional masseuse, and someone who falls under the “Wounded Healer” archetype, I have spent many years playing with practices to help my own and others' health—ways to tend our soil, if you will. Like most permaculture practices, what I am going to share is common sense. These are simply reminders, and hopefully some new ideas to help you tend your own garden of self-care.

I try to apply the Permaculture Principles to all aspects of my life, including my healing and self-care regimen. Here are some ideas around this concept:

**Design from Patterns to Details:** What has worked in the past for me—what should I apply today for what my body is needing now?

**Integrate Rather than Segregate:** If my shoulder, for example, is really acting up, try to bring it into my actions, rather than let it get stagnant with pain. Love it and use it as best I can.

**Use Small and Slow Solutions:** If something feels good, don't overdo it—too much of a good thing is how I often hurt myself.

**Creatively Use and Respond to Change:** Each morning I feel different; I check in with my body and do what it needs most in the moment.

**There Is No Waste:** Every little bit I do towards my health is a benefit; time spent on my self-healing is never wasted time.

**The Problem Is the Solution:** Eventually, I will learn something from the pain that will help my life. Perhaps it will lead to a new practice, or meeting someone, or somehow become a good thing.

**Use and Value Diversity:** Change up my routine to get more effective workouts and stretches.

**Catch and Store Energy:** My morning workout or stretching helps my energy level all day long.

**Observe and Interact:** I start with a body scan to see what areas need more attention and give them what they need in the moment.

**Use Edges:** I think outside the box, and integrate furniture, stairs, and other things into the workout for more efficiency. I get creative and work with what is at hand. I also work parts of my body that might otherwise be ignored and later lead to problems. I try to make it an integrated whole.

**Apply Self-Regulation and Accept Feedback:** Especially when I am in a yoga class or something, I listen to my body more than the instructor. My feedback from myself is my best instructor.

**It Depends:** Each day is different, and I try not to be hard on myself if I skip a day, or am too busy, or something else happens. I will try again tomorrow to create precious time for my healing.

In order to find the time for my self-care practice, I find I must get up at least 30 minutes earlier. On days that I think that 30 minutes of sleep is more important, then sometimes I opt for that kind of self-care. If I am tempted to stay in bed longer, I will often take a few minutes to practice this fun meditation based on Hawaiian Huna healing: Imagine a garden, preferably one that is totally made up rather than one you work in. Have this be your sanctuary, a place to go to in your mind any time for a minute of relaxation. Tend to the needs of your garden, and even invite helpers, such as birds or fairies, to help with the pruning, watering, hugelkultur building,

etc. As you are tending your garden, your subconscious sees it as tending to the needs of your body's healing. Powerful healing can come from this visualization meditation. And don't forget the ever-important permaculture tool: the hammock! Just lying in your hammock and "looking at" your meditation garden can be quite beneficial. This can either be a real hammock, or one in your imagination.

Once I do get out of bed, movement is key for my energy flow and physical connectedness of my body. After lying in bed for so many hours for sleeping, even just a few minutes of intentional movement can have a great effect on the rest of your day. A great way to wake up the body and actually reset the nervous system is simply a "Shake-Down"—start bouncing at the ankles, get the knees bouncing around, and slowly move up your body until your hands are waving, neck moving gently, and whole body is shaking around. I like to then throw all this built-up energy down to the Earth with a big breath, to be used by the Earth as energy compost. I run through the process three times. If you need to de-stress during the day, to do this for even one minute can help reset the mind, body, and soul. If needed, you can go into a restroom or other private spot and just shake it out for a bit. Funny as it sounds, it can really help the body's systems.

My massage guru, the late and great John Harris, taught me to simply put a tennis ball in a sock against the wall and rub around. It is great for those who have just been at work on the land or at a computer, and an easy way to do a deep self-massage. I set my alarm for

five minutes to be sure to take the time to get into the sore muscles thoroughly, release built-up tension, and make sure I am taking a few minutes for myself.

Some kind of a stress reducer is key to good health. Simply walking, which also brings in bilateral brain re-wiring for better emotional health, is a great practice, and a time to let your mind be clear. Journaling, talking to a friend on the phone, or some kind of way to let your thoughts flow outside your mind can aid greatly in self-care. Chi Gong, Brain Gym, The Genius of Flexibility, Pilates, and Yoga are all great forms of movement that can be found online, in classes, or through books. Combining mindfulness with movement produces a great yield for your efforts. This embodies another Permaculture Principle: produce the most yield with the least effort. I like to make little cards of my different movements or meditations and randomly draw one to decide what practice to do that morning, and to remind myself of the many tools available at any time.

Another quick favorite practice of mine is simply grounding when I feel overwhelmed or out of balance. I breathe deep, and imagine that like a tree, I have roots going deep into the Earth. Through the layers of soil and bedrock, I send my long tap root as a grounding cord deep to the Earth's core. Pulling up energy, I feel it circulate through my body and back down again. A few deep breaths doing this, and I am ready again for operating at a higher level of mental and physical ability.

It is all about creating a flow between your body's systems. I like to think of the body in terms of a permaculture design—an integrated whole that functions much better when everything is able to do its job properly. If something, like my shoulder, is really acting up, I try to integrate it with the rest of my body, rather than ignore it or get mad at it, though that is not always easy. I go between focusing on the spot in pain, then to a spot that feels good, and back and forth until my brain realizes it is much better to focus on the spot that feels good.

Every moment of your day can be part of your self-care practice. As you feed the chickens, for example, move with intention, stretch what is stiff, focus on the task at hand, and find joy in sharing with them what will bring them joy—food.

And of course, eating vibrant, alive, organic, perhaps even homegrown food helps the mind, body, and spirit thrive. Eating as a meditation is also a powerful exercise, chewing each bite with thought, intention, and appreciation.

Like feeding the chickens, self-care is best when it is just part of the daily routine, part of the integrative system. Feeling guilty about taking time for yourself is self-sabotage. Instead, consider taking the time to do some of these or similar practices of self-care as giving yourself a gift, which in turn is giving a gift to the world! 🍷

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*Hannah Apricot Eckberg is the Editor of Permaculture Magazine, North America (see [permaculturemag.org](http://permaculturemag.org)).*

*Taking time  
in nature is very healing.*



*Grounding  
meditation of  
being a tree can  
be very  
powerful.*



*Opening to our  
own healing power.*

Photos courtesy of Hannah Apricot Eckberg

# Facilitating Diverse Groups

*By Starhawk*

**E**dges or ecotones, where two different systems meet, are places of enormous diversity and dynamism in nature. Where the ocean meets the shore, the varying conditions of waves and tides create hundreds of niches where different forms of life can thrive.

But edges can also be places of enormous conflict and destructive change. In an old-growth forest, the trees that grow on the edge develop extra strength in their fibers and a spiral twist that helps them resist the wind. Cut them down, and the next storm may take out the forest.

When we open our groups up to more diversity, we create social edges. They can be places of immense learning and enrichment, but they can also become places of intense conflict and pain. We live in an historical moment where sensitivity is extremely high and society is deeply polarized around issues of race, of gender, of sexual orientation and class division and all the other factors that may be subject to discrimination. While we've made great strides in some areas—legalizing gay marriage, for example, and electing a black president—in other ways we are bombarded with the rhetoric of hate and the relentless tide of murders of people of color by police. On the edges of diversity, we often feel on edge—wary of receiving or inflicting pain.

Skilled facilitation can help us assure that diversity brings growth and resilience to our groups. Below, I would like to share some of the insights and lessons I have learned in half a century of wrestling with this issue. I have been fortunate in having many wonderful teachers and co-conspirators, including Pandora Thomas, Rushelle Frazier, and Charles Williams who work with me in Earth Activist Training, the permaculture training organization I direct. We offer Diversity Scholarships for people of color and differently-abled people, and making these resources available has significantly changed the demographics of our trainings—from mostly white to sometimes more than 40 percent people of color. Providing enough resources for groups instead of just one or two recipients also shifts the overriding culture of the group, and raises many challenges for the facilitators.

## Creating a Welcoming Environment

A facilitator's first task is to create a truly welcoming environment, where everyone can feel seen and valued. When people come to a new group, they are often a bit nervous. There's a bit of the child in each of us, wondering "Will the other kids like me?" For those in a target group for discrimination, that question broadens out. "Will people see beyond my race/gender/class/age/sexual orientation/physical ability and really see me?" How do we create an atmosphere that encourages people to do so?

First, beware of formulae that promise to do the work for us. Each group is different, and each constellation of needs and gifts may require its own response.

For example, it is customary now in progressive circles to ask people to state their preferred gender pronoun when they first introduce themselves. The idea is to make gender-fluid or non-binary people more comfortable and safe, so that they don't have to be the only ones to explain how they identify and whether we should use "he," "she," "they," or something else. And in many situations, this process can be a welcoming way of showing awareness and support.

But what if you have a group that includes some gender-fluid folks and many others from different cultures and backgrounds that have never encountered these ideas before and may find them disturbing or challenging? Sometimes stating gender pronouns might function more as an in-group ritual, a marker that displays our political savvy. It can leave the uninitiated feeling clueless and wrong.

How do we resolve these conflicting needs in a way that can further growth? Especially at the very beginning, when we have not yet established any group norms or support?

I began thinking about the complexities of identity after hearing Gregg Castro, speaking on a panel at a Pagan conference on indigenous experiences. "For a California Indian," he said, "your identity is your place."

Now, I often introduce groups by talking about the many and varied ways we each experience and construct our identities. Is it our place, our tribe, our clan, our gender, our work, our religion, our political affiliation, or whether we're a Mac or a PC person? I am a Jewish-American Pagan aging woman Wiccan author, activist, permaculture designer, teacher, change-maker, and many other things. Who are you?

I often start groups by breaking people into small groups or pairs to discuss the nuances of how they identify themselves, and then introduce each other.

Often, someone in the group will ask if we can each state our gender pronoun. Because the request comes from the group, and is not just something imposed by the facilitators, people feel more free to ask, “What is that about?” And the question then can lead to a truly meaningful discussion about gender and how we experience it.

Of course, that leaves us as facilitators vulnerable to being seen as clueless and unsophisticated, or worse, as unsympathetic to the needs of gender-nonconforming folks. So I might make special efforts to give off other signals that I am, indeed, aware of those issues and supportive. I might explicitly mention non-binary gender or say something like “women, men, and those who are gender-fluid or transcend the categories” in conversation.

There are other, simple things facilitators can do to create a feeling of welcome. Introduce yourself to new people, or introduce them to one another. When I think back on groups where I’ve been an outsider and yet felt very welcome—a neighbor’s Filipino wedding, a music festival where everyone else was 20 or 30 years younger—it was because people came up and introduced themselves. Even if you’re a shy person—I am!—push past it and extend yourself. And build into the group many chances for people to interact in pairs or small groups, so they get a chance to connect more intimately with a broader group of people.

Seek people out socially, outside of the classroom—sit with different people at meals, for example, not just your friends. A good facilitator is a bit like a good host at a party, introducing people, starting conversations, making sure shy people don’t get left out.

Say “racism.” Say the word, talk about it, early on. You don’t need to go into a political diatribe, but make racism present in the discussion, for that sends a message to the people of color in the room, “This aspect of my life is seen and acknowledged here.”

And acknowledge your teachers and influences. People who have been devalued need to know their contributions will be seen and valued, and honoring your influences can help set that tone. This article does not just reflect my own thinking and experience—it also comes from what I have learned over many years from working and struggling with many people. Here are some of my teachers and learning partners around these issues: Pandora Thomas, Charles Williams, Rushelle Frazier, Isis Coble, Luisah Teish, Ynestre King, Rachel Bagby, Margot Adair, Bill Aal, Shea Howell, Lisa Fithian, Juniper Ross, George Lakey, Fran Peavy, Johanna Macy, and many more.

## The Issue of Safety

If we truly welcome people into a group, how do we make sure the group is a safe place to be? We can make rules against using racial slurs or threats, but how do we protect against the micro-aggressions, those little digs that come from ignorance or unconscious bias?

There is no protocol or set of agreements we can make that will guarantee that no one will ever make a thoughtless remark, or say something insensitive. In our attempts to provide that safety, we may actually create the opposite. If we start out by saying, “This is a space in which we have zero-tolerance for racist, sexist remarks or name-calling or harassment,” the subtext is “This is a space full of people who are likely to use the N word or tell sexist jokes if not explicitly told not to!” Because otherwise, why would we need the rule?

I prefer to frame agreements as positives: “Can we agree that we want to treat everyone with respect, and use language that is respectful?” Or, more fully, I might say: “We’ve worked really hard to make this a diverse group, in many ways. Some of them are visible—like skin color, or the gender we present with. Many, many more aspects of diversity are invisible—our character, temperament, achievements, many aspects of our history, background, and culture. There’s a lot we don’t know about one another. We come out of a dominant culture where racism, sexism, heterosexism, and all the other ’isms are endemic, built into the structure. But can we agree that in this space, we want to value everyone here for the fullness of who they are? That we will strive to look beyond stereotypes and wrestle with our own prejudices, to see one another in our wholeness?”

I also want to establish an atmosphere that lets us all be less than perfect and encourages us to open up and learn rather than close down and defend. So I might say: “We all make mistakes. We all say things, at times, that are less than sensitive or that hurt someone else’s feelings, intentionally or not. Can we agree to be



Photos by Brooke Porter

open to feedback? That we'll do our best to learn from it, and take it as valuable information?

"And if we need help in that process, if we need someone to vent to or to run something by and give us perspective, or if we need support in confronting someone openly or bringing an issue to the group or the teaching team, who here is willing to offer that kind of support?"

Generally, almost everyone raises their hands, and now we've established the group as a pool of supporters rather than a bank of critical judges.

But what happens when somebody does make an insensitive or hostile remark? Then, as facilitators, it is our duty to intervene. But how do we do that in a way that educates, rather than simply polarizes?

There are two concepts that are helpful in understanding how our words or actions may have hurt somebody. The first is to recognize the difference between intent and impact. Maybe Joe's

intent when he wolf-whistles at Betty is only to express his admiration at how good she looks—but the impact may be to reinforce a lifetime's worth of experiences of men's entitlement to judge women's bodies.

The second concept is the difference between text and subtext. Text is the words I say; subtext refers to all the underlying meanings we intuitively understand, from tone, body language, and subtleties of language itself.

When a flamboyantly gay man says to an African-American roommate "Thank you for not being like all those other black men," the subtext is "Black men are homophobic." When an enthusiastic group member welcomes a new Latina participant by saying, "It's so good to have someone of your kind here," the subtext is "People like you don't really belong here—you're out of place."

Discussing these concepts in a group before incidents happen can give people a framework for understanding why a remark that seems innocent on the surface might actually be hurtful. Facilitators can encourage participants to let go of defending intentions, and instead open to feedback, take responsibility for the impact of their words and actions, and increase awareness and understanding.

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## Discussions of race, gender, etc. can be painful. But working through that pain is how we grow and make change.

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### When Pain and Conflict Erupt

We are all wounded by a dominant culture that does not value our inherent worth as human beings. Some get stabbed to the heart by being continually devalued because of something extraneous to our true worth: skin color, gender, physical ability or looks, age, sexual orientation, etc. Others suffer more subtle wounds by being overvalued for one of those same extraneous features. When we name the wounds, they often bleed afresh. So discussions of race, gender, etc. can be painful. But working through that pain can be immensely valuable, for that is how we grow and make change.

Racism and other forms of structural oppression are endemic, a constant, low-level or acute pain. I think of it like tinnitus. I have a hearing loss and a constant, irritating buzzing and hissing in one ear, that never goes away and interferes with every conversation. Tinnitus has been called "audible pain." Most of the time, I simply ignore it and focus on other things, because if I didn't, I'd go out of my mind. Discrimination is like that—always present, a static that comes into every relationship, a chronic, low-level pain that sometimes erupts into acute agony. And chronic pain can be exhausting and debilitating.

Most often in groups, the weariness comes from the micro-aggressions, the little digs, the jokes that go awry, the unconscious assumptions and insensitive remarks that the aggressors may not consciously intend to be a slight or even be aware of. It's the suggestion that isn't acknowledged, the smile that's not returned, the norms we unconsciously expect others to follow.

When we open up the topics of racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, we inevitably must confront the question of privilege—unearned social power and advantages accorded to us because of our skin color, gender, presentation, etc. People of privilege often go through a fairly predictable set of responses, similar to the stages Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified people go through when confronted with death: Denial—"I'm not racist!" Anger—"You're just playing the race card!" Bargaining—"If I call someone else out on their language, I can be the Good White Guy." Fear—"What will happen if we let these people take over?" Grief, guilt, and sometimes excruciating discomfort—I feel so bad about my privilege and your pain that I can only see you as a walking wound, not a person.

Why should acknowledging privilege feel like a kind of death? It's the death of a comfortable sense of self, the belief that whatever precarious sense of value you've achieved in your life is suddenly in question and rests on the broken backs of others.

The facilitators' task is to patiently shepherd people through this process, toward acceptance—"I am a person of value. I hold value that I have earned, and I also benefit from unearned privilege that I cannot escape, but can turn to the service of making a world of justice."



But people from targeted groups are often dealing with another kind of death—the kind where a cop shoots you when you are stopped for a traffic violation, or a homophobic attacker breaks your neck, or a rapist stabs you. Understandably, they may feel impatient with those responding to a purely symbolic death, and exhausted from being the objects of projections. So facilitators also need to make space for people from targeted groups to voice their pain and be recognized for their strength and contributions.

Facilitating can feel a bit like brokering a peace between warring nations, or attempting to reconcile a feuding couple. Good facilitators remain neutral, yet successfully establish an alliance with all sides. Skill, compassion, and training are all required, as well as a goodly dosage of pure dumb luck! We can also do the following:

**1. Do your own work.** Read, counsel, take workshops, ask for help from friends to move through your own deep feelings to a place where you feel comfortable with yourself.

**2. Whenever possible, have a co-facilitator that represents diversity.** If you're white, work with a person of color. If you are a person of color, a white co-facilitator can be a great asset in facilitating a mixed group. If you're a man, work with a woman.

**3. Set a strong container.** Pain will surface in these discussions. Make sure the space is safe, protected from interruptions or disturbances. Choose a time when discussion will not need to be cut off. Afternoons might be better than late-night sessions, so people don't go to bed in distress.

Who or what is going to contain the pain when it surfaces? Is that you—and are you ready for it? Or is it a process that you use, for example, a talking stick or Way of Council process specifically designed to let people share deep feelings without others responding or commenting? But be prepared to break the form if someone is saying or doing something deeply hurtful.

**4. The group may need to separate at times.** People of target groups may need a space where they can relax, share honestly what's going on with them without the fear of offending or the need to caretaker. People of privilege may need an opportunity to vent and emote without the burden of further triggering those from the target groups.

**5. Rebuild group cohesion.** Bring people back together again, to reconnect and share learning. This can take many forms—for example, a fishbowl where people of color talk and white people listen, or a sharing in pairs, where a man is paired with a woman or person of fluid gender. Group cohesion can also be rebuilt through collective work—moving a giant tree trunk together, or building a cob bench—or celebration. That wild dance party late at night may be just what everybody needs.

Working and learning together with a diverse group of people is one of the greatest opportunities we can have to grow. We can build true relationships and heart connections with amazing people and form strong friendships that have stood the test of conflict. Groups that embody the diversity of our world become richer, more colorful, more intelligent, resilient, vibrant, and fun—edges of creativity and positive change.

Teachers and leaders in the broad permaculture world are now understanding the need to strengthen the social aspect of regenerative design.

The ability of individuals and groups to collaborate successfully is one of the largest constraining factors in all forms of organizing, and as we succeed in creating more functional groups, all our work in every area of life will be strengthened. 🐦

#### Websites:

Starhawk: [starhawk.org](http://starhawk.org)

Earth Activist Training: [earthactivisttraining.org](http://earthactivisttraining.org)

Black Permaculture Network: [blackpermaculturenetwork.org](http://blackpermaculturenetwork.org)

Pandora Thomas: [www.pandorathomas.com](http://www.pandorathomas.com)

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*Starhawk is the author or coauthor of 13 books on earth-based spirituality and activism, including the classics The Spiral Dance, The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups, her visionary novel The Fifth Sacred Thing, and its long-awaited sequel, City of Refuge. Starhawk directs Earth Activist Trainings, teaching permaculture design grounded in spirit and with a focus on organizing and activism ([www.earthactivisttraining.org](http://www.earthactivisttraining.org), [starhawk.org](http://starhawk.org)). She travels internationally, lecturing and teaching on earth-based spirituality, the tools of ritual, and the skills of activism.*



# Five Tools to Help Groups Thrive

By Melanie Rios

I've noticed similar themes that underlie struggles within communities during the decades I've lived and worked in these groups. Good people get together with good intentions, and then find themselves wallowing in the doldrums of unresolved conflict, fear, isolation, and ineffective systems. Frederic Laloux's book, *Reinventing Organizations*,\* inspires helpful ideas for addressing the following kinds of situations:

*People join an ecovillage to live in community and close to nature, and later come to learn that there is disagreement about what these words mean. Angry factions develop over what kind of nature to cultivate at the village, with one group valuing food production on-site, another group wanting to cultivate native plants, and another group advocating for growing beautiful ornamental plants. There is disagreement about the meaning of community as well. Some residents hope the village will feel like a happy family with daily authentic connection. Others are busy with their nuclear families and work, and so are content to know their neighbors' names and to lend each other items occasionally. Some village members want to welcome neighbors outside the ecovillage onto the property, while others feel nervous about opening the ecovillage doors to those who don't live there. Disappointment due to mismatched expectations abounds.*

*Meetings are frustrating. Some people attribute the problem to one person who complains frequently in meetings on a recurring theme.*

*A few community members were excited about starting a business that they believed would benefit themselves, the group, and the larger community. A couple of people blocked this proposal, and the three initiators decided to move away in order to have the freedom to pursue their dream. Over time, there were fewer people still living at the community with energy for bringing new projects and ideas to the community and the world.*

I was moved by a permaculture convergence keynote address Doug Bullock gave about 10 years ago in which he said that we have the technological knowledge to solve the survival challenges humans and other beings are facing, and that what is limiting our success is our ability to work effectively with each other. I decided in that moment to be a practitioner of social permaculture, dedicated to helping groups that care about people and our planet to get more done while having fun. This article offers specific ideas for increasing joy and effectiveness in community, and focuses on an emerging approach to collaboration described by Frederic Laloux, who studied 10 financially viable businesses that serve their employees and their communities. He discovered three characteristics they all share in common:

- They each have a clearly articulated evolutionary purpose
- They welcome the whole self
- They are governed through self-management

One business Laloux studied is Buurtzorg, a Dutch health care organization in which small teams of nurses care for patients in their homes. Buurtzorg was founded with one group of 10 nurses in 2006, and had grown to 7,000 nurses by 2013, representing two thirds of all neighborhood nurses in the country. Buurtzorg has decreased the number of hours each patient needs professional care by 40 percent and decreased by one third the number of emergency hospital visits of their patients compared to the traditional care offered in the Netherlands. Patient health and satisfaction with their care increased, while absenteeism of nurses due to sickness has been cut 60 percent, and turnover is 33 percent lower. What can we who live and work within

intentional communities learn from this type of organization, which Laloux calls "Teal"? How might the three characteristics Laloux observed in the businesses he studied address the community scenarios described above?

## Articulating a Shared Evolutionary Purpose

An evolutionary purpose is one that seeks to contribute something of value to the world beyond the boundaries of the organization. In the first community scenario, people joined the ecovillage because they thought there was agreement about purpose, only later to discover that they meant different things by the words "community" and "nature." It's important that people who live and work closely with each other share the same goals, or at least support each other in pursuing different goals, and it's not enough to agree upon general and ambiguous terms. An ideal time to clearly articulate the group's purpose is when the group is first forming, as this helps people decide whether the community will be a good fit for them before they invest in moving in. But it's never too late to clarify purpose, and once the purpose is articulated, it should be revised periodically to keep it fresh. Here are a couple of tools that I have found useful for clarifying purpose:

### Tool #1:

#### A Question Process from *Moving Icebergs*

In this process from *Moving Icebergs: Leading People to Lasting Change*, Steve Patty offers some good questions for helping people ascertain whether they share the same purpose:

- What are your ultimate aims? By this he means, what kind of person do you want to be no matter what happens in the external world? (Honest? Kind? Compassionate? Curious?)
- What are your core convictions and as-



*Mindy speaks on behalf of Mothership community children at a Worldwork session.*



*Lauren describes an initiative she'd love to see happen at her community.*

sumptions? (Core convictions are your deepest values, for example that transparency is more important to you than confidentiality, or vice versa. Assumptions are key beliefs based on what you see in the world, such as that climate change is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.)

- What impact does your group intend to have? (There is so much to contribute to our world, and no one individual or community can do everything that is needed. What specifically will you focus on contributing as a group?)
- What are the best means to accomplish your chosen impact?
- What action steps will you take?

If there's not enough commonality in answering these questions within the forming or already existing community, a viable action step may be for some people to break off and start a different group. Or it may be that people deepen their appreciation for each other's passions through participating in this process, and graciously make more room for differences of perspectives within the community. The community that argued about what kind of plants to grow could decide to divide up the property into sections, with each group caring for part of the land held in common, or they could cultivate beautiful, native, food-producing plants.

## Tool #2: Worldwork

Developed by Arny Mindell of the Process Institute, Worldwork is a useful tool for addressing conflict related to differing purpose, such as whether vegan or omnivore food will be offered for community meals, or how much and what kind of supervision children are given. Here's how to hold a Worldwork gathering:

- One person speaks something that is true for them, or they may also speak what they imagine other people or entities might say on the topic. The goal is to have every possible perspective shared, even those that aren't in the room currently.

- People place themselves physically in the room based on how much they resonate with what was just said. They stand next to the speaker if they agree with what was said, and farther away if they disagree.

- Someone else expresses a different idea, and the others reposition themselves physically in relation to this speaker.

This process provides an efficient way to gauge the sense of the group on controversial topics. Participants aren't rigidly locked into their initial perspectives, as they find themselves moving close to people with different, seemingly contradictory perspectives. I have noticed that challenging issues often solve themselves after these sessions. After a worldwork session on raising children, for example, more community members engaged with the children, and parents became more consistent and clear about boundaries for their kids. Even without negotiating specific policies, safety concerns expressed in the worldwork session were addressed.

## Welcoming the Whole Person

What Laloux means by the expression "welcoming the whole person" is that feelings, intuitions, expressions of vulnerability, and rational thought are all invited to be expressed. A worker might let her colleagues know about extra responsibilities that have temporarily arisen at home, for example, and the coworkers might offer to cover some of her work roles so she can spend more time at home. This form of welcoming the whole person is fairly common in

intentional communities, unlike traditional businesses that limit acceptable expressions to those that are rational thought, so I would add some more ideas to this category to help stretch intentional communities.

The first idea is to warmly welcome people, beaming them energetic love, which will help in the scenario where someone repeats herself in meetings. Sometimes people show up in annoying ways because they want attention, and will seek negative attention when they don't receive the affection they long for. Affection is a basic human need, and people who don't receive enough of it tend to be anxious, which affects how they act and how people feel being around them. It's helpful to greet all community members with enthusiasm and kindness as they enter a meeting room, especially those who don't receive enough affection in their daily lives.

The second idea I would add to "welcoming the whole person" is to validate what is true and valuable in each person's sharing,

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**Welcoming the whole self means that feelings, intuitions, expressions of vulnerability, and rational thought are all invited to be expressed.**

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publicly acknowledging the contributions they bring to the group. In one meeting where I was a guest facilitator, there was someone who was very concerned about whether the group was following their agreed upon procedures, and I sensed others felt impatient with her concerns. When I thanked her for letting me know what these procedures were and for the important role she played in reminding people of them, she relaxed and agreed along with everyone else to put aside their traditional process for a specific amount of time in order to explore a different way of doing things.

The third additional aspect of "welcoming



Photos courtesy of Melanie Rios

the whole person” I recommend is to provide support for people to consciously expand their repertoire of behavior, exploring new ways of being in the world. An example is to invite those who speak often to listen more, and for quiet folks to share more in the group. In this way, everyone experiences more of the full range of being a person.

### Tool #3: The Zegg Forum

The Zegg Forum is a communication tool that encourages people to show their whole selves to their community or workplace, especially sides of themselves that others don't usually see.

- Everyone sits in a circle. People take turns walking the inside perimeter of the circle to share what is alive for them, including their joy, sadness, anger, and/or fear. The speaker may talk about other people in the room as long as they don't look at them while they are speaking about them.
- For the first part of the forum, people share for a maximum of two minutes each. The second part of forum is facilitated by a couple of people who might encourage the speaker to exaggerate something, to try on an opposite way of being, or to participate in a role play.
- After the speaker sits down, others who were listening enter the circle to offer appreciations for the speaker. They also offer “mirrors,” which are reflections about what the listener thinks might be under the surface of what the speaker said
- After a few mirrors, everyone claps, and a new speaker enters the circle.

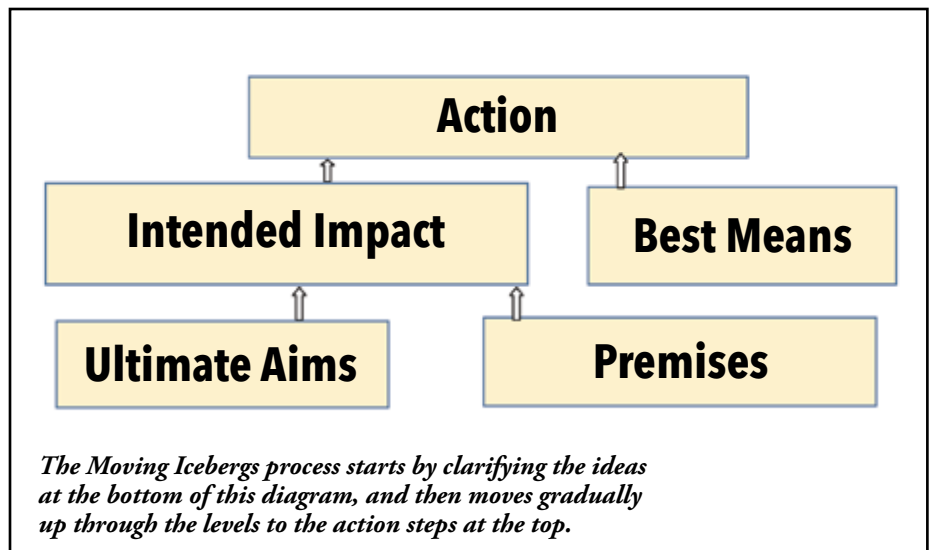
This process is helpful for airing resentments that arise in daily life, and for allowing people to see each other's personal struggles. It also offers opportunities for people to try on different ways of being in the world. One man who talked about feeling lonely accepted an invitation by the facilitators to wear a “passion man” superhero outfit with a heart attached to his chest for the next three days, while those listening were invited to offer him hugs and friendly connection. He appeared to be more socially confident and connected long after he stopped wearing the costume.

It's helpful to hold separate gatherings for the expression of feelings and decision-making because people who are comfortable expressing anger and other intense feelings can end up dominating in meetings where there are others who are less comfortable in the presence of these feelings. The folks who are not yet comfortable with the expressions of feelings tend to shut down mentally when strong feelings arise, and stop participating in the rational conversation required by effective decision-making. If the culture of the group shifts so that everyone learns to stay present in the presence of strong feelings, the two kinds of gatherings can then be combined.

### Governance by Self-Management

This third characteristic of the thriving businesses Laloux studied, self-management, provides ideas for addressing the third community scenario in which a few people want to start a business but are blocked from doing so. When implemented well, self-management brings out the best in people, including their dedication and creativity.

Self-management gives more power to small, semi-autonomous teams to make decisions, and these teams give more power to individuals than I've typically seen in intentional communities. This decentralization of power only works well when certain conditions exist, including the presence of a clearly articulated and shared evolutionary purpose and a group that welcomes the whole person. Two other conditions required for successful self-management are the “advice process” and a culture which supports frequent and skilled feedback.



### Tool #4: The Advice Process

One intentional community that is using this advice process is The Moss Milk Collective in Forks, Washington. Here's how they describe this on their website:

“Any person in this community can make a decision. But before making decisions that could have a significant impact on others, we ask that community members seek advice from all affected parties and people with experience or insight on the matter.... The person is under no obligation to integrate every piece of advice; the point is not to achieve a watered-down compromise that accommodates everybody's wishes. But advice is sought and taken into serious consideration. The bigger the decision, the wider the net is cast. Usually, the decision maker is the person who noticed the issue or the opportunity or the person most affected by it.”

I lived in an intentional community governed by the advice process 40 years ago, and loved the freedom it offered me to explore different careers and lifestyles. I started several businesses, and built a greenhouse that was attached to our house, all without a formal proposal or meeting to approve these initiatives. This approach is a radical departure from decisions based on consensus of the whole group!

### Tool #5: Frequent Feedback

Potentially destructive initiatives can be kept in check by a culture in which frequent feedback is offered between members of the community. A good resource for giving skilled feedback in delicate situations is in Susan and Peter Glaser's book *Be Quiet Be Heard*:

- Ask if it's a good time to talk
- Tell the person how you feel in response to something specific they did or said
- Acknowledge how you have contributed to the situation
- Offer something you will do, make a specific request, and then negotiate a solution.

So there are five tools for implanting what Laloux calls “Teal Organizations.” I would love to hear from you about your explorations into getting more done with your groups while having more fun, as I'm in the process of creating a website with these and many more ideas. Send your experiences along to be included! 🌈

*Melanie Rios consults and offers presentations on effective collaboration, including Teal Organizations, sociocracy, and emergency preparation. She loves to grow food using terra preta soil which she produces at her home in Portland, Oregon. She also enjoy singing with friends and backpacking in alpine mountains. Her email address is mel@rios.org.*

*\*I highly recommend that you read the book, or at least watch the YouTube video about Laloux's work: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcS04BI2sbk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcS04BI2sbk).*

# ECOSEXUALITY: Embracing a Force of Nature

By Lindsay Hagamen



Photos by Sheena Davis

*It is only when we deal with the dis-eased character of modern sexuality and the ecological crisis as a single problem that is rooted in an erotic disorder that we can begin to discover ways to heal ourselves of our alienation from our bodies and from nature.<sup>1</sup> —Sam Keen*

“Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?”<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau’s words ring just as true now as they did when he wrote them up on the highest mountain in Maine over 150 years ago. Permaculture—rewilding—ecosexuality—these may be terms that resonate more strongly with today’s crowd, but the urge is the same: a calling to immerse oneself in the raw forces of nature, to remember that being human means we are part of this Earth, and to relearn how to draw our sustenance and nourish our souls from the very places we call home.

In an age dominated by individual isolation, virtual reality, and the information economy, the hunger to partner with Life in its eternal dance and to experience the depth of real human connection is palpable. The primal energies of nature are as alluring as they are frightening, they invigorate us as much as they humble, they show us how fragile it is to be made of flesh and bone. Beneath the superficiality of the Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook posts, the soul of the millennial generation is crawling, naked and knowing, across the forest floor seeking the marrow that can nourish it back to life.

There is a movement underfoot. Alongside the software programmers and coffee-shop baristas, there are those who are returning to the forests, building with cob, practicing permaculture, creating community, sipping on bone broth, tanning hides, and fermenting everything from fruit and veggies to milk and grains. Thousands of young women across

the country are meeting on the new moon to honor the cycles of their blood, others are embracing the wildness and sacredness of their sexuality, still others are practicing as herbalists, midwives, death doulas, and as practitioners of other traditional arts.

You could chalk this up to youthful exuberance or a primitive backlash against the sterility of cubicle life, but I think that this trend strikes at a vein that runs deep into the human psyche. Ever since the beginning of the industrial revolution, nature writers have grasped at words for our relationship with this Earth—a relationship they describe with increasing intimacy the further it slips out of our outstretched hands.

Standing amidst the towering trees and exalted rock faces of Yosemite in the early 1900s, John Muir exclaimed that “no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”<sup>3</sup> For Aldo Leopold in the 1940s, the relationship focused on engaging with the land “as a community to which we belong.”<sup>4</sup>

By the early 1990s, Wendell Berry described his experience with the land he called home in far more intimate terms: “bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh.”<sup>5</sup> And it was Terry Tempest Williams who cut through any remaining artifice to urge activist, academic, and farmer alike to remove our masks and “admit we are lovers, engaged in an erotics of place.” As if to give us permission to acknowledge what we already know in our bones to be true, she added, “There is nothing more legitimate and there is nothing more true... We love the land. It’s a primal affair.”<sup>6</sup>

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As the spectrum and complexity of sexual expression becomes more readily accepted, the veil of shame that has cloaked sexuality since the dawn of agriculture is slowly beginning to lift. Sexuality finally has the opportunity to be understood on its own terms. Far from seeing the erotic as obscene or sexual desire as offensive, philosopher Sam Keen describes eros, or erotic energy, as the motivating principle of all life; it is eros that drives the acorn to become the oak. Erotic energy exists in all of nature, and it moves through us and around us, intertwining us with all Life. Sexuality is a potent and precious expression of this life energy, and it represents our primal desire to merge with Life itself.

This cosmetic-free and barefoot expression of sexuality is the adult child of the 1960s sexual revolution. Sobered by the prevalence of STIs and humbled by the rate of divorce and date-rape, intention and consent now take precedence over experimentation and drug use. Today's hunger is more for authenticity and community, holistic health and sustainability, and it translates into an acceptance that our bodies are born from this Earth. Gender norms slip away. Categories become cages. Nudity becomes nakedness. *Do not look away. This is who I am. I am of this Earth.*

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The impulse to embrace the Earth—wildness, bodies, sex, death, food, community, each other—is simultaneously an act of love and instinct. The urge to protect the very things that give us life is a basic instinct of survival. The drive to extend ourselves to others with courage and compassion in a time of crisis is love. As a social movement, ecosexuality emerges out of the deep place in our bodies that is retching in the pain we are inflicting on the world—on ourselves—and is grasping for the only thing that can bring it to an end: the rapture and pleasure of humbly submitting to intimacy so profound we begin to feel the Earth simultaneously as lover and as self.

Beneath the complexity and confusion of the ecological, economic, political, and erotic crises of our time lies one simple cause—disconnection. What more intuitive or logical response could there be to a crisis of disconnection than to once again hold the things that actually matter so close that we can feel their beating hearts—our bodies, the earth that sustains us, the places we call home, the people we call community? For in partnering with a place and its people, we draw strength and sustenance, purpose and meaning. Perhaps enough to even heal our self-inflicted alienation from this embodied world.

The search for reconnection with the natural, the embodied, and the authentic is what drives many branches of the ecological movement today. Permaculture seeks intimacy with the living systems that provide for our sustenance. Rewilding aims to reconnect the inner and outer wild landscape, to embrace it and live within it. Fostering communication, trust, and love with fellow humans so we can better live together is a focus of many intentional communities. Ecosexuality integrates all these elements with an explicit invitation to come back into our bodies and embrace the erotic energy that animates us and all of Life.

The path towards such profound intimacy with land and community requires time, knowledge, and ultimately love: we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not spend time with. It also requires skill, discipline, and patience. Whether it be with tree, rock, or person, letting another in, in their wholeness, requires that we suspend belief, let go of fantasy, and be exquisitely present.

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Like wind, water, or any other force of nature, erotic energy moves through our communities, organizations, and landscapes. It can be empowering and invigorating, and it can be destructive and debilitating. Yet, rather than acknowledge sexuality as a force of nature that greatly influences every social endeavor, it is often cast aside as a private matter—as being of little relevance to efforts to live communally, share power, deepen knowledge, develop alternative economies, pass wisdom down through the generations, and create a culture that respects all of nature and all those who call Earth home.

Isolating sexuality is foolish at best. Wendell Berry offers far more condemning words: “the failure to imagine sex in all its power and sanctity is to prepare the ruin of family and community life.” For sexual love lies at the heart of a community and ecological life, “it brings us into the dance that holds community together and joins it to its place.”<sup>7</sup>

In embracing sexuality and erotic energy as an inherent part of our communities, and responding to the deep hunger we carry for intimacy in this time of such profound disconnection, ecosexuality offers a proactive approach that can heal and transform.

Imagine the world we will co-create together when we:

- Meet our needs through deep intimacy with Earth, self, and community, instead of goods and services;
- Design our relationship networks with as much care and intention as we design our permaculture gardens and community governance systems;
- Allow our love for this Earth to transform all aspects of our lives, including our intimate relationships;
- Channel erotic energy to benefit the ecosystems we love just as we might channel wind, water, and other energies of nature;





- Engage with the Earth as a lover and partner who we tend to, care for, and respect in a mutual relationship where we give more than we take;
- Be as intentional about sex as we are about what kind of foods we eat, which products we buy, and what plants we sow in the garden;
- Allow pleasure to be a guiding principle as we engage whole systems thinking within our communities;
- Allow ourselves to experience the sensual in nature and the nature in our sensuality;
- Give ourselves in service to the lands that feed us, the ecosystems that keep us healthy, and the communities that support us;
- Love our bodies as ecosystems and our ecosystems as bodies.

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Every year, earth-lovers from all walks of life journey to the forests I call home on the plateau that descends off of Mount Adams in southern Washington for the EcoSex Convergence. Infused with a level of intentionality, sobriety, and intimacy unusual for a summer festival, the gathering aims to build a regional community of ecosexual practitioners who support each other in the transition to a love-based, sustainable culture.

For many, these five days in the forest are a time to reunite with old friends, develop new ones, and strengthen their personal relationship with the land. Others come drawn by the opportunity to teach and learn practical skills or to experience a place where sexuality is treated with intelligence and authenticity alongside conversations about food systems and gift economies. For some it's a rare opportunity to be able to make love in the forest under the night sky or feel the primal energies evoked by the rhythm of drums and the light of fire. But for all, it's a place where the wholeness of who they are is welcome and held by community, creating an all too rare experience where they are able to express their deepest longing, deepest sorrow, and deepest joy for the Earth we know as partner, lover, and self.

For, only when we create a container that is loving enough and strong enough to embrace the erotic, do we create a container that is loving enough and strong enough to embrace all of Life itself. Can we really afford anything less? 🍷

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*Lindsay Hagamen is a steward of the Windward Community in southern Washington. She is coauthor of *Ecosexuality: When Nature Inspires the Arts of Love* and co-creator of the annual *EcoSex Convergence*. Lindsay enjoys immersing her hands in rich garden soil, giving belly rubs to her pigs, and being a lover of the Wild.*

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# Public vs. Private: GROUP DILEMMA LAID BARE!

By *M. Broiling and T. Shirtless*

**A**mong the perennial questions our community grapples with: how “exposed” do we want to be?

We operate a conference center, hold courses and workshops, host visitors, and receive frequent postal and freight deliveries. More often than not, our conference guests, students, and visitors fall on the socially progressive side of the spectrum, but most are not unreconstructed hippies or obviously enlightened indigo, crystal, or rainbow children. Nor are the relatives of everyone who lives here. Nor, indeed, are all of us.

Our neighbors aren’t either, and have a tendency to leap to quick conclusions on seemingly scant evidence. A drumming and chanting ceremony at the fire circle years ago precipitated a persistent rumor that we were a satanic cult. The logical leap from “glimpse of skin” to “nudist colony” is a surprisingly short one to make, within some neighbors’ mentality.

We’ve defined “clothing required” and “clothing optional” zones in our community, but few community members are fully satisfied with these. Clothing is required in areas that are visible from our main drive, and that are in or around our main dining area, kitchens, offices, and classrooms. It is generally required in any areas used by conference guests, when they are here, even in those that are normally clothing-optional. It is optional in most places that are generally used only by the community, as long as they are not in sight of our main drive, a neighbor’s property, or a road.

We generally agree on the meaning and application of “clothing optional”: complete nudity is acceptable. “Clothing required” is more tricky to define.

In most places other than our certified kitchen, male toplessness is accepted and practiced in hot weather. However, female toplessness is not accorded the same status. Every few years, this becomes a topic of

discussion at a community meeting. We all agree that the distinction is patently unfair to women, who are required to endure discomfort that men are not. But the “public” part of our identity—and our economic reliance on it—always lead to the same conclusion: we can’t change the policy by which required clothing includes tops for women, but not for men.

Some men and women have lobbied for a ban on male toplessness wherever female toplessness is not allowed. Others have suggested that men can show support for women by voluntarily resisting the urge to take off their shirts in these circumstances. Others have said that male toplessness is the first step toward liberation, and that one step is better than none. Others have suggested that we change the policy to allow both male and female toplessness, and let the chips fall where they may in terms of impact on our reputation and businesses. And still others have suggested that in the absence of an immediate policy change, civil disobedience is the appropriate response: breaking our own rules to force the issue, and as a step toward getting comfortable enough to overturn them officially.

Ironically, toplessness is totally legal in our area for women as well as men—including on the streets of the nearest city. But a combination of conservative rural neighbors and a diverse clientele has kept our community—which fashions itself “ahead of the times” in most realms—behind the times here.

Although this gets under many community members’ skin—at the same time that it keeps many community members’ skin under clothing—the compromise endures. 🐦

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*On hot days, M. Broiling and T. Shirtless are (respectively) sweltering, and comfortable, around the community picnic tables at lunchtime.*







# THE PRIVATE IS POLITICAL

## or: There cannot be peace on earth as long as there is war in love

By Leila Dregger

**S**ummer 2016. In Tamera, the community in southern Portugal which is my home, we are expecting two children to be born. The parents live together with their friends, other children, and lovers in one of our community houses. Any time now the big chime could sound. Two times means: the birth starts. Five times means: the child is born. We will all be there, as we were many times before with the births of many children, most of us outside of the birth house, singing for them, supporting them, celebrating with them, and eventually welcoming the new beings on earth.

I have known the two mothers-to-be since they were little. As a community member I have taken part in their development, in their love stories, their ups and downs, their education, their growth into their own individual power. It is still a miracle for me to see them now becoming mothers.

*To whom will their children belong? Who will own them?* Everybody recognizes how absurd the question is when it's put like this. We all will care for the children, and along with the parents there will be some others around them who take a special responsibility for them, providing them with contact, love, and guidance. Private ownership however is an idea that could develop only in a sick world.

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**H**ow did it start? Let's take a brief historical look. *Privare* is Latin and means to steal, to rob. The Old Romans seem to have been

conscious that our private property is something that we have stolen; we stole it away from the original community, the tribe. When we declare something as private—our money, our opinion, our love life—we should be aware that originally it was a part of the common good. Everything belonged to everyone, because the members of a tribe felt as one. Just like the limbs of one body, they felt the needs of each of their comrades, and they knew that survival and thriving depended on that feeling of oneness.

When the first empires destroyed the original tribes and were looking for ways to dominate the people and lure them from their power, they developed the strategy of *divide et impera*—divide and conquer. The idea was clever and extremely successful: If people lose the feeling of unity among them but rather feel separation, they are busy with fighting against each other rather than against their rulers, and the permanent quarrel distracts them from the power they actually have when they are united.

Privatisation was the last shot of this strategy: dividing us up into millions of little units called families has made our world very small. We focus our energy and responsibility on only the smallest pool of people around us. Family first. The others are the others. Today, where instead of families we have a society of singles, this *we* was even replaced by the *I*. The culture that has developed under these conditions is a society of separation, ruled by private interest instead of the common care for each other and our planet. Loss of community has led to a loss of natural ethics and all kinds of social diseases. Most of the

random killings and amok attacks of this year can be seen as a cry of pain for losing the most essential condition in our lives: the connection with each other.

Women were the ones hit by this development the most. The original tribes had honoured the Goddess and the Feminine as principles of life and fertility, as historians know today. Women chose their lovers freely, they

came very limited, and she was more and more separated from unity with other women. Religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism provided the underlying ideology for that development: Women are connected to Original Sin.

But why did women accept it? What made us play along when we were losing so much?

There are two answers: First, the process happened with extreme violence, which is too painful to share here. Women who did not obey the new emperors were tortured and killed.

But the second answer is as powerful: love. All her wishes to love, to care, to be there for somebody, which were part of the glue of the original tribes, were now directed into her little family or relationship. "I love you! Only you!" Those sentences made us women give up our

power and the bases of our knowledge: community, connection, and oneness. In my eyes it is very obvious: women's liberation needs community. We will unfold our full potential to love and care and create not in privacy, but in connectedness to others and the whole.

Eventually, in the last century, the concept of privacy and separation was challenged. "The private is political" was an idea of the hippie movement. Tamera's founder Dieter Duhm, a bestselling author involved

in the student movement in Germany in the '60s, wrote one of the most quoted statements of that time: "Revolution without inner liberation is counter-revolution."

Before that time a political activist could speak about peace and justice in public and beat up his wife back home without anybody seeing this as a contradiction. The political and the private were regarded as two different worlds, and double standards were normal.

But consciousness changed. An awakening collective mind discovered that everything we are doing and how we are doing it has a meaning and an impact: the things we eat, how we use our resources, how we build, the way we treat our neighbors, lovers, and enemies, how we are in resonance with our souls...this all makes a difference. It even makes a global difference. This is central to the political theory of Tamera.

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The community that is today Tamera started in 1978, at a time when at least in Europe the leftwing movement was in a deep crisis. People understood that ideologies would not change the world. They needed examples, experience, and real knowledge about a new society.

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## We will unfold our full potential to love and care and create not in privacy, but in connectedness to others and the whole.

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were powerful, carried the responsibility for the most crucial areas of life, and motherhood was seen as a role model for a just, caring, and wise leadership—a quality that was also required from male leaders. The famous Iroquois constitution asked from their chiefs to be "like a good mother."

As tribes were overthrown, the Feminine became less and less respected, and in the end of that process women were made a private possession of one man. While in the past a woman had provided her social skills and loving care for the whole community, she now had to do everything for one man: give birth to HIS children, raise them, cook for HIM, keep HIS house—her circle of activities be-



Photos by Simon du Vinage

Three young people—Dieter Duhm, Sabine Lichtenfels, and Charly Rainer Ehrenpreis—met and decided to gather specialists of flow research, solar power, holistic medicine, systems theory, Biodynamics, and other areas of knowledge. They wanted to found an alternative university with teachers who were not heard at other places because their knowledge would not conform to the capitalistic world. For this they rented an old farm far outside of the cities, renovated the pigs' stable, and started a future lab.

It was an ambitious and charming idea. The specialists did come, and contributed their work and skills—and then the problems started. All of them were dedicated to creating a better world, but none of them were able to really listen to each other, to give space for the other's voice, to create something together, to reach common decisions, to deal with different opinions in a constructive way, to deal with each other's moments of anger, jealousy, fear. The founders of the project had to learn: a bunch of geniuses doesn't make a community. Behind all the intelligent arguments they had, they felt ruled by the personal fears of being not accepted, not loved, separated. They had reached a point at which so many initiatives and communities fail and split. How can we hope to create a global alternative if we don't overcome this point?

As a consequence they decided to start a social experiment with 50 people, initially steering all their attention toward building community. They looked at topics which are normally defined as private or personal: anger, love, jealousy, hatred, fear, relationship,





competition. Where do these forces come from? What makes them so strong that they undermine our best intentions? And how can we integrate them in a healthy way?

Three amazing, crazy, challenging, euphoric, and extraordinary years followed, during which the mainly young people challenged the bases of our society and every barrier that people have erected among them. Nothing was taken for granted. Nobody left during this time. They dug the garden and swam in icy creeks in winter, they looked for God and truth, they made their lives into theater pieces and asked each other during days and nights without sleep: who are you, what do you want? Humor and art were the major survival tools.

Insights came on a daily base. It was surprising how best friends turned into enemies when they started to love the same person. It was amazing how fast people with contradicting opinions could find a solution once they revealed the underlying emotional truth among them. It was mindblowing how often a sick person healed immediately when he or she revealed the thought or the condition that had made him sick in the first place. And how often this reason had to do with an unspoken sexual desire or with a longing to belong.

During these years, the community set cultural and social foundations for a peace society that they intended to build: it is based on truth in love and trust in community. The word “free love” is very inadequate to reveal the depth of this experience and practise, the radicality and readiness for personal change. The gold they found was community: An intact community based on truth, trust, and mutual compassion can embed all kinds of love relationships and can eventually heal love from fear and loss.



Thirty years later, the original group has grown immensely. Tamera in Portugal has 170 people living on the site and thousands of partners and coworkers throughout the world. All projects and groups of Tamera—the solar technologists as well as the healers, the place of the children as well as the political activists—require daily time and space for creative sharing and personal healing. The more truth we can dare to share, the more trust we can build and the better are our chances to create something new.

There is a Political Ashram—we call our spiritual center “political” because we think the most spiritual quality is acting out of compassion for the world—and there is a Love School in Tamera. The Love School has a program for each age group: for the kids it is mainly a school for creat-

ing friendship. We grown-ups go there to share, to learn, to celebrate sensual love and sexuality. There is a program for people who prepare for parenthood, there is a meeting for mature women, a meeting for youths with all their burning questions. In Summer, there is an open siesta every lunch break on the terrace of our Temple of Love. Community members can go there and rest, have a coffee, meet their lovers or a new acquaintance, find a space in nature or a room in the temple.

“I could never go there. Have you overcome jealousy?” a guest asked me recently. No, we have not overcome jealousy, but we don’t take it so seriously anymore and we try to not let jealousy rule our lives. We found out that the love between partners deepens when they support each other in their full true longing, even if it might lead them to others for a while. Once you experience this you might find a reaction other than jealousy when your partner reveals his longing.

A new friend, Rita from Lisbon, who came to Tamera recently, said: “The Portuguese culture has mixed reactions on your idea of free love. The generation of my grandmother were all married and all had affairs. She called it the glue of the society. The generation of my parents demanded a decision from the partners: either you are faithful or I leave you. The result was numerous divorces and a deeply shaken society which lost their glue. Tamera could help a lot.”



*Wednesday, 11th of August:* The entire community of Tamera is gathered around a pool of water in which a mother is about to give birth, accompanied by her partner and two midwives. We, the community, have been singing now for several hours, answering every moan of pain with our voices of encouragement and anticipation. Although most mothers prefer a smaller circle of close friends to accompany her, this mother wishes to have everybody here, and we as community receive the big gift of life. And now it happens: one last push, and the tiny boy stretches his fingers into the world. The first sound he hears, while his parents hold him tenderly on their chests, are our voices welcoming him into this world. May his life be guided by trust and the miracle of community. 🍷

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*Leila Dregger is a graduate agricultural engineer and longtime journalist. Her primary areas of focus are peace, ecology, community, and women. From 2012-2015, she was the editor of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) International newsletter, and today is press officer for the Tamera ecovillage in Portugal, her home community. She teaches constructive journalism for young professionals and students, as well as in crisis regions, and is the author of several books.*

# Preventing Child Sexual Abuse IN COHOUSING COMMUNITIES

By Linda B. Glaser

An idyllic scene in the pond at EcoVillage at Ithaca, the water inviting on a hot day, adults and kids splashing exuberantly and playing in the shallows.

But under the surface of the opaque water, something else is going on. One of the men swimming with the kids is a visitor, not anyone's parent. One of the kids reports later that he's acting "creepy" and chasing them underwater. The kid's parent called me, one of the burning souls behind EcoVillage's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention (CSAP) Committee, so we could decide if action needed to be taken. That time, fortunately, it didn't: the visitor was gone the same day and didn't come back.

Another, more serious incident happened just as the CSAP Committee was getting organized in 2011. A man—let's call him Jack—was renting a room from a long-time resident. Jack seemed very community-spirited: always ready to help out, friendly, enthusiastic, and willing to pitch in. Just after he announced he was going to buy a house and become a cohousing member, he invited one of the young boys in the neighborhood over to his room. Jack told him the visit would be their secret. The boy was not to tell his parents.

See anything wrong with this picture? You should. Enforced secrecy is one of the most powerful weapons sexual predators wield against their victims.

Thankfully, the boy told and his mom called me. But what to do? I had no doubt that Jack would deny any abusive intentions if confronted. We needed to send him a message another way. We decided to post a notice on the Common House door about the Sexual Abuse Prevention Committee's intentions to safeguard our community's children and announce a meeting. I sent it out via email, too.

The morning after we announced the CSAP Committee's existence, Jack announced he'd had a sudden change in plans and was leaving EcoVillage immediately, rather than buying a house. He was gone within two days.

Predators don't stay where they fear exposure. This is the strongest tool a community has in preventing predators from establishing a foothold. Be public, be clear, and be strong about your commitment to child safety.

But it's important to note here that most child abuse is committed by people a child knows well, and that often means family members. These are not predators who will be deterred by public community efforts. But those efforts still matter, because they discourage a culture of silence and offer clear pathways to help and support when a child has been abused or an adult suspects that abuse is taking place.

EcoVillage at Ithaca was founded in 1997 and has grown from one neighborhood to three. In 2011, there were 60 households and dozens of children at EcoVillage, ranging from baby to teenager. And we were committed to keeping every one of them safe to the best of our ability.

Our committee operated on two fronts: establishing guidelines for the community and education for parents and the community at large. The education part was easy. We had a great partner in Ithaca's Advocacy Center, which provides support, advocacy, and education for survivors of domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and adult sexual assault. They conducted workshops for us at EcoVillage on issues like child-to-child sexual activity, caring bystanders, and teen sexuality.

We also facilitated a group read of *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe (and Parents Sane)* by Gavin de Becker, which covers topics like safety skills for children out-



side the home, warning signs of sexual abuse, and how to screen babysitters. The book generated intense and heartfelt discussions about parents' fears for their children's safety—as well as conversations about what is appropriate in a community and how to avoid appearances of misconduct.

One example raised by a father during the discussions was their family's attitude towards nudity: within the closed doors of their home they often walk around unclothed in the hot weather. But in cohousing doors are rarely locked. What if one of their son's friends comes in unannounced and the father is unclothed? What if that child is female and in her family nudity is not okay? We talked about the pros and cons of changing family norms to conform to mainstream values, as well as the value of open discussion with the parents of the children caught in such a situation.

The most important and most difficult work we did, though, was hammering out guidelines for the community (see below). This was not easy. Living in community is supposed to be about building trust with your neighbors and raising kids as a village. When we broached putting restrictions on behavior between adults and children, and raised the specter of abuse, people felt uncomfortable: abuse couldn't happen here! They also said they felt mistrusted, as though by following the guidelines they

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## When we broached putting restrictions on behavior between adults and children, and raised the specter of abuse, people felt uncomfortable: abuse couldn't happen here!

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were being defined as potential predators.

During one discussion of the draft guidelines, a mother of two asked, "Is this coming from a place of fear that bad things will happen?" She didn't want our community's policies to be fear-based.

"Bad things do happen," I answered her. "The guidelines are intended to empower children to identify suspicious situations so they can keep themselves safe."

A father didn't like the point about private spaces. "I want to encourage, not discourage, intergenerational contact," he said. My answer: "The guidelines are not intended to discourage contact, but to put it in a safe context."

One difficult aspect of these discussions was that many people brought their own histories of abuse to the conversation, consciously or unconsciously, so that even raising the topic served as an emotional trigger. The feelings were so strong that ultimately we backed away from making the guidelines we developed mandatory.

We did, however, gain agreement to include the guidelines in the education process for prospective new residents of EcoVillage. Including the guidelines sends a strong message to anyone considering a move to EcoVillage that this community does not welcome child abusers and will act aggressively to protect its children.

### ECOVILLAGE SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION GUIDELINES

Our community values the safety of all residents. To this end, a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Committee formed to support ongoing community education on sexual abuse prevention and provide a forum for discussion and the establishment of community guidelines. The committee is open to any adult resident of EcoVillage willing to become educated on abuse prevention and to provide support to others in times of need.

The aim of community guidelines on abuse prevention is to:

1. Keep our children safe;
2. Prevent misunderstandings among parents, adults, and children; and
3. Send a strong message that child predators are not welcome in our community.

As adults, we commit to being responsive to any concerns that a child is able to share. We encourage community members, child or adult, to communicate with a child's parents or with a professional at the Advocacy Center if they notice something that seems inappropriate or makes them uncomfortable.

### Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Recommendations

The Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Committee recommends the following definition and guidelines for EcoVillage. (Note: These also apply to older children dealing with younger ones. According to some research, as much as a third of all sexual abuse of children is committed by someone under the age of 18. Children, particularly younger children, may engage in inappropriate interactions without understanding the hurtful impact it has on others.)

These guidelines are intended to create an atmosphere of openness and a feeling of security and empowerment for children, and in no way to discourage intergenerational visiting.

*Definition of Abuse:* "Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power over a child or teen and a betrayal of

trust. Child sexual abuse occurs when a child or teenager is forced or tricked into sexual activity by a teenager or adult. Child sexual abuse can be physical, visual, and verbal.”—The Advocacy Center

*Definition of Child:* A minor; any person under the age of 18. In New York state, children under the age of 17 cannot legally consent to sexual activity.

### Suggested Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Guidelines:

1. When a child visits your home, check that the parent knows where the child is either by asking the child (when age appropriate) if s/he has permission to visit, or by contacting the parents.
2. Before inviting a child into a private space such as your car or home, check that the parent knows where the child is either by asking the child (when age appropriate) if s/he has permission to enter, or by contacting the parents.
3. Parents can choose to give standing permission to their children to enter certain households or to accept rides from certain people. Adults can check either with the parent, or with the child when appropriate, regarding such permission.
4. Children should not be told to keep a secret from their parents (surprises are intended to be eventually told; secrets are not).
5. In recognition that people have widely varying comfort levels with nudity, adults are expected to check with a child's parents before being unclothed in a child's presence (such as in the sauna, the beach during nude bathing, etc.).
6. Adults will listen to and respect a child when s/he expresses discomfort with a person's behavior or touch (including that of his/her parents).
7. Any child who tricks or forces a younger child into sexual activity should receive a therapeutic evaluation and care, as recommended by the child's mental health evaluator. Parents should follow the recommendations of a mental health professional who has evaluated this issue in their child, and provide the appropriate restrictions and supervision to ensure that there is no opportunity for further such actions with other children. [This guideline was recently added to address an issue that was not previously considered by the committee.]

The Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Committee is available to answer questions about the guidelines and to discuss their application in the EcoVillage community. The Committee will not conduct investigations to determine whether child sexual abuse has occurred. Any case of suspected abuse should be referred immediately to the proper authorities.

The Advocacy Center in Ithaca is available on a 24-hour basis at 277-5000 to answer questions and offer help regarding sexual abuse and domestic violence. 🐦

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*Linda B. Glaser is staff writer and publicist for the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University. She believes passionately that all children have the right to grow up in a safe environment.*



Photos by Philip Glaser

# FINDING BALANCE of Public and Private in Community

By Helen Iles



I have arrived at the community towards late afternoon. Their homes are spread over a large expanse of property and there is no one at the communal area, so I drive along the road, looking for the right place. My hire car is a bright orange *Spaceship* and hard to miss and before long I am approached by a woman who marches up and raps on my window. I wind it down to say hello. “What are you doing *sticky beaking* around here?,” she barks.

If there is one theme that keeps emerging from my living in and travelling amongst communities, it is the issue of public and private space. In the individualistic society which is promoted by global capitalism, it’s a radical act to choose to live collectively. Sharing, be it space, food, or resources, has not been strongly promoted by those who want us to consume as much as possible and our shared spaces, the commons, if you will, are being swiftly eroded by private interests. School grounds are being sold off in lucrative housing deals, parks are being replaced by offices, and forests are being bulldozed to make way for roads. Whilst it’s true that in communities with an environmental focus, the sharing of resources is a defining element of their *raison d’être*, the sharing of space continues to be fraught with difficulty. As people brought up to hold privacy and private property dear, we are often too keen to delineate that which belongs to me and is mine, and mine alone. For instance, those choosing to live collectively in the ’70s often chose to share land and property. Now, even in community it is far more likely that individual houses and plots will be held in private ownership.

The division between public and private space is one which can be encoded into a community’s earliest plans and amended as members discover the reality of their individual needs. At Commonground Co-operative in rural Victoria, Australia, they decided early on to share all facilities. They even had a “shared purse” whereby all income was pooled and divided equally amongst the members. Their home was designed and built collectively, with a communal kitchen and dining room and shared meals. However, from the outset, each resident was given their own private room and even people in couples have their own individual quarters. Bathrooms are communal, too, but with a concession that if you want some privacy, you can hang a sign on the door to let others know you don’t wish to be disturbed.

The shared nature of community life is probably the part which most of us would find a challenge. “Sharing with other people?” teases Myles, a member of Tasmania Ecovillage in Tasmania. “Living side by side? Eating together? I found the idea abhorrent!” Myles cites his inner “recluse” as the reason for this, but the truth is that we all have moments when we need to be quiet, when we want some time “to ourselves,” and we worry that community life will be too busy for that.

In the example I gave at the beginning, by way of explanation I was told that the community was

“sensitive” regarding visitors. A high profile ecovillage, they had been under public scrutiny since their inception and a number of their members run regular courses and workshops. Recently, confided one workshop leader, a school bus of children had become stuck in one of the narrow lanes and blocked the way for some time. The community was not amused!

So how do people cope when their unique homes are the subject of curiosity, their way of life peered at from every angle? Some communities, like the Lammas ecovillage in Wales, have been developed as a demonstration of what is possible. As the first settlement to gain planning permission under new Welsh government One Planet regulations, it must seem to them as if they are always being watched. To help counter this, there are set times when the land is open to the public, for instance during courses or on Open Days throughout the summer months. Even so, the public face of the project can sometimes feel quite different to what is going on in reality. In the short film “Lammas and the Media,” made as part of the Living in the Future series about low-impact communities, Jasmine Dale comments: “If a person doesn’t know you, then it’s easy to be misunderstood out of context. So you might say something that could easily be...taken the wrong way.”

Nigel Lishman, secretary of the organisational body of Lammas, adds: “Communities are not the easiest thing, especially if you’re



trying to reinvent a pioneering ecovillage community. I get asked by so many people ‘what’s the hardest bit here?’ And you look around and you look wider and out to the planet and you see, that it’s people getting on with other people... They’re all arguing about the same thing. Your population are coming over our border so we’re going to shell you...same old b----ks!”

Nigel and his wife Cassie chose the Lammas project because it was pitched in between the “share everything” ethos of the commune and the “share nothing” model of living in private ownership. Sociologist Dr. Bill Metcalf describes how intentional communities exist along this sharing continuum, but stresses that in order to reduce conflict, the boundaries have to be clearly stated. Community elder Peter Cock, of Moora Moora near Melbourne, agrees. “It’s important to know what you can and can’t do.”

Perhaps the most interesting analysis of the implementation of public and private boundaries comes from Robin Allison of Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood in Auckland, New Zealand. A trained architect, Robin facilitated the design and building of this successful cohousing community in the suburbs. The analysis of how they utilise public/private space comes from permaculture, the holistic theory developed by David Holmgren and Bill Mollison in Australia. Robin told me that Earthsong has three “zones.” Zone one is their own private homes, where they each have a bedroom, living room, kitchen facilities, and small garden.

Zone two is the space which, in Robin’s opinion, has the most impact on “green” behaviour, being outside of peoples’ private homes, but inside the relative safety of community boundary. It is where the residents most often interact and is designed so that people interact with each other in the course of their daily lives. It includes the common

house, where there is an industry-standard kitchen, communal washing machines, a large dining area, a yoga room, and a generous balcony with seating. Earthsong has a lively LETS program and residents come to the communal house to record their points in a scheme that exchanges skills such as babysitting, sewing, cooking, and gardening. Zone two also includes the shared gardens with a vegetable plot, compost, and chook pen. A shared parking space keeps cars on the edge of the property but also means that people have to leave their private space in order to reach their vehicles. The communal bike shed and tool shed are also in this area.

Zone three is the space outside the community boundary, which residents see as a space for interaction with their neighbours in the street and wider locality. They have developed a good relationship with local businesses and public facilities such as the library and they play an engaged role in community activities. Robin considers zone three as the most exciting zone to be playing with and has established a group which calls itself YIMFY—Yes In My Front Yard. YIMFY aims to make use of this space to share ideas about ecological living, waste reduction, and sharing resources.

In my own community of Holts Field in Gower, Wales, there has always been a “Table” which serves as a focus for informal (and sometimes formal) gatherings. The Table sits at the edge of the central green and people take their meals there, meet for a drink or just a cuppa. Shared barbecues, bonfire picnics, and children’s parties gather at the Table and it is always a point where conversation can happen as residents pass on the way to their homes. On one memorable, if sad, occasion, a community member was laid out there in his beautiful wicker coffin, where he was remembered, blessed, and sung to before being carried up the path and out of the community to be buried.

In a traditional village, the point of connection for people would often have been the village hall or green, and having a shared space seems vital for maintaining connection between residents—through such things as social gatherings, meetings, musical events or film screenings, shared meals or simply a cup of tea. These spaces are where relationships are created and developed, where problems are aired, and where connections are forged. At Cascade Cohousing in Hobart, Tasmania, resident and founder Ian Higginbottom commented that problems were far less likely to arise between folk who shared informal time together.

To my mind, a community without shared spaces is barely a community at all, which is why the erosion of the commons by private interests is such a disaster for modern human settlements. In intentional communities, we see the value of having a place where people can come together to share, whether it be stories, resources, or simply part of ourselves. As our parklands become car parks and our social centres become shopping centres, we lose the vitality of simple human interaction to the self-centred pursuit of consumer goods and private wealth. In this regard, intentional communities might be able to show us, amongst many other things, why access to the commons is worth fighting for. 🌿

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*Helen Iles is director of the Living in the Future series of documentaries about sustainable living and communities. You can watch 60 short films in this series by visiting [livinginthefuture.org](http://livinginthefuture.org). You can also order Helen’s three longer films at that site or at [www.ic.org/community-bookstore/category/community-bookstore-videos](http://www.ic.org/community-bookstore/category/community-bookstore-videos). Helen’s home is in Holts Field, a chalet community in Gower, Wales.*



Photos courtesy of Helen Iles

# Lessons in Participatory Democracy

By Sylvan Bonin

While I write, trees are falling next door. Every time I go near the Common House I can hear their trunks cracking and the earth-shaking crash when they fall. My heart is breaking and my stomach is in knots. Members of our community stand at the edge of the property to drum and bear witness. I wonder if that makes the developer and the workers uncomfortable? They don't understand why we are crying: to them it's just progress, just profit, just a job. To us, it's the loss of the character of the place we live, the loss of habitat, the loss of cooling and filtering for the air, the loss of the 200-year old life-forms that were here before us.

There used to be a law that would have pro-

opment. It specifies how dense various areas can be, how many trees must be left, how wetlands are to be protected, and how traffic is expected to be impacted. Developers can ask the county to waive or change parts of the LTP for their particular project, and since the county nearly always does so, the developer has no reason not to ask!

We are wrestling with how much of our resources we should devote to fighting the developers, to making the county stick to its own LTP, and if we should get involved in the much bigger issue of how development is being handled throughout the county. While we are taking this developer to court over these two projects, we recognize that this fight is a microcosm, a reflection of another level. Do we have the time, money, and energy to become involved in protecting land beyond our neighborhood? Already some members of Songaia are nervous about the existing monthly tours and occasional open-to-the-public events. As we push back, make a lot of noise, get a lot of press, there are more strangers visiting here, including news crews with cameras and microphones. This week we had a radio spot, last week the county newspaper crew was here. Next week we host the developers for a tour, and we've invited the Hearing Examiner to come visit. We will continue to connect with nonprofit groups and other threatened neighborhoods. Our local County Council member was the only dissenting vote

when the Council supported the developers, so we've invited him to meet with us to discuss the directions Snohomish County is going. All of this press is getting a lot of attention, and with it, a lot more visitors. Even the residents who can see the necessity of all the visitors aren't always comfortable with it. Some retreat to their private home and shut the door, others plan to be off the property when the news crews are here.

We are getting a painful lesson in Democracy: if you don't want it to go to the highest bidder, you have to get involved early, stay

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**Songaia was surrounded by woods  
when I first came here;  
now large developments are going in  
on three sides.**

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tected many of those trees. Snohomish County has a Tree Ordinance, but several years ago developers lobbied to have it changed. The law was gutted: exceptions made easier, fines made smaller, the number of trees to be protected was reduced.

I live at Songaia Cohousing, in Bothell, Washington, just outside of Seattle and half an hour from the tech centers of Bellevue and Redmond. In King County, where those cities are located, there is a very public debate over population growth and the challenges that brings. Snohomish County, where I live, has long been a rural area, a patchwork of farms and forests and a few small developments. Discussions about growth in Snohomish County have been mostly out of the news, but recently that is changing.

Songaia was surrounded by woods when I first came here. Now the road we live on is mostly giant suburban homes, and large developments are going in on three sides of us this year. Two of those developments threaten wetlands, forests on our own property, and create public safety concerns. Part of the problem is that the county isn't enforcing their own Long Term Plan. The Long Term Plan (LTP) is the document that guides devel-

opment. When the county's Long Term Plan was made, guiding development over the next few decades, the broad strokes seemed fine. No one here had time to get involved at the level of detail it would have taken to notice the loopholes, because they were busy trying to plan and build an intentional community, run nonprofit groups, raise children. When the Tree Ordinance was changed, no one here noticed because they weren't involved with county planning. When the Urban Growth Boundary was changed, expanding to cover more area, everyone was too busy growing a garden, holding workshops, running businesses, and why wouldn't we be? We live in a progressive area with elected officials who care about the environment. Songaia was founded by people who wanted to make the world better, but for a long time that energy has been focused inward, on turning our 15 acres into a paradise. Now we are realizing that if we don't focus some of our energy outwards, to the rest of the county, we might become an island oasis instead.

We aren't the only neighborhood where this sort of "dumb growth" is happening. On the other side of the county is a development called Froggnal Estates, 112 proposed houses on 22 acres of heavily wooded steep ravine, draining into Picnic Point Park and Picnic Point Creek. Here again the county Planning Commission overrode its own rules for density, buffers, and protection of wetlands and steep slopes. They ignored the public comment process, which appears to be a routine joke. They ignored inadequate roads, schools, and other infrastructure. In recent months Songaia has connected with the Picnic Point Preservation Committee. We've been to the hearings for their appeals, and they've been to ours. While both appeals have been lost, the connections we've made with those neighbors might turn into something bigger scale and longer term.

Recently we've become aware of another inappropriate development nearby. Wellington Park, a proposed sports complex, would replace a wooded park full of trails, habitat, and wetlands. Developers who would benefit financially have again pushed the Planning Commission to grant them exceptions and override public outcry. It is too late to save the patch of forest next door to us, but can "Neighbors to Save Wellington Park" benefit from what we have learned?

Both Songaia and Picnic Point residents have been talking to the Livable Snohomish County Coalition. LSCC, formed by Snohomish County Audubon Society director Kristin Kelly, aims



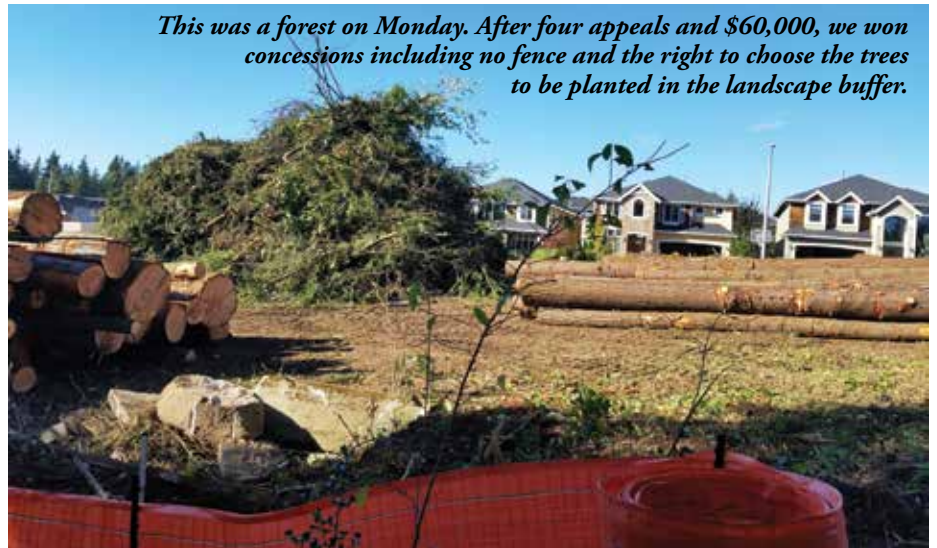
*Songaia residents and interns stand witness, with drums and songs, while the trees fall 10' from our driveway.*

to bring the region's residents together to make progressive, win-win plans that protect our environment and encourage good land use and development practices. LSCC networks groups together, so that instead of fighting separate fights we can support each other, learn from each others' processes, possibly even raise money jointly. Separately we can be dismissed as just NIMBY neighbors, together we are a movement for smarter development.

Some Songaia residents love the activism. Others support their neighbors but want to stay as private as possible themselves. Still others aren't so sure we should be putting ourselves in the spotlight this much. Some are feeling the beginnings of the "fishbowl" effect and wondering if their home will still be their sanctuary. We are debating proper use of community funds: should they be used only for maintaining our buildings and gardens, or should they be used to help maintain our beautiful Pacific Northwest region? How far does that responsibility extend? Our street? As far as we can see? The Urban Growth Boundary Area? The whole county?

Every community has an obligation to work to define their borders, the space in which they live and thrive, and the space they feel responsible for helping to maintain. How far does our reach go? 🍷

*Sylvan Bonin lives at Songaia Cohousing, near Seattle, Washington. She spends most of her time gardening, cooking for the community, putting up the abundance of the garden and orchards, building and fixing things, and teaching edible wild foods and mushroom foraging. Between "suburban homesteading" and raising a son, she makes as much time as possible for art and dancing.*



*This was a forest on Monday. After four appeals and \$60,000, we won concessions including no fence and the right to choose the trees to be planted in the landscape buffer.*



*County Code specifies a 15' tree protection buffer, but the county allowed the developer to reduce this to 10'.*

Photos courtesy of Sylvan Bonin

# Public Demolition and Private Distress

By Nils McGinn

**W**hat?!?! I was walking with five-year-old Emma, whose father Tim had adopted a hybrid cob/timber eco-building project just above the community's hillside garden, preparing it to be his and his two children's new home. His renovation of this dwelling—a project initiated by previous community members—had stalled over the past year, but both Emma and three-year-old Louis were fond of pointing out their elevated sleeping loft, where they expected to move once the work was finished.

On this occasion, however, Emma and I were met with a shocking sight: the building was now a pile of rubble.

How could this have happened? Neither of us had any clue the building was going to be knocked down. We both quickened our pace as we headed back to her father's current cabin, as I tried to gauge which of us might be more traumatized or upset by what we'd just seen. I saw that, at the very least, her faith in her story of a happy future, represented in this case by telling others of her home-to-be in this eco-building, had received a blow. Mine had too.

The felling of the building followed close on the heels of the unexpected felling of a large tree to make room for a construction project that never fully materialized. And it was followed swiftly by the removal of an old tree stump planted with huckleberries, a long-term permaculture project (possibly not even recognized as such by those destroying it) also deemed in the way of the new project. In none of these cases did the community receive notice of the impending destruction. Decisions about these events happened within subgroups which did not run them by the community as a whole. They were "private" decisions with very public impacts.

After the fact, we held a series of public meetings in which community members had a chance to work through the emotional and interpersonal effects of these actions, which many considered ill-thought-out or disrespectful at best, and cruel and aggressive at worst. Feelings were expressed, but in many cases, not resolved. Some actions cannot be undone.

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**G**len, head of infrastructure for the nonprofit associated with the community, had leveled the building, believing it to be his domain and annoyed by Tim's lack of recent progress on it, which had resulted in gradual deterioration. Apparently staff members of the non-

profit had met with Tim about the building a number of times over the past year, during which the possibility of its eventual demolition was floated. But none of them (save Glen) expected it to be felled without warning, and most of the community (including Tim's children and me) had no idea that demolition was even under discussion—and thus had no opportunity to offer alternative ideas about how to help the structure toward completion.

Complicating perceptions of the matter, Glen appeared to some observers to hold long-term personal resentment for Tim, who was an obvious rival in Glen's unsuccessful attempts to woo Tim's (now ex-) partner; Glen's scorn for Tim's unconventional and sometimes jerry-rigged construction techniques had also been evident. The demolition of Tim's project came across to some as a power play, and as a violent expression of Glen's feelings about Tim—disguised under the cloak of Glen's work for the nonprofit. Glen, meanwhile, likely considered Tim's lack of timely follow-through on the building to be personally disrespectful of him and his department. However, these tensions never got a chance for airing in a public forum—instead, action took the place of words.

The nonprofit's history of making decisions and taking actions without input from the larger community—and without informing "non-staff" members that these matters were on the table—highlighted some fundamental divisions within the group. Those who saw the business as having the right and the power to make its own decisions had little incentive to attempt to inform the "public" in the community about issues that could slow down or impede the nonprofit's ability to make decisions or act. Public discussion of the fate of the eco-building, or of the large tree, or of the permaculturally-planted stump, would have brought out additional information, ideas, and opinions that could well have resulted in very different outcomes in each of those cases—not necessarily the outcomes that the staff members originally had in mind.

The blowback from these privately-made decisions and actions was strong enough that staff members recognized that their process needed to be more public, and that they would be prudent to at least think about larger impacts in the community, rather than automatically plowing ahead in their individual spheres. Ultimately, their short-cutting of the public sphere had created more work for them, rather than less, because of all the processing that it made necessary. For a time at least, repeats of these episodes seemed unlikely. But the damage from those actions had already happened.



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Six months after the demolition, bruised by this and other events that served to undermine his sense of belonging and purpose in the community, Tim made the decision to leave, taking Emma and Louis with him. Over the previous several years, I'd become a frequent caregiver and companion to Emma and Louis, eventually helping Tim navigate single fatherhood as the children's weekday parent when their mother moved to town. I had enjoyed this time with the children more than any other aspect of community life. I felt a terrible pit in my stomach as they prepared to leave, and especially when they left. I dealt with my grief as best I could, but as I tried to adapt to the new situation (by, among other things, making visits to town to spend time with the kids there), I was still plagued by the sense that my "family" in community had left, and thus my feeling of family in community had evaporated.

I pressed on with my life, but immediately fell ill—partly the result of the juggling act that my life became while trying to maintain continuity in both community and "adoptive family" life. One sickness followed another, again directly traceable to this juggling act. (In one case, alienated by another episode of what I perceived as "staff entitlement" at the expense of the public good, and needing space, I decided to stay in town with Emma and Louis even though they were both ill with a virulent coughing virus—which I immediately picked up.) Unexpected complications followed, eventually leading to surgery. The surgery had further consequences. Nine months after I first got sick, I struggle with chronic problems that have turned my life on its head. Nerve damage (which I still pray may be temporary) caused by the surgery colors my experience and perceptions of the world in a continuous way.

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In my community, I was long an advocate not only of more public discussion and decision-making (of the type that would have averted some of the episodes described above) but also of more public sharing of our inner lives within the group. I joined the community's well-being team and often initiated activities in which we shared about our inner processes and emotional lives. I also joined the "wisdom council," a group which often helps individuals bring to the surface and start communicating about feelings and conflicts. I went off-site to participate in further personal-growth workshops, and tried to bring back what I learned there. I also helped arrange on-site workshops and forums about personal growth and interpersonal communication. Significant portions of the community never overcame their inclinations to keep their inner and interpersonal lives "private" rather than "public," but at least some portions of the community were able to open up and share with one another, partly due to my participation in

efforts to make these forums and practices happen.

Now, however, I have become mostly private about my emotional life. My chronic physical condition has created ongoing emotional pain to match. Existential ambivalence is not a sentiment that I feel safe expressing in public in my community—nor does it seem as if there would be any productive result. I am sick of feeling these ways and I am sure others would quickly tire of my bringing this heaviness to group forums. Most "problems" I ever thought I had before seem silly to me now, and I have an equal challenge feeling interested in relationship dramas or other struggles that once seemed important. When daily physical existence is at stake, when one's perceptual reality has crumbled, the "normal" things that people talk about—even their emotional lives, which once held such interest for me—seem less and less compelling.

(I wonder now if those who avoided attending or sharing in our community well-being forums, during those years in which I was so involved in them, did so not out of shyness or disinterest or simple discomfort or even inability to express themselves, but for another reason. Perhaps they were acutely aware, as I am now, of a distress that they judged the larger community would not be able to handle or want to hear, and that would seem out of sync with their group's "life-affirming" culture. Perhaps public emotional self-exposure in our community is in some ways a luxury afforded to those who are not afflicted with deep pain—a gift available only to those who believe they have some realistic chance of feeling better afterwards.)

Because of all this, I have now retreated from community life—literally. I am hundreds of miles away from my home community as I write this article's first draft, essentially in retreat from the world. I don't know what the future holds, but as of now I am far from the fully involved Public advocate and community member I once was.

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If there is any moral to this story, it may be this:

In intentional community, when too much is kept Private—whether in decision-making or in community members' inner lives—the Public sphere suffers, sometimes irretrievably. A resultant retreat into the Private may become the only apparent remaining option. Please don't let this happen to you.

Community thrives only when we value and honor it for what it is: an opportunity to join with others to marry the Private with the Public in ways that enhance and deepen our experiences of both spheres. It's up to each of us—through conscious intentions, words, and actions—to keep that marriage healthy. 🌱

*Nils McGinn has been contemplating questions of Chance, Fate, Time, Interstellar Travel, and Community. Some details in this story have been changed.*



Photos by Nils McGinn



# Saying “No” to Prospective Members

*By Laird Schaub*

One of the trickiest issues that intentional communities face is screening prospective members.

Some groups find this so odious (judging whether others are good enough) that they don't even try. Instead, they rely on prospectives to sort themselves out based on what the community has said about itself (on its website, in brochures, in listings, or in informal conversations with members), and how the new person relates to the community when they visit.

Another factor when it comes to screening is that communities in the US are subject to Federal and their state's Fair Housing Laws. Federal Fair Housing Law prohibits the discrimination (in housing sales, rentals, advertising housing, loaning for housing, etc.) against people on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, or familial status. State Fair Housing Laws may mirror the Federal law, or they may add additional characteristics such as age, military

status, sexual preference, etc. to the Federal list. Some groups mistakenly translate this into a proscription against using *any* discernment about who joins the group (or buys a house) but that's not true. It's perfectly legal to insist that people be financially solvent, not have been convicted of felonies, or agree to abide by common values and existing agreements. In fact, it's legal to choose against a candidate for any reason *other* than the Federally and state protected characteristics in your state.

What's more, there are any number of people who are attracted to community for the right reasons but are not a good fit, and it's better all around if the community plays an active role in screening for decent matches. In many cases (unless the would-be member is a community veteran) the new person is still wrestling with the question of whether *any* intentional community is a good choice for them, much less *your* community. There will be many new and strange things that people have to make sense of during their initial visit, and in the process they can easily miss clues as to whether the visit is going well or not as seen through the host's eyes.

Finally, when you take into account how important it is to have your membership aligned about what you're trying to create, it becomes clear why it's not a good plan to rely mainly on the new person figuring it out on their own. Yes, this may mean that someone washes out sooner, but isn't that better for them as well—rather than getting a false impression about how things are going and discovering the mismatch six months after moving in? Delayed disclosure may relieve the community of having a difficult conversation up front, but at what cost?

OK, let's suppose I've convinced you that communities should get actively involved in membership selection. In broad strokes, there are four possibilities about how a prospective visit may go:

a) Both the community and the prospective realize it's not a good fit. While there's the possibility of some hurt feelings if the prospective feels that what they found did not match what the community promised, mostly this ends amicably and there's no problem.

b) You both like each other and the prospect converts to becoming a new member. Hooray! That's what you had in mind and you're off to a good start. Of course, the honeymoon will end and not everything that starts out well stays that way. While there's no guarantee of long-term happiness, you did your best and now you take your chances.

c) The prospective doesn't feel there's a good fit, though the community likes what they see and wants to encourage the prospective to hang in there. Most of the time when this occurs it's because the prospective comes across as a "good catch" and will likely be attractive to a number of communities. In short, they have options. In this situation also, there's unlikely to be hard feelings. The community may be sad at losing a good prospect, but dating doesn't always lead to marriage and you knew that all along.

d) The hardest combination—and the one I want to focus on in the remainder of this essay—is when the prospective likes the community but it's not reciprocated. Now what?

In general, this is because of one or more of the following factors:

#### • **Poor social skills**

There's a high value placed on good communication skills in community and it can be a serious problem if the prospective is not good at:

- Articulating what they're thinking
- Articulating what they're feeling
- Hearing accurately what others are saying
- Expressing themselves in ways that are not provocative
- Taking in feedback about how others are reacting to their behavior
- Being sensitive to how their statements and actions are landing with others

The issue is not so much whether the prospective fits right in, as whether the members feel they can work things out with the prospective when there are differences—because there will always be differences (eventually).

#### • **Weak finances**

Sometimes it's a question of whether the prospective has sufficient assets or income to meet the financial obligations of membership. Not everyone who is drawn to community has their life together economically.

#### • **Too needy**

Occasionally prospectives come to the community to be taken care of, and there appears to be a frank imbalance between what the person can give relative to the level of support they're needing. For the most part communities are looking for a positive or break-even balance from prospectives and will tend to shy away from those with mental health issues, emotional instability, addictions, or extreme physical limitations—unless there is a plan offered whereby those needs will be taken care of in a way that works for all parties.

Note that there are some excellent examples of communities that have built their identity around serving disadvantaged populations:

- Gould Farm (Monterey MA) focuses on mental health
- Innisfree Village (Crozet VA) focuses on intellectual disabilities
- Camphill Village (the first in the US was located in Copake NY and now there are 10 others) focuses on developmental disabilities
- L'Arche Communities (the first in the US was located in Erie PA and now there are 17 others) focus on intellectual disabilities

#### • **Failure to keep commitments**

It's hard on communities when members make agreements and then don't abide by them; when they make commitments and then fail to keep them. Sure, everyone has a bad week, but with some people it's a pattern and communities are leery of folks who aren't good at keeping their word.

To be sure, it can be difficult to discern a pattern during a visitor period, yet it's one of the reasons groups like to ask prospectives to lend a hand in group work parties—so they can assess follow-through and work ethic. People who come across as allergic to group work don't tend to be viewed as good members.

#### • **Too different**

This factor is something of a nebulous catchall. It can be an unusual personality, a quirky communication style, strange tastes or habits... Perhaps this traces to a different cultural

background, but regardless of the origin it can be hard when there are no others like this person already in the group. Members may feel awkward in this person's presence and questions arise about whether they can make relationship with this person.

Even where there is a group commitment to diversity, that doesn't mean that *everyone* can find a happy home there.

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One of the measures of a group's maturity is its ability to have authentic and compassionate conversations about hard things. And discussing the sense that a particular prospective is pushing the group's edge around the limits of what it can handle is an excellent example of a difficult conversation.

Saying "no" is not fun, and it can be very hard to hear it if you're the one being voted off the island. Yet sometimes groups have to do it, and putting it off doesn't make it

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## Saying "no" is not fun, and it can be very hard to hear it if you're the one being voted off the island. Yet sometimes groups have to do it.

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easier later. The best you can do is anticipate that this is coming and discuss ahead of time what qualities you want in new members, so that you've already established the criteria you'll use before you start applying them.

There will still be challenges, such as the dynamic where one member wants to stretch to take a chance on a prospective that another member is convinced is a poor risk, but at least you'll have established a basis for the conversation—in this case: what is the perceived risk, and how much is too much?

While living in community can be a wonderful experience, it isn't always easy. 🐦

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*Laird Schaub used to be the Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), publisher of this magazine, and was a cofounder of Sandhill Farm, an egalitarian community in Missouri. He now lives with his partner, Susan Anderson, in Duluth, Minnesota, where their community is an old-fashioned neighborhood, complete with book clubs and backyard barbecues. He is also a facilitation trainer and process consultant, and authors a blog that can be read at [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com). This article is adapted from his blog entry of October 13, 2014.*

# LEGAL STRUCTURES FOR Intentional Communities in the United States

By Diana Leafé Christian, Dave Henson, Allen Butcher, and Albert Bates

*Every forming community makes crucial decisions about whether and how it may comply with various local, state, and federal laws and regulations, and which legal entity, or several entities, it will use to co-own land, run educational programs, and/or manage any community-owned businesses—all of which affects the group’s relation to the wider public. This article, excerpted from the new 7th edition of the Communities Directory, explores this issue. It was substantially revised and updated by Diana Leafé Christian from previous versions of this Directory article, and shortened slightly for this issue of COMMUNITIES.*

“Thank you very much, but your advice really doesn’t apply to us,” wrote a community I’ll call Buckeye Farm to their lawyer. He had just reviewed their proposed legal plan for co-owning their 98 acres of farmland and their new-member joining document.

The lawyer cautioned against their proposed plan, saying it wasn’t legally sound and could be considered fraudulent if anyone took them to court. But the community considered this advice irrelevant because, for them, Buckeye’s spiritual and ecological intentions, values, and mission morally superseded any laws of mainstream culture. They executed their legal-financial plan.

A decade later an incoming member’s questions triggered a second look at these issues, and they hired another lawyer. He concluded members were seriously vulnerable legally and financially, and to protect their community from potential disaster they should change their legal arrangements significantly. They learned, for example, that with their current legal arrangement, if a member were sued for any reason, lost the suit, and couldn’t pay damages or legal costs, the court could compel the sale of the person’s assets. And because they all owned all of the property, this could include the forced sale of all or part of the property to pay the money owed. Their financial-legal structure also made them subject to local subdivision regulations—which, if enforced, would require two to three million dollars of road-paving costs, which they couldn’t possibly afford. Lastly, and even worse, their financial document for new members promised rights in the land that, it turns out, were not true, and so if taken to court, the document would most likely be declared as fraudulent. Once they absorbed this news—with members in various states of shock, incredulity, confusion—they stopped accepting new members until they could decide what to do. That was their first problem.

Their second problem was the fierce conflict and years of heartbreak arising when various community members couldn’t agree on what to do, and some of their older, more countercultural members still didn’t believe there was actually a problem. A new lawyer advised that all three problems could be resolved by re-apportioning land ownership among various smaller groups of members and creating several new legal entities to do this. But six years later things still weren’t resolved. No members had been sued, the group hadn’t been cited by local authorities for subdivision violation, and they hadn’t been taken to court for fraud, yet they were still vulnerable to any of these potentially occurring at any time. While members had agreed on some aspects of implementing the lawyer’s recommended legal changes, with no new members for six years—and some departing in frustration—Buckeye had no new capital and far less annual income from remaining members with which to pay mounting legal expenses.

## The Seven Steps Every Community Needs to Follow

Buckeye could have avoided its legal-financial vulnerabilities and years of conflict if they’d taken seven simple steps at the beginning. For example, what if the founders and early members had done what newly forming communities *need* to do—and what your community should do:

(1) Clearly understand the community is embedded within and subject to local, state, and federal laws and regulations.

(2) Know what these laws and regulations are, how they will affect your community over time, and what the risks may be if you don’t comply with them. These include federal tax requirements; federal laws regarding illegal substance use, firearms, and other issues; federal and state laws regarding the rights and responsibilities of your chosen legal entities; annual legal-entity reporting



requirements with the state, and state health department and environmental quality regulations; county subdivision regulations, zoning regulations, building codes, and property tax requirements.

(3) Orient all members, especially new ones, to these laws and regulations.

(4) Make a well-informed, conscious decision to either comply or not comply with the laws and regulations, or comply with some but not others.

(5) If you decide not to comply with some laws, you are willing to take the risks. You *fully inform all potential members of these risks*. New people get full disclosure.

(6) Orient all members, especially new ones, to the legal entity(ies) your community uses and the benefits, responsibilities, and challenges of these entities.

(7) Orient people especially to liability issues, so everyone understands the degree of liability protection the community does and does not offer its members.

Fortunately, many community founders do understand the need to understand the law and design their projects to be legally sustainable. See, for example, the combined multiple legal entities of Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC), Los Angeles Eco-Village, Mariposa Grove, and EcoVillage at Ithaca, below.

### What's a "Legal Entity"?

A legal entity is a recognized set of rights, protections, and requirements created and regulated by each state for activities such as owning property, conducting a for-profit business or providing a nonprofit service, or investing money in stocks and securities. A legal entity confers the same rights that an individual person has and can function as an individual person functions. A legal entity is able to buy and sell assets—for example, it can buy your community's property—and enter into business contracts, such as hiring contractors and other building professionals, Permaculture designers, workshop trainers for your community, and so on.

In the US, legal entities have been created for businesses and nonprofit organizations, for securities and stock ventures, and for co-owning real estate. Most intentional communities use business and nonprofit legal entities even though none of these exactly fits how most intentional communities function. The five most commonly used legal entities used by intentional communities in the US are homeowners associations, condominium associations, housing cooperatives (which can be used for land as well as buildings and housing), limited liability companies (LLCs), and 501(c)3 nonprofits. Three others used occasionally (and examined more fully in the longer version of this article in the *Communities Directory*) are non-exempt nonprofits, 501(c)2 title-holding nonprofits, and, for income-sharing communities, 501(d) nonprofits.

Two real estate legal entities, Joint Tenancy and Tenants in Common, can be used to own shared property, but they have serious limitations and are not ideal for communities. (See "The Disadvantages of Joint Tenancy and Tenants in Common," p. 55.)

### How a Legal Entity Benefits Your Community

(1) **Limited liability protection.** In addition to allowing your community to function like a person re buying and selling assets and entering into contracts, a legal entity also confers limited liability protection for community members. That is, community members (and any board members, officers, employees, or shareholders, if applicable) are not held *personally* responsible for any criminal wrongdoing or debts incurred by the community. No one's personal bank accounts or other assets are vulnerable to court-ordered fines. (It's called "limited" liability because in some cases when a court can show that a specific board member, officer, or employee knowingly caused their organization to break the law or take out a loan knowing there was no possibility of repayment, that person *is* held personally responsible—that is, liable. The person can be subject to criminal charges or court-ordered fines or punishment.)

(2) **Buying your community's property is easier.** Having a legal entity will make the process of buying land easier. A seller, bank, or other lending institution will take a legal entity with tens of thousands in the bank and a brief credit history more seriously than it would take a collection of individuals trying to buy property together.

(3) **Higher credibility.** In doing business with others—buying liability insurance, pay-



*Members of Rocky Corner Cohousing in Bethany, Connecticut set up an irrigation system during a work party on their 33 acres.*

ing property taxes, getting a loan, hiring people for various services, and entering into business contracts with building contractors and other professionals—having a legal entity offers more credibility than if you were just a collection of individuals with no recognized business or non-profit entity.

**(4) Your community's intentions, values, mission, and major agreements are backed by law.** Any agreements the group states in the documents of its legal entity (such as bylaws, articles of incorporation, an LLC's operating agreements, etc.), will be compatible with federal and state law, and thus legally enforceable. If a member violates one of these agreements and if the issue goes to court, your community will have the force of law behind it to induce the errant member to comply.

The same is true if your community is sued or cited for violating a law by a government authority. If a court has to consider your community's intentions, mission, and shared values in light of the lawsuit's claims or the government authorities' claims, having them written clearly in your legal documents will have far more credibility with a court or judge than if the only way you convey them is by your members testifying simply verbally.

**(5) Land ownership is easier.** Some legal entities are more compatible than others for the various ways you can own property together, such as: (a) everyone owns the property in common; (b) each household owns its own individual plot; or (c) each household owns its own individual plot and everyone owns the rest. Whichever entity you use, it allows your group to co-own property in a more secure and sustainable way than if just one member owned it, or if multiple members' names were on the deed, which unfortunately requires officially revising and re-registering the deed when anyone joins or leaves.

**(6) Reduced taxes.** If you use any legal entity other than a 501(c)3 nonprofit, the federal and state governments will tax your community's income (and the county will require property taxes). Thus you can choose a legal entity that saves the most taxes relative to your community's particular circumstances.

### For-Profit and Nonprofit Corporations

The word "corporation" is a term for a legal entity which, as noted, confers some of the same rights and functions on an organization as an individual person has. More importantly, a legal entity offers limited liability protection for community members as well as for board members, officers, and employees and/or shareholders, if you have them. (When a community uses a corporation legal entity either all community members function as board members or they annually elect people to serve on the board. In either case, everyone has limited liability protection.)

Before limited liability companies (LLCs) were available, some intentional communities used the for-profit Subchapter S corporation to own shared property, because it was specifically designed for small companies without shareholders. But nowadays most intentional communities use LLCs instead, because they offer much better benefits and none of the disadvantages of a Subchapter S corporation. (LLCs are not corporations, but offer the same advantages; please see below.)

Communities also use nonprofit corporations. These are designed for organizations that intend to benefit people but not earn a profit for owners or shareholders, and they offer exactly the same liability protection. Like for-profit corporations, nonprofits can earn income by selling products

or offering services (as long as that income and how it's earned is connected to its purpose) and can hire employees.

Nonprofits offer various kinds of tax-exempt corporations. The 501(c)3 nonprofit, created for educational, charitable, scientific, literary, or religious reasons, can receive tax-deductible donations, as noted above, and is used by many communities. Other nonprofit corporations include 501(c)2 title-holding nonprofits and 501(d) religious and apostolic corporations (used by most income-sharing communities).

Homeowners associations and condominium associations use nonprofit legal entities.

Housing co-ops are nonprofits (though in some states housing co-ops have their own legal entity). Private land trusts and community land trusts which are created using nonprofit legal entities are not themselves specific nonprofit entities.

Corporations are created by registering with the state—filing a list of corporate officers and



*Rocky Corner Cohousing members celebrate Winter Solstice on their land.*

articles of incorporation, and receiving state approval. Nonprofit corporations are also created by registering with the state; after receiving state approval the organization may apply with the IRS for a specific federal tax exemption like those noted above.

Let's look at five of the most common kinds of legal entities used by intentional communities.

### Limited Liability Companies (LLCs)

Limited liability companies (LLCs), which were created for small businesses, are not corporations but have many of the same advantages, including limited liability protection. They are created by filing an “operating agreement” with the state, and participants are called “members.” A group qualifies to use an LLC if it intends to continue through time, has centralized management, and ownership in the LLC can be transferred easily. The LLC law in most states makes it pretty easy to comply with these qualifications.

An LLC's operating agreement can allocate different decision-making rights to different kinds of members (for example, if there are outside investors, community members can decide most day-to-day decisions but only investors can make decisions about expenditures over a certain dollar amount). In addition to individuals, members of an LLC can also be other legal entities, including partnerships, corporations, other LLCs, and/or trusts. Unlike a corporation, LLCs are not required to keep minutes, hold meetings, or make resolutions.

LLCs must distribute their earnings the same year the earnings are made. An LLC's income taxes are not paid by the LLC itself, but passed through to each member to pay in their individual income taxes (called “pass through” taxation).

*Benefits:* Limited liability protection; ease of setting up, using, and changing; banks and lending institutions are familiar with LLCs.

*Challenges:* None that we know of.

*Examples:* Sowing Circle Community in California, known as Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC), uses an LLC to own their land. Many forming cohousing communities start off owning their land and bank accounts with an LLC, and then switch to a homeowners association or condominium association after construction is finished.

### Homeowners Associations and Condominium Associations

These are property ownership arrangements which allow people to own their own individual housing unit (or lot, house, or apartment) and, through the association, share ownership in the rest of the property.

A homeowners association (HOA) owns the common elements of the property—roads and footpaths, bridges, community buildings, common green areas (lawns, gardens, fields, woods), parking lots, children's playgrounds, ponds, etc.—and is obligated to manage and maintain everything. People own their own individual units, including the structural components (roof, walls, floor, foundation, etc.).

In a condominium association, everyone shares an undivided interest in all the common elements named above, as well as in the structural components of each individual dwelling (roof, walls, etc.). People own the air space inside their individual dwellings. A condominium association is obligated to maintain all the common elements.

While HOAs are most often used for planned housing developments with houses and lots, and condo associations are most often used for apartment buildings, this is not always the case. Sheringwood Cohousing in Washington State, for example, uses a condo association for its individual lots and houses.

Homeowners and condominium associations are not legal entities themselves, and are usually organized as nonprofits under IRS Section 528 tax designation. The 528 tax designation means that any funds collected for buying, developing, building, repairing, maintaining, and/or managing the property are not taxable if the association meets two tests. First, it must receive at least 60 percent of its gross income in a given tax year specifically to pay the above-named expenses (such as collecting membership fees, dues, assessments, etc.). Second, it must spend at least 90 percent of its gross income on these same expenses. If the association doesn't meet the 60 percent and 90 percent tax-exemption requirements in a given year, all their income that year is taxed at the corporate rate of 30 percent.

This tax-exemption may even include property owned privately by an individual community member on their own lot, such as a greenhouse, meeting space, retreat cabin, etc. But to qualify for

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**A legal entity offers limited liability protection for community members, board members, officers, and employees and/or shareholders.**

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this tax exemption, the greenhouse, etc. needs to meet these criteria: (1) it must affect the overall appearance of the community, (2) the owner must maintain it to community standards, (3) there must be an annual pro-rata assessment of all members to maintain it, and (4) it must be used only by association members and not rented out.

When intentional communities use HOAs or condo associations, they are either all members of the board of directors or they choose board members from among their members.

A downside is that homeowners associations and condominium associations cannot choose their members because of Federal Fair Housing laws. This means they must say “Yes” to any interested new people who can pay the purchase price and meet the terms of the sale if property is offered on the open market. They cannot say “No, thanks” to people who seem not to understand and support the community’s purpose, values, and lifestyle, or who seem to offer red flags to the group, such as having substance addictions, a history of financial irresponsibility, or undesirable behaviors or attitudes. They can choose people for a waiting list, however, and use the list to draw from when a lot, house, apartment, or housing unit may be for sale, if the property is offered privately, not publicly.

Not all states have HOAs (e.g., Massachusetts doesn’t) and condo associations.

*Benefits:* Limited liability protection;

credibility with banks and lending institutions who will loan money and create mortgages for individual members; and tax breaks.

*Challenges:* The community can’t choose their own members (unless they have a waiting list); not all states have both of these.

*Examples:* Most cohousing communities, including Sharingwood, as noted above, use either a homeowners association or condominium association to co-own their property after their initial development and construction phases.

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## Federal Fair Housing laws require HOAs and condo associations to say “Yes” to any interested new people who can pay the purchase price and meet the terms of sale.

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*Benefits:* Limited liability protection;

### Housing Cooperatives (Housing Co-ops)

A housing co-op owns the land and buildings. Its members don’t own any part of the property, but own shares in the co-op and have a lease to a specific house, lot, apartment, or housing unit.

Housing cooperative law varies slightly from state to state. In general, however, members own shares in the housing cooperative, which, with a lease, gives them the right to live in a particular dwelling. And again, depending on the state, in general the number of shares the members buy is based on the current market value of the dwelling in which they intend to live. People pay a monthly fee—usually a prorated share of the co-op’s monthly mortgage payment, if there is one, and property taxes, combined with a general fee for maintenance and repairs. The monthly fee is generally based on the number of shares each of the members holds, which is equivalent to the dollar value given to the member’s individual dwelling.

While housing co-ops are legal in all states, some states have clear laws for housing co-ops and other states don’t. Housing co-ops are usually organized as nonprofit corporations; however, some states have a special “cooperative corporation” category that is neither nonprofit or for-profit.

Most banks and lending institutions won’t loan to a co-op or to co-op members because they don’t want to own shares. This is because if the bank had to foreclose on the loan they would rather own tangible, sellable assets like a title to a house or housing unit. The National Co-op Bank was created to loan to housing co-ops and other kinds of co-ops, though it usually charges a higher rate of interest for loans than other banks do. There are several kinds of housing co-ops including student housing co-ops, senior housing co-ops, and limited equity housing co-ops.

*Benefits:* Limited liability protection; the community can choose its members.

*Challenges:* It can be difficult to get a bank loan and loans have higher interest rates than loans for HOAs and condo associations.

*Examples:* Walnut Street Co-op, a shared house in Oregon; Los Angeles Eco-Village; Miccosukee Land Co-op, which uses a housing co-op to own their 344 acres in rural Florida.

### 501(c)3 Nonprofits

Communities primarily use 501(c)3s to own land in order to preserve and protect the land from future real-estate speculation and development. This entity can also be used to receive tax-deductible donations and grants, which can come from corporations, individuals, government agencies, and/or private foundations.

Some communities use the same 501(c)3 or a different 501(c)3 to own and manage their educational programs as well.

A 501(c)3 nonprofit is created by registering as a nonprofit corporation with the state and applying to the IRS for the specific 501(c)3 tax designation. In order to qualify for receiving this tax status the group needs to either provide educational services to the public, offer charitable services to an indefinite class of people (rather than to specific individuals), combat negative social conditions, or provide a religious service to its members and/or the public. (This nonprofit is designed for charitable, religious, educational, scientific, or literary organizations. The IRS interprets “religious” liberally; this can include self-described spiritual beliefs or practices.)

As well as receiving tax-deductible donations, 501(c)3 nonprofits pay no income taxes, and are exempt from most forms of property tax. They are eligible for lower bulk mailing rates, and for some government loans and benefits. Communities that are also religious orders may also be exempt from Social Security, unemployment, and withholding taxes in some cases, if they qualify.

In order to receive a 501(c)3 nonprofit tax status, an intentional community must meet two IRS tests. It must be organized, as well as operated, exclusively for one or more of the above tax-exempt purposes. To determine the “organizational test,” the IRS reviews the nonprofit’s articles of incorporation and bylaws.

To determine the “operational test,” the IRS conducts an audit of the nonprofit’s activities in its first years of operation. Many communities have difficulty passing the operational test because of the requirement that no part of the net earnings may benefit any individual (except as compensation for labor or as a *bona fide* beneficiary of the charitable purpose). If the primary activity of the organization is to own land and operate businesses for the mutual benefit of its own community members, it fails the operational test.

Even if the community passes the operational test by virtue of other, more charitable, public benefits—running an educational center, providing an ambulance service, or making toys for handicapped children, for instance—it can still be taxed on the profits it makes apart from its strictly charitable activities.

These profits, called “unrelated business taxable income” (UBTI), have been a source of disaster and dissolution for some nonprofits because of the requirement to pay all back taxes and penalties arising from unrelated business taxable income, which can assume massive proportions in just a few years of unreported earnings. The IRS has the rule about unrelated business taxes in order to prevent tax-exempt nonprofits from unfairly competing with taxable entities, such as for-profit businesses, which may offer the same kinds of services or sell the same kinds of products. The IRS determines a nonprofit’s unrelated business income in two ways: the destination of the income and the source of the income. If a community uses profits from bake sales to build a community fire station (presumably a one-time project related to the community’s purpose), the IRS may consider that income “related” to its educational or charitable purpose and not tax it. If, however, the bake sales expand the general operations of the community, or pay the electric bill, the IRS may consider that “unrelated” income, and tax it.

A 501(c)3 nonprofit may not receive more than 20 percent of its annual income from passive sources, such as rents or investments. If the community has an educational purpose, it may not discriminate on the basis of race and must state this in its organizing documents. 501(c)3s are not allowed to participate in politics—they can’t back a political campaign, attempt to influence legislation (other than on issues related to the 501(c)3 category), or publish political advocacies.

A serious downside is that if a 501(c)3 community disbands, it may not distribute any residual assets to community members. Rather, after payment of debts, all remaining assets must pass intact to another tax-exempt beneficiary such as another 501(c)3. In the early 2000s a relatively new community in South Carolina disbanded and gave its land to a church. Various members who’d spent their life savings paying the community’s joining fee and building their house lost everything. This financial aspect of 501(c)3 nonprofits may dissuade some potential new members from joining a community that owns its land this way—those with significant assets or those who have children and who want to build a house and sink deep roots in the community. Some communities protect against this outcome by owning their land with a different legal entity (and protecting it from future speculation by other means), and creating a separate 501(c)3 nonprofit to run their community’s educational



*Chickens can be both alarming and engaging for children. Rocky Corner Cohousing will raise chickens on their farm.*

programs. Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC) did this. (See below.)

*Benefits:* Limited liability protection; can protect land from later speculation and development; can receive tax-deductible donations and grants; exempt from income taxes and property taxes.

*Challenges:* Elaborate and time-consuming to set up and maintain; the 501(c)3 cannot engage in political activity; if the community disbands it must donate the organization's property and assets to another 501(c)3. For this last reason, sometimes people with equity and families with children tend to not join, seeking instead a community where they can have equity and financial sustainability even if the 501(c)3 later disbands. Also for this reason, communities owning their land this way tend to attract many nomadic young people interested in community adventures but uninterested in establishing equity and sinking roots into any one place, so the community can have higher than normal turnover as its young people move on to their next adventure.

*Examples:* Lost Valley Educational Center in Oregon owns its land through a 501(c)3; EcoVillage at Ithaca in New York owns some but not all of its land with this nonprofit. Occidental Arts and Ecology Center in California uses a 501(c)3 for its educational programs.

Please note, a "Land Trust" is not a legal entity per se, but a way of preserving land for a specific use, and land trust nonprofits or individual communities that organize themselves as land trusts generally use a 501(c)3 nonprofit, sometimes in combination with a 501(c)2 (title-holding) nonprofit.

### Non-exempt Nonprofits

This is a legal structure created by setting up a nonprofit corporation with one's state but not seeking any tax-exemption status with the IRS, hence it is a "non-exempt" nonprofit. It can be used to own or manage assets with limited liability protection but with no intention to either make a profit or seek tax exemptions. EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) in New York uses a non-exempt nonprofit, the "EVI Village Association," as a kind of member-owned co-op. All community members are automatically also members of the EVI Village Association, which owns the two roads into the property, the water and sewer lines, the three neighborhood parking lots, the swimming pond, and the land around each housing co-op.

*Benefits:* Limited liability protection.

*Challenges:* Income is taxed at the corporate rate.

*Examples:* Abundant Dawn Community, Virginia owns its land this way. A non-exempt nonprofit is one of six legal entities used by EcoVillage at Ithaca in New York.

### How Four Communities Use Multiple Legal Entities Together

**1. Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC)** in California uses an LLC, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, and a lease. They own and manage their 80 rural acres through an LLC, called the Sowing Circle LLC, and own and manage their educational programs through a 501(c)3 nonprofit, the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center 501(c)3, which itself owns nothing. Sowing Circle LLC leases most of its community land to the OAEC nonprofit. Their permanent community members (rather than their two-year temporary residents) are members of the Sowing Circle LLC as well as members of the board of the nonprofit OAEC. This arrangement works very well, for three reasons. First, the commercial lease mandates that the lessee, OAEC 501(c)3 nonprofit, maintains and repairs all the property they lease. This means that some money earned by the 501(c)3 nonprofit through classes,

workshops, tours, and donations, can be used to keep the community's property well-maintained. Second, OAEC's landlords are wholly supportive of the nonprofit's activities, as they are the same community members. And third, if for any reason the OAEC nonprofit couldn't pay the full amount of their annual lease fee to Sowing Circle LLC, the LLC could claim a loss on their income taxes.

**2. Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV)** uses a housing co-op and a 501(c)3 nonprofit and many leases. About half of LAEV's members created Urban Soil/Terra Urbana (USTU), a 501(c)3 nonprofit used as a limited equity housing co-op, which owns two adjacent two-story apartment buildings and a four-plex unit across the street, but not the ground beneath these buildings.

The ground underneath the three buildings, as well as other parcels in the Beverly-Vermont area, are owned by the Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust, a 501(c)3 nonprofit cre-



*Hart's Mill members use machetes to cut brush on their land.*

ated by several LAEV members and other local affordable eco-housing activists.

UrbanSoil/Terra Urbana is considered a limited equity co-op because shares in the co-op apartments are much more affordable to purchase than other, similar apartments in the area because the owners don't own the ground underneath their building. Also the purchase price is not based on the exorbitantly expensive land values in the Los Angeles area. Some LAEV members couldn't afford to become owners, however, so they remained renters. All the residents of all three buildings, owners and renters, as well as a few people living in other nearby buildings on the street, are members of LAEV, and have full decision-making rights. Each renter has a lease for their apartment with USTU, and each owner has their certificate of shares and a lease allowing them to live in their apartment.

**3. Mariposa Grove Community** in Oakland, California uses a condominium association and a local 501(c)3 nonprofit. Mariposa Grove Condominium Association owns six apartments and shared community building space renovated from three small single-family houses on two adjacent city lots. The ground underneath these buildings is owned by the Northern California Community Land Trust (NCLT), a local 501(c)3 nonprofit devoted to limited equity housing in the northern California region.

Each of the six owner households in the condo association has a ground lease with the community land trust. In addition the community founder owns a large house with rental units—two small apartments and seven bedrooms—directly behind one of the community land trust lots. He owns the property with a deed, and each of the tenants has a lease. The four buildings share a big yard with all fences removed, and all residents are Mariposa Grove members and share the amenities of the community building.

**4. EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI)**, a rural community in New York State with three separate cohousing neighborhoods, has six legal entities, 100 co-op leases, and two ground leases.

(1) *EcoVillage at Ithaca, Inc.*, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, owns all the community's 175 acres not owned by one of the community's other legal entities.

(2) *FROG Housing Co-op*, the legal entity of the community's first 30-unit cohousing neighborhood with two-story townhouses, owns the duplex buildings and the land directly under each unit; it purchased the land from EcoVillage at Ithaca's 501(c)3 nonprofit. Each FROG neighborhood household owns shares in the co-op and has a lease for their individual townhouse unit.

(3) *SONG Housing Co-op*, the legal entity of the second 30-unit cohousing neighborhood with two-story townhouses, owns the duplex buildings. The SONG Housing Co-op owns only the buildings; it leases the land underneath with the SONG Neighborhood Ground Lease, a 99-year lease from the EcoVillage at Ithaca, Inc. 501(c)3 nonprofit. This was done in order to create more affordable housing, and was required by Equity Trust, the organization that gave the SONG neighborhood a construction loan. Each SONG household owns shares in the SONG Housing Co-op and has a lease for their individual housing unit. (SONG also created two temporary legal entities—joint venture partnerships of 21 and 14 future residents respectively—in order to raise money for construction. When construction was finished the joint venture partnerships were dissolved.)

(4) *TREE Housing Co-op*, the legal entity of the third cohousing neighborhood, owns 40 units in several buildings and the land under each unit. TREE Housing Co-op purchased the land from EcoVillage at Ithaca's 501(c)3 nonprofit, and each TREE household owns shares in the TREE Housing Co-op and has a lease for their individual townhouse unit.

(5) *EcoVillage at Ithaca Village Association (EVIVA)*, a non-exempt nonprofit, functions like a member co-op (although it's not legally a co-op), through which all community members co-own the two roads into the property, the water and sewer lines, the three neighborhood parking lots, the swimming pond, and the land around each of the three housing co-ops.

(6) *The Center for Transformative Consciousness* is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that promotes EcoVillage at Ithaca, develops each neighborhood, and runs EVI's onsite educational programs. Like OAEC's educational 501(c)3 nonprofit, it doesn't own anything.

The community, through its EcoVillage at Ithaca, Inc. nonprofit, leases 10 acres to West Haven Farm, a CSA farm owned by two community members, and leases 5 acres to Kestrel Perch Berry Farm, another CSA farm owned by another community member. The community also created a Conservation Easement for 35 acres of the property to remain wetlands and woodlands in perpetuity, and this is on the deed to EcoVillage at Ithaca, Inc. If the community ever disbanded and gave the land and assets of the EcoVillage at Ithaca, Inc. nonprofit to another 501(c)3 nonprofit, the new nonprofit owner would have to honor this conservation easement.

"One of the reasons for creating so many different entities," writes Bill Goodman, an EVI resi-

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**Because the owners don't own the ground underneath their building, the purchase price is not based on Los Angeles' exorbitantly expensive land values.**

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dent and lawyer, “is our need to satisfy the requirements of other parties, including the town of Ithaca, the New York Attorney General’s Office, banks, and insurance companies.... Because this project is so unusual, we have had to create a complex framework to fit both our needs and the expectations of the legal and financial worlds.”

### Eleven Issues to Consider When Choosing Your Legal Entity(ies)

(1) Does the entity resonate with your community’s values, intentions, and mission? Intentional communities generally arise from a specific set of values and intentions, often stated as its mission or purpose. The founders may want to create an economically equitable lifestyle, a self-reliant and ecologically sustainable lifestyle, or a contemplative or spiritual lifestyle. They

may want to educate or serve others, provide a nice place to live, or several of these. Given your community’s values, intentions, and specific mission, what kind of formal, legal organization best suits your group?

(2) To what degree would the legal entity confer limited liability protection?

(3) Would the community pay federal income taxes, and at what rate? Would a different legal entity confer better tax benefits?

(4) If you’ll need to borrow money, for example for a development loan or construction loan, how would your entity in-

fluence banks and other lending institutions? Are they familiar with this legal entity? Does it have credibility with them?

(5) How would the entity affect people’s joining or leaving your community?

(6) Does the entity allow your group to assign its own criteria for governance and decision-making authority, or does it mandate specific rules for decision making within the group?

(7) Does the entity allow your group to choose its members?

(8) Does the entity set requirements or restrictions for how your community must divide any annual profits or losses among community members? Would it mandate how you must divide any assets if the community disbanded?

(9) How easy would the entity be to set up and manage over time? How vulnerable would it be to changes in the law or to changes in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), or to other governmental scrutiny? How much are annual filing fees?

(10) How easy would it be to make changes in the bylaws, articles of incorporation, or operating agreements?

(11) Would the entity limit your community’s political activity? If so, is that important to your group?

### Legal Resources

Please get advice from a lawyer and a CPA about the legal entity(ies) your community is considering. You’ll need a real estate lawyer for buying your community property. Not all lawyers know about all legal entities, so in addition to your real estate lawyer, choose one who specializes in the kind of legal entity(ies) you’re considering. Get advice from other intentional communities in your state who use the same kind(s) of legal entity you’re considering. What lawyer did they use? Do they recommend that lawyer?

It can save you money to draft your articles of incorporation and bylaws or operating agreements (for an LLC) ahead of time and ask your lawyer to alter them to fit the specific requirements for that entity in your state.


The internet is an excellent place to find free legal advice: you can find many sites with very clear and lengthy legal notes about the options discussed here.

Legal clinics at law schools often offer legal advice inexpensively or for free, and may be able to connect community members up with law students looking for a research project.

Nolo Press offers excellent self-help legal forms and online documents, books, and software for almost every kind of legal entity and legal issue: [www.nolo.com](http://www.nolo.com).

The Community Associations Institute (CAI) offers information, education, and resources about homeowners associations, condominium associations, and housing cooperatives: [www.caionline.org](http://www.caionline.org).

The National Association of Housing Cooperatives (NAHC) offers the same services for housing cooperatives: [coophousing.org](http://coophousing.org).

The Institute for Community Economics (ICE) is a federally certified Community Development Financial Institution that makes loans for permanently affordable housing across the US: [www.enterprisecommunity.com](http://www.enterprisecommunity.com). 

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## Does the legal entity you’re considering allow your group to assign its own criteria for governance and decision-making authority, or does it mandate specific rules?

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*Diana Leaf Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, has also contributed chapters to the books Beyond You and Me, Gaian Economics, and Ecovillage: 1001 Ways to Heal the Planet. She speaks at conferences, offers consultations to communities, and leads workshops internationally on creating successful new intentional communities—including legal issues, what helps existing communities thrive, and governance and decision-making. She lives at Earthen Ecovillage. See [www.dianaleafchristian.org](http://www.dianaleafchristian.org).*

*Dave Henson is a founding member of the Sowing Circle Community in Sonoma County, California and founder and Director of its affiliated Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC), an educational and rural retreat center. Dave leads many workshops at OAEC, including “Creating and Sustaining Intentional Communities,” and is available for phone or in-person consultation about legal entities and organizational structures, group process and facilitation, and setting up nonprofit educational centers. See [www.oaec.org](http://www.oaec.org).*

*Allen Butcher was a founder of the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), and was a board member of the FIC and many other organizations. Allen lived at East Wind (1975-83) and at Twin Oaks (1985-89) communities. He now lives collectively in Denver, Colorado. His most recent book is The Intentioneer’s Bible: Interwoven Stories of the Parallel Cultures of Plenty and Scarcity. His book on the theory, design, and history of intentional community is available free at [culturemagic.org](http://culturemagic.org).*

*Albert Bates, a resident of The Farm Community in Tennessee since 1972, is a former environmental attorney and author of books on law, energy, and environment, including The Biochar Solution: Carbon Farming and Climate Change (2010); The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook: Recipes for Changing Times (2006); The Paris Agreement with Rex Weyler (2015); Communities that Abide with Dmitry Orlov (2014); and Climate in Crisis (1990). Albert has been Director of the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Summertown, Tennessee since 1994. See [peaksurfer.blogspot.com](http://peaksurfer.blogspot.com).*

## The Disadvantages of Joint Tenancy and Tenants in Common

These are two legal entities from the realm of real estate entities, not business entities, which allow two or more people to co-own a piece of property. While there are advantages to each, the disadvantages are especially onerous for intentional communities.

In *Joint Tenancy* all of the joint tenants have an equal interest in and rights in the property and all share equally in liabilities and profits. This most often includes sharing all necessary maintenance costs, taxes, and work responsibilities. However, a tenant is solely responsible for the costs of improvements made without the consent of the other tenants.

A Joint Tenancy has the “right of survivorship,” which means that a joint tenant cannot will their interest in the property to heirs, but rather upon that joint tenant’s death, the title is automatically passed to the surviving joint tenants.

The disadvantages of Joint Tenancy are significant for most communities. For example, a joint tenant may sell or give their interest to another person without the approval of the other tenants. This means a community could end up with a resident they don’t know and don’t want. Another big disadvantage is that if one joint tenant goes into debt, the creditor seeking collection could force the sale of the community’s property to get the cash value of the person’s share in the property.

*Tenancy in Common* is when two or more people have undivided interest in a property. If not otherwise specified, all the tenants in common share interests in the property equally. They can, however, distribute interest in the ownership of the property in whatever fractions they wish. Taxes and maintenance expenses, profits, and the value of improvements on the property must be distributed in the same proportion as the fractional distribution of their shares of ownership. There is no right of survivorship—the ownership interest of a deceased tenant in common passes to their heirs.

A tenant in common may sell, mortgage, or give their interest in the community’s property as they wish, and the new owner becomes a tenant in common with the other co-tenants, again, whether or not the community members know the person or want them as a community member. Even worse, if a tenant in common in the property wants to sell their interest and get out but the community can’t afford it right then, that person **can force a sale of the property** in order to recover the value of their interest in the property.

—DLC

# NINE TRADITIONS THAT DRAW US TOGETHER: How a Small Town Nurtures Community

*By Murphy Robinson*

I've been a part of many communities in my life, many of them ephemeral: summer camp staff teams, wilderness trail crews, and urban houseshares with an ever-changing parade of roommates. Four years ago I moved to the tiny rural village of Worcester, Vermont, and found a unique and vibrant community that welcomed me immediately. After a decade of subscribing to COMMUNITIES and scheming to start an intentional community one day, it struck me that I'd just stumbled into one by accident—one that was cleverly disguised to outsiders as a regular small town of just under 1,000 people.

Why do some towns and neighborhoods seem to embrace you in the arms of community, while others don't? Let me share a few of the things that make my village feel this way:

## 1. Community Lunch

Every Wednesday I head down the hill to the Worcester Town Hall for Community Lunch, as does just about everyone else who's in the village at noon on a Wednesday: young mothers, senior citizens, the local loggers, and people who work from home. While the meal is officially sponsored by the Vermont Food Bank, people from every economic class attend enthusiastically. This is where you see your neighbors every week, talk to the guy you want to buy your firewood from, find a friend who can lend you their truck, wish someone a happy birthday, and hear the local news. A core group of volunteers does the cooking every week, and they always lavishly decorate the hall for every major and minor holiday they can think of. Community spirit is palpable, and every newcomer is welcomed in without hesitation. Before you know it you've learned everybody's name and feel right at home.

## 2. Gathering Place

Worcester has a tiny gas station, a post office the size of a closet, and a little café that closes at noon. This "commercial district" (two small neighboring buildings) is home to the morning banter of all who rise early and work hard. You can find tradesmen grabbing coffee, commuters gassing up, and local hunters displaying their take. When it's not yet time for Community Lunch, this gathering place is where you go to see your friends and hear the latest news.

## 3. Online Forum

Vermont is the home of Front Porch Forum, a local online discussion board for each town. You must have a valid local address to be a member, and a summary of the posts lands in your inbox every day at 6 p.m. Whether you are selling a chest freezer, renting your cabin, announcing an event, or reporting a lost dog sighting, you know your neighbors will hear your words and respond.

## 4. Volunteers

Worcester's sense of community is founded on the village's volunteers. Community Lunch, the Fire Department & Fast Squad, the After School Play Group, the Community Garden, the twice yearly Clothing Swap, and the Fourth of July Committee are all run entirely by unpaid community members. These labors of love allow residents to serve their town and be proud of what they achieve together.

## 5. Long-time Residents

People tend to come to Worcester and stay. Many folks who started as renters love the community so much that they buy a house and settle down. When friendships and alliances form, they get to deepen and ripen over time. This is something I really missed in high-turnover communities, and it gives the town traditions deep roots.

## 6. Economic Interdependence

While plenty of people commute to work in the nearby capital city, lots of folks make their living right in our town. The loggers supply everyone with firewood while being thoughtful about forest sustainability on the small private woodlots they manage. The

ladies who run the café give us a place to meet and connect. I'm proud to live on one of Worcester's two community farms, where CSA members often volunteer in the fields to harvest the vegetables. Worcester is big enough to provide a living for those serving the community, and small enough that we all know these people by first name.

## 7. Celebrations of Community Pride

The Fourth of July is Worcester's day to celebrate itself. The town proudly puts on the best fireworks display for miles around, and everyone lines the street for the tiny parade. The winters are long here, so at the height of summer we come mingle on the public field in the center of town and smile giddily with community pride.

## 8. Direct Democracy

Like many New England towns, Worcester is governed by a town meeting. All registered voters may attend to elect town officers, approve (or challenge) the town budget, and





discuss the school board. Even if it's only one day per year, this participation in direct democracy reminds us all that we collectively decide what Worcester will become.

### 9. Accepting Our Differences

Worcester has a very rural character, but it's close enough to Vermont's liberal capital city that values of acceptance prevail. It's very okay to be gay (thank goodness, because I am!), neighbors of differing economic classes tend to rub shoulders with relative comfort, and the United Methodist Church co-exists peacefully with the Green Mountain Druid Order. We're a very white town, but racial diversity is embraced when it finds its way here. Since the '60s and '70s Vermont has faced an influx of back-to-the-landers who sought a place in the traditional rural communities, and here the integration seems to have enriched both groups. It's as if everybody has decided, "Well, you choose to live in our wonderful little village, which shows good sense, so I guess you must be alright."

Reading over this list, I recognize many of the core traditions that support the success of most intentional communities. Indeed, aren't many of our intentional communities seeking to reclaim the lost small-town solidarity of yesteryear? So I suppose Worcester is an unintentional community that has partially retained its rural heritage of community traditions and partially been enriched by fresh ideas from beyond its borders.

These nine methods of community-building could be applied to any small town or city neighborhood where the residents are willing. If you're a communitarian soul living in the non-communitarian world, give one of them a try in the place where you live and see if the seeds of community take root. While intentional communities are crucial laboratories that teach us so much about how the human social fabric can work, the art of creating community spirit within mainstream towns and neighborhoods has at least as much potential to change the world for the better. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go to Community Lunch! 🍷

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*Murphy Robinson is a wilderness guide and hunting instructor. When her wandering years came to an end she founded Mountainsong Expeditions in the wild forests of Vermont, where she helps people learn to be in deeper relationship with the land and each other. You can learn about her work or send her a message at [www.mountainsongexpeditions.com](http://www.mountainsongexpeditions.com). She has also published COMMUNITIES articles in the past under her former legal name, Mary Murphy.*

# AVOIDING “SOCIOCRACY WARS”: How Communities Learn Sociocracy and Use It Effectively...Or Not

By Diana Leafé Christian



*Members of Hart's Mill Ecovillage near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, meet the three requirements for learning Sociocracy well and using it effectively.*

“**W**e’ve made more decisions in the last two months than in the previous two years!” observed Pioneer Valley Cohousing member Davis Hawkowl a couple months after Pioneer Valley Cohousing in Amherst, Massachusetts agreed to try Sociocracy for an 18-month period. Sociocracy, sometimes called Dynamic Governance, is a governance and decision-making method created for businesses in the 1970s. In recent years it has been adopted by some intentional communities too. But groups don’t usually just replace their current governance and decision-making method with Sociocracy. Rather, they decide to try Sociocracy for a specific period of time, usually two years or 18 months, and then take a member survey to learn if they like it, how it may have benefited them, and if they want to keep it or return to the method they used before.

So after 17 months of using Sociocracy, in July 2014, Pioneer Valley conducted a member survey to see if and how many community residents liked using it. Before, the same relatively few members had done almost all the administrative work. After implementing Sociocracy,

their survey showed that far more members became involved in community governance. The survey also showed that more people took on leadership roles, including newer members who had not participated in community governance before. And an overwhelming majority reported they were “highly satisfied” with Sociocracy.

Pioneer Valley and other communities using Sociocracy have generally experienced four distinct kinds of benefits. These include more enjoyable and effective meetings, a greater sense of accomplishment, becoming better organized, and a feeling of more connection among members. However, certain conditions are required for effective implementation of this method, and not meeting these conditions can be a recipe for failure—as I’ll describe below.

## Three Requirements for Learning Sociocracy and Using It Effectively

After teaching Sociocracy for intentional communities since 2012, I learned—from observing communities where it wasn’t working well—there seem to be three requirements for using Sociocracy in order to truly benefit from it. And not meeting these requirements tends to result in ineffective meetings and conflict. The requirements are:

**1. Everyone learns Sociocracy.** They learn the basic principles, governance structure, and meeting processes, and this includes organizing periodic trainings for new people. This way no one is likely to misunderstand a facilitator’s role. Or characterize the facilitator as a “dictator” when the facilitator leads the circle through the steps of a meeting process, seeks everyone’s consent first before agreeing to a request for a (time-limited) open discussion, or calls on people in rounds rather than responding to random raised hands.

If not everyone can learn Sociocracy relatively soon after the group decides to use it, I recommend that these members sign an agreement saying they will learn it as soon as they can, and specifically that they won’t try to stop the facilitator from doing their job, or try to induce the group to use a process more like the one they’re used to, which is usually consensus.

**2. They use all seven parts.** (See “Seven Parts of Sociocracy,” p. 61.) Sociocracy of course has more than seven parts, but in my experience there are seven main parts groups need for it to work well. This is because each part reinforces and mutually benefits the other parts. Consent decision-making, for example, can tend to trigger conflict unless the group uses three other parts of Sociocracy: a governance structure of circles and double-links, a clear, well-understood domain and aims for their circle, and feedback loops built into each proposal. With these other parts in place consent decision-making tends to work beautifully.

**3. They use it as it was designed.** The group doesn’t try to change Sociocracy into a hybrid method with what they’re used to. When some community members want to stay with consensus, they may try to induce the group to try a kind of hybrid Sociocracy-consensus so they can feel good, and they can threaten to block the proposal to

try it unless they change Sociocracy this way. Unfortunately a pseudo-Sociocracy/consensus hybrid usually triggers more frustration and conflict than either method alone. In my opinion Sociocracy is in a different paradigm altogether from consensus (and making it more consensus-like dilutes its effectiveness).

For the most part, Pioneer Valley does all three things. Everyone has learned it, they use it correctly, and most circles use all the parts. While some circles haven't used Role-Improvement Feedback yet, and not all circles have built feedback loops into all of their proposals, increasing numbers of Pioneer Valley members are becoming aware of and including these parts of Sociocracy.

### When These Requirements Aren't Met—"Sociocracy Wars"

Unfortunately the following two communities didn't do these things. Learning about their painful experiences is what convinced me how important these three requirements are.

The first is a community I'll call Cypress Commons. Their founders began using Sociocracy early in their history, in their property development and financing phases. At first it went well; several founders told friends how much they loved using Sociocracy. But unfortunately, the group didn't periodically train the new people who joined, believing they'd "just pick it up" by being in meetings. By the time construction was finally finished and people moved to the land three years later, as is common in communities like this, approximately 80 percent of the members had not taken the original workshop or had training in Sociocracy.

The four remaining founders had done the best they could to convey Sociocracy to people during meetings, and over the years they served as meeting facilitators. However, their ability to help others understand and use Sociocracy correctly was countered by almost 30 newer residents who'd joined over the years—people who were familiar only with consensus or else top-down management.

The community fell into what I call "governance drift." With approximately 30 out of 34 people barely understanding Sociocracy—and often projecting onto it the top-down management or classic consensus governance methods they already knew—the original Sociocracy principles and meeting processes gradually shifted into something else. Increasingly in meetings people insisted on speaking whenever they wanted to regardless of the steps of a process the facilitator was attempting to lead them through, and the facilitator, wanting to be accommodating, just let them speak. Most didn't understand the need for double links between circles, and because increasingly fewer people participated in governance, the group gradually began filling the operations leader and representative roles with one person.

Furthermore, feedback loops were not built into proposals, so objections were not resolved by adjusting the ways people might later measure and evaluate the proposal. Instead of benefiting from this easy and collaborative way to resolve objections, people argued for and against objections and treated them like blocks. Meanwhile, many people also insisted on attending meetings of the General Circle and functional circles even though they weren't members of those circles, and worse, insisted on having full decision-making rights in creating or consenting to proposals. Clearly, most Cypress Grove members didn't understand the basic Sociocracy principle of consent.

People also argued about *how* they were supposed to organize circles and make decisions. Some members really did seem to understand how Sociocracy works, but others had different ideas. The arguments about this, in meetings and on email, were fierce. At one point I did a Sociocracy review workshop, hoping to help Cypress Grove. (One of the founders paid for it, as the community as a whole didn't think they needed and wouldn't pay for a review workshop.) Unfortunately the workshop didn't help much. My attempt to present the basic principles of Sociocracy and the simple steps of its

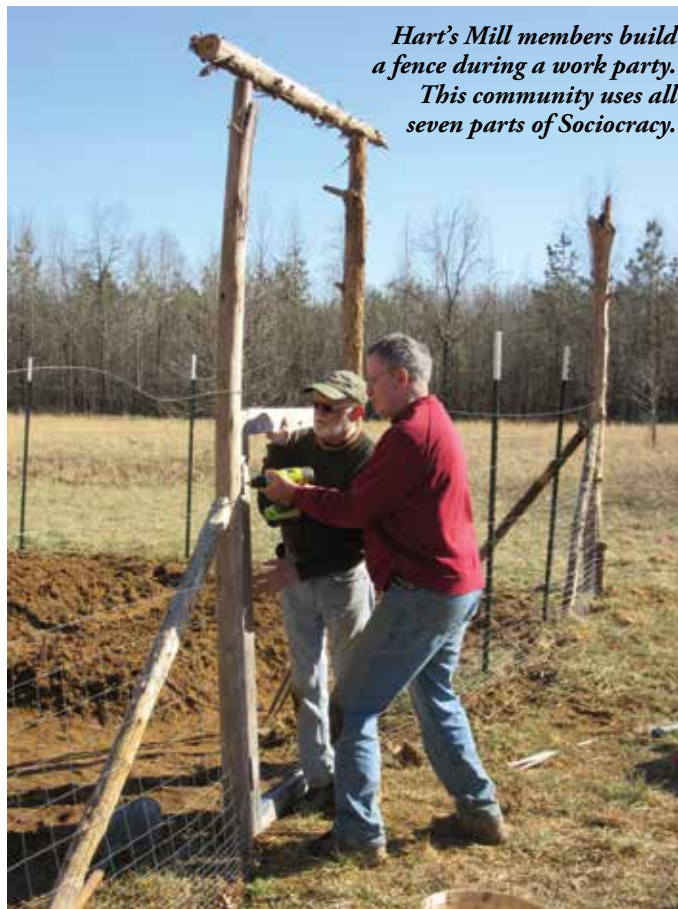
meeting processes only intensified the conflict. "You're taking their side!" one member blurted out.

Cypress Grove had recently elected a newer member as Operations Leader for the General Circle, who had not learned about Sociocracy. He was involved in the issue of conflicting statements in the Sociocracy book *We the People*, which described making decisions in Operations Meetings two different ways on two different pages. I forwarded my email from co-author John Buck to this new Operations Leader and other members. John explained that these were not contradictory but two optional ways people could make decisions in Operations Meetings; the circle could choose. But the new Operations Leader was convinced that since the page saying the Operations Leader makes decisions unilaterally appeared later in the book, that was the actual truth, and so he'd make all decisions in Operations Meetings. He also believed that any issues in circle other than actual proposals must be operations, and so he'd unilaterally decide those issues too. This is not true, of course. So I offered the new Operations Leader a series of one-on-one Sociocracy training sessions on Skype at no charge. But he declined, saying he was too busy, and it was unnecessary anyway since he already understood Sociocracy.

These difficult experiences, and those of several other communities I visited, didn't seem to result from anyone's quality of character or harmful intentions, as everyone seemed motivated by a genuine desire to help the community. The problems occurred because, in my opinion, not everyone in the group had learned Sociocracy, they didn't use all the parts, and they used most parts incorrectly!

### When These Requirements Aren't Met—Sociocracy Gets a Black Eye

A few years later I did a Sociocracy workshop with participants from three nearby intentional communities in a rural area I'll call Orca Bay, including homeowners in several small adjacent private housing devel-



*Hart's Mill members build a fence during a work party. This community uses all seven parts of Sociocracy.*

opments, which I'll call the Orca Bay Homeowners' Group. Many had taken two previous workshops by a Sociocracy trainer colleague, and he told me the Homeowners' Group was now using Sociocracy.

I later met the president and meeting facilitator of the Homeowners' Group, whom I'll call Sam. He told me about a series of difficult meetings they had since they began using Sociocracy. A building with a kitchen and dining room on an adjacent property, which the group leased for weekly common meals, had become overrun with mice. So they created and consented to a proposal to have two cats live in the building to take care of the mice, and they'd look at the issue again in six months. Six months later they reviewed the now-implemented proposal, looking at the effect of the cats living in the building. The mice were gone and most Homeowners' Group members had grown fond of the cats and wanted to keep them, but two members intensely disliked cats and a third was highly allergic them. As the meeting facilitator Sam had tried to conduct an evaluation discussion but the meeting was so contentious nothing was resolved. Those who wanted to keep the cats used what Sam called "bullying and shaming tactics" to try to silence those who had problems with the cats. This didn't sound much like Sociocracy!

In the process of asking more questions I learned that only Sam and a few other members of the Homeowners' Group had actually taken my trainer colleague's Sociocracy workshops. The rest knew relatively little about it, and they weren't interested in learning more. In addition, Sam and the members who did know about Sociocracy didn't seem to understand much about the process of building feedback loops into proposals. In their first meeting, for example, they had not included a clear list of ways they would measure and evaluate the proposal later. They didn't appear to understand that based on what they might learn by measuring and evaluating specific impacts of the cats on the building and on the people, they'd have the choice to keep the cats, change how they lived in the building, or remove the cats. Instead they worded the proposal to say they'd keep the proposal after the six-month period "if we can live with it." This is not how feedback loops are used in Sociocracy. This wording was more like a kind of "sundown clause" used in consensus, in that the implemented proposal would have to be disbanded unless it met the vague criteria, "we can live with it," and this criteria was not defined either. No wonder they were stuck.

Even more significantly, the Homeowners' Group didn't actually have the basic structures that an intentional community needs in order to decide something all members must comply with, like their governance and decision-making method. In this group, anyone immediately became a full member of the Homeowners' Group and had full decision-making rights as soon as they bought a house from a departing homeowner. They had no membership process, which would

include first getting to know and then choosing new members based partly on their willingness to learn and use the group's chosen governance and decision-making method. Furthermore, homeowners who attended meetings included the small group that always attended and those who only came when there were agenda items they cared about. Thus the relatively few people who participated in the meeting where it was proposed the group adopt Sociocracy agreed to a process only a few had learned about and most were unwilling to learn, and which couldn't be enforced in any case.

This was the group that Sam as facilitator bravely tried to lead through the various steps of proposal-forming and consent decision-making—with the controversial issue of what to do about the cats as the topic!

At first I thought Orca Bay's problem was their misunderstanding about including feedback loops in proposals. So I suggested that, if the group consented, to try again with another trial period for the cats, this time with clear and specific ways they'd later measure and evaluate their impact on the mice, the building, and the people, and clear and specific ways to mitigate the effect of the cats on the several members who'd been adversely affected. And to make sure knew that their options about the cats after the trial period would be to keep them, change how they lived there, or remove them.

But this turned out to be bad advice. Sam later emailed to say the group tried to do this but endured another whole year of conflict. They finally agreed to remove the cats, which pleased three people but was a painful loss for almost everyone else. And their additional year of conflict, Sam told me, was the direct result of my advice to try again. Not only that, he said, but most people in all the Orca Bay communities now had a poor opinion of Sociocracy and were no longer interested in using it.

Ouch! I was appalled to think I contributed to this. But my actual mistake, I now think, was in not advising them, given their situation, to *not use Sociocracy at all*. They didn't meet the basic criteria to use it! No group can use a governance method without having a way to make sure everyone learns it and uses it. For example usually Sociocracy is taught to businesses and nonprofits: if the bosses of a company or nonprofit agree to try Sociocracy, all the employees will do so. In teaching Sociocracy to intentional communities I now know this only works if the group passes a proposal to try Sociocracy for a period of time with the agreement that everyone will learn it and use it. (And members who don't learn it will of course still be welcome in meetings but wouldn't be able to participate adequately.)

Learning the painful experiences of the Orca Bay Homeowners' Group, on top of the previous painful experiences of Cypress Grove, absolutely convinced me that these three requirements are needed in order to benefit from Sociocracy.



*Hart's Mill members celebrate a work party on their 112 acres. All members learn Sociocracy.*



*Workshop participants at Huebucoyatl Ecovillage in Mexico discuss the three requirements for Sociocracy.*

Jan Svante

## Meeting the Requirements—"Our Meetings Rock"

It doesn't have to be like this. Hart's Mill Ecovillage, a forming community near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, meets the three criteria. Everyone learns Sociocracy, and they regularly offer in-house trainings for new members. They use all seven parts. This includes building feedback loops into proposals and later measuring and evaluating the effects of their proposals after trying them for awhile. They choose Operations Leaders and Representatives for each circle. They use all four meeting processes, including Role-Improvement Feedback. And they use them correctly.

"Our meetings just rock," observes cofounder Hope Horton. "Recently we had a huge amount of business to conduct in one large-group meeting that lasted for three hours. We moved through it easily, spending no more than about 10 minutes on each issue. It took a lot of preparation and training to accomplish this, but there's a group coherence around this process now, and people tend to have more energy after a meeting than before. When new people learn the steps of the process, and learn how to do rounds, they feel amazed at how much we can get done. They feel confident that when they come to a meeting it will be productive, so people don't mind coming to them—lots of them!"

Rocky Corner Cohousing, a forming community near New Haven, Connecticut, also meets the three requirements. They regularly offer in-house Sociocracy workshops for new members. Most circles use most of the seven parts and some circles use all of them. They use Sociocracy correctly and have easy, enjoyable, effective meetings. "I personally place so much value on Sociocracy that I have become critical of every other organization in my life," wrote Rocky Corner member Marie Pulito in the Spring 2016 issue of COMMUNITIES. "The redundancy of tasks where I work is horrendous. My church meetings make me cringe. The annual meetings of my small New England town fall far short. Where is the equivalence of voice, the power of many minds coming together to find a solution to a problem? I now want every organization in the world to use Sociocracy!" 🌱

*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 a reputation for a teaching style that is so clear that communities can start using Sociocracy right away after a three-day workshop, with additional consultation help on Skype, if needed. Diana has taught Sociocracy in North America, Europe, and Latin America, and is currently helping train the Board of Directors of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). This article series is part of her forthcoming book on Sociocracy in intentional communities. See [www.DianaLeafeChristian.org](http://www.DianaLeafeChristian.org).*



*Members of Rocky Corner Cohousing in Bethany, Connecticut celebrating Winter Solstice on their land. They also meet the three requirements.*

## The Seven Parts of Sociocracy

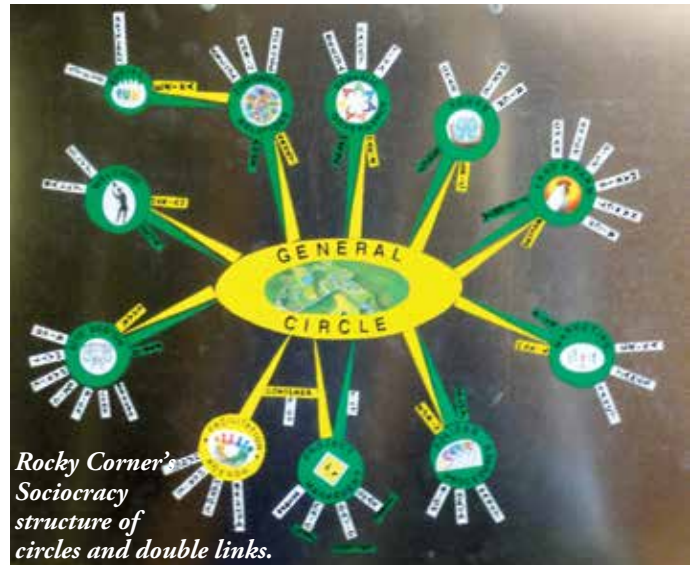
Sociocracy has more than seven parts of course, but these are the main parts I believe are minimal for a group to learn Sociocracy well and use it effectively. In the same way the seven main parts of a bicycle mutually benefit and reinforce each other (frame, front wheel, back wheel, handlebars, pedals and gears, brakes, and seat), so too the seven parts of Sociocracy mutually benefit and reinforce each other.

1. Circles and Double Links.
2. A clear domain and clear aims for each circle.
3. Feedback loops built into every proposal.

And four (really five) meeting processes:

4. Proposal-Forming.
5. Consent Decision-Making.
6. Selecting People for Roles (Elections) [and Consenting to Circle Members].
7. Role-Improvement Feedback.

—DLC



Rich Wilbur



*Rocky Corner Cohousing Winter Solstice celebration.*

Photos courtesy of Diana Leafe Christian

# Remembering Joani Blank

By Laird Schaub

I lost a friend and community lost one of its staunchest promoters when Joani Blank died this past August of pancreatic cancer at age 79. She had lived a full life.

As the cancer wasn't discovered until June, the end came fast, but Joani made the most of it, spending her last few weeks surrounded by friends and family, celebrating their shared lives. She died at home in her beloved cohousing community, Swan's Market, in downtown Oakland.

I first met Joani at the national cohousing conference held on the campus of UC Berkeley in 2001. Though it was a "home game" for her (as an East Bay resident she could sleep in her own bed each night), it was immediately obvious to me that she was a tour de force whose energy would be strong in any setting. She was one of the early adopters of cohousing, and worked tirelessly to promote it all the years that I knew her.

Joani and I didn't always see things the same way. For example, she viewed cohousing as the epicenter of community living, while I saw it as just one of many good choices available under the big top that the Fellowship for Intentional Community has erected for showcasing options in intentional community and social sustainability. Yet, in the end, our differences were minor and we recognized in each other the same burning desire to create a more cooperative and just world. We were fellow travelers.

On a personal level, Joani stood out as someone you could work things out with. As an activist, she was aware that feathers would sometimes get ruffled. Whenever that occurred she wouldn't necessarily change her viewpoint (or her style) but she'd tackle differences straight on, being willing to hear your side and to work constructively to a mutually agreeable solution. She did not duck the tough questions. While I'd like to tell you that this quality is common in the world today, it isn't—and Joani was all the more precious to me as a friend because that's the way she lived her life.

Joani and I crossed paths early on as I helped organize benefit auctions for a number of cohousing conferences and she was a generous contributor, often sending something sizzling from Good Vibrations, the groundbreaking sex-positive business that she started in 1977, with the goal of providing a "clean, well-lit place for sex toys, books, and [later] videos." Long before she died, Joani had converted Good Vibrations from "her" business to one that was employee-owned.

While she was undoubtedly better known as the proprietress who started Good Vibrations, I knew her as an icon in the Communities Movement, and I'm pleased to have this chance to salute her in passing. I last saw her in May at the regional Cohousing Conference on Aging in Salt Lake City, and we had our last exchanges via email in late June.

She faced death as fearlessly as she faced life: directly and with her eyes fully open. We'll miss you, Joani. 🌱



Liz Hatalla, The Chronicle



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**FAIR OAKS ECOHOUSING, EAST OF SACRAMENTO, CA** - Fair Oaks EcoHousing is a family-friendly, inter-generational group of households committed to creating an earth-friendly cohousing community. We're building 30 homes on 3.5 acres, with start of construction planned for fall 2015. We're seeking others who share our vision to join us! We're pleased to be working with Charles Durrett of McCamant & Durrett Architects and Katie McCamant of CoHousing Solutions, both leaders in environmental sustainability. Fair Oaks is 18 miles east of downtown Sacramento. The site is within easy walking distance of the 23-mile American River Parkway, deemed the "Jewel of Sacramento." Nearby attractions include charming Fair Oaks Village, the Sacramento Waldorf School and Bannister Park. Being located on the eastern side of the valley provides access to the Sierra Foothills, with opportunities for hiking, skiing, rafting and kayaking. Interested in learning more? We'd love to talk with you! Learn more at [www.FairOaksEcoHousing.org](http://www.FairOaksEcoHousing.org).

**BELFAST ECOVILLAGE IN MIDCOAST MAINE** is a 36-unit multigenerational community on 42 acres. The super energy efficient homes are clustered to preserve open space for recreation, agriculture and wildlife. Automobile access is limited and the houses are connected by a pedestrian path, making it a safe place for young children. A 4,000 square foot common house is nearly complete, and will have several voluntary shared meals weekly. Many homes have solar systems, making them near net zero. Members gather weekly to harvest food from the 3-acre worker share community farm and there are two multi-household flocks of laying hens. Members come from all walks of life and include educators, naturalist, carpenters, medical professionals, social workers, musicians, and artists. Belfast Ecovillage is located two miles from the quaint coastal town of Belfast, with a harbor, library, YMCA, schools, employers, and health food coop. For more information visit: [Mainecohousing.org](http://Mainecohousing.org) or call 207-338-9200

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**BREITENBUSH HOT SPRINGS IS HIRING!** Information Services - Network Administrator/Assistant. - Breitenbush Hot Springs (BHS), a worker-owned cooperative, is a remote, rustic retreat and conference center located ten miles north of Detroit, Oregon. The community of 60-80 people is surrounded by the Willamette National Forest and has access to countless outdoor activities. BHS has an immediate opening on our Information Services Team for a full-time Network Administrator/Assistant. This position works with the Network Administrator to provide end-user technical support and maintain hardware and software infrastructures for a unique Apple OSX-based

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**COHOUSING COACHES / COHOUSING CALIFORNIA / AGING IN COMMUNITY:** Hi, we're Raines Cohen and Betsy Morris, longtime communitarians living at Berkeley (CA) Cohousing. We've both served on the FIC board and have collectively visited over 100 cohousing neighborhoods, lived in two, and helped many. We have participated in the Group Pattern Language Project (co-creating the Group Works Deck) and are on the national cohousing advisory board. Betsy has an urban planning/economic development background; Raines wrote the "Aging in Community" chapter in the book *Audacious Aging*. We're participating with the Global Ecovillage Network and helping communities regionally organize in California. We'd love to help you in your quest for sustainable living. Let's talk about how we can help you make your dream real and understandable to your future neighbors. <http://www.CohousingCoaches.com/> 510-842-6224

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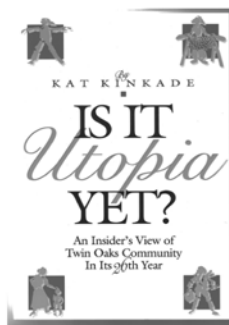
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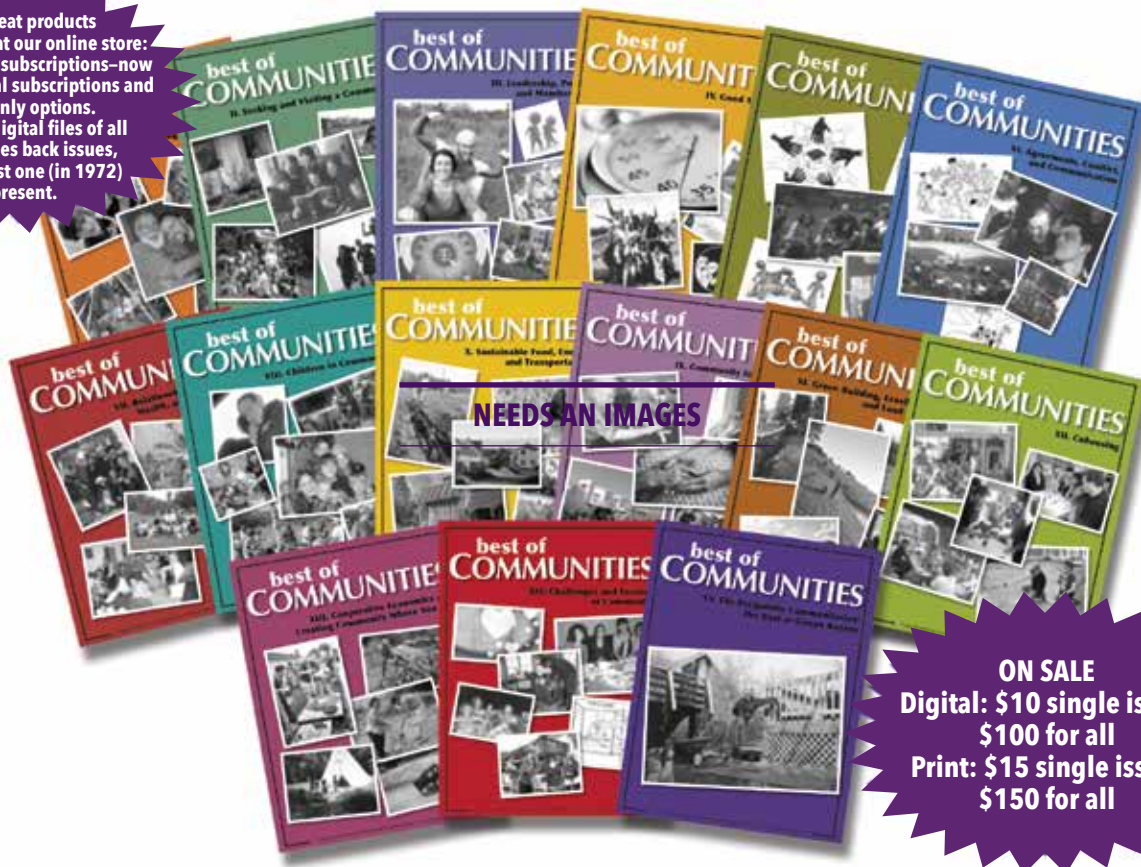
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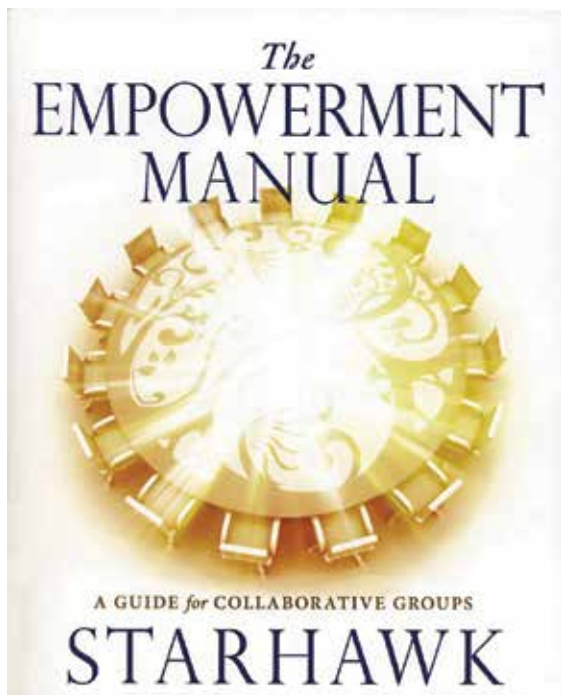
Each collection is comprised of about 15–20 articles, containing a total of 55–65 pages. All are available in both digital and print format.

If you're hungry for information about cooperative living, we have a menu that will satisfy any appetite! If you're thinking about starting a community, this collection offers an incredible storehouse of practical advice. If you're thinking of joining a community, these special issues will help you discern the right things to look for, and how to be a savvy shopper.

While there are some classic pieces that date back to the '90s, the vast majority of the articles in The Best of Communities Bundle have been written in the past dozen years, representing cutting-edge thinking and how-to explorations of the social, ecological, and economic aspects of sustainable living. We've gathered insights about what you can expect when raising children in community, and offer a wealth of information about what it's like to grow old there, too. For dessert, we have the collected wisdom of over 50 essays from Geoph Kozeny (1949–2007), the Peripatetic Communitarian.

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



# Collective Empowerment

## The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups

By Starhawk

New Society Publishers, 2011, 304 pages

Available from Community Bookstore,

[www.ic.org/community-bookstore](http://www.ic.org/community-bookstore)

an impossible vision, though it's one in which a little extra effort and oftentimes a lot of self-reflection is necessary. In her book *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*, Starhawk leads us from the visionary imagination into the practical with hands-on tools for manifesting such a reality.

I can distinctly remember the first time I read *The Empowerment Manual*. It was 2012, shortly after the book was published, and I was living and working on a farm in Chatham County, North Carolina in which I was also helping the farm's owner, Meredith, transition her 40-acre farmstead into a working agrarian intentional community. Although my experience in community was in its infancy—having just completed a five-month work-exchange at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage—my enthusiasm was expansive and infectious, and I soaked up every word of the book oftentimes with an audible “Yes!” to the others in the room.

The book was useful in those formative stages of starting a community because it touches on the essential issues of any forming or existing group: visioning and creating, power dynamics and leadership, communication and accountability, group conflict and understanding. Each topic is illustrated with a fictional example carried throughout the book and periodic exercises for the reader and/or group to consider.

I can remember spending my early hours before farmwork appreciating Starhawk's ability to articulate a common dynamic we have all likely experienced: the “ladder of inference.” This is when an incident takes place and we assume a story as to why someone behaved or spoke or reacted in a particular way. Each “step up the ladder” is the building of our story, which could very well not be accurate, and the details of our story are built on our original assumption. All this makes our elaborate story seem possible, however inaccurate it might be. Starhawk walks us back down the ladder and points out ways in which we can seek clarity through *communicating*, instead of *inferring* what has happened and letting it emotionally escalate.

I also recall with delight reading about the “Mandala of Group Roles” in which Starhawk draws an x-y axis with representations of the four directions, elements, and associating animals—then uses these qualities to describe the various personalities one may take in a group.

For instance, the x-axis is the “axis of learning” and the far right of this spectrum is represented by the East, the air element, and the Crow. Those in a group that fall within the East/Air/Crow personality type are the leaders, the ones that fly overhead and see the overarching goals and future obstacles. Those on the left of the spectrum are of the West and are represented by water and the Snake. These people tend to carry more of the emotion for the group and observe subtle tones, communication, and conflicts that arise. Of course, many of us fall somewhere inside the spectrum rather than on the edge. The Mandala of Group Roles reminds us that we all may take on different tendencies but that our roles have an equal importance in the whole of the group.

As one who personally uses elemental energy and animal spirits for my own symbology and

understanding of the world, I greatly appreciated this dynamic model. It works for me, but I recognize it does not work for everyone. If you are averse to earth-based spirituality and symbolism, this particular part of the book may be difficult to digest. With that said, I find the content throughout the book to be relatively grounded and practical.

Starhawk has an ability to take the hand of the deep, earth-based spiritual world, and with the other hand take our universal need for human connection and healthy group dynamics. She has a gift for bridging the two worlds and maintaining a *spirit* within the *tangible*.

Coincidentally, it was that same year as I read *The Empowerment Manual* that I also wrote my complete application for Starhawk's Earth Activist Training (EAT), a uniquely developed Permaculture Design Course with a flavor of activism and a heavy dose of ritual. As it turns out, I did not attend EAT but rather moved back to northeast Missouri where Dancing Rabbit resides, began planting my own seeds, and ultimately landed the Bookstore Manager position at FIC.

Somehow, writing this review and reflecting on my relationship with the book demonstrates to me the nonlinear sphere that Starhawk describes. We do not work in a linear fashion with simple cause and effects. Rather, we continue to fold in and overlap, support and be supported, try and change course only to return to where we ought to be, just like a successful collaborative group. 🐦

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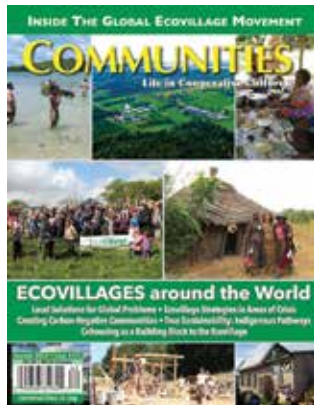
*Kim Kanney, FIC's Bookstore Manager, currently lives in northwest Ohio in what she calls “the original community”: living with and near extended family. In addition to managing the FIC bookstore, she helps to tend the family gardens and orchards, and owns a soap and herbal apothecary business.*

# COMMUNITIES

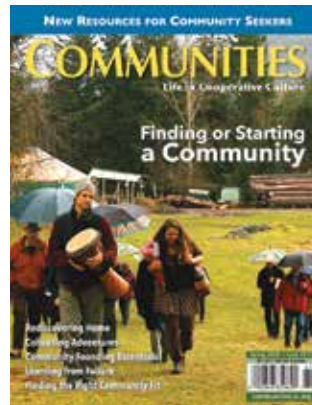
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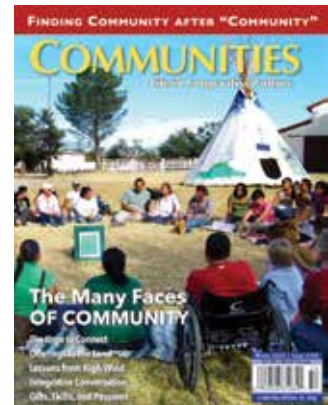
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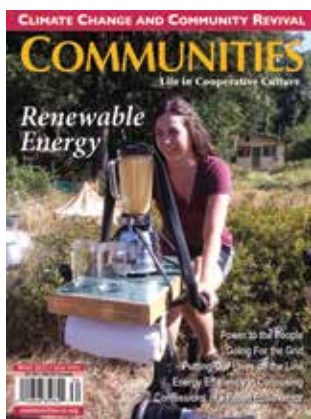
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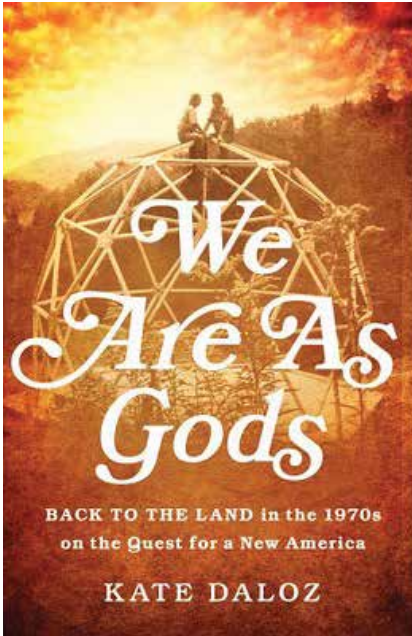
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# Back to the Land

## We Are As Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America

By Kate Daloz

New York, Public Affairs, 2016

Kate Daloz's new book begins, as it must, with a search for land, and ends, many pages later, with a summary of the eventual fates of the principal characters we encounter in her tale of that land. And what a tale it is. The book's inscription, deftly lifted from the "Purpose" sections of *Whole Earth Catalog* of 1968 and the *Whole Earth Epilogue* of 1974, capsulizes the story in miniature. The early entry, full of hope and high purpose, states boldly, "We are as gods," and sets out, famously, to support the late

One minor caveat in regard to *We Are As Gods* is the downside of Daloz's age—she is a child of the back-to-the-land movement, not a founder like her parents. This causes a few lesser scenes to lack the specificity of an on-the-ground observer, but this does not detract from their overall relevance to her narrative. Another is that though *We Are As Gods* is a thoroughly worthwhile endeavor, what it adds to the literature of alternative living and the pursuit of community is one person's perspective on a highly representative scene from the back-to-the-land movement, rather than a broader comparative view. Again, this does not detract, it simply places Daloz's effort among the several other important individual interpretations of social movements of this era.

20th century voyage of informed individuals and groups to the new world they hope to create. The later entry, only a little more than five years later, is cast as a corrective: We thought we were gods, but it was more complicated up there than we expected.

This brief paradigm of the back-to-the-land movement can serve as an introduction to Daloz and her own purpose and method as well. *We Are As Gods* tells the compelling story of a communal enclave in northern Vermont, and its extended family, over a period now approaching 50 years. With a cast of about 20 adults and their various offspring, and the overall frame of a lengthy span of time, the author has taken on a task that might be compared to writing a *bildungsroman* focused on a small, tightly-knit group rather than an individual. The learning curve is steep, but the progress achieved is palpable. Yet, as many a community-builder has learned, progress comes at a price, and even goals achieved can falter in the face of the very human development they have fostered.

Such is the case with Myrtle Hill and Entropy Acres, the two pseudonymous neighboring communes on whose history the book is based. From the beginning, Daloz sets a personal tone that rings true. Following the search for land, we look back at life in the cities of the late 1960s and early '70s, and to the restless young denizens who will take issue with it and set out for the country. For someone who wasn't yet born, the author's description of the world of urban youth in that era (she offers especially the example of Boston and Cambridge) is remarkably accurate and sentient. This holds true for the length of the book, and is one of the signs of the devoted labor, including extensive interviews and research, that went into creating it.

"To go back to the land," she writes, "it seemed, all that was necessary was an ardent belief that life in Middle America was corrupt and hollow, that consumer goods were burdensome and unnecessary, that protest was better lived than shouted, and that the best response to a broken culture was to simply reinvent it from scratch." College age youth of 1968, she states, quoting sociologist Kenneth Keniston, "were concerned about finding 'exciting, honorable and effective ways of using their intelligence.'" This is pretty much it in a nutshell. (pp. 5 and 6)

With her larger task in mind, however, Daloz balances the many personal stories that make up the larger tale with a national, sometimes global historic view. Alternating between these two narrative poles, macro and micro, with a mastery of transitions and segues, yields a combination of content and style that admirably suits the subject. Hence, the Myrtle Hill and Entropy Acres community grows from its humble roots to full bloom in the context of Woodstock, Drop City, the Vietnam War, the fall of Richard Nixon, and other cardinal points of the era, and declines in the widespread necessities brought on by marriage, children, livelihood, and the unexpected challenges of community life that followed. Daloz's approach to these issues, and the way she has executed it, make for a book that, though complex, is clearly written and a pleasure to read. While much of the evident ethos and its application to community-building in the woods will be familiar to those who went through the back-to-the-land movement, study it, or continue to be involved in such endeavors, Daloz's retelling in the particular dress of her community and family will, I think, prove a unique resource in recalling the values and challenges of an important and often underestimated period, as well as passing on their lessons to later generations.

While a complete reading of *We Are As Gods* will deliver the lifelong stories and what seem to be accurate character readings of Craig, Amy, Loraine, LJ, and not least Daloz's parents Larry and Judy, and their efforts at community, it also serves to outline in vivid detail and mood the complexity of a time that produced both hope and despair, leaving us with the mixed verdict such enterprises tend to hand down: It's tough to get there, but it's worth it. The particular contribution of Daloz's own effort is the insight her portrayal and analysis adds to an archetypal communal portrait. As such, it is a valuable addition to the literature of later 20th and early 21st century alternative life. Saving the world and saving ourselves are intertwined.

A good summary is offered in the anecdote with which Daloz closes her book. Her father, Larry, commuting to work in Vermont, picks up a hitchhiker who turns out to be coming from Myrtle Hill. "I'm sorry the commune failed," Larry says. "It wasn't a failure," the hitchhiker responds. "Just because we didn't end up with what we thought we were going to end up with doesn't mean we ended up with nothing. We ended up with something else. Which is also beautiful." (p. 337) 🍷

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*Tom Fells is a curator and writer whose books and articles on the counterculture have focused on the extended communal families of Montague and Packer Corners farms. He is the founder of the Famous Long Ago archive at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He lives in North Bennington, Vermont.*

# GPS Directions for Community



**E**XIT the mainstream urban/suburban/rural single-dwelling lifestyle you've been living. Depending on your life experience, you may need to VEER LEFT to accomplish this.

IMMEDIATELY ENTER into the heart of your new community home. You will need to NAVIGATE THE COMPLEX TWISTS AND TURNS that seem to pop up with alarming frequency. Who knew that such a simple change in the kitchen would upset so many people? It was just one little thing. What was wrong with the suggestion to adopt a community puppy—don't people here want to provide a good home for a stray? Why isn't the brilliance of my new business proposal obvious to everyone? Well, except for you-know-who's constant bias against all post-Industrial-Revolution technology.

PAUSE to consider: When the other person said what they said, how did I feel? What is their piece of the truth? Do I need to give them some space?

Even after traveling the road for years, you may find yourself in the middle of a tricky community conflict, looking like it's going to end in a horrific pile-up of emotions. You have several options:

YIELD to the more vocal, more articulate, or more tenacious energy. or

TAKE A SHARP TURN and attempt to address the festering, long-term issues that have slowly calcified over years into unwavering caricatures of process, then QUICKLY DODGE the head-on collisions and emotional shrapnel that comes flying towards you and everyone else.

RECALCULATING.

Now SIGNAL your willingness to work together, and MAKE A DETOUR by adjusting your position and offering a modified proposal that addresses the concerns that have been raised.

Before proceeding, BUY YOURSELF SOME INSURANCE by investing in other peoples' viewpoints and building up some goodwill in your community-karma bank account.

As you continue on the journey, ENTER A ROUNDABOUT of meetings, discussions, and surveys. In due time, you will...

ARRIVE AT YOUR DESTINATION. You find a solution that works for the group!

Now that the situation has resolved and the communal dust has settled, SLOW DOWN AND IDLE for a while, relishing this period of time and enjoying the glow of some skillful, caring cooperation and warm feelings towards your sister/fellow travelers.

Soon enough it will be time to RESET and start again... 🐦

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*Valerie Renwick lives at Twin Oaks Community (Louisa, Virginia; [www.twinoaks.org](http://www.twinoaks.org)), where she has very little occasion to use a GPS device. She does, however, sometimes read The New Yorker, where a "Shouts and Murmurs" article ([www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/30/gps-directions-for-getting-home-drunk](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/30/gps-directions-for-getting-home-drunk)) provided the initial inspiration for this piece.*



Camphill is a worldwide movement of vibrant lifesharing communities where people with & without developmental disabilities strive together to reach their full potential through a combination of community life, the arts and work on the land.

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### CAMPHILL VILLAGE KIMBERTON HILLS

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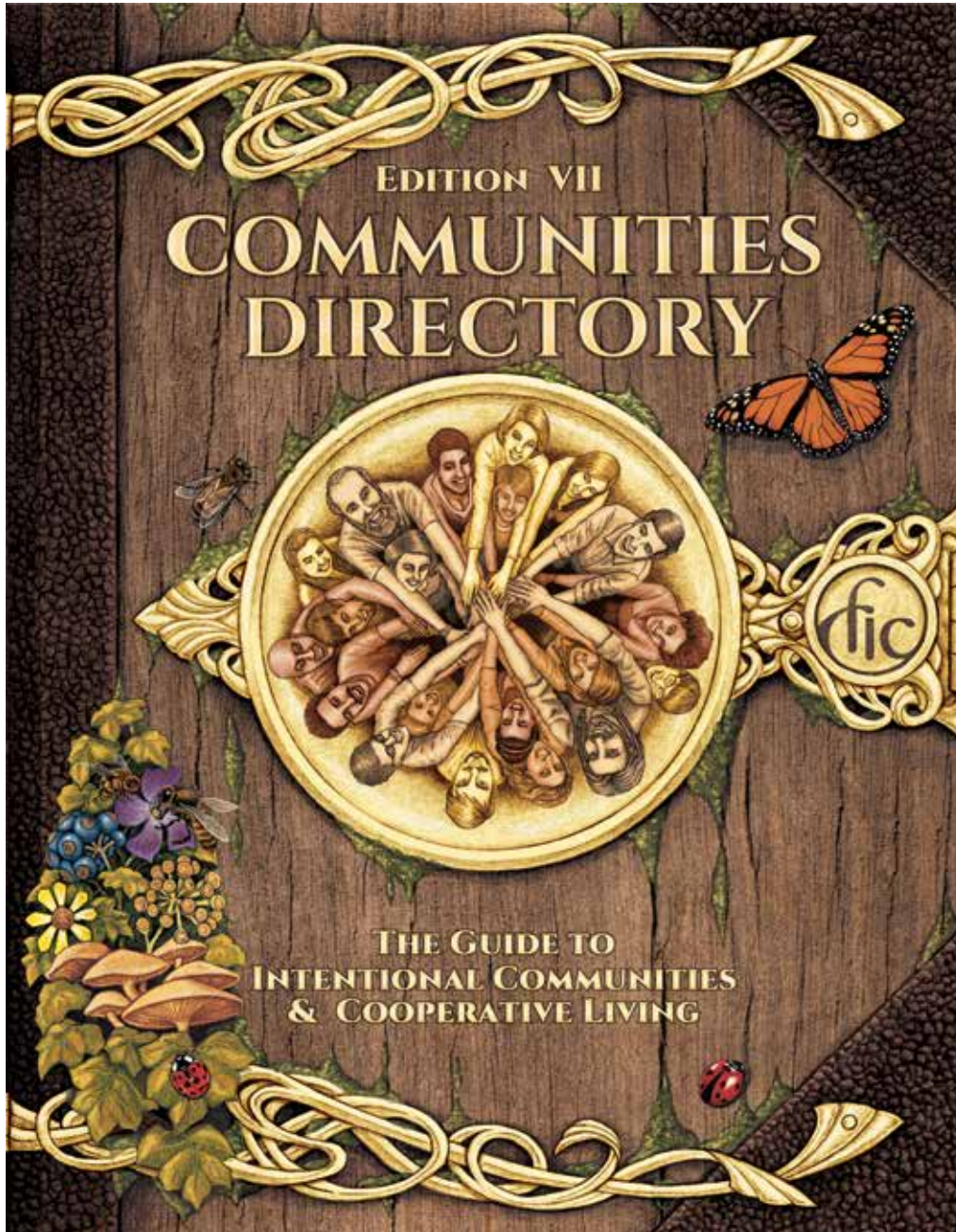
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