

CONSENT CULTURE • CONFRONTING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Summer 2019 • Issue #183

## SEXUAL POLITICS

Power and Accountability

Pros and Cons of Polyamory

A Tangled Web:

Sex at Zendik Farm

Community Action on

Sexual Assault

Gender, Intimacy,  
and Discrimination





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FIC is grateful for the grant support of the:



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Photo by LK. See her article "Sexual Misconduct in the Sphere of Power" on pages 17-23. "It's in all of our best interests to learn about how to care about one another better...and no person or community is exempt from difficult truths and vulnerabilities. Engaging with these truths and vulnerabilities creates personal and societal growth."



# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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## FIC News BY CYNTHIA TINA

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# INTRODUCING THE New FIC

After 30 years of service to an ever-growing communities movement, it is time for a change. We're excited to share with you about our new brand and why we made the change.

## You asked and we listened.

Thanks to the help of over 100 FIC supporters who responded to a recent branding survey, we have reimagined our name, logo, typeface, colors, and imagery. We've also redesigned our website with the new identity and improved our online services.

Underneath it all, we are still the same mission-driven organization. Our commitment is to support and promote the development of intentional communities, as a pathway towards a more sustainable, cooperative, and just world.

## New name.

We've evolved from the Fellowship for Intentional Community to the **Foundation for Intentional Community**. Still the same "FIC" shorthand.

We loved the kindred-spirit sentiment of "Fellowship," but we didn't care for the old-school masculine connotations. The title "Foundation" speaks to our commitment and professionalism.

We believe that intentional communities play a critical role in the transformation of society. 100,000 people in the US are estimated to live in communities designed for social enrichment, environmental responsibility, and economic equity. We are serious about serving these communities and spreading their solutions.

## New logo and style.

We have created a new logo to reflect who we are today and to symbolize our di-

verse, expanding movement.

We have designed our new brand to shine with the spirit of community. Warm hues and diverse colors convey a sense of creativity and inclusivity. Our brand delivers a wellspring of both inspiration and practical information to support people on the path to community. Spaciousness throughout our materials conveys calm and care. Thick lines and bold statements tell the world we are a force for change.

### New website.

We can tell you all about it, or you can check it out for yourself!  
Head to [ic.org](http://ic.org) to see our new brand in action.

### How we got here.

A quiet transformation has taken place within FIC during recent years.

We have a rich history. At every in-person Board and Staff meeting, we pull out “the bag of beads.” Each uniquely colored and textured bead symbolizes an important moment in the 30-year history of our organization. One significant turning point was at our recent Fall Meeting at Twin Oaks Community in Virginia.

That’s where we approved our new logo. We took time to completely reimagine our self-identity—our visual presence, our stance on important issues, and how our services can better meet the needs of users. Thank you to all the FIC Members, Subscribers, Donors, Staff, and Board (past and present) who completed our branding survey for your valuable feedback. We felt your voice in the room as we approved new brand elements while meeting at Twin Oaks.

During and since the Fall Meeting, we have continued to level up our vision. We are growing trust in innovation and change. We are asking ourselves difficult questions about what is needed at this moment in humanity and our planet’s history. While we may not have all the world’s problems sorted just yet, we know that more community is definitely part of the answer!

We hope to build on the rich contributions of our past, and to become an even more relevant, resilient, and revolutionary organization in years ahead.

Join us as we support community solutions and amplify their inspiring stories. You can help in these ways:

1. Contribute quality photos, video, and short stories so we can share them at [ic.org](http://ic.org) and on our Facebook Page.
2. Pass along media and partnership opportunities to [connect@ic.org](mailto:connect@ic.org).
3. Make a donation of any amount so we can continue to improve our services and support a thriving communities movement.

In service to a better world,

—Cynthia, Communications Director and Board Member 🐦

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*Cynthia Tina writes: “Community is my home. I have lived in several community projects around the world and visited many over the past decade. My mission is to grow networks towards a more regenerative world. I travel to visit sustainability initiatives, speak at events, facilitate groups, and improve the communications of mission-driven projects.*

*“I serve FIC as Board Member (since 2015) and more recently as Communications Director. I’m also a Board Member of the Global Ecovillage Network. You can learn more about me and my online service helping people find community on my website: [www.cynthiatina.com](http://www.cynthiatina.com).*

*“You can get in touch with me directly at [connect@ic.org](mailto:connect@ic.org) or by sending a message on our Facebook Page ([www.facebook.com/FoundationForIntentionalCommunity](http://www.facebook.com/FoundationForIntentionalCommunity)).”*

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# Introducing this Issue



Kaley Jordan

This issue on “Sexual Politics” was directly inspired by the #MeToo movement. As Sky points out in his Publisher’s Note (pages 8-9), intentional communities are not immune to any of the challenges or problems that afflict the wider culture. An illusion of safety or insulation from “things going wrong” and from the resultant pain or trauma can prove to be just that: an illusion. Ideas about having evolved to more advanced forms of consciousness in sexual or gender relations can crumble into the messiness of apparently intractable conflict or even tragedy. How can communities respond when confronting the sometimes harsh realities of human behavior and relationships, especially in the realms of power, sexuality, and gender?

We asked contributors to share their stories about sexual assault and harassment; power dynamics related to gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual expression; attitudes toward polyamory; understanding of consent culture; and a host of other topics. We received a wide array of stories, many of which, authors reported, were very difficult to write because of the depth of pain and even trauma some of them touch upon. We urge similar awareness in reading them: especially near the beginning of this issue, some articles discuss sexual violations that many will find disturbing to read about and contemplate.

And yet silence and denial about such things are what allow them to continue, and also exacerbate the anguish of survivors who imagine themselves isolated and alone in their experiences. We are committed to sharing the truth, the difficult truths as well as the redemptive truths, about life in community. We see this as the only path forward in addressing these issues, learning

from them, supporting one another in confronting them, and sharing lessons that can help not only others living in community but people in the wider culture as well.

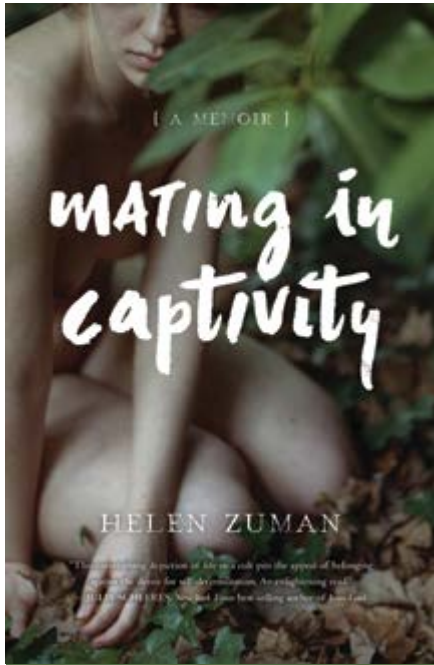
For every very difficult story told in this issue, there is another one, sometimes even more difficult, that we were referred to or that an author contacted us about but was ultimately unable to write about. The pain and/or in some cases potential legal or personal peril of writing about these topics continues to reinforce silence as the only apparent safe choice for many. We appreciate both those who aspired to but were ultimately unable to tell their stories, and those who found ways to do so. We know that in many cases, neither process was easy.

All that having been said, this issue contains plenty of stories and suggestions about making things better—ways to not only address traumatic events when they happen, but to make them less likely to happen in the first place. Alternative approaches to relating and communicating with one another can present both steep learning curves and potentially transformative results. We hope you’ll find inspiration in these pages, as well as honest reckoning with difficult realities. After all, if one author (in a non-theme article which nevertheless in some ways relates to our theme) has found a way to “stop climate change and never be lonely again,” and has evidence to back it (he does), perhaps we can all breathe a little easier about several things. We can’t breathe easier unless we commit ourselves to change, but if we do, the window of hope for a better world remains open. 🐦

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*Chris Roth edits* COMMUNITIES.





“Zendik Farm has long been both mysterious and intriguing. Helen Zuman has given us her wrenchingly personal and deeply insightful story of her time in this most unusual of communes. Others might see the group and their own experience differently, but few will provide a better-written or more probing account of Zendik.”  
 —Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*

“Zuman . . . retains her sense of agency (and humor) as she weighs Zendik’s weird creed and power plays against the sense of righteousness and belonging that drew her in. Her whip-smart prose . . . conveys the squalid exuberance of Zendik’s blend of idealism and fraud [in this] engrossing and offbeat story of ideological bonds that chafe—and sometimes liberate.”  
 —Kirkus Reviews (*starred review*)

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

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

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

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

## Submissions Policy

To submit an article, please first request Writers' Guidelines: COMMUNITIES, 1 Dancing Rabbit Ln, Box 23, Rutledge MO 63563-9720; 800-462-8240; [editor@ic.org](mailto:editor@ic.org). To obtain Photo Guidelines, email: [layout@ic.org](mailto:layout@ic.org). Both are also available online at [ic.org/communities-magazine](http://ic.org/communities-magazine).

## Advertising Policy

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

Please check [ic.org/communities-magazine](http://ic.org/communities-magazine) or email [ads@ic.org](mailto:ads@ic.org) for advertising information.

## What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

## Publisher's Note BY SKY BLUE



Kaley Jordan

# Cooperative Groups, the FIC, and Sexual Politics: Sharing, Learning, Healing, Persisting

One of the hardest parts of my job is undoubtedly responding to reports of misconduct or misrepresentation by groups listed in the Communities Directory. Not all of these situations have to do with sexual misconduct, but they often do, or involve misuse of power, often along gender lines. We've also fielded accusations of racism, as well as financial misconduct. Sometimes someone brings a complaint and it's clear that they're either off base or just have an axe to grind. Sometimes it's unclear what's going on, which in itself is challenging to deal with. And other times it's clear that what we're being told is true.

No community, intentional or otherwise, is immune from people doing terrible things. Thinking intentional communities are somehow above this sort of thing is at best naive. We carry into intentional communities all of our baggage and trauma and dysfunction, and some carry worse. Intentional communities may have a better chance at screening it out or seeing it before it happens, but on the other hand they also create opportunities for people to take advantage of others that don't exist in other living situations. And because intentional communities make good news stories, especially when bad things happen at them, we need to be extra vigilant.

We know the likely problems we'll face in cooperative groups. Even if we assume the best in people, we know our flaws. And while we don't want to live in fear and create reactionary policies for every possible thing that can go wrong, we can be realistic and guard against the very real possibility that someone will try to harm someone else.

There are two broad categories of people harming others in intentional communities. There's the one-bad-egg scenario, where someone does something terrible, often to everyone's surprise, and the community has to grapple with how did this happen and what can we do to make sure it doesn't happen again. What makes this situation even more horrific is when the community is divided on whether or not it really happened or what the appropriate response should be. This kind of controversy often means that the incident is never really processed or healed, which limits the chances that the community



really does what it needs to do.

The other scenario is where a person, couple, or small group starts a community and uses it as a platform for taking advantage of people. We've gotten enough reports about groups listed in the Communities Directory to know this happens sometimes and it makes me sick to my stomach to think that we're providing information about groups that may be leading people into dangerous situations.

The Directory is a platform for intentional communities to present themselves, often for the purpose of attracting new members. While we review each listing before publishing, we do not have the staff time to examine each community firsthand to assess the accuracy of the information they provide. There are several restrictions for being listed in the Directory. Groups must not:

- Engage in, advocate for, or condone any kind of physical, sexual, mental, financial, and/or emotional violence, coercion, manipulation, abuse, and/or harassment, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, towards any person or people.
- Prevent or interfere with anyone attempting to leave the group or to contact people outside the group.
- Misrepresent themselves in any way, intentionally or unintentionally.
- Discriminate based on certain protected classes as defined by Fair Housing Laws.

We require groups to be honest and accurate in the information they provide, and publishing a group's listing is not an endorsement of them, and yet we know that publishing the Directory may be helping create harmful situations for people.

When people bring issues to us we will do our best to understand the situation and respond accordingly. But we are neither a law-enforcing authority nor do we have the capacity as an organization to function as a mediator. Other than communicating with the parties involved and attempting to provide resources or support resolution, our only power in a situation is to require modifications to a listing in the Directory or refuse service. In some cases we may go as far as to communicate the issues we're aware of to other organizations that list communities.

My hope with this issue of COMMUNITIES and the upcoming issue on The Shadow Side of Cooperation is that we can begin to share these stories more openly so that we can all learn from each other. Trying to create cooperative organizations of any kind in the world today is an uphill battle. There is so much to learn and unlearn. We're trying to undo generations of conditioning and trauma. We're not going to be successful overnight. We have to start with the mistakes, the failures, learn from them, help each other heal, learn how to love a little more, and try, try again. 🌿

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



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# COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY:

## The Struggles, Challenges, and Hope for Community Action on Sexual Assault

By Amanda Rain

*Trigger warnings: Sexual assault, predation*

More than anything, we want to feel safe in the places and spaces we inhabit, especially within the communities where we find refuge. When we think of sexual assault and boundary violations, it is common to think *not in my community, or the person I know wouldn't do that.*

When accusations of sexual violations arise in a community, disbelief and shock are common responses. At the same time, I have found that sentiments like these make communities especially vulnerable to predatory behavior. When people feel a sense of safety and openness, of feeling at home, their defenses go down, which increases their vulnerability. In alternative, conscious, radical circles, that feeling of openness and acceptance is healing, regenerative, expansive, and often filled with love. I've experienced this myself and I was slower than I would have been normally to perceive the threat that was before me.

To be fair, the first time the issue of sexual assault arises, the shock factor that reverberates and unsettles the fabric of a community and its members is intense. That was certainly the case when a member of a community I was part of in 2010 was raped by an acquaintance. It was initially allowed to be dismissed as a misunderstanding, though later in what I would now call an accountability circle he admitted what he did and why he did it. It had nothing to do with sex.

The second time it arose, I was less shocked, but no less impacted. In 2015, there were five men who were called out for separate incidents across multiple communities in Portland, Oregon. Many grappled with the shock, and there were many who rose to the defense of the men because the person they “knew” wouldn't intentionally harm others.

In addition to this, it was challenging because they weren't part of an intentional community, but more community in a broader sense, loosely knit, centering around the same events, organizing work, and/or lifestyles. This made it difficult in that membership in these communities was less defined, so questions of decision making, authority to act, and who should be involved were not so easily answered.

In response, myself and two other women organized a series of six events taught by local organizations to educate the community and unpack rape culture, teach concepts of consent for healthy relating, allyship, bystander intervention, and integration. From these and other education events, our attempt at accountability with the man who was part of our community, and my other experiences over the years, the following is what I have learned that may benefit ICs and other communities.

### The Undercurrent of Defensiveness

In nearly every community dialogue on sexual assault I facilitated or participated in, there occurred what I came to call the Rise to the Defense of Men. Inevitably, and early on, someone would say, “But not all men are bad,” as if speaking to sexual assault, which for adults predominantly occurs male to female, somehow implies that all men

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**When people feel a sense of safety and openness, of feeling at home, their defenses go down, which increases their vulnerability.**

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are harmful. First, let me say that I love men and know *many* who are exquisitely beautiful in their integrity, humanity, and care. Of course, it is true that not all men are malevolent, nor even most. I believe in the overall goodness of men.

The challenge is not in the statement itself, but in the effect it has on any attempt to advance the dialogue that must happen to create a shift in the overwhelming instances of sexual assault. As soon as “the Rise” starts, there follows a symphony of voices that chime in to support defending men. The result is that the conversation no longer centers on sexual assault, but rather on the defense of men. And as those versed in critique of the patriarchy might say, much of society already centers on men and this is part of the problem. At the same time, it’s worth noting that it is not always men who initiate the Rise. It is not gender specific in that way.

While speaking with a friend about my frustration with all this, he said, “I bet the ones who speak out the loudest have been sexually violated themselves as a child.” His words were highly suspect to me. Still, I openly sat with the questions they instigated. Then, in the final integration circle at the end of our educational event series, the first share was from a brother who rose to the defense of men. I was heartbroken. After muddling through the various responses that followed, again decentering sexual assault from the dia-

logue, we engaged an exercise for personal reflection and integration. Upon returning for a closing circle, the brother shared first again, but this time, he shared how he was personally violated as a young boy by a grown man. It was as if he needed to know that not all men are bad for his own benefit and sense of self.

As I integrated this experience, I reflected on the man who resisted bringing a consent workshop to our volunteer collaboration who later confided in me that he was molested as a child. And I later spoke with a woman<sup>1</sup> who had been raped and had to deal with a man who loudly defended her rapist,<sup>2</sup> even going so far as attempting to discredit her. She said he had confided in her long before she was raped that he was violated as a child.

It’s worth stating that in the case of the two men I knew, we went forward with the integration and consent workshop as planned, and in each instance the men found pieces of their own healing, voice, and recovery.

I could theorize about why I think this is, but there is not yet much by way of science or formal study, so I will leave this here. I do want to be a voice for compassion. Even when someone appears to be derailing good faith efforts, there is likely something underneath the surface at play.

Of course, resistance to dialogues and accountability efforts could also reflect people subscribing to beliefs that more align with

rape culture, or other personal and cultural blocks. I don’t want to paint the picture that this will be the case in all instances, but it is something to consider when faced with resistance and defensiveness.

### Patterns of Predation

There is a common idea that sexual assault happens by strangers in dark alleys. This myth is starting to lose its hold in the collective consciousness; however, many are still not aware of the facts. Eight out of 10 sexual assault instances are committed by people who are *known* to the survivor. Only 19.5 percent, or two out of 10, are committed by strangers.<sup>3</sup> This means that those who violate people most often build a base level of trust, then violate that trust with intention. That’s a difficult reality for many people to grasp, especially those who want to see only the good in people. I can relate. I personally believe in the goodness of people and believe that represents the majority of people. And there are exceptions.

There is a spectrum of violations and misconduct that occur, ranging from “Oops! I didn’t know better,” to those who cause harm and feel no remorse. Education and consent training are very helpful and can often course-correct for those on the Oops! end of the spectrum. However, for those on the opposite end of the spectrum, it becomes about mitigating their capacity to do more harm. And there is

a broad range in between. Unfortunately, many predatory behaviors are seen as normal, accepted, or even sexy, masked as a cool façade painting over the culture of rape hidden underneath.

The Portland-based organization Call to Safety ([calltosafety.org](http://calltosafety.org)), working to support survivors of sexual and domestic violence, shares the following about a typical person who sexually assaults others, based on Dr. David Lisak's study over the years of 1991-1999.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to popular belief, they don't use a weapon, they use "just enough" violence, have access to consensual sex, are not mentally ill, premeditate their actions, look for VAL (vulnerability, accessibility, and lack of credibility), use alcohol deliberately, often groom or stalk, and are repeat offenders. It's also important that people understand that rape is about power and control. It is not about sex.

From my experience, a common tactic is to isolate their targets, perhaps going for a walk, waiting for them outside an event, inviting them to do something alone. It is also common for them to target new people, especially young women. And they are often likeable people, incredibly charming and charismatic.

What I believe is that no one wants to consider themselves to be a person who causes another harm. Of the three men that I personally had direct experience with, what I found unsettling was they each saw themselves as a sort of hero to

women. One saw himself as a protector of women, repeating this claim over and over and over. Another saw himself as a healer and considered what he was doing when he violated women as "healing" them. And the third saw himself as a sort of liberator. They were each out of touch with the reality of what they were doing. It was as if they were so wrapped in the lies they were telling that they wholeheartedly believed them.

This is where the role of community as protector and keeper of truth is so important. And it is critical to recognize when something is bigger than what a community can hold, process, or otherwise deal with. It is quite easy to get seduced by those who cause harm, especially when one's proclivity is to see the good in people.

What I have witnessed in nearly every instance where someone was confronted for sexually violating others is that they pack up and relocate, often to other unsuspecting communities where they again harm people. A network to share information between communities would be helpful in mitigating the potential harm that too often follows.

Another pattern that is important to recognize is Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle of persecutor, victim, rescuer. Invariably, when someone is called a persecutor (or abuser, violator, or rapist), they claim they are in fact the victim, wrongly accused or otherwise harmed. The victim then gets painted as the persecutor, and

often, the community goes into rescue mode. This becomes a dance in which the actors involved move from one point of the triangle to another with very little resolution.

To break this dysfunctional pattern, people must be heard, supported in the ways they have requested (not what we think is best or needed), unless of course it creates a safety risk, and challenged where behavior needs to change (i.e., boundaries set and enforced). This is where accountability processes come in.

### Accountability

Matters of sexual assault and violence are not easy, simple, or straightforward. They are uncomfortable, emotionally taxing, and many people would rather not deal with them. However, if we are to move from rape culture to consent culture, we must.

Creative Interventions ([www.creative-interventions.org](http://www.creative-interventions.org)), a national resource center to create and promote community-based interventions to interpersonal violence, defines accountability as "the ability to recognize, end and take responsibility for violence." They further state that "Community accountability also means that communities are accountable for sometimes ignoring, minimizing or even encouraging violence. Communities must also recognize, end and take responsibility for violence by becoming more knowledgeable, skillful and willing to take action to intervene in violence and to support social norms and conditions that prevent violence from happening in the first place."<sup>5</sup>

This toolkit was our guidebook as a group of us attempted to bring an accountability process forward for the man who was within our community. It was challenging, and in the end, we were not able to fulfill our objective. However, we learned many things from our process. Here are highlights from my own perspective which may benefit ICs.

First and foremost, when someone has been violated the top priority is for the community to be accountable to both the person who has been harmed and the overall safety of the community. Supporting survivors is often where we fall short. To do so well, Call to Safety recommends



Ben White



the following:

- Start by believing
- Offer unconditional support
- Ensure safety
- Listen carefully
- Let them take time
- Validate them
- Remind them they are not at fault
- Let them decide if they want to go to the hospital and/or report
- Don't ask too many questions
- Don't blame yourself
- Let them know about available resources

Accountability best practices start with centering the survivor, meaning that the survivor's needs, desires, and well-being guide the process. For instance, it would be retraumatizing, likely causing greater harm to the survivor, for them to be asked to confront their violator, especially if there is a web of lies clouding reality. Survivor statements, whether written or video-recorded, can be very powerful if they choose to make them, while the survivor does not need to be present when the violator receives the statement. It is helpful for community members to be present to help the integration process.

Another key learning was to not make the process, the task, the effort so big that you get stuck. It's okay to start small and build to something larger. We expanded into multiple groups focused on the various aspects of survivor support, offender accountability, education and resources, and a few other subcommittees. This stretched both our bandwidth and capacity to bring actions full circle. There was also a separate attempt at one point to do a restorative justice circle earlier on by a different group. However, that effort was not fully realized either and the offender ended up pointing to the initial effort to say that he had been through an accountability process already, which was not validated when we spoke with those involved.

Keeping the process manageable can also help with the overall emotional weight that can quickly burn people out. Emotional fatigue is a real thing. It's crucial to be a team and tap out when someone needs a break. Pay attention to who is doing the heavy emotional labor and work to support each other.

One challenge that especially restricted our group was the effort to make sure that those who were involved or joined us were not abusive themselves. As the #MeToo movement has shown, it is often central figures in positions of power that abuse that power with sexual coercion. I have also witnessed that people who harm others are well versed in the language of sexual assault and violence resistance efforts. The man from our community was even attempting to teach consent a year later in a different city.

A key question to an accountability process is how to repair the harm. Again, this is best centered on the survivor. Here are some essential pieces to consider and act upon:

- Support for the one(s) harmed, perhaps creating a collective fund for therapy.
- What does accountability look like for the survivor? What do they need and/or desire?
- Therapy for the one(s) who harmed is also a reasonable ask. For people who rape, group therapy is important because it is through listening to the stories of others who harmed that they begin to see themselves and their own behavior.
- How can the community support the people involved to ensure they are not at the same events at the same time?
- Limiting engagement within community activities until certain requirements are met (perhaps cooperation, therapy, or when/if it works for the survivor).

The community has a critical role it can fulfill in caring for the integrity of safety for its members. And it is important to note that safety cannot be guaranteed by anyone. Some groups like to refer to "safer spaces" for this reason. I prefer "brave spaces" because



bhuvanesh gupta

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**In accountability best practices, the survivor's needs, desires, and well-being guide the process.**

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## Helpful Resources:

**Creative Interventions Toolkit:**  
[www.creative-interventions.org/  
tools/toolkit](http://www.creative-interventions.org/tools/toolkit)

**RAINN:**  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

**Call to Safety:**  
[www.calltosafety.org](http://www.calltosafety.org)

**The National Hotline for  
Domestic Violence:**  
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

**The National Child Abuse Hotline:**  
1-800-422-4453

**The Rape, Abuse, and  
Incest National Network:**  
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)



Tim Marshall

this life calls upon us to be brave, to face the uncertainties, to be present, aware, and attentive to that which is happening within and around us. I believe our modern desire for “safety” comes from being disconnected from the wild nature of this world. While most people are genuinely good people, we each play the role of the one who harms and one who has been harmed at various points in our lives, sometimes even in the same day. When we go into blind faith and trust in our surroundings, we are at risk. The unfortunate reality is that the minority who do harm with intention prey upon people and places where people feel safest. So we do our best, and lean into the difficult moments, to open space for the uncomfortable truths to emerge, and find our way through it all.

One of the men we worked with on the education piece, Chris Huffine, who leads Allies in Change ([www.alliesinchange.org](http://www.alliesinchange.org)) and is an advocate for the role men

have in ending violence against women, said that he believes communities play a central role in accountability and creating substantive change in both the dialogue and response around sexual assault and domestic violence. I share his perspective.

Ideally, agreements and processes on behavior, conduct, and what happens when violations occur happen *before* they are needed. Considering the systemic failures of our larger society with regards to sexual violence, community action and response is perhaps the most viable solution we have.

I love community and have found deep healing in the bonds I’ve been gifted with through community living, especially in ICs. Over the years, I have learned that community is both sanctuary that offers shelter, and a home that needs protection.

Perhaps the greatest teaching I have gained from these and other experiences is to trust my intuition, to not dismiss it; to respond to it; and to pay attention

to the intuition of others, as well. The root word of intuition means “to guard.” It serves as our internal warning system.<sup>6</sup> May you be guided by the wisdom within you. May you be guarded by and guardian to the places, spaces, and people you hold dear. 🌸

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*Amanda Rain founded Speaking the Unspeakable® to inspire the courage to meet our challenges and empower our lives through effective communication. Her blend of rhetorical studies, speech communication, debate, activism, political advocacy, and dynamic life experience is distinct and powerful. Amanda inspires the willingness to face our challenges, while confronting them with skill. Her voice offers hope for the spirit and medicine for the soul. She loves to sit by rivers and be immersed in the natural wonder of this place. You can reach her at [connect@speakrain.com](mailto:connect@speakrain.com) and [speakrain.com](http://speakrain.com).*

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1. Generalizations of gender do not intend to dismiss other experiences by non-gender-conforming people, nor men who have been violated and/or raped. It is important to acknowledge that transgender individuals experience the highest rate of sexual assault and face significant risk as a result of simply existing.

2. Labels of victim, violator, persecutor, even survivor, are less than ideal as they can lock people into an identity and come with heavy shame. More conscious communities are increasingly averse to their use. I have interspersed labels with “those who have harmed and been harmed” to speak to the simultaneously occurring experiences within our society.

3. [rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence](http://rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence)

4. [www.davidlisak.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/RepeatRapeinUndetectedRapists.pdf](http://www.davidlisak.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/RepeatRapeinUndetectedRapists.pdf)

5. [www.creative-interventions.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/4.FCI-Toolkit-Tools-Taking-Accountability-Pre-Release-Version-06.2012.pdf](http://www.creative-interventions.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/4.FCI-Toolkit-Tools-Taking-Accountability-Pre-Release-Version-06.2012.pdf)

6. Gavin De Becker, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*, 1997.

# Effective Community Justice

*By Anonymous*

**R**ape: Sexual penetration accomplished through violence or the threat of violence, or when the victim is unable to consent. The victim is unable to consent if she (or he) is drunk, high, asleep, mentally deficient, or underage.

Frozen in terror, I stayed as still as possible, pretending to still be asleep. His hand continued working at my crotch for a while, then withdrew. Suddenly I could move again, and I demanded in a hard voice, "Leave now." Miraculously, he did so.

I left the bed where my toddler slept beside me and walked across the community garden to my community pod's common house. Unaware of what I was doing, I slammed the door so hard that the glass broke and scattered across the floor. Startled, my community-mate looked up from his late-night computer use and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I've just been raped!" I stormed, and stomped past him into the shower for the requisite post-rape scrubbing.

It wasn't the first time someone I knew had raped me, but it was the only time I had an adequate response from my friends and community. Living in intentional community doesn't eliminate the risk of sexual assault, but it does give us the opportunity to address it in profound ways. In my case, my community's response empowered, healed, and supported me. I actually left the experience feeling closer, more connected, more trusting, and more courageous than before. Many people contributed to this wonderful outcome, and it was made possible partly because my community had an ongoing practice of actively questioning rape culture and standard sexual norms. I hope to share here a vision of effective community justice, to inspire others towards a world of true sexual agency.

The supportive actions of my community-mates ranged from small to large, and all played their part:

First, the man in my community pod's house cleaned up the broken glass and repaired the window. He never said a word to reproach me.

The next day, as I explained to a female community-mate what had happened, I expressed the agonizing feeling that it was my fault. After all, I had allowed him to give me a massage, and then I had fallen asleep. My friend cocked her head at me and crooned sympathetically, "Oh, it feels like that!" Her words returned me to my senses. Of course it wasn't my fault! Agreeing to a massage is not

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**Living in intentional community doesn't eliminate the risk of sexual assault, but it does give us the opportunity to address it in profound ways.**

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the same as agreeing to sex, even if the location is my bed and even if I am not wearing clothes.

Note that my friend's apt response required advanced communication skills. If she had tried to talk me out of my feelings by denying my assertion and arguing the point, I would not have experienced that instant awakening into sensibility. It would have been nearly as confusing on an emotional level as if she had agreed that it was my fault. When one is seeking to make sense out of a traumatic situation which involved erasure of one's autonomy or perspective, more erasure of autonomy and perspective will not lead towards healing.

As I continued to talk about the rape, and my community-mates talked about it with others, the general feeling from my community was that this was not okay, and something had to be done. A woman and two men decided to hold a meeting with my assailant. As I was not present for most of the meeting, I will tell you what I know.

The meeting happened in a community space, and lasted several hours. The woman and two men met with my assailant, and talked with him about how his behavior was unacceptable. They listened to him as well. During the meeting, my partner and I waited in the garden near our sleeping space. At one point the woman left the meeting to ask me a question. She said my assailant claimed that I had "wanted it" because I had an orgasm, and they didn't know how to respond to him about that. Embarrassed, I answered that I had no idea if I had an orgasm or not; I was so terrified that I could not move, and felt as if I was floating above my body. If my body responded, it was not a reflection of my will or consent.

I also explained that this man and I had a history. I was 25 years old, and he was near 50. He had been flirting and coming on to me for months, and I consistently rebuffed him. I said no to him so many times that I thought his continued flirting must be a joke. I started to alternate negative responses with outright laughing in his face. I had agreed to a massage only because we were both part of a wider community where

people talked about consent a lot, and sought to de-couple affectionate touch from sexuality. It was widely understood in our social group that snuggling, massage, nudity, hot-tubbing, and other potentially confusing behaviors were valuable unto themselves, and did not automatically indicate a sexual invitation. So when I agreed to a massage, fell asleep, and woke up with his hand penetrating me, I was genuinely shocked and traumatized.

Nodding, the woman thanked me and returned to the meeting.

After another hour, my partner and I were invited to join them in the community space. My assailant sat with the other two men, while I stood in the middle of the room, my partner and the woman on either side of me. They invited me to say anything I wanted.

"Did you know that I am in a monogamous relationship with my partner?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear me say 'no' to you over and over again?"

"Yes."

"Did you just hope I had changed my mind?"

"I guess so."

Although furious, I was not shaking. I felt a rush of power running from the Earth through my entire body. I was a force of nature as I told him how he had disrespected me, my partner, and my toddler who slept in the bed during the entire scene. Finally I wound down, and he had a chance to respond.

"I'm sorry," he said. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to be able to go to social events and feel comfortable staying at them when I find out you are there. I don't want to limit or shrink my life because of you."

Surprisingly, he cringed. "It seems like you have all the power in this situation," he said.

What a turn-around: from being a victim to being the one in charge. I really did feel powerful, and he felt powerless. I wish every rape victim could look her attacker in the face and hear him say that she had all the power. At the same time, it sounded pathetic to me. He still had no idea how his positioning in the

wider society (as a man, and much older than me) gave him automatic privilege and power in our relationship. He felt powerless, so he denied his authority.

Note that while he was a part of my wider community, this man did not live in my intentional community. If he had, I would have made other requests to ensure my safety. Depending on the community's social and physical infrastructure, this might have included moving him to a different part of the land, changing our working groups, or requesting eviction.

We finished the meeting soon afterwards, and I thanked the support people who had done the intervention. Within six months, my attacker moved to a different state. I actually felt sad and disappointed when I heard that news. As long as he stayed in our city, people who knew him could hold him accountable to better behavior. Likewise, women could be warned that he had a history of violating boundaries. By moving to a different state, he removed the accountability of his support network. I felt confident that he would not repeat his behavior in our city, but I feared that in a new community he would violate women again.

Let me be clear: I know this man is a good person, and is doing his best. I believe his best is better in a community where his past mistakes are known, confronted, and followed-up on. In a place where he is completely unknown, the risk of repeat offenses increases. The effectiveness of community justice dissolves when one leaves the community.

Sexual crimes are hard to prosecute in the criminal justice system because they frequently happen in private, with little or no physical evidence, and pursuing a case re-traumatizes the victim. In community we have an opportunity to institute our own forms of justice. My community created a structure where evidence was unnecessary, women were believed, and pursuing justice healed and empowered the survivor. May others be inspired by this article to create workable community justice processes to hold sexual assault perpetrators accountable, and help heal and protect their victims. So mote it be. 🙏

# SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN THE SPHERE OF POWER: The Nexus of Gender, Intimacy, and Discrimination

By LK



Photos courtesy of LK

I had a conversation recently with a woman who sighed a lot when I talked to her. She was a friend of a friend, and a woman's crisis counselor. I was speaking to her over the phone about my experiences with sexual misconduct in the intentional community I lived in. I wanted to know what she thought of our situation, and what she thought I should do, for the best interests of everyone involved. As I described the situation—what had happened, how it made me feel, and what I thought—she kept exhaling deeply; the characteristic sigh of someone who's heard it all before, over and over. Even though it felt new to me, there wasn't anything new I was telling her. These stories are patterned.

It's so hard to talk about this. It really is, and there's no other way for me to start this essay than with that statement. I would rather be writing about anything else on earth right now. For example, a story about linoleum peeling, or a poem on bad bowel movements, or an essay called *All My Failures in Life*. These would all be topics I'd be more inclined to throw my energy into. But instead here I am, sitting inside on a sunny day, writing about sexual misconduct. I can't avoid it, I can't ignore it, I don't seem to be able to stop it, so the only remaining recourse is to simply talk about it. I need to talk about it because I need to connect

with people in a way that not talking about it no longer solves. And I need to talk about it because part of the pattern of sexual misconduct is a pattern of gender discrimination, and that's a pattern that we really need to change.

Of the many reasons this is hard to talk about, one is that it's just embarrassing. Even after all this time, I still feel strangely, deeply ashamed. I'm ashamed of my long-term confusion in understanding these issues, and my inability to solve these problems in my own community. I'm ashamed of the way I have, in my own life, participated in, condoned, or neglected to see behaviors that I now realize were damaging and discriminatory. And I'm ashamed, painfully, of the depth of my own necessity. I need human intimacy—real, authentic connection with other people—with as much feral force and vulnerability as any of us. Sexual misconduct of all kinds stabs at the heart of that personal need, and forces us to feel it—feel the shame of our own vulnerability—so much more viscerally. It is a unique kind of hurt.

But as uniquely felt and deeply personal as this hurt may be, it's not only personal; it's also prolific, and it's patterned, in ways that have sweeping social consequences, especially for certain groups of people. As I sat down to write this, it wasn't difficult to find



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## Male sexual misconduct creates serious, predictable consequences, both personal and professional, for women.

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women to talk with about these issues, and every woman I asked had a story to tell. Sexual misconduct, harassment, assault, abuse—these are just the normal threads of so many women’s lives. My male friends don’t have these same stories in the same way or with any fraction of the same overwhelming consistency. This pain is personal, but most of the time it’s personal to individuals who are linked by one unifying factor—their gender. Sexual misconduct of all kinds is mostly gendered: it’s mostly done by men, and mostly done to women. Recognizing this as a systemic social pattern instead of just an individual problem is what makes this issue relevant to all of us. And understanding that there are real, serious, and predictable consequences, both personal and professional, for women who are exposed to sexual misconduct, is what makes sexual misconduct a form of gender discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

### Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct is a tricky phrase in and of itself, because it’s defined so differently by different people. It’s often used as an “umbrella term” for any negative sexual behavior (like sexual harassment or assault) that is not a felony offense. Additionally from Wikipedia, the term sexual misconduct is used “particularly where the situation is normally non-sexual and therefore unusual for sexual behavior, or where there is some aspect of personal power or authority that makes sexual behavior inappropriate.”

In this essay I discuss sexual misconduct as one specific iteration within that umbrella, and define it as sexual behavior by men in positions of power towards women under their power. This could be the case of an employer/employee relationship, a teacher/student relationship, a mentor/intern relationship, etc. I think this particular lens on sexual misconduct invites an exploration of power and intimacy that is extremely relevant to communities. Intentional communities come in an array of forms, many of which combine, intertwine, and blur working and personal relationships in ways that are different from other home and workplace environments. There is a real confluence of many factors that shape, hold, and replicate power dynamics. This essay seeks to explore the way that male sexual misconduct towards women is an abuse of power which holds a high risk for personal and professional consequences for women. Sexual misconduct in this form is so common, and the consequences

for women are so predictable, that it is a form of systemic gender discrimination.

### Life and Work at The Branch

When I was 24 years old my boyfriend and I arrived for a four-month internship at an education center and intentional community in an isolated village in Central America. The following year we returned, and the owners (a married couple with an infant daughter) asked us to partner with them in the business. They had established The Branch about eight years before we arrived, had built structures, and gardens, and business contacts, but were worn out and needed help with organization, program development, and financial viability. The owners were in their late 30s, were kind and charismatic, and the whole place had a vibe of boundless creativity and possibilities. I was flattered to be considered for what seemed like a lot of responsibility, and excited to commit to this new and wonderful world. My boyfriend and I made a large, sweeping commitment to work there for five years in directorship and development roles, on a handshake deal for co-ownership and profit sharing. In hindsight, how crazy. But at the time, it felt so special and so genuine. It was all about idealism, trust, and community—we would just do this thing together, and how unique, and how untethered, and how cool were we.

As well as being a professional education center that hosted international groups, The Branch was also a radical commune, in many of the ways people think of that phrase. We built our own houses out of earth and local wood, grew and processed a lot of our own food, made most decisions as “a collective,” and treated most non-hospital type medical ailments with turmeric and love. We cooked and shared all meals in a single, open-air communal kitchen. We had no television, cell phones, or on-site internet, and entertained ourselves with home brews, scrabble, costume parties, and frisbee. The closest significant town was a day’s bus ride away, round trip, on rough dirt roads that frequently washed out. Most of the buildings had few, if any, walls. There was very little privacy, and the place was packed with educational groups and students almost every day of the year. There was a lot of laughter, a feeling of



unbridled creativity, and a soft blanket of shared trust that seemed to coat the entire place and everyone in it.

Fast forward five years: my boyfriend and I had put in a huge amount of labor, helped stabilize the business financially and organizationally, implemented new professional programs, and had become independent educators in our fields, but we still didn't have a profit share, co-ownership, or compensation. The owners acted and spoke as if we were all a cooperative, but in reality, my boyfriend and I had no real power or ownership whatsoever. The power dynamic was gravitational: I was working seven days a week to the point of burnout, creating and filling roles that were essential to the business's success, but was still completely dependent on the owners in every aspect of my life. Even though I was working hard for our shared home and business, it wasn't really ours—it was really theirs, and that difference was real, no matter how much we imagined it wasn't.

### Positionality and the Sphere of Power

This type of positionality—the positionality of having significant power over, or power under, someone else, either personally or professionally—can be a defining factor in the context and consequences of sexual misconduct. When someone controls resources you really need and value, your entire identity and mode of perception shifts, or “positions” itself in relation to that person: you need that person to like you, and/or to like your work. If they don't like you, for any reason whatsoever, your access to those resources will be at risk. This heightened influence can make consent to sexual advances difficult or impossible to fully assess; significantly reduces women's likelihood to speak up against uncomfortable behaviors; and creates a space where denying sexual advances from someone who has power over you is very likely to have personal and professional repercussions. None of this is necessarily cognitive or premeditated. Positionality is a felt experience that continuously moderates perceptions and behaviors, within a sphere of power. In addition to the gravitational pull to be likable to people who control resources that you need, women have an added enculturation to be likable to men.

We are raised to listen and to soothe, to be good girls, to smile, to gather and nurture and defer. As an employee, to not defer or agree with your employer's desires, and/or as a woman, to not defer or agree to a man's desires, often has cascading consequences for your subjective likability and by extension, the perception of the value of your relationship and your work. This subjectiveness is at the root of why the consequences of sexual misconduct can be difficult to see, understand, or prove. And it's also one of the reasons those consequences are so persistent, and so damaging: they arise from internalized motives that people may or may not be aware of.

In my own case our fifth year arrived, still with no ownership or compensation. By this time I loved The Branch dearly as my home, and had invested years of labor into it. I had an excellent personal and working relationship with the owners, and several new colleagues. The owners often described my boyfriend and me as their “little angels” because of how we had stabilized the community and made the business more professional and financially viable. But even though the business was starting to make money, it wasn't financially viable for me or my boyfriend. This situation became extremely stressful, and that stress filtered into all aspects of my life. I felt really confused, and trapped.

One day I approached one of the owners, the husband (I'll refer to him from here on out as “my employer” since that's the simplest accurate description of his working relationship with me) in a fit

of tears, confessing my insecurities and confusion about what I was doing at The Branch. My boyfriend was away at the time, leading an educational group off-site. That evening I went back to my cabin and lay in bed, alone, in the dark. A while later I heard a sound outside the window, and saw my employer standing in the doorway. Even though it was nighttime and I was alone, I felt relieved, because I thought he was there to continue our conversation and offer guidance for my situation. Even though he had never visited me at night in that way before, I trusted him and believed he was there to help me. But he wasn't. He was drunk, stumbled over to my bed, and lounged over me, asking for a kiss. I lay there, frozen and unable to think of what to do. It didn't make any sense. This wasn't the person I believed him to be. He was a mentor, a friend, an employer. He was someone I liked and admired, who I needed to like and admire me. He had control over ev-

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everything in my life. I trusted him, in most ways more than I trusted myself, and for this reason had put so many of my personal and professional eggs in his basket. I told him, in a small voice, to go back to his wife and family, who lived in another cabin a 10-minute walk away. But he didn't. He stayed there, sitting next to me on the bed, one arm crossed over my body, leaning in, asking for a kiss, over and over again, while I just laid there and quietly said no. Finally he rubbed my side, kissed my cheek, and stumbled out.

When he left, I was still in the same position I had been when he entered the room, flat on my back, with my arms plastered to my sides. I heard another sound, a fast paced tapping, and turned my head to see what it was. Then I realized it was my teeth. I was so upset, my whole body was shaking, and my teeth were chattering in my head, uncontrollably.

I am a tough person, and not easily rattled. And this story is not about sexual

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**I didn't have any words for what happened, except that it made me feel really bad about myself.**

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violence, nor did I ever once feel threatened physically. And yet, this experience, within this context, was so disturbing, and so emotionally wrenching, that it upset me to the core of my being, to the point where I froze so tightly my teeth chattered. It wasn't cold in Central America. This was an embodiment of extreme anxiety. It was the pain and pressure of discovering myself, suddenly, to be completely bound in another person's sphere of power, and then realizing they were willing, able, and ready to abuse that power in a way that was not in my best interest. If I had an affair with him, it would destroy our community and I would lose everything that was important to me. I trusted this person's character so deeply, I knew he wouldn't put me, or us, in that position. But here he was, putting me, and us, in that position. It was impossible to understand, and it just felt terrible.

This situation was disturbing, and deeply hurtful, but it wasn't insurmountable. We could have all gone to sleep that night, woken up in the morning, talked it out, made some organizational changes in our home and work lives, and moved on. Maybe he and his wife could have found a marriage counselor. It would have been hard, but it could have been done. But that's not how it happened—that's almost never how it happens. I was afraid to talk to anyone about it, because I thought if I did I would lose my position in the community, and everything my partner and I had worked for. And on top of that, what would I say? At the time this happened I was in my late 20s, and my understanding

of the context of the situation was limited. I didn't have any words for what happened, except that it made me feel really bad about myself.

I never would have believed that this one moment would spiral into so many consequences for my personal and professional life. I didn't understand that this experience, and my reactions, and the long-term consequences, were so common that I could have sat there that night and made a fairly accurate list about what would happen next. If sexual misconduct were just about someone saying something inappropriate, or touching you briefly in a way you didn't want to be touched—if it were just about the the literal behaviors of sexual misconduct—it wouldn't be a big deal. What do I care if my employer comes back to my bedroom and wants a kiss? The literal behavior is not exactly life-shattering. It's the context, the meaning behind it, and the persistent, patterned, ongoing consequences, that make these experiences so debilitating, and so discriminatory.

### Retaliation

Immediately, two general, yet very specific, things happened after that night. One is that my attitude changed toward my employer and my employment; the other is that my employer's attitude toward me and my work changed as well. My feelings of trust in him, and his feelings of personal and professional closeness to me, fractured, and that fracturing led to a slow avalanche of consequences for me, both personal and professional. This wasn't this man's first time approaching women sexually at The Branch. As it turns out, he had a history of extramarital affairs with interns/students, which had already been emotionally devastating for his wife. After the night he came back to my room, he no longer wanted to spend time alone with me, out of fear that his wife might think we were having an affair. This caused him to become less aware of or involved in the work I was doing, and therefore less able to recognize or assess its value. My personal and professional relationship with him became strained and uneasy.

From my end, my employer's behavior to me that night exposed a serious host of power imbalances that I realized needed to be fixed, and I threw myself into fixing



them. I started pushing immediately for improvements in our organizational structures and for legalization of our co-ownership structure. I educated myself and our community about group dynamics, communication, and gender; I bought us numerous resources and reading materials and hired a facilitator; I designed an organizational system for our decision-making circles and agendas, led us in mission- and vision-building, and created criteria for work and compensation (at the end of that year we did begin receiving some compensation, though to this day, legalization of co-ownership is still pending). Overall we succeeded in making quite a lot of structural improvements, but the process was like pulling teeth, it was clearly unwanted, and I was left feeling exhausted and increasingly alienated.

As I educated myself more about group dynamics, power, and gender, my perspective on our lovely little community continued to change. I started to see things that had always been there, but I had never paid attention to. The women on our team were extremely experienced in their fields, and worked really hard, but they were consistently funneled into assistantship or service roles. Women's work was not valued as highly as men's work. Women in our decision-making circle said they felt uncomfortable speaking, and/or unable to disagree with male voices in the circle. Women who spoke directly were "abrasive," while men who used the same tone were "assertive." These weren't just random personality traits. They were classic symptoms of gendered power dynamics which constantly leave women with less economic and decision-making power. Over the years a number of women had complained to The Branch about sexual harassment, and in at least one case sexual assault, by our male employees. We all thought of these incidents as unfortunate mistakes in male judgment—"bad choices." But these were repetitive behaviors that made women feel uncomfortable or even truly unsafe. Why had everyone, including myself, just accepted this? And why had no one ever talked about relationships, and the employer's past affairs with interns/students? All of these pieces, which for so long had just seemed random or incidental, suddenly started rising

up into a big coherent puzzle of enculturated gender inequality. Naively, I thought that the men on our team would genuinely want to know about this, and make changes. But presenting information about gender dynamics was largely met with disinterest, denial, and gaslighting.

At one point early on, I presented our team with some basic literature on gender dynamics, and said that I thought we might be experiencing some issues with gender. My employer looked at me from across the table, said, "We do a great job with gender here," and just moved on in conversation. It was so unnerving. Repeated denial that we had any kind of issue, or that it was worth people's time to consider group dynamics, made me question myself and my perspective constantly. It was really confusing, because before all this started, my opinion and perspectives always felt valued and included. But after the incident with my employer, and as soon as I started speaking up about power and gender, I lost my perceived credibility and influence. It was so strange, it felt unbelievable. A friend who was present at the time commented that it was like "living in the twilight zone." Many people in the larger Branch community agreed with me, listened, shared their own stories, supported me, coached me, and worked with me. A lot of people who had invested in and still loved The Branch also realized there were some real problems regarding gender and power, and wanted to see change happen.

But even after several years of work, a lot of the central problems still remained,

and my relationship with my employer continued to wither. I became increasingly anxious and unsettled. It became so untenable, and so pointed, that I finally decided to tell our decision-making collective about his incident with me, in the hopes of building context for why certain structural changes like legalization of co-ownership, and objective measures of work and compensation, were necessary.

Shortly afterward, out of the blue, my employer sat me down on a cob bench and told me that he wanted to change our previous compensation agreement, so that I would receive less compensation. When I asked him why, he replied that it was just "something he felt." More than infuriating, it was crushing. All of this—all these little subjective alienations, and gaslighting, and nebulous reductions in pay or opportunities—is what retaliation looks like. It's not a guy screaming at you or threatening you, while you stand righteous and tall in your own calm and coherent defense. It's a slow

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**As soon as I started speaking up about power and gender, I lost my perceived credibility and influence.**

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withering from all angles, including from yourself, inside. As subjective as these experiences appear in the moment, they are real, and they are common, and they have significant personal and professional consequences for women.

Around this time my boyfriend also became romantically involved with one of our interns. She was a woman I lived with and worked with. It exacerbated any and all insecurities I had developed about relationships in our community. I was expected to teach and mentor interns/students every day. But I became terrified of every young woman who came to our program—all of them were threats to my home and job. I developed extreme anxiety, and slowly fell into a deep depression. Teaching became extremely uncomfortable, and my previous passions were no longer interesting or meaningful. I was surrounded by people I didn't trust, and I felt sick all the time. The situation became so uncomfortable and untenable that I resigned, forfeiting the home and business I had worked so hard to build and save.

### Consent and Intimacy

I stayed with my boyfriend and finally convinced him to leave The Branch with me. But as we were preparing our exit, he had an affair with another intern. He hid the affair for months, and encouraged her to lie about it as well, until they were eventually discovered. Later she wrote to a friend that he had manipulated her, that she hadn't wanted a romantic relationship with him but felt desperate for affection and unable to say no, and that she was

emotionally unstable when he initiated sex. She wrote that she felt like the experience had ruined her career in [the country we were in].

So there I was, on my way out the door from The Branch, separating from my boyfriend of 10 years, and trying to understand, once again, the context and structure of intimacy and sexual misconduct. The intern repeatedly wrote that she had only wanted mentorship and education from my boyfriend and not a sexual relationship; he repeatedly wrote that she had been open to a sexual relationship. Both of them independently asserted that the relationship was consensual. They also both expressed regret and confusion. Several people who had seen them interacting during that period commented that they looked like they were "having a good time." Both parties expressed an inability to understand their own behavior and choices, or what they felt or thought about what had happened, or what parts of their own statements were most accurate. It was a big, tangled, mess, full of emotional contradictions.

And I was, once again, in the middle of that mess. "Well, it was her choice," some community members from The Branch said. "She consented. This is a personal problem, not a professional one."

This was a personal problem. But additionally, I think it was also a professional problem, in a way that's really crucial for how we understand intimacy and power in a workplace or community. When someone is your student, in your sphere of power, and also personally vulnerable,

consent is impossible to fully assess. And regardless of such assessment, this behavior puts women at an undeniable risk for lots of consequences, *both* personal and professional. This type of behavior funnels young women away from healthy mentorship opportunities, and derails their energy into sexual availability instead of professional development. It makes them question their own competency—did he spend extra time with her because she was capable, or because he wanted to sleep with her? Even if she doesn't question her own competency based on those measures, chances are, someone else will.

Months before this happened, I facilitated a discussion on women and global health. During this talk, the same young woman who would later sleep with my partner commented about how important it was for young women to have mentorship, since mentorship is still heavily weighted across most professions towards young men. But this is the very situation that makes it impossible for healthy mentorship to happen for or by women. Women don't want to mentor other women who will sleep with their partners. And women shouldn't have to be sexual with men in order to receive education and attention. Professional and personal retaliation for denying sex with a teacher, employer, or mentor is high, and have real economic consequences for the women involved. Sexual misconduct is a real reason women hesitate to mentor other women, and why women have fewer mentorship opportunities to begin with.

In communities where you are both living and working with your monogamous partner, men having affairs with students creates a deep-seated feeling of emotional insecurity. At educational institutions it derails women from digging into their teaching careers and from connecting fully with female students. It prevents female students from looking up to female instructors with respect. It's bad personally and professionally for women all around. It inhibits women professionally from all angles.

From a personal perspective, I do sincerely believe that all parties involved in all of these situations were genuinely trying to meet deeply felt needs for connection, agency, and intimacy. I understand that we are universally vulnerable to a need for

human connection, and that these feelings can be tangled, contradictory, and misguided. This is not a charitable assessment, but rather a reflection on my own lifetime of learning intimacy through trial and error. It is also not an excuse for bad behavior; but rather, a call to consider the ways that our attempts at intimacy do or do not function in the way we hope.

I believe my boyfriend's relationship with our intern was consensual, in the way that society currently defines consent. But what does consent really mean, if you are consenting to do something that is bad for you or bad for someone else? That type of consent has less to do with personal well-being, community health, connection, and intimacy, and more to do with an expression of desperation, confusion, or narcissism. It's a consent that says, "I deserve to be treated less than," or "I deserve to treat you less than." Intimacy that arises from either of these places is malfunctioning—it is not doing its job to help people connect, trust, understand, and support each other in positive ways. Men in mentorship positions, especially in these isolated communities, need to hold themselves accountable for fostering healthy and caring environments for the young women that trust them and inhabit positions of vulnerability under their guidance. It doesn't matter how much you feel attracted to someone in a moment; how much you want to connect physically with them—if it's not in the best interest of both parties involved, it's not healthy intimacy, and it's not part of a healthy relationship dynamic in communities. And given how common this behavior is, how consistently gendered it is, and how frequent the personal and professional consequences are for the women involved, it really is a form of gender discrimination.

The professional consequences for women who are subjected to sexual mis-

conduct often exist regardless of whether or not women consent to the behavior. Consequences can be overt or subtle, premeditated or spontaneous. Most women who report sexual harassment at work experience some type of retaliation. This can come directly in the form of reduced opportunities, pay, or promotions, or it can come more subtly in the form of reduced likability, credibility, and weakened relationships—all of which carry their own cascading consequences. Sexual misconduct also infuses itself into the psyche of women's expectations for themselves and the way they are valued. Even when "nothing happens" or "she consents" there may be consequences for these behaviors that almost always affect women negatively.

### Moving Forward

A few weeks after I left The Branch, I phoned the crisis counselor who came out in the first paragraph of this essay. I'll call her Maggie. She had counseled many women about their experiences with sexual misconduct, and I wanted her perspective. Wasn't my situation so bizarre? And everything I tried to do such a failure? The Branch was a vibrant, creative, fun, and funny community. These weren't bad people. These were people who made their own soap, and sang songs about sauerkraut, and really believed we could change the world if we just worked hard enough. They held hands every evening and gave thanks. They planted trees. And they taught me some of the best skills and most beautiful lessons of my life. So what *happened*?

And this is where Maggie would let out a sigh. Because what happened in my community is what happens in so many communities. Sexual misconduct, enculturated gender inequality, gender discrimination—this isn't just the behavior of raging lunatics and power-addled CEOs. This is kind of normal stuff. It's stuff we grew up with,

and were raised on. It's stuff we don't see because it's just always been there. It's stuff that perpetuates power dynamics that a lot of really nice, progressive people feel really uncomfortable letting go of.

None of us arrives to community with a clean slate, and I continuously find myself implicated in my own critiques. I recognize my own participation in maintaining a status quo of structured inequalities for marginalized groups, including women, over the entirety of my life. All of us are caught up in social patterns. The narrative reveals those patterns. The way we think and feel about that narrative is what gives us an entrance point to positive change.

It's in all of our best interests to learn about how to care about one another better, as individuals and within groups, and no person or community is exempt from difficult truths and vulnerabilities. Engaging with these truths and vulnerabilities creates personal and societal growth. And that is something all of us can offer each other, no matter where we find ourselves in the story. 🌱

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1. There are infinite nuances and caveats to any broad statements about how sexual misconduct is gendered, not the least of which is the complexity and fluidity of gender and sexuality in the first place. Our world is not binary and heterosexual; it's a mixture of many flowing factors and ways of being—but the wonderful wideness of this diversity can be difficult or impossible to harness in the space of a single essay. Add to that the reality that the terms sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault are all currently defined as being gender neutral—anyone can do them to anyone else, regardless of gender, and this is the way our society has chosen to both define and conceptualize these phrases. This way of defining sexual misconduct is absolutely true—any type of sexual misconduct, done by anyone and to anyone, is unacceptable; at the same time, this gender neutrality also obfuscates these behaviors' clear and consequential power tilt towards (cisgender, heterosexual) men and away from women (and anyone not cisgender heterosexual male). I wish I could adequately explore and include the way that variances in gender and sexuality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and other demographic factors entangle people differently in these statements and realities, but I don't have the ability to go so wide, so directly, in the space of this article. These complexities spiral so broadly, and my span of words is so short, that the best I can do is simplify and narrow, and hope that a diversity of voices will address these same issues from a diversity of perspectives. For now I hope that people can just accept that sexual misconduct is a social pattern that is mostly done by and done to certain types of people based on their gender group, in a way that personally and economically marginalizes people from the targeted gender group. The reality is more complex, but this is the broad, and broadly replicating, pattern.

# A TANGLED WEB: Sex at Zendik Farm

By Helen Zuman



Photos courtesy of Helen Zuman

Before having sex for the first time—in February 2000, at the age of 23—I had to ask permission of a man I barely knew, at a “sex meeting” attended by all but a few of the 50-plus adults then living at Zendik Farm.

What qualified this man—whom I’ll call Zar—to make this decision? He’d fathered the founding couple’s first grandchild, while in a relationship with their daughter. He emitted an air of menace (incubated, perhaps, during his pre-Zendik run with a Los Angeles street gang). He was close—and mostly loyal—to Arol, who’d taken over as the Farm’s sole leader when her partner, Wulf, had died in June 1999.

That is, Zar drew his authority to dispense advice not from a record of wisdom or empathy, but from his rank in the Zendik hierarchy.

I did sense the perversity in this; I’d tried, before the meeting, to preserve a modicum of discretion by making my request, one on one, of a high-ranking woman instead. Yet I also sensed resonance between my predicament and what I saw as the core of Zendik’s promise: the chance to blossom, as a sexual being, with the support of my adoptive family—rather than prolong my pre-Zendik pattern of sneaking toward sex, in secret, while guarding against the ever-present threat of sexual violence.

Since questions posed at sex meetings tended to throb with pain (stemming, we believed, from our “Deathculture” corruption—yes, we Zendiks called the outside world the “Deathculture”), Zar didn’t quite know what to do with the simple optimism inherent in mine. So he punted to Kro (also a pseudonym), my proposed partner. Was he into it? Zar asked.

Indeed he was. And so, that night, on a quilt in a moonlit field, I brought two precious gifts with me into the mystery of intercourse: the regard of a man who truly loved and admired

me, and the blessing of my tribe. I’m still grateful to Kro for his kind and gentle guidance, and to Zendik for allowing me at least *this* instance of claiming my sexuality without shame.

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Zendik Farm was founded in 1969, in the high desert east of Los Angeles, by Wulf and Arol Zendik (formerly Larry Wulfing and Carol Merson). The two hoped to empower artists like themselves to thrive on collaboration and creativity, and practice radical honesty, while opting out of what they saw as the suicidal, ecocidal American mainstream. In other words, they desired to live tribally—which, to Wulf, meant riving the pair bond.

“Possessive attitudes about sex,” he wrote, “lead to jealousy, hostility, hate, violence, murder.” His solution? Extend the weave of intimate belonging and interdependence beyond the couple; relocate responsibility to provide from the pair to the tribe; free those in partnerships from the compulsion to cling to one another, for the sake of survival.

Was Wulf scheming, from the beginning, to gain sexual access to nearly every post-pubescent female on the Farm? Perhaps, perhaps not; either way, he got it. But that didn’t translate into “free love” for the rank and file—sex at Zendik was subject to a strict, if changing, set of rules.

Here’s a sketch of those rules, as I knew them, in the five years between my arrival at Zendik in October 1999 (several months after Wulf’s death, and the Farm’s move to western North Carolina) and my departure in September 2004 (shortly after the Farm’s final relocation, to West Virginia, and about nine years before its demise):



Sexual interaction couldn't just happen; it had to be pre-arranged. If I wished to "get together" with a guy, or vice versa, one of us had to "hit up" the other for a "walk"—sometimes involving actual walking, usually stopping short of nudity or sex—or a "date," during which it was expected that we would get naked and "ball" (i.e., fuck) and/or engage in oral sex. How the hitting up happened shifted with Arol's whim; in my time, we transitioned from using designated go-betweens (called dating "strators," or administrators), to making requests directly, to enlisting anyone we chose to play the third-party role.

In the event of a "yes," my lover or I had to speak to the date-space strator about securing a private spot. If we were lucky, we'd be assigned one of three bona fide "date spaces" (secluded cabins just big enough for a double bed and a nightstand); if we were unlucky (late in making arrangements, or lacking in seniority)—or feeling adventurous, or interpreting "walk" literally—we'd end up elsewhere, e.g., the trailer, a van, the library, a barn loft, or outdoors. (Since most of us slept dorm-style, we did not conduct assignations in our own beds.) Then I (the female) had to make sure my "date sheets" were clean, and, unless I was bleeding, get specked.

Specking? What's that? It's one aspect of the "rhythm" method Zendik relied on for birth control: I gauged my fertility by tracking my waking temperature (which rises right after ovulation) and submitting, before each date, to a cervical inspection, with a speculum, by someone trained in gleaning meaning from how open my *os* was and the nuances of any ambient mucus. If the woman wielding the speculum discerned a risk of pregnancy, then no balling for me. (Condoms, which Wulf disliked, didn't become available at Zendik until four years after his death—and then only with prior approval, granted case by case.)

On my walks and dates, results varied. Sometimes, I felt mild interest blossom into lush fascination; other times, I stuttered and fumbled, or went through the motions, or—in one instance—agreed to abort the mission, upon discovering that my quotidian admiration for my partner did not in fact correspond to ready potential for sexual pleasure. In general, I thoroughly enjoyed assignations rooted in shared excitement. Meanwhile, I stumbled, or suffered, through those that stemmed from a desire to "evolve sexually"—which I could supposedly do by either coupling with

someone above me in the hierarchy, or erring (per Arol's occasional exhortations) on the side of generosity, or deferring to my peers' belief that a certain guy would be good for me, or forcing myself to move on from loves condemned as corrupt.

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Part of what kept me at Zendik was my belief that Wulf and Arol had been the first—and only—couple in history to craft a committed, honest relationship and that, if I left, I'd never have this myself. For proof of their union's superiority, I looked no further than its longevity: they'd stayed together—as partners, if not lovers—for almost four decades, whereas no other Zendik pairing I knew of had lasted more than a few years. Then again, Wulf and Arol—enthroned atop a pyramid of their own making—had faced no pressure from above to break up.

I didn't understand this when I lived there. Each time I broke a bond under threat, I turned the blame on myself: I was neither honest nor committed nor evolved enough to serve Zendik while sustaining a partnership. In fall 2003, after Arol crushed what seemed like my best hope of mating for life, I vowed to myself that the next time a conflict arose between my loyalty to Zendik and my desire for a man I would dump him immediately. That is, I decided to drop my hope of lasting love.

I didn't know my spirit would rebel against this.

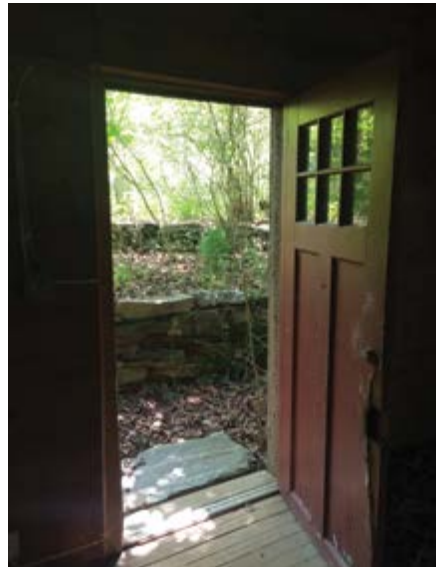
Nor did I know that my romantic gashes—untreated, unhealed, ungrieved—would one day reopen, and exact retribution.

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**Unlike the rest of us,  
Wulf and Arol—enthroned  
atop a pyramid of their  
own making—had faced no  
pressure from above to break up.**

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## I paused to acknowledge the pain I'd caused by cutting ties, under duress, with men I'd still loved.

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In 2015, plodding through the final revision of *Mating in Captivity*, my Zendik memoir, I paused to acknowledge the wrong I'd done, the pain I'd caused, by cutting ties, under duress, with men I'd still loved. Over the next three years, I reconnected, in person, with three of these men.

To one, I apologized—for kissing him, on our first walk, without permission, and for ending our relationship in such a shitty way. (I'd apologized before, via email, but it seemed vital, as well, to say these things face to face.) He said he could tell I'd changed a lot in the past 15 years and indicated that, in any case, he'd long since forgiven me.

To another, I revealed the maneuvers some higher-ups had made to persuade me to choose Zendik over him; I also refreshed his memory of the initial strike against us. These details—some of which he'd forgotten, some of which he'd never

known—incited him, a dozen years after he'd chastised me, by phone, for calling Zendik a cult, to agree that it was one (which did please me, I'll admit, even though I no longer needed his agreement as a condition of friendship).

Later, I gave him the gist of the tragic tale I'd penned (at a higher-up's suggestion) to hammer home the point that sticking with him would only generate cascading heartbreak and (to borrow a phrase from Wulf) “perverted death”: a young mother, driven to distraction by wedded isolation, combined with her husband's pull to itinerant evangelism, kills their infant son by accident and then, to keep her husband from finding out, kills him as soon as he comes home, before killing herself. I'd known, in the moment of creation, that this was a twisted bit of witchcraft; I didn't realize, until I was summarizing it for the human I'd fictionalized as the husband, that it was also an act of cruelty—that I'd done violence to both of us by writing this story.

To a third former lover, I also disclosed the action behind the scenes of our breakup (he too acknowledged, in response, that Zendik had in fact been a cult). And then, I went further: in light of our rekindled flame, in defiance of Arol, in spite of the pain I was causing my husband, in reaction to fault lines already lurking beneath the crust of my marriage, I chose to enter—openly, honestly, foolishly—into a reprise of our previous intimacy.

Fortunately, thanks to a change of heart on his part, we made out only once, and didn't have sex; nonetheless, the shock of my

betrayal continues to reverberate through my union with my soulmate, to this day.

Do I blame Arol for this? Do I blame Zendik? No. None of it was foreordained. But I do trace back to the Farm the tinder of love cut short, the combustible brush pile of loss unmourned.

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In the midst of my ill-starred foray into polyamory, I turned for context to Christopher Ryan's and Cacilda Jetha's treatment of “The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality”—*Sex at Dawn*. Though I no longer resonate, on a personal level, with their defense of taking multiple sex partners, I still find their work useful in illuminating what may be the greatest gift I received from Zendik's tangled sexual web.

During World War II, on American Air Force bases, fighter pilots and their wives started holding “key parties,” at which they “intermingled sexually...before the men flew off toward Japanese anti-aircraft fire,” all too aware of the likelihood that some would not return. According to researchers Joan and Dwight Dixon (quoted in *Sex at Dawn*), these couples “shared each other as a kind of tribal bonding ritual, with a tacit understanding that the two thirds of husbands who survived would look after the widows.” That is, they complicated their sexual weave in service of the entire tribe's survival.

At Zendik, we fancied ourselves “warriors” battling the “Deathculture” to save

life on Earth; this lent a sense of urgency to any mission we attempted. And those missions were many: not only did we foray out into the world, most weekends, to sell the magazines, music, stickers, and T-shirts that supported us financially, but we also grew much of our own food; built and maintained our own buildings; tended horses, cows, and goats; repaired our own vehicles; and handled every other responsibility of operating the authoritarian equivalent of a small village. To this ferment of constant activity, our snarled sexual practices did add bubbles of volatility and discord. But, I believe, they also firmed the mesh of affection underlying countless acts of service to each other—which in turn thickened, thread by thread, the fabric that held us together.

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Some little girls dream of having children; I myself dreamed, in this realm, only of finding the man I was meant for and mating for life. Had I known, growing up, how to do that—had I belonged to a tribe, a clan, a culture prepared to help me on my way—I might never have gone looking for Zendik. Or fucked dozens of men. Or contracted herpes, during a mock rape meant to root out my “Deathculture” corruption. I might have chosen to honor, from the start, my desire for one true flame.

But that was not to be. So I did my best, with what I had. I let Zendik teach me its mangled version of the mating dance. I discovered—not too late, but late enough—that my soul would not let me surrender my quest for lasting love. I took the long way ’round to the arms of my husband—knowing, by the time I arrived, that this union was worth fighting for, and that I would fight. 🌸

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*Helen Zuman—author, chocolatier, reweaver, walker, wife, daughter, sister, and witch—details her Zendik experience in her memoir, Mating in Captivity (She Writes Press, 2018; available from Communities Bookstore; see review in COMMUNITIES #179, pages 76-75). She lives in Beacon, New York; loves Earthen Ecovillage in Black Mountain, North Carolina; and invites you to visit her at [helenzuman.com](http://helenzuman.com).*

## Sounds Like a Fairytale

excerpted from *Mating in Captivity, Chapter 1: “Interview”*

My task after lunch was to help Zeta—one of the young women from the trenching crew—paint shelving units on the Addition’s upper level, divided into three bedrooms. The one we set up in was a loft at the crest of a spiral staircase, bright with sunshine pouring in through windows and skylights. From the railing I admired the structure’s soaring floor-to-roof sweep, as well as the love glowing through each hand-crafted detail. I would not have guessed that every board in the building had been pried from the skeleton of some rotting home or shop. The Zendiks had taken a motley jumble of derelict stuff and found purpose for it in a smooth new whole.

Zeta filled two yogurt containers with thick white paint from a bucket nested in newspaper. As we laid it in sleek glides over rough reclaimed pine, I learned that she, like me, had grown up in New York City. She’d even attended the same high school as my sister, at about the same time. A musical virtuoso, she played violin and sometimes sang backup in the all-improv Zendik band. She met her *machisma* quotient with high-topped combat boots, and tiny-toothed shells biting into her dreadlocks. At the Farm about a year and a half, she was one of only two Black women in the group, and one of only three Black Zendiks.

Warmed by news of our shared origins, I barely blinked when Zeta switched subjects. “Hey,” she said, with a playful smile, “has anyone told you how dating works?”

“No,” I said. “But last night at dinner I heard one of the girls say she was going on a date. I figured she and her boyfriend were heading into Hendersonville to see a movie or something.”

Watching Zeta’s smile widen, I began to doubt the story I’d supplied. “Was I wrong?”

Zeta laughed and nodded, eliciting a burst of clicks from the tiny teeth. “Yeah, you were wrong,” she said. “Dating here is nothing like dating out there. The way we do it is totally different.” She paused, raised her brush to remove a stray bristle. “Have you met Shure and Loria?”

I hadn’t.

“They’re the dating strators. They’ve been here forever—I think since Boulevard.”

“Strator,” I would discover, was Zendik slang for “administrator.” Boulevard—a town outside San Diego—was one of the Farm’s earlier locations. Other Zendik vintages, from older to newer, included Topanga, Texas, and Florida. In its 30-year history, the Farm had moved many times.

I nodded. Zeta continued. “If you wanna get together with a guy you like, you ask one of them to hit him up for you. You can hit him up for a date—which means sex—or if you just wanna kiss, hold hands, make out, you can start with a walk instead.”

My brush slowed as I imagined ambling through a meadow at midnight, hand in hand, with Estero. The thought of my fingers twined in his roused a delicious wave of tingles.

“You can say in advance how far you wanna go, and the guy will respect that. No games, no pressure. No dumb pickup lines.”

My vision dissolved into the final scene of a vivid dream I’d had when I was 10. A handsome man, at least thrice my age, was chasing me through a tropical forest. Upon catching me, he said, “Let’s not have sex. Let’s just make love.” I was relieved and enraptured.

Twelve years later, I still thought “making love” and “having sex” were separate things. To me, “making love” meant luxuriating in the holding and kissing, the stroking and petting, the languor and longing, as long as you chose. This, it seemed, was the promise of a “walk.”

Zeta broke in with a question. “You’re a virgin, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, taken aback. “How’d you know?”

“Oh,” she said, dabbing extra paint into a knothole, “Toba told me. At lunch.” She covered the patch around the knothole with short, quick strokes. “So, yeah, you’d wanna take it slow. Here, you can do that. People will help.”

I thought again of Estero—the latest in a string of crushes threading back to first grade. How many boys, then men, had enthralled me with their wit, their salt, their sweat, only to dance out of reach? How many chances had I missed to take a hand, test for a match?

Where had Zendik been all my life?

“Wow,” I breathed, gazing out the bedroom window at a pillow of mist falling on the Blue Ridge. “That sounds like a fairy tale.”

—HZ



# Sex Positivity in the New Culture Movement

By Crystal Farmer



Photos courtesy of Crystal Farmer

New Culture is a movement in the United States that aims to help people create authentic relationships. New Culture was inspired by the ZEGG community (founded in Germany in 1991, with roots in the Bauhütte community of the '70s). Some of New Culture's values include vulnerability, transparency, and responsibility. Its tools and practices are useful for those who have felt disconnected from their sexuality and relationships.

Very little has been published about New Culture as a community, and I am writing to explain some of the ways New Culture addresses sexual politics. I believe its practices around consent can be adapted to any type of community, but there are some downsides to its approach. I have been involved in New Culture mainly through Center for a New Culture since 2016. I am the organizer of New Culture Charlotte in North Carolina, but I do not represent the leadership of New Culture as a whole. The experiences and impressions I describe may not match others' experiences.

One of the values of New Culture is the ability to be "at choice" in your activities. Center for a New Culture has an annual summer camp, and almost all of the activities are optional. Campers are encouraged to look inside and discover what their "yes" and "no" feel like and respond to invitations accordingly. Workshops help us practice declining requests without apologizing or excuses. The people making the request are taught to say, "Thank you for taking care of yourself." Through these exercises, we learn to honor our desires regardless of

what another person wants or thinks.

The idea of taking responsibility for your choices is sometimes a double-edged sword in New Culture. Participants are asked to establish boundaries and express lack of consent when they need to, but many New Culture events involve hugging, snuggling, and other intimate touching. Going against this culture by declining hugs can be alienating.

In mainstream culture, boundary violations, including sexual assault, usually involve expulsion of the offender, or, as in some recent cases, a restorative justice process to help both parties find healing. In New Culture, these violations are handled by a leadership team that desires to keep both members in the community. In some cases, this means that victims are asked to "work through" their trauma by continuing to interact with the accused at community events. If the victim feels unsafe, it is assumed they will make the choice to leave the activities. The accused has the privilege of participating in the community without publicly acknowledging their violation, which means they could continue to harm others.

Another part of the New Culture experience is asking for what you want. If everyone is at choice, then people can feel free to make requests and respond positively (or at least neutrally) to a "no." I had this experience at my first summer camp with Center for a New Culture. I was recently divorced and seeking connection. I had heard of summer camp's reputation as "sex camp," so, a few days into the first week, I invited

people to approach me for sex.

I enjoyed the interactions I had as a result of this request, but I also enjoyed observing the reactions of fellow campers. New Culture has many people who are polyamorous, but, contrary to popular belief, most of the polyamorists at camp were not interested in casual sex with a new person. For me, sex is an activity at the same level as sharing a meal. For many others, sex requires more emotional intimacy and physical attraction. The people who said "no" were honoring their desires as much as the people who said "yes." Despite the camp's reputation, many people found it hard to ask for what they wanted, especially if it involved intimacy.

The New Culture movement reflects the demographics of North America in general and the sex positive movement in particular. It appears to me that most of the participants are white, cisgender, Baby Boomers, and female. As a black woman, I am not the default object of attraction for the majority of Americans. Young white women are considered the most attractive. When it comes to New Culture, young white women were the most sought-after for connection and intimacy. At events, these women may feel like they receive a lot of attention and requests for connection.

Women who are comfortable with their boundaries and eager to explore will find that New Culture is a place to do that safely. Women who have a history of abuse and struggle with boundaries may find New Culture activities to be too personal and the requests too aggressive. Just like in

traditional culture, people who desire connection may unconsciously apply pressure to continue an interaction past the point of comfort. American women are socialized to be demure and non-aggressive, so they may not have practice deflecting this attention. Despite their experience in New Culture workshops, they may not have the confidence to say “no” and end an interaction. This is the narrow gap where New Culture values fail. If a person never voices their lack of consent, it is assumed they are ok with the interaction. If the person later calls it a violation, they will be faulted for not taking responsibility for their (in)actions.

I have seen these interactions at events and experienced the pressure to push through uncomfortable situations. Some communities view discomfort as a “growth edge,” an opportunity for self-transformation and learning. For those with a history of abuse, these opportunities are more like triggers. We are encouraged to be at choice and remove ourselves from these triggers, but we also may be considered less enlightened or capable than participants who are willing to work through their trauma in public. In my experience, those people feel disconnected from the community and often do not return. Despite its openness and care for vulnerability, New Culture is simply not safe for people who are not willing to put their wounds on display and subject themselves to public healing processes.

With its positives and negatives, New Culture is like any community. It has tools that are useful for those willing to implement them, and the way it creates space for authentic connection is admirable. Unfortunately, some of its cultural values are harmful to others and may make participation difficult. If you are interested in learning more, I encourage you to visit [new-culture.org](http://new-culture.org) and connect with a local community. 🐦

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*Crystal Farmer is an engineer turned educator from North Carolina. She became the organizer for Charlotte Cohousing in 2016 and has been involved in cohousing and the intentional communities movement ever since. She is passionate about encouraging people to change their perspectives on diversity, relationships, and the world. She owns Big Sister Team Building and teaches at Gastonia Freedom School, an Agile Learning Center.*

## A Response to Crystal Farmer

As organizers with the Center for a New Culture, we appreciate Crystal Farmer and COMMUNITIES for letting us respond to Crystal's critique of sex-positivity at our events. Our main article (pages 32-34) lays out the New Culture context—here we briefly describe where we agree and disagree with Crystal's feedback.

### Points of agreement:

- The New Culture environment of transparently asking for what you want and giving a clear “yes” or “no” can be challenging for people who are not yet acculturated and for people who have a history of trauma.
- While facilitators emphasize that everyone is at choice and all consensual choices are valued, people who don't want to hug or touch can sometimes feel alienated.
- Young attractive women have historically received a potentially overwhelming number of requests for intimacy—we have attempted to address this with our new guidelines on expressing impersonal desires (described in our main article).
- People who process emotions in public healing spaces receive respect and visibility—this is a natural consequence of the immense value that these spaces create for the group in increasing collective understanding, empathy, and wisdom. (However, those who process emotions in private are also supported in multiple ways, explained below.)
- The Consent Team discerns when a consent violation should be reported out to the entire community. Minor incidents that are resolved with mediation and education tend to be kept private, while the rare major violations are reported with transparency. We appreciate Crystal's feedback that with more transparency, individuals could make better-informed choices about who to engage with.

### Points of disagreement:

- The demographics of CFNC events no longer matches Crystal's impression.
- In 2017 and 2018, attendees of our flagship 10-day Summer Camp were almost evenly split among Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers.
- In 2017 and 2018, approximately 10 percent of attendees identified as nonbinary gender, and of the rest, slightly more identified as men than as women.
- In 2018, 18 percent of attendees were people of color.
- The process of working with consent violations (detailed in our main article and Consent Team sidebar) does not match what Crystal wrote. Specifically:
  - Our intention is to support learning and growth as appropriate, not to keep both people in the community at all costs.
  - We don't leave people in trauma to “work it out” with the accused.
  - We do not assume that victims will be the ones to leave if they feel unsafe, and we offer a variety of resources to support them in feeling safe.
  - Not voicing a lack of consent is not assumed to be equivalent to consent; we now address this specifically in our boundaries training.
  - Some people do choose to process their feelings in private—alone, with the Empathy team, or with supporters they pick—or not to process at all. It's possible that they might feel uncomfortable at New Culture events, and we welcome specific feedback that could help us reduce the discomfort, but we disagree with Crystal's characterization of them as being “unsafe.”

We appreciate Crystal for giving feedback that helps us improve our training and culture creation. We've made significant changes since she was last involved, and her comments will inspire further upgrades.

—Sarah Taub, Indigo Dawn, and Michael Rios

# The Triangle of Consent

By Crystal Farmer

Consent is an agreement between two people about how to move forward in a sexual relationship. While one might assume that obtaining consent is easy, American society has never created a space for people to learn how to obtain consent. What appears to be a simple issue of “yes” and “no” to sex often turns into “he said, she said” when someone makes an accusation of sexual assault.

So how do we improve our knowledge of how to handle consent? The sex positive community has not been a good example. In 2018, a well-known sex educator was accused of sexual harassment by a colleague. Though he later apologized and entered into a restorative justice process with other colleagues, his initial decision to not take responsibility showed a huge gap between his preaching about obtaining consent versus his actions.

He had created a well-known model for consent, a way to establish boundaries and agreements before sexual activity. If a person who taught others how to obtain consent made a potential partner feel pressured, how can a regular person know what to do when consent gets messy?

I decided to develop my own model for consent. Who am I? I’m the website editor of Black & Poly, a community for black people transitioning to polyamory. I have been an assistant organizer for my local polyamory group and I am part of the sex-positive New Culture movement. I’ve taught others about consent and I am a survivor of sexual abuse. I identify as a womanist and I believe everyone wants to get this right.

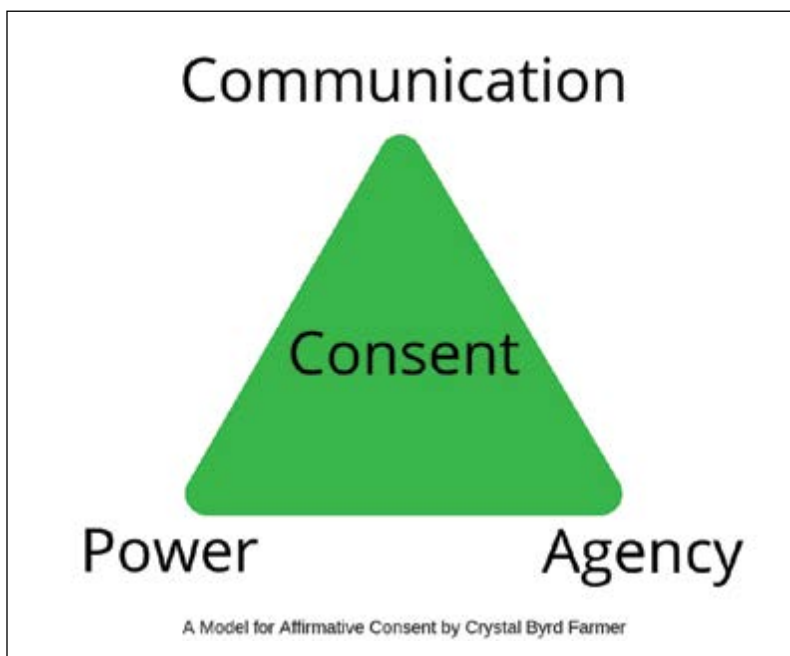
This consent model goes beyond the basics of who, what, and how. It starts with the recognition of agency and power balances and ends with specific communication about sexual acts. This model has the form of a triangle in equal relationship to each other. If one part is missing or abbreviated, it will affect the entire experience of giving and obtaining consent. Here are the three legs: agency, power, and communication. I’ll break down each leg in detail.

## Agency

The first leg is agency, which is the recognition that we all have the ability to make choices for ourselves. We make those choices based on available information and our own judgment. When we’re in a relationship, disclosing relevant information is the way we recognize our partner’s agency.

For instance, a person in the dating scene may tell a potential partner that they are seeing others. For those currently in a relationship, it may mean telling a partner that they have acquired an STI. This information usually affects the partner’s future actions, which is why it’s difficult and sometimes embarrassing to talk about. When we withhold information, we are taking away some of our partner’s agency. When a partner has the right information, they can respond in a way that will protect their own safety and peace of mind.

Another part of agency is cognition, or each person’s ability to understand the situation. Children, teenagers, and even young adults do not have the brain development of mature adults; it’s why we restrict drugs, alcohol, and driving by age. In the same way, neurodiverse people often lack the social awareness that will give them the information needed to





give or obtain consent. For all people, impairment due to drugs and alcohol means people may make different decisions than if they were sober.

When determining if your partner has agency, compare their individual abilities against what is expected of people the same age and disability status. If they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, are they cognizant of the decision they are making and its possible effects? Recognizing our partner's agency is a critical part of obtaining consent. We must also acknowledge that even when consent is asked for and given, actions could cross legal and/or moral boundaries.

### Power

The second leg of the consent triangle is the awareness of power. It's no accident that the majority of celebrities called out for sexual assault and harassment in the #MeToo movement have been powerful white men. Men born in the US have been brought up in a culture of toxic masculinity that values aggressiveness, manipulation, and dishonesty in order to "get the girl." When a potential partner refuses to consent, a man's response of disappointment and even anger is seen as socially appropriate.

Men are not always the bad guys, though. Any relationship between two people is subject to a power imbalance when someone has more seniority, wealth, status, or social support than their partner. Women who pressure men into sex by using their "feminine wiles" are just as guilty of manipulation. The power dynamics of each relationship is not fixed, and it's always subjective. If someone believes they have less power, that will impact their ability to deny consent.

Before engaging in sexual activity, people should acknowledge the power they hold in the situation. Have they considered the reasons their partner might say yes besides an actual desire to engage? Are they using their position or cultural privilege to get their desired outcome? Can they give their partner the space to say no without fearing the consequences?

The fear of rejection is a powerful motivator during consent conversations. Saying or hearing "no" can be painful no matter how justified it is. In fact, many

people go through with sex they are not sure about because the idea of hurting their partner seems to be worse than grinning and bearing it. To counter this, sex educators have asked people to ask for enthusiastic consent: it's either a "Hell, yes!" or it's a "no."

Consent is almost meaningless when one partner has created a power imbalance through coercion and violence. People evaluating consent from the outside cannot use someone's failure to stand up to or leave their abuser as a sign of consent. In the same way, it can be difficult to tell if a situation is sexual harassment or not. We can only start by believing the accuser and looking for patterns in each person's behavior as it relates to the power balance.

### Communication

The final leg of consent is the actual communication. Even in romantic comedies where the couple is falling over each other to get in a bed, consent has to be asked for and given. In an ideal world, progressively more intimate activities are verbally consented to by each partner. In the real world, it looks more like shy touches, smiles, and other nonverbal communication. The problem is that some people will look back on those activities and know that at some point they were unwilling to continue.

The moment bad sex becomes something worse is when this unwillingness is glossed over, when one partner notices that something is wrong but continues anyway. We have all experienced the feeling of powerlessness when we give up our agency to another. Our consent is half-hearted, and the guilt can be overwhelming. If you've ever had that experience in a non-sexual situation, then try to act with compassion when you see your partner hesitating to give consent.

So what does a conversation about sex look like? It starts with the truth. "I want to be intimate with you." Even if the phrase sounds awkward and perhaps unauthentic, I encourage you to go into even more detail. The initial yes should be followed up with a checklist of sorts to cover the entire spectrum of sexual activity. Consider the following areas:

- Dirty talk

- Kissing
- Touching genitalia and erogenous zones
- Penetration (genitals, fingers, toys)
- Oral sex
- Anal sex
- BDSM activities such as spanking and fetishes

In the spirit of recognizing agency, both partners should discuss any potential barriers to consensual sex. This includes:

- STIs and date of last testing
- Use of barriers (such as condoms or dental dams), what kind and where
- Current relationships and agreements
- Past sexual history
- Use of birth control or medical sterilization
- Medical conditions and other physical limitations
- Psychological limitations, history of abuse, and triggers
- Attitude towards sex and how it will affect the relationship moving forward

Practice communicating consent before you and your partner get to the bedroom. Over time, these conversations will become commonplace and easier. It's understandable that not everyone can talk about these things without feeling embarrassed or nervous, but sex is not something to be done in the proverbial dark. The more openness you bring to the conversation, the less shame you will feel around one of the most human of activities.

At the end of the day, consent is just one part of navigating relationships. Due to the legal and social change in the world, it's more important than ever to find a way to give and obtain consent without shame and guilt. Recognizing each other's agency, addressing power imbalances, and communicating consent is a great way to create space for the pleasurable experience that sex should be. 🌱

*This article is adapted from a version that appears at [blackandpoly.org/the-triangle-of-consent](http://blackandpoly.org/the-triangle-of-consent).*

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*Crystal Farmer is an engineer turned educator from North Carolina. In addition to the roles and activities listed on page 29, she is also a member of the FIC's Editorial Review Board. Her article "Barriers to Diversity in Community" appeared in COMMUNITIES #178.*

# Consent in the New Culture Community

*By Sarah Taub, Indigo Dawn, and Michael Rios*

**W**hat does it take to create a world that works—in every way, for everyone? The “New Culture” network aims to find out! Community, compassion, authenticity, personal growth, global change...these are some of the values that inform New Culture experimental gatherings and communities. There are independent New Culture groups across North America and Hawaii—we authors work with the nonprofit Center for a New Culture (CFNC) in the Mid-Atlantic US.

Our events usually include a special focus on relationships. All consensual ways of relating are open for exploration, including but not limited to sexual, sensual, and romantic connections—asexual, aromantic, and celibate people are also supported to relate as they choose. These explorations are core to our social change agenda: people who have fulfilling relationships are harder to manipulate into “filling the void” by buying things, joining hate groups, and so on. The exploration is also a source of joy, delight, and nearly unlimited opportunities for learning and growth.

Most of us have received astonishingly bad training from mainstream culture about relationships and sexual expression. We’ve been taught to say “yes” to things



Photo courtesy of Sarah Taub

we don't want, for fear of reprisals, or to push through others' "no" because of insecurity or entitlement. In broader society, this conditioning contributes to widespread violence across lines of power and privilege; in a wide-open field for sexual connection, it is a disaster. To create relative safety for sexual and sensual exploration, we need to do a significant amount of unlearning and retraining.

For over a dozen years, all multi-day CFNC events have included training in consent and boundaries, because improving people's ability to say "no" and accept others' "no" gracefully is the first step in reducing consent difficulties.

In our consent and boundaries trainings, people practice saying "yes" to what they do want, saying "no" to what they don't want, and changing the situation when they're no longer a "yes." On the "yes" side, we teach enthusiastic consent: asking people to tune into three main centers—the body, or sensations; the heart, or emotions; and the mind, or thoughts—and to say "yes" when all three centers agree.

On the "no" side, we teach that an authentic "no" is an incredibly precious and intimate gift. A "no" saves the people involved from an unwanted or barely tolerated interaction—for example, a creepy hug or an icky kiss. And a "no" can redirect towards something even better—perhaps something delightfully unexpected. If someone feels comfortable saying "no" to you, then you can likely trust that their "yes" is authentic. Being easy to say "no" to is one of the core skills of a consent culture.

Some recent upgrades in our trainings include practicing nonverbal as well as verbal consent skills, teaching about "freeze" and compliance responses that can masquerade as consent, and encouraging people to check for consent on an ongoing basis. We emphasize a clear, positive "yes," and teach that it's never OK to assume a "yes." In the past year, we've also begun to distinguish between *personal* desires, which come from a wish to deepen connection with someone specific, and *impersonal* desires, or desires for a particular activity with any appropriate partner. We teach that personal desires can be expressed pretty much anywhere and anytime, while someone with an impersonal desire can announce it to the group, or ask an individual, "Are you open to hearing an impersonal desire from me?" and get consent before proceeding. This has cut down on conventionally attractive people being bombarded with impersonal requests.

Even after tons of training, community members still carry conditioning from the culture they grew up in. In the past year we've added extra support structures and clarified our process for addressing consent difficulties at events. Participants can speak to the Empathy Team—volunteers handpicked for their active listening skills; small groups check in regularly and identify participants who are struggling; and the community comes together for sharing processes like the ZEGG Forum. We also have a Consent Team (see sidebar) to provide appropriate support, guidance, and intervention in the case of a consent incident.

New Culture events are aimed at those who want to challenge their limits, and are open to experiencing triggers as a path towards growth and empowerment. We deliberately include a

## The Consent Team at CFNC Events

Over the 25 years of New Culture Camps, organizers and community elders have always helped resolve consent difficulties. In the past year, we've made the process more accessible by creating a visible Consent Team. The vision of the Consent Team is to support a healthy, empowered community. Its values include physical safety, respect, bodily autonomy, freedom, learning, healing, and remediating power imbalances. The team's mission is to support, guide, and intervene to provide safety when the people involved cannot provide it for themselves.

The organizers select people for the Consent Team who are generally perceived to have the most wisdom on interpersonal issues. Wherever possible, this team includes at least one person who is not an event organizer, to counterbalance potential conflicts of interest.

Consent Team members are available at all times, including overnight. Attendees are encouraged to come to the Consent Team with any consent issues, even if they are not sure whether a boundary was crossed—the Team's intention is not to punish but to support healing, learning, and transformative justice.

Once an issue comes to the Consent Team, the Team's process involves collecting information from all sides, giving support as needed and training as appropriate, and taking necessary action to ensure safety.

In particular, the Team evaluates the distress level of the person whose boundary was crossed (Person A), and gets them whatever support they need. The Team also investigates the level of awareness and teachability of the person who crossed the boundary (Person B). The Team chooses a course of action that is appropriate to the combination. The Team also informs the community as a whole when, in their discernment, the issues need group attention and processing.

For example, if A is feeling empowered and B appears well-meaning but unable to pick up social cues, the Team might support A to give feedback to B by coaching A or acting as a mediator for A and B. If A is having a trauma response to B's action, the Team would provide emotional first aid to A (and refer out as necessary), handle whatever education of B seems possible, and impose appropriate boundaries on B as needed. If B's responses to the Team seem manipulative or predatory, the Team can expel B from the event.

We're pleased with the increased effectiveness and accountability that have come from implementing a Consent Team—we welcome questions and comments from others seeking to improve their groups' consent processes.

—ST, ID, MR



## Indigo's Story

When I attended my first New Culture Summer Camp East in 2015, I was a 23-year-old, monogamous woman. It was my first time in a space where platonic touch was abundant; where nude females were treated like humans; and where consensual sex was seen as a normal activity. It was fundamentally and phenomenally transformative.

On my second night in the open sexuality space, the facilitator invited us to form groups for “Multi-handed Touch”—a game where one person states their boundaries and preferences, then receives touch from three to five people. There were two middle-aged men in my group, and I felt a somatic fear that echoed my trauma history. At the same time, I trusted my group members, who I'd gotten to know through workshops, meals, and sharing circles over the last several days. When my group began to give me feather-light touch, the knot in my chest began to soften. My pleasure began as a faint glow and slowly grew. I cooed, ahh'ed, and mm'ed as my group members smiled. Eventually, I felt safe enough that I verbally welcomed touch on my nipples—and for the first time, I experienced pure, unfettered bliss with a splash of sexuality. Before then, sexuality had always gone hand-in-hand with pain. This moment is just one of many beautiful, intimate, and healing moments I experienced at Summer Camp that year—all while preserving my bodily autonomy and my relationship agreements.

—ID

## Dawson Robert's Story

Before coming to a New Culture event I had never been in an open sexuality space, and the warmth and support helped me feel welcome. Through a half-dozen events, I would go to the space to connect, but was never “active” or even naked. There was a wall of fear for me concerning nudity and as for open sexuality, I could never.

Finally, at a winter event, one of the participants called a group self-pleasuring ritual. It was the last night, and the community and container were well-established for me. I decided to attend the ritual and cuddle with my partner while they participated.

I undressed down to my underwear, took my place in the circle, and laid down. I held my partner's hand as the facilitator said some opening words, then slowly looked around the room as another participant started playing a soft and slow beat on their drum. I let my eyes wander as people began to touch themselves, watching one another. Soon the beat and volume of the drum began to intensify and the other participants began to exclaim in a variety of ways. It occurred to me that I was missing out in a way, that the protection my privacy had afforded me came at a cost. I felt a warm desire to join in. I separated from my partner, removed my underwear, and quickly became a part of the rising wave of energy. The volume of the drum and humans steadily grew, the tempo with it. Finally a rolling crescendo moved through the room and everyone in it. The sound of the drum and of pleasure subsided. And it was over. Soon we were all just cuddling and talking in a few clumps.

After that night I never again felt the need to hide my body or my pleasure; nudity became almost mundane and open sexuality became a thing to consider rather than an impossibility. I never felt required to join an activity, and I think that openness is what eventually led me to find my true comfort zone. And I have yet to be in an open sexuality space that feels so open and supportive as those at New Culture events.

—DR

range of spaces, from workshops that are tightly facilitated for maximum safety, to unstructured times between workshops. People open up and learn skills in the most safely held spaces, and then start to apply those lessons in progressively less structured spaces. If they are struggling, they can call on the Empathy Team, the Consent Team, and the other supports—this in-the-moment coaching on real problems maximizes rapid learning of new skills. We support people with a background of trauma to choose the level of stretch they feel comfortable with—and we know that some people will need a more structured and safely held environment than these events can provide.

The personal stories in the sidebars illustrate the delight and expansion that typically take place in the New Culture exploration field. These events happened in a specific space where open public sexuality is welcome.

At New Culture, we have come to see that pleasure in general and sex in particular, when made safe and consensual through appropriate training, structures, and support, can form a solid foundation for the joyful and violence-free world we want to create. Healing the cultural mistreatment, trauma, and damage that people carry is not easy. We've made some progress and hope our learnings can serve other intentional communities and the larger world. 🍷

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*Sarah Taub, Indigo Dawn, and Michael Rios organize with Center for a New Culture ([www.cfnc.us](http://www.cfnc.us)) and live at Chrysalis Community in Arlington, Virginia, and Allegheny Crest Intentional Village in Mt. Storm, West Virginia ([www.cfnc.us/aciv](http://www.cfnc.us/aciv)) with a network of lovers, friends, and co-creators. Sarah (she/her) is a Gen X hippie with a Ph.D. in cognitive science who teaches relationship and community skills and helps groups transform conflict and deepen intimacy. Indigo (they/them) is a practical love activist, Cuddlist, and workshop facilitator who lives and works for a more humane, sustainable, abundant world. Michael (they/them), cofounder of three intentional communities, is a practical visionary and social entrepreneur with a creative (radical) approach to freedom and empowerment.*

# THE STING OF DISCRIMINATION: When Polyamory Is Considered a “Red Flag”

By Sylvan Bonin



Photos courtesy of Sylvan Bonin

Today I am playing board games with my boyfriend and my neighbor Z and Z’s boyfriend. The small living room is crowded and warm. Behind me my husband and my girlfriend are playing cribbage and she is strumming Z’s guitar. It’s early February and we have snow and ice on the ground. Guests who were visiting for the weekend are trapped here until the roads clear. My boyfriend had planned to be back at his own Intentional Community by now. Z’s boyfriend needs to get home to his wife and kid in Oregon. But no one is driving anywhere in this weather. We are taking advantage of the day off to gather, make music, drink tea, and play board games. We talk about politics, community issues, books, the weather, and cats. They ask how my article is coming. I wrote some earlier, but my friend O and his girlfriend were watching a movie, and O’s wife and their housemate were working on a project for our women’s group. The article isn’t done because there are always so many interesting things going on in a Community. Despite the inconvenience of the snow, today was a Good Day.

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There’s a story that I want to tell, and it’s different than the one we tell ourselves. I think we have an unspoken taboo not to talk about some things. I’m breaking that silence. Telling this story might cause discomfort, maybe anger, but I think it needs to be told. I hope that it will help us all to look more closely at our blind spots. I hope that my story spurs discussion in whatever communities you are a part of.

The story that “enlightened, progressive, West-coast liberals” tell is that other people are racist, sexist, or bigoted, but we are not. We talk about “them” discriminating, but rarely see the ways in which

we discriminate. So I’m going to share my story of experiencing discrimination from within the Communities movement.

I am a cisgendered female. I am more or less gender-conforming, though I wasn’t as a child. I am not white, but I “pass” for white. My childhood home was dirt poor, but full of books and love. I was raised race-blind, but as I grew up and began to see race and class divides I often chose my friends from among those who were outcasts and marginalized. I have lived in trailer parks, migrant worker camps, and under bridges. I know what systemic discrimination feels like. It feels like a child eating at a lunch table alone because their clothes are shabby. It feels like my friend Rosa, child of probably-illegal migrant workers, disappearing in the night, never to be seen again.

As a female I have experienced sexual assault, harassment, condescension, exclusion, patronization, objectification, dismissal of my views, and violation of my boundaries. This gender discrimination is, sadly, so prevalent in our society that it becomes background. The water we swim in may be murky, polluted, and sometimes a barrier to movement, but it is the water we have always swum in. We don’t notice it much because it is always there. We put on our armor every day and accept that having to armor ourselves is “normal” and inevitable.

Because the gender discrimination was background, and the class discrimination was systemic rather than personal, I had never felt the direct sting of bigotry, the shock of exclusion based on stereotypes...until I tried to join an Intentional Community. I was raised in Intentional Communities, and as an adult I decided that this was how I wanted to live, this is my path, my passion, my activism. My husband and I visited many communities, looking for the right place for us. I thought maybe we’d found it in a place I’ll call Pine Tree Village.



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## The reaction was immediate: please do not come back or contact us again.

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Pine Tree Village (PTV) is a medium-sized cohousing community in a small town on the West coast. The demographics are average for cohousing: mostly white, educated, middle class, with a handful of other races. More diversity in religious practice, basic binary gender perceptions, at least publicly accepting of homosexuality. The residents of PTV are leftist liberals who consider themselves open-minded and alternative, sort of grown-up hippies. PTV has a Welcoming Committee that handles enquiries, orientations, and prospective members. This Welcoming Committee consisted of two women in their 50s, who I'll call Angela and Becky. All went well for three months, we'd made a few friends, there were kids our son's age, we'd investigated income opportunities in the area. We were at the stage of exploring long-distance membership options, trial periods living there, and figuring out if it would make sense to build or buy. In short, this was exactly the kind of community I had dreamed of.

Then it came up in conversation with Angela that we are polyamorous. We weren't hiding it, neither were we making a declaration. To us being polyamorous isn't

something we wave flags about and make a big deal of. It's just us, quietly living our lives, finding lasting love and support and connection like anyone else. For some people it may be a choice, but it isn't for me. It's just the way I'm wired. Like being gay or straight, this is how I am, an inherent trait.

We explained that we were not interested in dating within the community or disrupting any existing relationships. We know how to be respectful and responsible with our relationships. We weren't looking for a "poly community" because that's not a primary consideration. We just wanted a home where our other sweethearts didn't need to be hidden. I don't want to have my partner of 20-plus years over for holidays and say he's "just a friend." I want to be able to kiss people goodbye on my front porch, just as I would kiss my husband. I want to acknowledge the role that others have played in my son's life as role models.

The reaction from the Welcoming Committee was immediate: please do not come back or contact us again. The closing line was "I would not choose to join an ecovillage where polyamory was being practiced."

Read that again. Let it sink in. They wanted no further communication from us whatsoever. Ouch! (I still can't read that without tears.)

There was no discussion. When we offered to have a discussion with the community so that they could ask us questions we were shut out. We were told that we would only bring complications and distractions to the community without any benefits. We wrote a couple of emails to

which we got only the briefest of responses...then no responses at all. I think the comment about us bringing no benefits was the most confusing, since prior to that our reception had been entirely positive.

Imagine yourself in our shoes. We were in shock. It took us a while to talk through what we were feeling. My husband, a white cis male in a liberal city, had no experience with discrimination and didn't even know how to process it. I was less unnerved, having lived with discrimination all my life, but this wasn't a place I expected to find it so I wasn't prepared. It's easier to take a kick to the gut if you are tensed than if you are relaxed. That's what this felt like: a kick to the gut. I felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me. For the first time I felt like I wasn't safe to be myself in my own progressive liberal social circle.

Becky was the veto on our presence. She said she "had a friend who was polyamorous, and her life was full of drama and instability." Those dreaded words "I had a friend once who..." are the cliché of exclusionary stereotyping. It says "I am not \*-ist! How could I be when I just said this person is a friend?" It bases a rejection on a single experience, the definition of stereotyping. Becky even excused herself from honesty by saying she had "immense respect" for said friend. I am always amazed by people's ability to lie to ourselves to protect our self-image!

My research for this story included re-reading all the emails we traded with the people at PTV. We wrote a lengthy and reasoned open email to all of the members of PTV whose email addresses we had. In it, we explained ourselves a bit and asked for open, honest communication. Reading that letter now I can see between the lines the anger and sarcasm I was trying so hard to reign in. I wrote, in part: "The most shocking part of this decision is that it was made without any discussion with us. That was quite unexpected. We know that people are often wary of anything that is different from their experience, and we were prepared for many questions. One thing that has stood out with the members of PTV that we have met so far is an over-all high level of emotional maturity. That is important in an Intentional Community, and one of the things



we look at when evaluating a group. From such a group I would have expected a request to discuss this issue in person.” Yeah, that was snarky and a little bitter. We were trying to write a calm letter, but once we got over our shock, we were also furious.

Our response to the part about us bringing nothing of value to PTV was “Unfortunately, it seems that there will not be time for the skills and attributes we offer to be explored, because it would take a bit of listening and talking to understand this single choice first. Were you to get to know us, you would find that in most ways we are a fairly normal couple, interested in a traditional country life with old-fashioned family values, enjoying the same hobbies as other people, thinking more often about what to have for dinner than how to handle sleeping arrangements (most people’s first question when they know nothing about polyamory).”

That letter still stands as one of the best defenses I have ever written for treating people as individuals rather than as a single characteristic. But...it’s pretty angry. I’m not sure if I could have kept my feelings out of it, or even if I should have.

After that our search for a community was darkened by caution, fear of being judged. We were careful how we spoke, considering whether every sentence would “give us away.” We put our best foot forward and hid ourselves. That’s not a very good way to look for a group of people to share your lives with. It felt icky. Even now it makes my stomach churn to remember.

Eventually we found a good cohousing fit. I already knew that one person there was openly polyamorous. People there were cautious, curious, embarrassed, supportive, or totally didn’t care. He was still a respected leader. We didn’t “come out” to the community before we moved in. A few people knew, and considered it to be our business. We kept that part of ourselves quiet out of fear. Slowly, over the first couple of years, we told people one by one. It turned out okay, but it felt like a tightrope without a net.

It was nine years ago this month that we got that five-line rejection note. I thought the feelings of hurt and anger I felt then were gone. I thought that finding my place in a community, my Forever Home, had healed the pain of rejection. But now...

I have to take breaks while writing this article. My chest hurts. Reading through those emails, reading their current website, I realize I still carry disappointment. I see the photos of a dozen children romping through the garden, of their thriving community businesses and store, of the peaceful rural landscape...and a part of me still wishes that was my life. Seeing that brings me face to face with an uncomfortable fact: when I choose Songaia I was “settling.” I love this place now, and never intend to move, but...still...this wasn’t my first choice.

Maybe writing this, being this publicly vulnerable, will help heal my heart.

Reading the PTV website is also a bit of a slap in the face. I see the words “diversity,” “inclusive,” “respectful dialog.” They say over and over that they support individuality. Their mission statement says that all “family configurations” are equally respected. That wasn’t our experience, but maybe Pine Tree Village has grown and learned in a decade. Maybe meeting us helped that to happen.

Here’s the ironic twist: I am more firm today about being accepted as I am, sweethearts and all. I am much more “out.” I still don’t consider myself a polyamory activist or crusader but I stand up for love choice in conversations and I never hide anymore. I don’t back down from my convictions. I don’t save the hard parts for last when I meet people. If they can’t accept all of me then I don’t need their respect,

and I certainly don’t want them to be an important part of my life! I think that I would not be this unapologetically myself had I not had the experience of being discriminated against and excluded.

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**T**he neighbors and sweethearts who gather together on this snowy day to keep warm by fireplaces, watch movies, drink cocoa...this isn’t a political statement or a movement. It’s just life. Dinner is cooking in the Common House. Kids from three families are throwing snowballs outside. People work from home on laptops if they can, or borrow a neighbor’s four-wheel drive car if they must go out. Intentional Community is the revolution here. If we’re radical about anything, it’s the idea that neighbors can help each other out. If we have two extra boyfriends at dinner, it’s “the more, the merrier.” Someone walks the old ladies home so they don’t fall on the ice. That’s what matters. 🍷

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*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.*



# I Survived a Dysfunctional Polyamorous Relationship and Learned Some Lessons about Love

By Clara Fang

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**We would be sharing our beds as well as our home, our partners, and our families. There was a lot to figure out, but with everyone being a mature adult and Art and Guin's experience living in communities, we were excited to try to figure it out.**

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He was married, 19 years older, and my supervisor at the start-up he founded. We “met” when I published a blog article about Findhorn, and he emailed to tell me that he liked it. This led to a year-long conversation about eco-villages, sustainability, relationships, and working on a start-up together. Then one summer evening, he was in town visiting his mother. I met him for dinner, and as we talked about our work and relationships over spicy salmon rolls, it felt like reuniting with a long-lost family member, a father I hadn't seen since childhood perhaps, or a twin brother separated at birth. We talked until midnight on the porch under the magnolia tree. The next day I wandered about in a daze, recalling his hands on my face, the audacity of his lips on mine. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, and when I tried to describe to my best friend what happened, I was as astonished as she was to hear myself say, “I met Art in person for the first time last night. I love him.”

He had been in an open marriage for 25 years. When he and his wife lived at Findhorn in the 1990s, she fell in love with someone in the community, and after six months of talking about it, they decided to open their relationship rather than call it quits. At the time, several affairs came to light in the community, heartbroken couples split up, and people left the community. Years later, he recalls how their agreement kept their marriage intact. “I am sure that we would not be together today if we had not opened our relationship,” he said.

I discovered polyamory a few years before I met him after reading *Sex at Dawn*, and then verifying on the internet that it was a thing. My discovery that there was a way to ethically be in more than one romantic relationship at a time was as liberating to me as accepting that I wasn't going to hell for having sex with my boyfriend when I was 20. There was nothing wrong with me for loving more than one person at a time. In fact, it felt like a gift that I loved with so little jealousy and so much generosity.

In December I visited him and his family. He and I slept in the guest bedroom while his wife slept in their bedroom. The next morning she made eggs, toast, and coffee for breakfast. Their daughters, age 11 and 15, acted as if it was perfectly normal for their dad's girlfriend to sit down at breakfast with their parents. They left to visit her family for the holidays leaving us to spend a blissful seven days alone together. On New Year's Day they came back with her boyfriend, John. We all unwrapped presents, and I took photos of us: Guin smiling goofily as her husband and her boyfriend leaned in to kiss her cheeks, Art with one arm around his wife and the other arm around me.

By March, we were talking about moving in together. Having lived in intentional communities for over 25 years, Art was no stranger to the pitfalls entailed, but this was different, because the people involved were in intimate relationships with each other. We would be sharing our beds as well as our home, our partners, and our families. How would we split the finances, make sure the house was clean, and dietary differences accommodated? Who would sleep where, when? How would we make decisions and deal with conflicts? There was a lot to figure out, but with everyone being a ma-

ture adult and Art and Guin's experience living in communities, we were excited to try to figure it out.

In September, I packed everything that could fit into my four-door sedan, including my dog, and drove the 10 hours to our new home halfway across the country. Art and Guin had found a huge house in the suburbs with six bedrooms, a hot tub, and fenced back yard. It was bigger than anything any of us had lived in, and big enough, we hoped, to contain all of our relationships and all of our dreams.

The first month went fairly well. Guin and John were on vacation at Findhorn, Art and I painted rooms, bought furniture, and confused the neighbors about our relationship. (Are you the daughter? The wife? What are you?) But once Guin came back and John went home, problems started. She complained that I woke her up when I walked around my room in the morning, that I stacked my shoes incorrectly by the door, and left my mug out on the table after breakfast. She wanted a cat, even though I am allergic to cats. She didn't bother to tell me that she would be late at work and wouldn't be able to make dinner. Her back hurt and she wanted to sleep in the master bedroom, even though it was Art's room and we were supposed to take turns being in it with him. Since I was the new person, I tried to please her and brush off the injustices, even though I knew it was setting a bad precedent.

In October came bad news: John was not moving in with us. He had started a new relationship with a woman back home, and even though he loved Guin, it was no longer working for him to be partnered with a married woman.

Guin was devastated. Ironically, she had encouraged John to pursue this new love interest, thinking that it would help him understand polyamory, but he chose monogamy instead. She cried inconsolably, lamenting the loss of "the love of her life." She complained bitterly that Art never paid attention to her like John did, and now that he was gone, there was nobody to love her. While I was visiting my parents for the holidays, she flew into a rage when she found him talking on the phone with me, and it took him hours to calm her down. She said she was polyamorous all those years only because of

the lack of intimacy in her marriage. She demanded that her husband and I break up so they could work on their marriage.

After recovering from his shock, Art refused. Not only did he not want to break up with me, he felt that her demand was unethical given their agreements.

"If we had two children," he asked, "and the child that you liked better died, would you give away the other child?"

"Well, yeah," she answered unsympathetically.

"Wrong answer," he told her.

I found an apartment on the other side of town and we continued our relationship as best as we could with him coming to see me twice a week. His family life was increasingly unbearable. They no longer slept together, and she was angry all the time and they fought whenever he tried to talk to her about our relationship. Every time he came to my place, he arrived shaken from the fight he just had with her, and I spent hours trying to comfort him, counsel him, and imploring him to make some hard decisions.

"I am ready to commit everything, Art," I said with tears in my eyes, "Are you?"

He was silent. He wasn't ready to give up on 30 years of marriage. He wanted to be

with his children and for them to be with their mother, and he wasn't ready to turn his life upside down. If only they could talk with a therapist, work out their resentments or their sexual hangups, or even try Ayahuasca (a psychedelic drug), then perhaps she would understand and accept our relationship. "I don't want to give up until I have tried everything," he said.

• • •

It's been almost two years since Art went home to his wife and didn't come back. He tried valiantly to stay in touch with me, braving many fights and abuses in order to see and talk to me. We tried a six-month break where we did not have sexual contact and saw each other rarely, and I spent six months living in a different state where we did not see each other at all. She continued to berate him about talking to me, so we also agreed to two months of not talking to each other. They went to therapy and worked with two poly-friendly counselors, but could find no compromise that would make both of them happy. She insisted that monogamy was what she needed to stay in the marriage, and he said that we should at



Photo courtesy of Ciara Fang



least have the right to stay friends. But when the reality comes down to defying his wife and living in a disharmonious household, he chose to stay home.

I have had terrible breakups before, but nothing this soul-crushing. I became angry, bitter, and resentful. Whenever I had any interaction with Art it usually turned into a big fight and ended in tears and a meltdown. I would show up at his door unannounced, come onto his phone calls without warning, threaten to do harm to myself, and refuse to get off the phone when he needed to end our conversations. One time when we were arguing while driving, I jumped out of the car and refused to get back in, and the driver in the vehicle behind us called the police. He became fearful and withdrawn, and did not want to stay in a relationship with me because he feared my doing harm to myself or to him. It took me almost two years to recover from the worst of it, and I'm still processing the grief. I suffered frequent migraines, chronic back pain, heart palpitations, and suicidal thoughts. My weight dropped from 116 to 102 pounds. With yoga, therapy, and a lot of help from my friends and my partner, I slowly, slowly, brought myself back to life. In the process, I developed some insights to help me move forward.

I learned that trying to convince someone to do something they don't want is like leading a calf to slaughter: the more you pull, the harder they pull away. I would love for Art and Guin to love each other and to love me, but I can't make that happen. Even though I've talked to Art many times, I cannot convince him to act differently. Accepting that people are not going to change was the biggest part of my letting go. All I could do was focus on getting myself better, which I did by dating, going to the gym, and trying to eat as much as possible.

I accepted that sometimes good people do stupid things, and that's just a fact of life. I don't understand why people shoot children in schools, why our government doesn't take action on climate change, or why Trump was elected President. Volumes have been written on why things are the way they are, but the world is still a mess and I'm still disappointing to my mom. Even Buddha or Christ probably

broke someone's heart at some point in their lives. Understanding why Art made the choices he did helped me have compassion and forgiveness, but I still suffered the consequences of those decisions. I cannot prevent bad things from happening to good people, including myself, but if I were to be frustrated with everything I didn't understand or like, I would explode and not be able to function. "Why me?" is not a productive question; shit happens; and we just have to do the best we can.

The most helpful lesson was that even if my beloved stops loving me, I don't have to stop loving him. Just like if someone you love died suddenly, you'd continue to love them and remember them, even if they can't love you back. Love is too strong an instinct to be dismissed, repressed, or restricted, even if it is not returned. If Art doesn't come to see me, I can still text, "Good morning." If he doesn't talk to me, I can talk to him in my head. I can build a shrine or light a candle, and find some expression for my emotions, even if he's not able to receive it. I can hold my partner a little longer, or take my dog for a longer walk, or call some friends and care about how they are doing, instead of always bemoaning how terrible things are for me. As the Rolling Stones sang, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need."

The fact of the matter is, I am at the source of my love. I can generate it, give it, and attract it, regardless of whether I get it back. In fact, people do this all the time. Babies are born and loved even though we still don't have universal health insurance, people work even though wages suck, and activists keep acting up even though the coming global warming apocalypse shows no sign of abating. Love is a rose blooming in December. Love is a smiling baby in poopy diapers.

Eventually I found a new partner, and we moved in together after nine months of dating. He is polyamorous and we truly support each other and our relationships with other partners. Sometimes I wake up in the morning next to him, and I cry about everything—the loss of my soulmate, the best sex I ever had, the home I wanted with him and longed for all my life. My partner holds me tightly

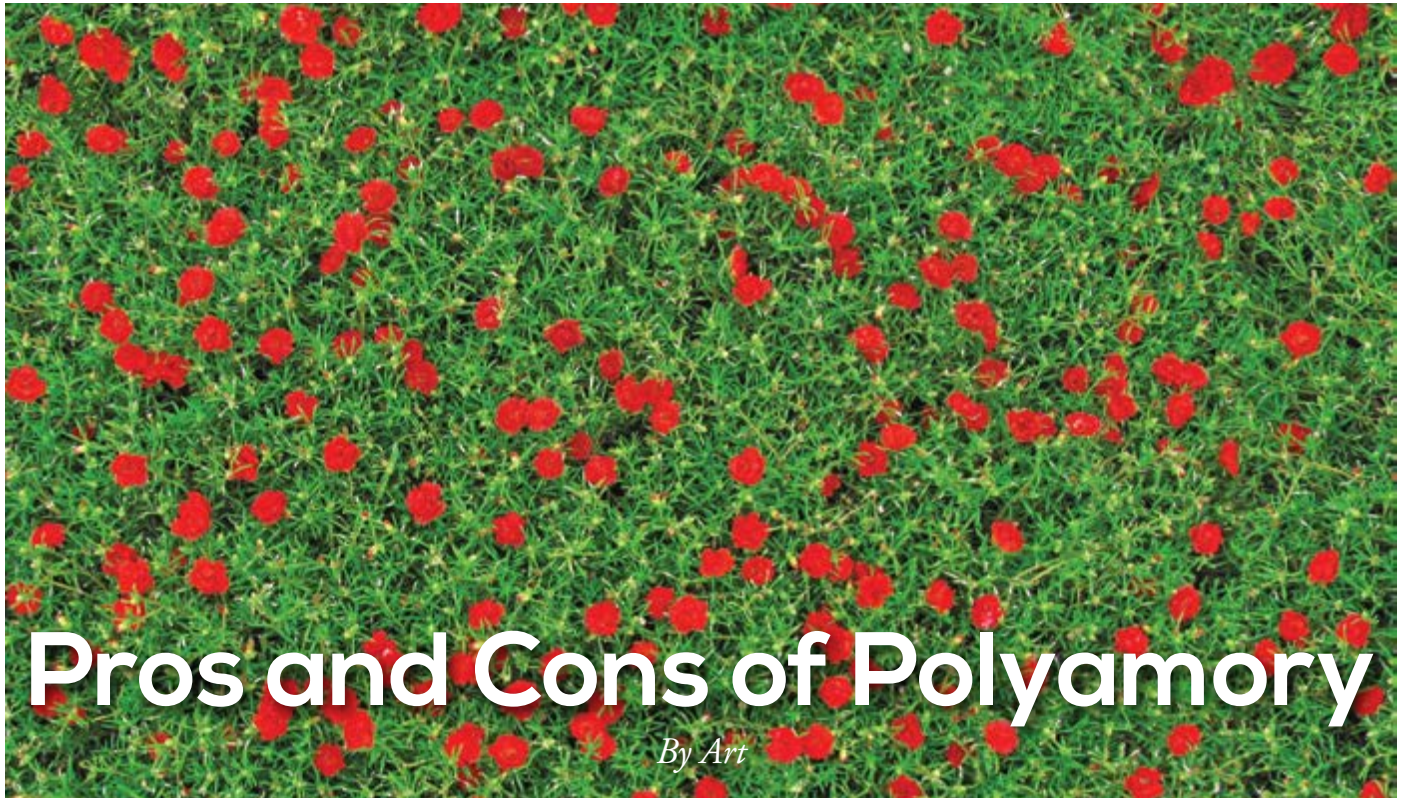
in his arms and his shirt becomes wet with tears. Then I cry that in spite of everything, I love someone who loves me, someone whose beauty and kindness brought me back to life. I'm moved to tears by the simplest things—the smell of his hair, the warmth of his hand, his quiet and constant devotion. I cherish his physical presence because I am always denied that in relationship with Art.

I learned that relationships work not because they are polyamorous or monogamous, but because of the kindness and dedication of the people involved. I learned that intimacy doesn't depend on how much sex you have or how much time you spend together, but mutual understanding and compassion. A couple who sleeps in the same bed and lives under the same roof can have no intimacy, while two people hundreds of miles apart interacting only through their phones can feel that their hearts are one. Like a cactus, love is more hardy than it is delicate.

Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I am; the world seems so full of love, my heart can hardly stand it. It's the 31st of December, and I'm dancing with friends at a New Year's Eve party at their house. As we count the seconds to midnight under a swirling disco ball, I feel myself part of a community—people who show up to wish you Happy New Year, people who spill champagne on your couch by accident, who call you when you are having a bad day, or when they get their heart broken. We don't have to live in the same house to be a community; community is anyone who cares. Love is all around us, and all we have to do is let it in. 🌿

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# Pros and Cons of Polyamory

By Art

I reluctantly became polyamorous 25 years ago when my wife, Guin, asked to open our marriage. Over time, however, poly has shifted my worldview and identity to the point where it's hard to imagine living any other way (you can read more about my shift into poly at [consciouspolyamory.org/2016/01/15/model-t-to-solar-car](http://consciouspolyamory.org/2016/01/15/model-t-to-solar-car)).

Many friends expected our marriage to end decades ago with one of us running off with another lover, but I was convinced we lasted so long *because* we allowed space for other lovers. I was proud of what we achieved together and thought our marriage was bulletproof.

Until now...

After losing a deeply significant relationship a few months ago, Guin decided she now wants to be monogamous. This would be fine except she also wanted me to drop my longstanding relationship with Morgaine. Guin is now debating whether she wants to stay married to me and is considering leaving to "create space" to attract a monogamous partner. It has been a deeply painful and confusing time in my life, but also a period of deep learning and insight.

I've been revisiting what I experience as some of the pros and cons of polyamory to keep my bearings in the storm. I hope they prove useful to others exploring whether or how to be in loving, consensual relationships with multiple partners.

## POLY PROS

### Personal Growth

In my blog post at [consciouspolyamory.org/2016/09/29/polyamory-and-spirituality](http://consciouspolyamory.org/2016/09/29/polyamory-and-spirituality) I shared how polyamory has repeatedly compelled me to let go of old ways of being and expand

into larger and better versions of myself. After I got married, but before becoming poly, I actually felt relief that I never had to "date" again, but this also meant a part of me was going to sleep. Whether it is being open to flirting or contact improv or staying fit, polyamory keeps me more on my toes, introduces me to new ideas and ways of being, and reminds me to not take any of my relationships for granted.

### Freedom and Acceptance

Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I would add that it also bends towards liberation and tolerance. Over generations, marriage has become less about property and politics, and biracial and gay marriages have expanded its definition. Polyamory is further pushing this envelope by releasing the concept of ownership in relationships (unless, of course, if you're into that sort of thing ;-). While often difficult at first, there's no feeling like compersion, which comes from offering our partners an unrestricted ability to share love with others and delighting in the joy they find.

### Expanded Love

When it comes to love, our society suffers from a scarcity mentality. Love is often seen as a zero-sum resource and we often feel we have to prevent our partners from loving others for fear that it will deplete the love they have for us. Similar to switching from fossil fuels to solar energy, polyamory reminds us that, like the sun, love is abundant and can be shared with multiple people in non-threatening ways. And really, on our deathbeds, will any of us regret trying to have loved more deeply and more often?





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## With polyamory, we are forced to talk about what works and doesn't work for each of us.

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### Clarity

People often think of monogamy as something black-and-white—you either are or you aren't. But to me, it is all gray areas. Is it okay to have close friends of the attractive gender(s)? Is it okay to share secrets with them? Difficult emotions? A massage? A kiss? Monogamous couples generally think they are on the same page without having to discuss boundaries, but discrepancies will arise over time, which can be painful to process, especially when they are discovered “after the (f)act.” With polyamory, there's no illusion of “one way” to do things so we are forced to talk about what works and doesn't work for each of us. This requires a lot of communication, but hopefully results in greater clarity around our relationship dynamics, comfort levels, and boundaries.

### Expanded Opportunities

With monogamy, most or all of our needs are expected to be met within the

relationship. This can be a challenge when only one partner enjoys spooning all night or public displays of affection (PDAs) or winter camping or strip poker or BDSM or...well, you get the idea. With polyamory, it is more likely we will find relationships that fulfill us without needing to pressure our other partners to do things they don't enjoy. On the downside, this can also raise the bar for our original partners, which I will discuss below.

### Added Support

Life is hard sometimes. You're home with the flu. Work sucks! A family member is in trouble or passes away. Having multiple partners to bring chicken soup or vent about your boss with or cry on their shoulders can offer incredible emotional and physical support. And when living together, combining incomes and extra help with household chores and raising kids can make life much easier for everyone.

### POLY CONS

Lest we become pollyannaish about polyamory, here are some of the downsides of loving multiple partners:

#### Jealousy

While also a problem in monogamous relationships, opportunities to experience jealousy and fear of missing out (FOMO) are more common when there are multiple partners. Those new to poly

may even feel disgust or repulsion towards metamours, particularly if they are icked out by coming into secondhand contact with others' bodily fluids. Feeling jealous is a very natural emotion and doesn't mean you're bad or not cut out for polyamory. However, it can be very unpleasant to experience (on both ends!) and suffering can also become a self-fulfilling prophesy. As Shakespeare said, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Exploring what is beneath these feelings and how we often unconsciously play out cultural narratives can often help sort them out.

### Complexity

While the feeling of love is abundant, time and energy are often scarce resources and polyamory demands a lot of both. Balancing schedules and parenting duties (when kids are involved), processing emotions and relationship dynamics, and striving to meet diverse expectations can sometimes make poly feel like a Cirque du Soleil act. More relationships can also mean more heartbreaks and “growth opportunities.” Sometimes it can all just feel like too much to handle and make one yearn for the simplicity and sense of control (at least imagined) within monogamous relationships.

### Health Risks

Obviously, being with multiple partners, who themselves may have multiple partners, increases the chance of becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease. Yes, safer sex reduces these risks, but the key word is “safer,” not “safe,” and no technique is 100 percent guaranteed. And there's perhaps no easier way to strain the relationship between metamours than by introducing an STD into the equation.

### Social Ostracism

While being openly poly generally does not carry the legal, professional, and even physical threats that being openly gay did (and still does in some places), polyamory is generally considered unacceptable behavior and “coming out of the poly closet” can risk prejudice and ostracism from parents, family, and friends. As a result, secondaries often pay a heavy



toll when their partners do not acknowledge them publicly. They may not be invited to family functions; they may be invisible on social media; and they may not be allowed to engage in displays of affection in public or in front of their partner's children.

### Small Dating Pool

It is hard enough to find one partner who is within an acceptable age range, geographically available, physically attractive, and emotionally compatible. Adding polyamory as a dating criteria reduces this pool of potential partners considerably, especially in less populated areas and locations where there is widespread intolerance of alternative lifestyles. And men tend to have an even harder time finding poly partners than women, which often leads to imbalance and frustration within open couples.

### Negotiating Change

All relationships evolve over time and change is difficult enough to negotiate between two people. In poly relationships, there is both more change and more people to negotiate with, which makes boundaries and expectations an ever moving target. New partners might fall deeply in love and want more than was originally agreed to; a primary partner might decide to become monogamous and demand that you do likewise (it happens!), When only one partner wants to change (or *not* to change), the result is often heartache.

### Raising the Bar

With polyamory, it is common to get certain needs met in new relationships to an extent you did not expect or even think was possible. You may develop a deep intellectual connection with someone that makes your old partner seem dull in comparison. Or a new partner takes your sex life to a whole new level and you are no longer interested in the vanilla sex (or lack of sex) you had before. This can be scary for the original partner, especially when it seems their worst fear is being realized by their partner being lured away by a younger or more beautiful, intelligent, compatible, etc. lover. OR, it can be an opportunity to appreci-

ate and accept our differences and perhaps even to explore new ways of relating to those we love.

### Avoiding Problems

It is often said that couples should not have a child in order to "fix" their relationship and this is also true for bringing new people into poly relationships. While full of growth opportunities and new relationship energy (NRE), new relationships can also make it easy to avoid the hard and often painful work of resolving problems and maintaining passion within existing relationships.

### Couple Privilege

Finally, secondaries in relationship with a member of a couple can often feel the needs of their metamour come before their own. Boundaries may be set around when, where, and how much time a secondary can spend together with their primary partner; there may be constraints around what kinds of activities, emotional or sexual involvement are permitted; their relationship is often put in the closet; and they have limited access to the partner's everyday life. Check out Morgaine's post at [consciouspolyamory.org/2016/02/04/challenges-of-being-a-secondary-for-more](http://consciouspolyamory.org/2016/02/04/challenges-of-being-a-secondary-for-more).

Polyamory is clearly not for everyone, but then again neither is monogamy. Like

any style of relationship it comes with pros and cons that we each need to weigh for ourselves. Hopefully, polyamory will eventually become just another choice that is available without social stigma or judgment. Until then, I appreciate those who are openly loving multiple partners as it is making it easier for those who follow and it is also challenging some antiquated cultural narratives in order to allow more love in our lives. 🌱

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*Art is a sustainability educator, serial social entrepreneur (you'd think he'd learn), ecovillage ring leader, on too many boards, holder of a Ph.D. in child psychology, mediocre guitar player, vegetarian for 35 years, and audiobook narrator. This article is adapted from a blog post published May 1, 2017 at [consciouspolyamory.org/2017/05/01/pros-and-cons-of-polyamory](http://consciouspolyamory.org/2017/05/01/pros-and-cons-of-polyamory).*

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**Polyamory is clearly not for everyone, but then again neither is monogamy.**

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# Relationships in a Community-Forming Group

By Rachel Lyons

“I won’t say it’s impossible for a woman to be fully herself in a relationship with a man, but it is a constant battle.” So began a not-uncommon conversation I had recently with a fellow community-forming member. We’d all heard that relationships tend to either strengthen or fall apart when living in intentional communities, but we weren’t aware that the community-forming process itself could both cause our partnerships to deepen and put them on trial. Among the original visionary couples that began meeting a year ago, there have been shifts, stress, and even separation. But we’ve also given and received support, processed emotions and assumptions, and grown as individuals and as a group.

Through community visioning exercises, we are looking honestly at what we want to create for ourselves and our world. This work can reveal that our deepest values and yearnings differ from our partners’. Some members’ partners have dropped out of the monthly founding meetings because they didn’t have the time or energy to commit. Other pairs have fractured or split altogether when it became apparent that the two did not share the same life vision. In one (oversimplified) example, a long-term relationship ended a few months after we started meeting. Issues surfaced that had been brewing for years, and the partner who stayed with the group now has others with whom to share co’s vision of a better life, while the other’s vision of sustainability includes living in a mud hut without being subject to community agreements. Another partner in a couple left the founders meetings once we had clarified that our purpose is to create a land-based intentional community. He was reluctant to imagine purchasing property with the group and give up living on the land he already owned.

I will write of the gifts and challenges pertaining to my own six-year relationship, which ended between writing the first and final drafts of this article. As a monogamous pair of founders, we saw our partnership affected in several ways. Through our shared participation in envisioning a more just and sustainable world, we grew closer, and we always had something juicy to talk about. We could process things together before bringing issues to the group, and we were often able to help each other see a different point of view. However, the intensity of the community-forming work could burn us out. We had to balance this immense project with other activities and remember to simply have fun together. (Since realizing that this need for balance is the same among my other relationships in the group, I’ve been making an effort to connect outside of meetings.) My partner and I also worked to seek others’ perspectives on topics to avoid being stuck in the vacuum of our own limited positions.

Because our group regularly engages in conversations about creating a new paradigm, I became more aware of, among other things, areas where I had unconsciously surrendered autonomy in my relationship (as referenced in the opening line of this article). This “battle” for selfhood manifested when I insisted on my way of doing things rather than going along with what my partner claimed was best, or when I attended social and educational events without consulting him (as well I needn’t!). Another example of evaluating our conditioning is when I confessed over dinner that I sometimes wondered if my mate would tire of the way I looked or dressed (or, let’s just say it, rarely bathed or brushed my hair). My dinner-mate looked at me wide-eyed and stated firmly, “That’s internalized sexism.” To his credit, my partner laughed at the idea of leaving me for my looks, since he shares my lack of impeccable grooming.

It was helpful for our relationship to hear perspectives on sexism from other women

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**My partner and I enthusiastically joined these discussions about polyamory, but sometimes felt the need check in with each other afterward: “By the way, just how in love *are* you with so-and-so?”**

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in the group. One example occurred during group meetings, when I, and others, challenged my (male) partner for interrupting and talking over his (female) counterparts—a charge he was receptive to. Another way this played out was when women in our group talked about occurrences of sexual predation we'd experienced, and how these encounters determined how we interacted with men. During check-ins at a one meeting, we discussed being inappropriately hit on at work, at school, in wellness classes, and on the street. My partner was awed when listening to these almost-daily occurrences from other women, which had a stronger affect on his understanding of sexism than my single stance.

Sometimes the group helped our relationship simply by bearing witness to our disputes. At one vision committee meeting, I cried and yelled at my partner because I felt he was invalidating my experience. We had just buried our beloved dog that day, and we were emotionally tender and failing at self-regulation. Rather than running away or changing the subject, our dinner-mates (who of course knew about our dog and our heightened sensitivity) listened and gave calm feedback. My partner and I were both able to apologize and talk some things out with the caring support of our friends. While our public struggles sometimes played out

awkwardly—even painfully—they could lead to healing and candid conversations about interpersonal and cultural norms we wanted to change.

Lastly, a two-sided element we experienced was the intimacy we have with other members of our community-forming group. Several of us already live in close proximity and share a lot of time, resources, feelings, and experiences. This has led to a sense of extended family and is enriching in many ways. The social butterflies are able to hang out with fellow founders when our partners are not in the mood to socialize. We exchange emotional and material support through conversations, carpools, and meal-shares. But feeling “in love” with our cohorts has created conflict when this deepening affection leads to questioning our monogamous partnership. As our dinner-mates spoke of “polycules,” “sister wives,” and other forms of polyamory that they embraced, my partner and I enthusiastically joined these discussions, but sometimes felt the need check in with each other afterward: “By the way, just how in love *are* you with so-and-so?” These questions provoked honest searching and enlightening conversations. Prior to this year, I never thought I'd have a non-judgmental discussion with a friend inquiring about her potential sexual interest in my partner! But ultimately, the pressure of these

uncertainties added to an already weakening connection between my partner and me that led to the end of our romantic relationship.

Through our community-forming process of the past year, stress on relationships is one of many interpersonal challenges we've endured. As a fellow member recently pointed out, the positive side of conflict is that once you get through it, your connections will likely be stronger than before. My now-ex-partner and I don't know how involved we will continue to be in the group at this time. But I hope that as our relationships continue to evolve, our connections grow stronger and enable us to pull off this community vision together. 🐦

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*Rachel Lyons is practicing feeling in love with herself and life in general. You can find her at [tinyhappypeopleblog.com](http://tinyhappypeopleblog.com) and [rachelyonswrites@gmail.com](mailto:rachelyonswrites@gmail.com).*



Photos courtesy of Rachel Lyons



# Polyamory at Earthaven

By Arjuna da Silva

*There can be no peace on earth as long as there is war in love.*

- Dieter Duhm (ZEGG/Tamera)

Early in 1995, founders of Earthaven completed the purchase of a 300-acre plot of undeveloped forestland near Asheville, North Carolina. A dynamic mix of progressive, mostly college-educated urban refugees, they decided to stake their small fortunes on the possibility of realizing a vision of meaningful, land-based culture steeped in the shared acknowledgment of the oneness of all being. What that might mean in the context of their mutual commitments would be discovered while living, striving, and evolving together.

We were an energetic mix of meditators, therapists, permaculturists, artists, entrepreneurs, gardeners, and teachers—a group whose norms of relationship and sexuality were basically mainstream. Lifetime commitments, predominantly heterosexual, were *natural*; sequential monogamies *the next best thing*; players of the proverbial field and abstainers all *making the best of loneliness*. One early couple did confess to being in a partner swap for a while with a group of friends, but most of us were used to the standard ways of hooking up.

In the intensive atmosphere of visioning and planning, many rich friendships blossomed and, after a few years of gradual population growth, an extramarital affair took the wind out of a newer family's sails. The woman (let's call her "Grace") whose husband had become involved with another woman just wasn't prepared for the shock and shame of it, nor were the rest of us ready to be of much help. Attending meetings, work parties, or social gatherings became unbearable for her, so she stopped showing up. Eventually, we lost her valuable contributions. As the other woman was an actively participating member at the time, Grace never found a way to come back.

Our lack of experience in openly dealing with these (not unusual) painful realities left us without a clear way of responding. One on one, sure, friends reached out; but overall our mindfulness tools and communication practices had not prepared us for a whole-group conversation on a topic that probably stimulated past relationship traumas for many of us.

Over that first decade, other couples went through similar confrontations with the realities of sexual attraction and commitment. There were probably also emotional crises in non-sexual friendships going on, but the stories the sexual liaisons sparked spoke to me of classic partnership roles, the hurt party stepping back and, eventually, out of the picture. Despite this occasional tension, the growing connection to our land, the joy of natural living, and the promise of rural plenty continued to sustain us and help our numbers grow, setting down roots for a culture of lived solutions. From time to time, relational problems weighed on us, but I guess we treated them as "normal" problems. Hadn't some of our parents also strayed from their monogamous commitments, or broken up over them—or our friends' parents, or other folks we'd known? Whatever the motive, it turned out to be relatively easy for the topic of love affairs and infidelity to keep slipping under the rug, too hot—or at least too large—for our heart-sharing population to tackle as a group.

But soon the mean demographic was becoming significantly younger and age and generation spans, as well as the challenges of living with people from different family and regional backgrounds, kept calling us back to the ever-present cultural remodeling table, to evolve our conscious communication and transparency skills. As our process

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**Our mindfulness tools and communication practices had not prepared us for a whole-group conversation on a topic that probably stimulated past relationship traumas for many of us.**

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toolbox expanded, some of us traveled to meet, learn from, and, when possible, bring trained communication facilitators into our midst. We worked on interpersonal conflicts in vision, values, and styles, though more intimate personal and relational issues were settled, if that, in more private settings. Opening up about jealousies, fears, and self-criticisms would take more time. We would learn to speak our truth to each other in a continually less confrontational way; we would study and practice NVC and Restorative Circles.

At the same time, a small group of process enthusiasts who had attended ZEGG Forum workshops brought experienced facilitators home to work with us. (You can find lots of information about ZEGG Forum online, so please take my attempt to describe the process as a totally incomplete sketch.) Briefly, people sit in a circle and take turns getting up and sharing what's alive for them at the moment. The silent attention of others and the possibility of going deeper into vulnerable spaces heightens the atmosphere of trust and support. The risk is of being seen. An experienced facilitator can help keep a monologue (or pantomime or dance) flowing, offering suggestions that might help one go deeper. The rest of the circle simply offers attention and, when the sharing is over, may be invited to offer "reflections" (but never advice).

From what I've learned, the early ZEGG community developed Forum to help a particularly young, daring, and peace-oriented population come to terms with the frictions of close community living and, of course, the fallout from changing sexual partners. ZEGG founders are on record as putting the root cause of much violence, and the inclination toward war throughout the world, at the feet of this problem:

"After thousands of years of repression and denial during the patriarchal era, the healing of love between the genders is probably the most revolutionary step in the current healing work. A

new, humane culture is rooted in a new relationship between the genders." (Dieter Duhm, *Future Without War*)

ZEGG became known as a daring population of truth-seekers, pushing the envelope of community vulnerability. "Is there a realistic model of love, in which the wishes for partnership are compatible with the wishes for sexual adventure?" wrote ZEGG cofounder Dieter Duhm. "Is there a form of living together in which the sexual affection of one human being to another no longer provokes fear, anger and revenge in a third person?" he wondered, and concluded that "We cannot provide ideological answers to these questions. Instead, we are looking for new spaces of experience, for truth and insight."

Though a core group of us at Earthaven loved Forum, we rarely gathered enough participants for a vibrant experience and eventually only pulled one off when a skilled facilitator was in our midst. Meanwhile, some of our newer, younger couples were having children, mixing it up some with each other, and in a few cases changing partners. Young singles and new couples with young children began arriving, further enriching the scene. These younger community citizens, who would make up the core of Earthaven's mind and spirit for the foreseeable future, were spending their first years on the land accommodating to a lifestyle so much more self-reliant and less automatic than they were used to. No doubt, the demands on them precluded much in the way of social adventuring.

Then, perhaps because of a growing sense of stability, people seemed to be taking more risks. One couple that had separated invited us all to hear their story directly from them. Connections sparking between singles and marrieds began to be more obvious, without much apparent self-consciousness. Sometimes those connections also became stressful, but new ways of responding as a community continued to emerge, such as when a hurt party brought their neighbors into their story, or reached



*Outdoor Forum.*

Photos courtesy of Arjuna da Silva



out for feedback. There have been occasions when a circle of friends gathered to help a breakup or a breaking heart find empathy and encouragement.

Watching from the virtual sidelines as an elder past 70, I wondered how this community subculture was fitting into our established social memes and whether people were talking to each other about how this new way of sharing feels; whether to be in it, observe it, or hope to push it away. I remembered hearing that Forum had been used for years at ZEGG to help their youthful, sexually active community process the consequences of open relationships. I remembered reading Dieter Duhm's statements on the link of sexual possessiveness to war. I thought perhaps it was time for a Forum with a topic: polyamory.

Enough folks responded with interest to my suggestion of a polyamory Forum, so I got in touch with Hany Nagib, a local Forum facilitator who had, in recent years, facilitated an occasional topic-less Forum for us. Though they were sparsely attended, those of us who'd participated had enjoyed working with him. He has the sweetest, kindest energy (he and his wife run an alternative mixed-age school called ZigZag), yet as a facilitator is able to be just provocative enough to keep the speaker's attention focused and true to their needs.

We hadn't had Forum for a while, but more than half of the folks who showed up had some experience with it. Hany and I were thrilled to have a topic so many folks wanted to talk and hear about. Valley<sup>1</sup> folks—committed monogamous couples, polyamorous couples, their other partners, and quite a few elders and those proverbial celibates showed up. With his musical voice and easy-to-read body language, Hany had us absorbed in the action in no time.

The first person to take space in the middle shared her excitement and joy in being able to have a lover without fearing for her marriage. Her willingness to profess her delight in such a jubilant yet humble manner touched a special chord in many of us, and I believe her authenticity made it possible for others to speak more freely about their hopes, fears, and experiences. In addition to reflections of appreciation for her gift of transparency, there followed a sharing of concern by one participant for their own partnership, and curiosity about how different relationships models can fit together in one community. Another reflection considered the impact of multiple relationships on children. A sharing that may have expressed what was alive and true for many of

us focused on the loss of a relationship in the presence of a partner's new lover. One participant with a history of multiple lovers celebrated his openness to others' needs being met while now feeling safer and more relaxed having surrendered to his current lover's request for monogamy.

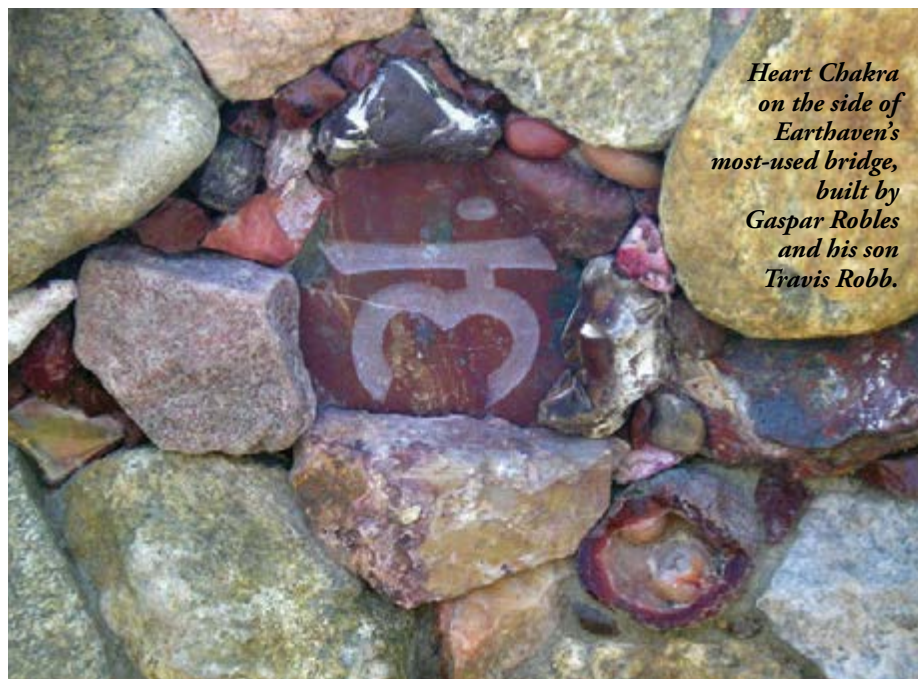
We had allotted 90 minutes for the Forum, with an optional extra half hour should we or Hany feel we needed it, but we didn't need all that time this first time through. There was so much to take home and continue to process already! The circle that had held so much sensitivity, fragility, courageousness, and caring was happy to be holding hands and passing blessings around, with appreciation for Hany's stewardship of such an edgy topic.

I don't think I've ever participated in a Forum that left me feeling so much more in touch with who my neighbors are, what's important to them, and how they care about each other. Between the monologues and the reflections, we got to experience a rich cross-section of who we are in this Valley with regard to love, sex, marriage, and fidelity, and perhaps we developed some more confidence in going forward in our world of mixed interpretations of happiness. But more than just confidence, a special blessing is bestowed on us all through what has become a shared dedication to relationships that are honest, nourishing, and compassionate.

It's been half a year or more since then; there are quite a few new folks among us now. Maybe it's time to call for another Forum on the same topic. 🌊

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*Arjuna da Silva was among the team of intrepid cultural revolutionaries who started Earthaven Ecovillage in 1994 and the educational nonprofit, Culture's Edge, in 1996. Her semi-professional life included many forms of psychotherapy and group counseling, but her passion for transformative community has been the focus of most of her attention over the last two decades. Arjuna still focalizes the work of Culture's Edge at Earthaven. She was given the name "Shunyam Arjuna" (which means "emptiness of the morning sun") by the great spiritual master, Osho.*



1. In addition to the 80-some adults and children living at Earthaven, our community feels like it includes many of our neighbors who we spend time with throughout the week. So we tend to refer to the Valley when we're not just talking business.



# A Project to "Save Love"

By Sabine Lichtenfels



Ludwig Schramm

*Aerial view of Tamera, southern Portugal.*

In 1978 I met Dieter Duhm, who had been a spokesperson for the students' movement and had become quite well-known through his book *Fear in Capitalism (Angst im Kapitalismus)*. He had been traveling throughout Germany and other countries for several years to contact interesting researchers and projects. Together with my longtime friend Rainer Ehrenpreis, we decided to establish the so-called "Bauhütte"<sup>1</sup>—a peace research community and a holistic university to bring together areas of knowledge that in normal universities were separated from each other, or were not taught at all. Our idea was to establish a nonviolent cultural model in which holistic peace knowledge would be developed for a new culture.

The early group rented a small farm in southern Germany. Soon, people who were interested came from the most varied directions—from the political left, spiritual groups, art, science, and welfare organizations. In spite of the initial enthusiasm, it soon became clear that the establishment of the research areas would not go smoothly. We experienced the typical conflicts that arise in the establishment of every group. We realized that we had to find a new way of dealing with and solving interpersonal conflicts, and that developing knowledge about creating communities and especially about love, partnership, and sexuality would constitute core areas of research for a new culture.

We learned to no longer keep budding infatuations secret from each other, but made them the object of our research. We

wanted to find out under what social conditions love and faithfulness, truth and freedom are possible. A main research question was: "How can we live together so that the sexual attention from one person to another does not give rise to so much fear, anger, and jealousy in a third person?" We struggled for many years to combine the great longing for intimate love between two people with a life in freedom, especially in sexual freedom.

We were thereby confronted with many prejudices and moral beliefs in society—in the public realm, in our neighborhood, in our parental homes, and in ourselves as well. We realized that we had to deal with and resolve subconscious fears and taboos in ourselves to find a more encompassing love and faithfulness. We realized how much power this underground of suppressed emotions, fears, and moral attitudes has in society and how much power we still allowed it to have in our lives when we gave way to blind attacks of jealousy or possessiveness or even romantic ideas about love. To shine the light of consciousness into these areas was a voyage of discovery without end.

Nothing human was to be alien to us. Under tears and laughter, we revealed our secret loves, erotic confessions, and sexual fantasies. We were surprised to find that almost everybody had similar fantasies. We spent hours and days together, spoke about issues that are normally never discussed, and about hopes and fears. We put the most hidden thoughts on the stage with the help of art and theater and we learned to become visible to each

1. In the Middle Ages, a "Bauhütte" or "builder's hut" was a hut or lodge erected at the site where a Gothic cathedral was to be built to prepare the different steps in its construction.



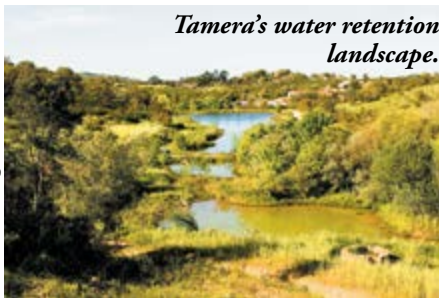
*Tamera's Community  
Time ritual.*



*Healing Biotopes sign at Tamera.*



*Forum at Tamera.*



*Tamera's water retention  
landscape.*



*Love School dance  
at Tamera.*

## We experienced firsthand what it meant to be a black sheep.

other and recognize who we truly are. We discovered the value of trust in a community. Protected by it, the partners in a love relationship could say things to each other that they couldn't have said otherwise. Slowly but surely, we approached the areas of the soul where true love becomes possible.

We had made the great discovery that what is most secret and intimate is not private. One's entire life and every human society are permeated by secret thoughts and the suppression of sexual desires. They form a substrate in society that makes honest exchanges and cooperation within a group extremely difficult and causes every utopia to fail. This substrate dissolves in a community in which it is possible to communicate truthfully, including about emotional abysses and secret fantasies. We understood deeply that it is only in the spirit of compassion that the mighty hidden sexual force can manifest without creating chaos. It is only in the spirit of compassion that the eternal dream of true partnership between man and woman will become reality.

We were courageous, in public as well; sometimes in our youthful folly, perhaps a bit too courageous. Our statements were provocative and they were experienced as a threat by some—but this was not at all our intent. This ultimately caused enmities to arise. In the 1980s there was a media campaign throughout Germany and Switzerland with headlines such as “Sex Clinic in the Black Forest” or “Orgy with 150 Couples.”

There were no limits to the fantasies expressed in the articles. What was most painful was the grotesque statement that we promoted sex with children. Nothing was further from the truth. On the contrary, one of our deepest motives was to embed sexuality among adults within trust and truth, specifically so that children would be protected against the abuse of sexually pent-up adults.

Among other things, we were said to be a subsidiary organization of the AAO (Aktionsanalytische Organisation, or Action Analytical Organization) in Austria. In 1999 its founder, Otto Mühl, was sentenced to seven years in prison for child abuse, and the community was dissolved. In search for a social alternative,



Dieter Duhm had visited the commune several times in its early years, once even for several months. The last time he was there was in 1979. In the beginning he was inspired and enthusiastic about the commune; but then, for various reasons, he distanced himself from it. Only very few of us ever visited the place. And yet it kept on being publicly repeated that we were a subsidiary organization. For a while this intensified the suspicion of child abuse.

For us it was a time of testing and awakening. We experienced firsthand what it meant to be a fringe group in society, a black sheep. We saw how the same process called forth enmity everywhere: Those who feel threatened and attacked automatically go on the attack so as not to be hurt. This reaction happens so fast that it usually occurs subconsciously. The result hit us harder than I could have imagined possible in a democratic country. The nonprofit status of our association was revoked. The owners of the property where we were living imposed stricter conditions. Construction applications were revoked. When Dieter Duhm wanted to speak in public, the organizers were warned against us and often canceled the events at short notice. Bookshops took our books from their shelves. Those who took our side were soon also branded a “cult.” It was like a

public gag order. And yet all these attacks could not destroy us, for we had learned to look all our mistakes in the eye and were no longer afraid of the denunciations of others. Our inner cohesion gave us the strength to persevere.

Today the community has become so stable that it can no longer break apart due to interpersonal conflicts—and it is therefore also strongly protected against attacks from outside. Our 40 years of experience in establishing community has given rise to a field of solidarity and creativity that other recently founded communities can now profit from.

Time and again we are asked: “How did you make it?” By doing what many people had warned us against: We took on the topic of Eros and remained faithful to it through all the conflicts. In spite of being branded a cult and other slander, we never kept silent about the issue, and that gave our work a clear direction.

The establishment of our project required that we go through a challenging process. We had to learn not to react to attacks with fear, anger, and enmity. Our intent to establish a holistic peace project thus first had to be fulfilled within. We could train ourselves to overcome fear, rage, and violence. This provided a solid base for our work.

Today, our basic knowledge about sexuality also helps us in our political work in areas of crisis. We are able to create spaces of truth, for example, for women who have been raped and never spoken about it or for men who do not know what to do with their dammed-up sexuality.

At the same time, I do not see us as having reached the goal of combining the very intimate quality of partnership with free, knowing sexuality. We need a social framework in which truth and trust among people is possible and in which the youth can find orientation. Only then will sexual violence truly end.

Sometimes we felt like salmon in the water, which always swim against the current. This is how we made things possible that others regarded as being impossible. 🐟

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Art studio at Tamera.

Jan Oelker



International summer event at Tamera.

Yuval Kovo



Lizard at Tamera.

Simon du Vinage



# The Pronoun Dilemma

*By Murphy Robinson*

**T**rouble was brewing at Pagan Camp. People were grumbling, irritable glances shot across our meal circles, and passive-aggressive comments peppered our announcements: we had suddenly been hit with the Pronoun Curse! How do you break this divisive enchantment and cast the spell of the Pronoun Blessing instead?

I've been going to this pagan camp every August for 13 years, and it has often been the one week of the year when I feel like I can be fully myself: a queer butch priestess with a deep love of magic-making in community. Our all-genders and all-ages camp of 130 people has had 75 percent returning campers each year for most of its multi-decade history, making it into a tight-knit community of friends whose bonds of trust run deep. This web of deep relationship can be a little intimidating for new campers, but by the end of the week most newbies find their place in the matrix.

This community has witnessed me with unfailing love and acceptance as I've gradually shape-shifted from an eager young maiden priestess with long hair and flowing skirts to a strapping butch witch with close-cropped hair who struts around the ritual circle wearing deer antlers and a motorcycle jacket. I'm friends with several long-time queer, non-binary, and transgender campers who could tell similar stories, and all of us feel the loving embrace of genuine acceptance from our fellow pagans, who come from many different walks of life.

Because of the spread of ages and backgrounds at our camp, the new culture of inviting people to state their pronouns has slowly become common, but not all the campers are very skilled in remembering to use the correct pronouns in conversation. People especially seem to struggle with "they/them" pronouns, which can be confusing at first because you must change all your grammar to the plural even though you are talking about just one person. I've heard a few grumbles about how hard this can be, but I've never heard anyone at camp challenge the value of using people's correct pronouns. We are patient with our elders and others who are unfamiliar with this linguistic innovation. Those of us with more pronoun culture experience model good practice whenever we can, and occasionally give individual or group feedback if something feels disrespectful. Apologies are given, hugs are exchanged, and we all feel like we've drawn a little closer as we move forward and do better. This is how the Pronoun Blessing begins to thrive in our web of community.

In 2018, it became clear in the first few hours of camp that a group of new campers were not feeling this embrace of safety and love quite yet. Our opening all-camp meeting was peppered with a few aggressive questions that felt strongly charged with a defensive and angry energy, all strongly implying that our camp culture was clearly not up to snuff on all the latest politically correct language and practices. It was a rough beginning.

Our bunkbed housing at camp organizes itself organically in an ever-changing array of affinities, and this year I found myself invited to sleep in the Queer Cabin. This turned out to be the hub of the unhappy young radicals who'd entered camp for the first time with critiques already on the tips of their tongues. It was disorienting to find myself aligned with their values but completely perplexed by their experience of the camp culture and very put off by their angry attitudes.

As a 36-year old butch who's genuinely happy to be called he, she, they, or anything else, you could argue that I don't exactly have skin in the pronoun game, but I've long ago worked through my own grammatical grumpiness and committed to using people's correct pronouns to the best of my ability. I'm not perfect at it by any means, and I make mistakes all the time, but no one seems very upset about this because I am clearly very queer and still somewhat young; I don't look like a TERF, so I get the benefit of the doubt. For the uninitiated: TERF stands for "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist" and has become a bitter slur that refers to the sort of feminists who won't allow transwomen to enter women-only spaces, rejecting their ability to self-define their gender. TERF is one of the most damning labels you can throw at someone in radical queer cultural circles.

Pagan Camp is rich in elders who were veterans of the earlier days of the feminist movement, whose age and appearance had set off the TERF-radar of the young new queer campers. One of my first-year-camper cabinmates took me aside one day in the dining hall and exclaimed, "Aren't all these Baby Boomers ridiculous? We can't let the TERFs have Pagan Camp; we've got to stand up to them!"

"Wait, who here is a TERF?" I asked. "I have not met a single TERF here in 13 years. Not everyone is good at the pronoun language, because a lot of them only get to practice it during this one week each year, but I haven't met anyone who isn't willing to try. If someone is telling you that correct pronouns are silly or worthless, please tell me who it is so I can talk to them. That's never happened here before...well, there was that one skit last year that made fun of pronouns mistakes a bit, but we talked to them and there was a whole-camp public apology the next day that actually really raised awareness. People here want to do the right thing."

My cabin mate had no actual TERF encounters to offer, and quickly changed the subject. I found myself spending less and less time in my cabin, as tensions over radical language and pronouns increasingly divided our camp.

Towards the end of the week, a young long-time-camper organized a discussion about the issue with some of the camp elders and invited me. Every one of the elders present agreed with the value of correct pronouns. One woman's words have stuck with me: "The number one thing that Pagan Camp has taught

me over the years is never to make assumptions about anyone. I've met so many people here over the years that I would never meet in my normal life, and every single one of them is a beautiful soul with so much to offer. The reason this conflict feels so hard is that the new campers are making all sorts of assumptions about who we are without ever having a conversation with us. We absolutely want them to feel safe and loved, but they've already decided we are the enemy."

Her words are an excellent illustration of the Pronoun Curse: when radical language is the primary measuring stick of who is an ally and who is not, we preemptively sever connection with so many people who would have been ready and willing to support us. A purist approach to language weakens our movements and actually delays linguistic change.

This story doesn't have a neat ending quite yet. Tensions had tamed a bit by the end of the week, but we'll have to wait until next year's Pagan Camp to see how the issue is going to settle out over time. I have no doubt the camp organizers are planning ways to address the issue more proactively, and I'm already planning ways to address it in my Pagan Camp workshops. I hope we can foster a feeling of safety and trust both for trans and non-binary campers, and also for their eager allies who are still unlearning their grammatical conditioning. As we struggle to grow into a space that supports all people skillfully, we blaze our own trail towards the Pronoun Blessing. 🐦

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*Murphy Robinson lives on a mountainside in central Vermont with a variety of human and canine landmates, where she offers inclusive and empowering feminist classes in archery, ethical hunting, and wilderness skills. In October 2019 they are launching The Way of the Weaver, a nine-month training in non-culturally-appropriative magic and ritual skills for students of all genders. You can learn more about Murphy's work at [www.mountainsongexpeditions.com](http://www.mountainsongexpeditions.com).*

## What Is Pronoun Culture?

A strong part of modern queer culture is the idea that every person has the right to choose what pronouns they are called by. It has become common practice in many circles to ask people to share their pronouns when they introduce their name at an event or gathering.

### Common choices include:

- She/Her
- He/Him
- They/Their (as a singular pronoun)
- Any Pronouns Are Fine
- Just Use My Name

### Less common choices include:

- Ze/Hir (a modern invention)
- That One
- We/Our (as a singular pronoun)
- It (considered offensive by some)
- ...and many others

Being able to ask people to use the correct pronouns is essential for many people to feel healthy and safe in a group. This is particularly true for people who are frequently misgendered (called by the wrong pronouns) by society at large, which typically includes some transgender and non-binary people. Developing fluency with a variety of pronouns can feel challenging to some people, but the effort you put in will help many people around you feel safe and respected. We all make mistakes with pronouns sometimes, so if that happens, just correct yourself as a matter of course: "So River is going to lend us her shove—oops, I mean *their* shovel!—for the garden project..." Making a really big deal about your own mistakes isn't helpful to anyone. You will get better at it with practice.

—MR



# TERF Battles: Women Standing Their Ground

By Anonymous

***P**rologue: Our innate drive to connect with each other is the strongest hope in turning the tide away from mass destruction. As a human being, and a social worker, I am intimately connected to many communities, including communities of people living on land, the lesbian community, and the queer community. It is critical that we find ways to connect with people within our circles, and find ways to bridge with people in other communities—to recognize our shared humanity and stop fighting with each other, which is threatening our very survival. I am deeply disturbed by the ways lesbians and feminists are being silenced in our communities today, ideologically “up against” trans activism and trans allies.*

*I want to make one thing very clear: I am not against people being trans, gender variant, gender neutral, or gender fluid. I have friends and family members who have transitioned from female to male. I have loved ones who use gender neutral pronouns such as them, ze, and zem. I do my best to honor their choices and I am grateful when they are forgiving when I fail. I support people’s right to self-identify and to choose any pronoun they wish. The thrust of this article focuses on how gender critical thinkers are not allowed to question current ideology; in fact we are being bullied for our point of view. Our movement is failing to create dialog about how trans activism is affecting our communities, our children, and the implications for addressing the common predicament on our planet today.*

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**Lesbians and lesbian voices are usually absent from so-called LGBTQ spaces, and unless we are lesbians who invite men into our circles, we are not usually welcome in these spaces.**

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I was fortunate to come out as a lesbian in the late 1970s in a liberal pocket of the US, an environment where most of the extremely violent forms of retaliation against lesbians were fading out. Although most of us did not feel safe holding hands in public, in many ways our coastal city was an oasis. Local feminists and lesbians created many women-only spaces where we could socialize, dance, share food, read poetry, do rituals and political work together, and even hug and hold hands in protected public and semi-public spaces.

I was one of many lesbians who were brave enough to “look like a dyke,” which meant having a short haircut (which was much less common for women in those days), combat boots, flannel shirts and a political t-shirt underneath, with a political button or two completing the look. Every week we went to a local bar that hosted a Women’s Night to dance and socialize. The first time I went to Women’s Night and saw all those strong and beautiful women, I knew I had found home. I danced unfettered, loose in my limbs and spirit, connecting with women on the dance floor by smiling, nodding, or imitating her moves for a few moments before moving on. I felt young, wild, free, and a sense of deep belonging.

The lesbian community at that time was steeped in views on political liberation. I quickly learned that to be a legitimate “out” lesbian, I had to learn to challenge all forms of oppression. Sexism, classism, racism, anti-Semitism, disability oppression, and ageism intertwine to prop up this unsustainable and life-killing system we call capitalism. In order to free myself as a woman, I needed to work towards everyone’s liberation. I embraced this perspective, while remaining firmly grounded in feminism as my home base.

In the intervening years I became active in the Women’s Land movement, creating and holding land in trust for women-only residency. I continued to be active in



the lesbian community and in advancing feminism, and also worked in various ways towards an end to racism and disability oppression, as well as reducing food insecurity. I also parented some kids with my transgender partner.

In my youth, I became lovers with a woman who was in the ROTC military program at our University. To protect her closeted status, I wore a paper bag over my head while attending a rally put on by the Lesbian and Gay Alliance. After the rally, I went into a nearby building, took off the bag, and cried. When she broke up with me, I vowed I would never go into the closet again. I was able to keep that vow for nearly four decades, but now things have changed and I am back in a new unexpected kind of closet. While I choose to speak out now, I write anonymously to protect myself. In my profession I work with and for trans people, and I would not feel safe continuing to do so if I was “out” with my radical feminist, gender critical views.

Many people think that the LGBTQ community is a cohesive one, and at times in the past that has been true. In the last 20 years, however, third-wave feminism has brought Queer Theory to the forefront, consequently shutting

down a women-led politically powerful dialogue. The trans movement is silencing people who openly question the efficacy of Queer Theory to address sexism. Horizontal hostility between queer people and radical feminists is disempowering our efforts to end oppression. Lesbians and lesbian voices are usually absent from so-called LGBTQ spaces, and unless we are lesbians who invite men into our circles, we are not usually welcome in these spaces that increasingly focus on Trans, Gender Queer, and Queer ideology.

Individual behavior in terms of gender expression does not change the overarching potency of cultural expectations that men are in a position of power over women. When a person switches from male to female gender expression (or vice versa), they are not subverting the dominant paradigm, they are merely switching roles. Even when people choose to be gender non-binary, the rest of the world goes on exploiting women for their labor. Much of women’s labor is unpaid, even in the US, where half the wealth of our nation’s economy is created by unpaid female reproductive labor.<sup>1</sup> Women are still targeted with sexual violence: we are at highest risk of rape between the ages of 12 and 26. (Let the reality of that number “12” sink in for a moment.) Women who are murdered are most likely to be killed by an intimate partner.<sup>2</sup> Gaining the legal right to vote, own property, and work for pay has not ended our status as oppressed on the basis of biological sex. With gratitude to those who have sacrificed for our advances, we still have a lot of work to do.

Today’s trans movement pits so-called “cisgendered” people against transgendered folks, which is not a true oppressed/oppressor dynamic as set forth in other civil rights movements. Brown and black bodies are exploited by white people for their labor. Women are exploited for their labor by men. Transgender people are oppressed, but not exploited for their labor in the same way that people of color or women have been traditionally exploited. “Cisgendered” people are not the oppressors; we are (potential) allies. When natal born females continue to be blatantly oppressed, to call us oppressors muddies clear thinking about who truly benefits from oppressive schemas.

The assertion that one can identify with a gender that “feels” right (as in, “I was identified as male at birth, but I really feel that I am a woman”) is a kind of gender essentialism. This position implies that natal females who identify as women are in align-



ment with the trappings of how women are “supposed to” behave and be treated by our dominant culture. I can assure you that there are many women who reject the ways that they are “supposed to” behave, and protest the ways that women are being treated by our culture. Being female does not mean you fit the cultural gender box, and failing to fit the female gender box does not make you something other than female.

Many young women who are not exposed to feminist thinking don’t know how to recognize or resist the oppressive aspects of being female in a misogynist society. Some of these young women are turning towards being trans or gender queer, unconsciously grasping at a strategy to sidestep living as a woman. They might be unconsciously asking themselves who would want to grow up in a system where you are expected to labor for free raising kids, while struggling to develop strategies to protect your sexual sovereignty?

When young people and children question their gender, we are not offering them a feminist perspective taking into account these pervasive cultural distress patterns. Instead, people are encouraged to transition, and parents are pressured into taking a “progressive” view towards gender identity; they are being pressured to give their children hormones before they go through puberty, and when they resist they are called trans-phobic and schooled on how to be a better “ally.” Therapists are trained to support gender queer and gender fluid identities without any exploration of sex roles within misogyny. The medicalization of gender identity profits pharmaceutical companies and surgeons, while medical treatments alter young people’s bodies permanently, before they have the maturity to understand the long-term consequences.

To be a good ally in this trans friendly climate includes a taboo on gender critical theory and discourse. The active silencing of dissenting voices verges on violence. Women who want to protect women-only space by excluding any body with a penis are being told that we are trans-phobic. There are memes

aplenty on social media that TERFs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists) should be literally killed, including this gem: “I’m not into mass murder but I’ll commit TERF genocide.”<sup>3</sup> Check out [terfisaslur.com](http://terfisaslur.com) to see more heart-racing violence against women, as well as public erasure of biological females’ authority to define “female.”

My feminist friends and I are genuinely afraid. People who publicly criticize the trans movement’s tactics as counterproductive to ending sexism are being condemned as “trans-phobic.” People have lost their social media accounts for being outspoken (Meghan Murphy); been threatened at public speaking events (Derrick Jensen); been de-platformed at national events where they were once welcome (Max Dashu). Countless others do not speak up for fear of losing their jobs. In this political climate, we are cautious about who we tell about female-only spaces, aware that our gatherings can be legally questioned. Gone are the days where a local bar hosts a “Women’s Night” as I once knew it. Venues where we choose to hold female-only gatherings have been threatened with fire and destruction. We have been physically harassed at dyke marches, including one elderly lesbian who had “TERF go home!” shouted in her ear through a bullhorn. Some of us have had our property vandalized, and slurs spray-painted on our homes. Reducing gender critical women to TERFs not only shuts down dialog, it creates a cycle of venom and conflict between people who could be natural allies.

We have no legal recourse. Our definition of women, or even female, does not fit the current legal definition. Currently, trans folk and trans advocates are defining “woman” and “feminist” even against objections from many women who also identify as feminists. Our right to self-identify (as women born and raised female) is being taken away from us. In the current climate, biology is no longer a consideration when it comes to gender, even though women are still oppressed *on the basis of our biology*.

Last week, I went to a women’s dance that welcomes trans women. As I moved around the dance floor, my body remembered the way I moved more than 35 years ago, but my energy can no longer reach out to every woman there. I do not want to dance with the women who lived as males and were raised with male privilege; I would gladly sit across a table in honest dialog, but that way does not seem open to me in this current climate. In order to honor myself, I draw my energy close to my body and I dance with myself; my safety net is no longer as large as the whole room. As I dance, I celebrate what I once had, and I grieve the loss of a room full of women where I am fully accepted. I don’t want to be stigmatized by my community, and I don’t feel like I fully belong here. I do have a few places I can go for female-raised-women-only spaces, and I hope and pray that they will continue to exist.

In spite of today’s climate, lesbians and natal females still have wisdom to share. We have healed in circles where our shared reality of growing up female is a source of strength, even though it also has painful aspects. Is it possible that we all could learn to really listen to each other with our hearts and souls engaged, using our enormous, socially developed brains, brains that evolved especially for the purpose of understanding each other? Is it too much to hope for that we could have empathy for each other as well? White allies have learned how to listen to brown and black people; men who are feminists have learned how to hear and understand how sexism affects women; people who know that anti-Semitism is a problem have learned to listen to Jewish people and join in being effective at stopping these kinds of hatred. I am well aware that we still have a lot of work to do in these areas. It remains that any constituency where we are successfully divided and pitted against each other allows the wealthy to assume more wealth, and the destroyers of the earth to continue to ravish in the name of greed. As a woman, a feminist, and a lesbian, I hope you have found a way to listen to my heart, and that my story inspires you to keep listening; we need ever deeper contemplation and right action in these times. I end this article in gratitude, and with a prayer that we all may find peace. 🌱

1. Crittenden, Anne. *The Price of Motherhood*. Picador Publishing, 2010.  
2. [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/07/homicides-women/534306](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/07/homicides-women/534306).  
3. [terfisaslur.com](http://terfisaslur.com).

# Hold Off on Romance When New to Community!



**Y**ou've just moved to an intentional community you're considering joining. Great!

And you're about to start a new sexual relationship there? My advice? **Wait!**

Yes, *don't* begin that alluring new romance yet. If you're at all serious in possibly later joining the group, wait a few months first. Take your time to get to know people in the community; assess their character, behavior, and reputation as they're assessing yours. If soon after arriving you jump into bed with someone you barely know, it's possible that folks may be so disappointed their interest in you as a potential new member will drop off sharply. Here's why.

## Why You Should Wait before Jumping into Bed

As soon as you begin a sexual relationship with someone the whole community will know it. The faster you get into a new romance the more it can lower your reputation. Aren't you the kind of person who *looks* before you leap?, they'll wonder. Or are you reckless and rash, or insecure and flattered by attention? What kind of judgment do you have? What kind of community member would you make?

If the first thing you do after arriving is to start a relationship, how serious could you be about the community itself? People won't know whether you're interested in joining because the group's values, mission, lifestyle, and goals are resonant with your own, and you're eager to help the community fulfill its

purpose and meet its goals, or whether you're just caught up in your hot new relationship.

Worse, your lover's reputation in the community will absolutely reflect on you. Did you just hook up with someone whom some of our members might consider "our community lonely guy," the man who hits on every new woman (or man) about your age who comes to the community? Does that mean you're lonely and indiscriminate too? Did you immediately get together with the woman some in the group might consider "a bit desperate," going after any new man (or woman) of your age? Please don't get tarred with the same brush as the community's possibly most lonely or desperate members.

And please don't get affiliated with someone even if they *do* have a great reputation in the group. Are you there for romance (that is, immediate romance), or to see whether you and the community are a good fit? Before jumping into a new relationship, take the time to first understand and appreciate the community traditions and norms and enter into its culture.

*Then* have the romance. Most people love to see happy love relationships, and in my opinion, given what you might call "the vibe ripple effect in community," happy couples in a group benefit *everybody*. So please know I'm not against romance; I'm against "too-fast, too-soon" romance for new people serious about joining the community.

This suggestion if you're new to the group to hold off for a few months is not absolute; it can certainly happen that you're



asked to join the community in spite of your immediate new relationship. But please be forewarned and proceed with caution. You've got plenty of time. And that person, if they're worth their salt, so to speak, will keep.

Earthaven member Lee Warren, writing in a guide for new community residents, puts it this way: "It is important...if you are exploring community membership, to approach the community as yourself rather than as a community member's partner or lover....Sometimes a new love affair can color an incoming person with the reputation and habits of the person who is already the member....Entering a relationship right away often adds more complexity to the process for both the incoming member...and the community. It might serve everyone if a love affair were postponed until you're more settled in."

She also advises, and I suggest this too, that when new to a community it's best to seek friends with your own gender first (or if gay or lesbian, with the other gender). The point being, enter into friendships that can help you learn more about the community and gain social support without offering any temptation for romance or possible misinterpretation by other community members.

### Which Needs Are Actually Being Met through Your New Romance?

Sometimes various universal human needs can be confused with one another. This can affect how we feel and what we do when we first arrive in community. And this can affect how we're seen by people who will later decide whether to welcome us as new members or not. Lee Warren describes it well:

"We've all been taught...we have basic needs for water, food, air, shelter and clothing. More recently, studies about violence, depression, and a variety of negative emotional and psychic states have shown that we [also] have deep needs for...touch, emotional intimacy and yes, sex. *I'd like to suggest that the acting out of inappropriate sexual behavior is often due to our repressed needs for touch, appreciation, encouragement, love, or healthy genital pleasure.* We act out mostly because we are suffering from a lack of these things, if not actually starving for them. [This] often causes us to start looking around for sex when what we really want is comfort, communication, understanding, or holding someone or being held...."

"We all generally want to feel loved, to be touched appropriate to our desires, to have someone to talk intimately with, and to have pleasurable sensual and sexual lives. It is up to us to learn how to distinguish among those needs, learn how to meet them ourselves, and how to engage others in meeting them with us. We all need to learn to get over our fear of being vulnerable and transcend our conditioning in order to create a language and [community] culture that is vital, thriving, and nourishing to ourselves and others."

I couldn't agree more. 🌸

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*Diana Leafé Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and webinars on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, an effective self-governance and decision-making method. She lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina.*



# How to Stop Climate Change and Never Be Lonely Again

By Alexis Zeigler

I made my first European friends when I was 19 years old. Zowie was then, and is now, a vivacious, creative, and compassionate soul. She listened patiently while I tried to sort out the meaning of a difficult teenage passage. She taught me a language—I thought it was British English—that I learned later was Zowenglish, her own much amused creation. Kari was a Norwegian I met in that time as well. Her nickname was “little fox,” and she could guide me—the redneck countryboy—through a forest at night at a steady gait. She is as wily and magical as any forest sprite could be. I met these people at an intentional community, and since that time I have lived in, and helped found, a few different “ICs.”

Now over 40 years later, the vast majority of the close friends I have made in this lifetime have been in ICs. In the context of modern industrial society where everyone moves around to maximize employment and housing options, we have become a society of strangers. The world of the IC is one where everyone knows everyone else. The culture of ICs tends to be much more relaxed, trusting, and socially interconnected than our isolated, industrial society. Even for those of us with less than stellar social skills, building a strong social network in the world of ICs is not hard.

ICs are also the most powerful environmental technology ever developed. If fact, ICs are the magic bullet that makes renewable energy work. (A previous article, “Community Makes Renewable Energy Work”—in *COMMUNITIES* #161, pp. 8-11, and *Wisdom of Communities* Volume 4, pp. 173-176—made this same case; this one attempts to develop it further.) While the mainstream environmental movement often ignores the laws of physics to play politics, the reality is that renewable energy systems need to be scaled and integrated at a village level in order to work really well. Employing renewable energy on a village scale is the only effective way we can address climate change and the other environmental impacts brought on by the relentless growth of the industrial/consumer society. And, oddly enough, village-scale living is also the most effective cure for loneliness and isolation.

If you study much anthropology, you come to realize that, before the industrial age, everyone lived in a village or band. For all of human history, our lives were interwoven though a vast kinship network. The phrase from a study of !Kung gatherers in southern Africa rings through my mind: “loneliness and isolation are unendurable to them.” The single most powerful social sanction any village- or band-level society could impose upon any egregious outlaw was social ostracism.

In modern times, we ostracize ourselves. People move from one job to another. Some carry a family along, but many millions of people now live in private apartments. Nothing could be further from our true “human nature.” But by earning good (one hopes) wages and living alone, or even with just a family in a suburban home, the average citizen of modern industrial society is doing precisely what that society has defined as socially acceptable behavior—achieving “success.” The symbolic social acceptance achieved by monetary “success” is far more compelling to many people than the actual social connections that can be made in more intimate communities.

Symbolic “success” in modern industrial society is a terrible lie. You see it with the vast numbers of people who “fall through the cracks” of modern social networks: the socially awkward who are unable to negotiate the maze of problems imposed by our segmented society; those who get sick, or just get fired, and everything falls apart. The social networks that can be built in intentional community are far deeper, more enduring, more reliable in times of sickness and need, than petty tokens of social status. The social “safety

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**The intentional communities I studied ranked from nine percent up to about 60 percent of the US average for per capita energy use. Sharing matters; it matters a lot.**

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*This and following photos: practical climate activism at Living Energy Farm, Louisa, Virginia.*



net” is incomparable. An older woman, a friend of mine, died recently in the intentional community I first joined so many years ago. She was conscientious, helpful, a good friend to have, though not exceptionally charismatic. She lived many years in an IC. As she was nearing the end of her time, she was put under hospice care. The hospice nurses asked if she was famous. They had never seen so many visitors and well-wishers for an ordinary person.

Want to “save the Earth?” Want to live your life surrounding by a supportive and engaged group of friends and co-conspirators? Want to make it much, much easier to find a life partner? The answer to all of these questions lies in shifting our focus from private consumerism to intentional community.

### Politics, Climate Change, and the Laws of Physics

Empowered, sustainable communities are the antidote to isolation. And they are the pivotal technology that makes renewable energy actually renewable. Even as a teenager, absorbed as I was with the out-of-control frock of a precious young Brit, it was clear back then that the level of conservation achievable in a community setting is very different from anything that is possible in industrial society. One machine, be it a tractor or a washing machine, could serve the needs of many people. Likewise, the skills of any individual, be they herbalist or mechanic (we had one

of the former, a few of the latter), serve the needs of many.

Some years after I found my first IC, I began the process of trying to quantify my impressions. Intentional communities in the US and globally are diverse—some are downright peculiar, and some are no more than aspirations—but there is enough of a movement that their impacts can be quantified. I began collecting the energy bills of ICs, and also of a number of my environmentally-minded friends and acquaintances who live in urban areas of the United States. I set three years as the study period, and analyzed residential energy use only. After standardizing the units and comparing head-to-head, the results were shocking. If one takes the energy use of the average American and sets that as 100 percent, my environmentally-minded associates ranged from 80 percent to 140 percent energy use, with the average around 120 percent.

How could that be? Well, bricks and mortar matter more than ideology. Turns out a slob in an apartment in Manhattan or Chicago uses less energy than a saint in a free-standing house because the apartment has other climate-stabilized apartments around it and the house has moving air around it. Equally surprising was energy use in community. For this analysis, I included firewood and homegrown energy, as well as electricity and petroleum fuels. The communities ranked from nine percent up to about 60 percent of the US average for per capita energy use. Wow. Sharing matters; it matters a lot.

Many of our modern environmental groups put out goals about reducing energy use and carbon output by various arbitrary goals: 50 percent by 2050, etc. Theoretically, so they say, we are going to achieve such goals by ignoring how society is organized, and adding some solar panels and windmills. Well, there were a couple of communities in my study that had reduced energy use by 90 percent or more based on a capital investment of less than \$15,000 US per capita. That would be a miracle, if our environmental leadership cared to notice.

Why are communities so efficient? There are a few reasons.

#### 1) Context

The first is context—what gets built and where. Modern housing in mainstream America is patterned after imitations of European royalty. As such, the mansion on the mountaintop may be a symbol of status, but it is an environmental disaster. If you are driving to work, driving to pick up the kids, driving to go shopping, coming home to shovel “homegrown” firewood into a boiler, and then eating convenient food that was industrially produced, there is nothing you can add to that scenario that will make it more “environmental.” It’s the wrong thing in the wrong place. And when you get fired? You’re alone.



In an IC, the physical infrastructure is built based on need and proximity. Never in my life have I been dependent on a car. I have been months at a time without getting into one. My wife and our two children live in an IC in a rural area, and we still don't own a car. We have invested in some good bicycles. Food, employment, and entertainment are all within walking or biking distance.

Shared use is the magical “technology” that makes renewable energy effective. Solar hot water is an exceedingly simple technology, though a little more complex in temperate and cold climates than in tropical ones. Our climate is temperate, so we need good equipment to take a solar-powered hot shower in the middle of winter. If you tried to pay for such a system for a single-person apartment or condominium, it could cost a few thousand dollars for just one person. In the company of others, the per capita cost drops to hundreds of dollars for effective, durable equipment that can generate hot water for decades with no monthly energy bills.

The advantage of fossil fuel is that it is concentrated and portable. That allows us to make small, cheap, powerful machines. Renewable energy by comparison is dispersed and intermittent. Cooperative use allows for—indeed, the economics strongly support—the installation of durable, effective renewable energy systems that compensate for the intermittent nature of renewable energy. Given more users, it is wise to invest in better renewable equipment that is village-scaled. In a village, the use of energy is near the source of energy. Energy systems can be scaled and integrated in a manner that provides a high level of comfort and a tiny fraction of the environmental cost compared to our segmented, industrial society.

## 2) Conservation

The varied and flexible use in community compensates, to a large degree, for intermittency of renewable energy. Housing is a clear example. Housing that serves as a status symbol gets larger and larger, and is supposed to be as ostentatious as possible. The average residential square footage per capita in the US is about four times what it was in the WWII era. (Commercial space is 10 times!) But if people share space, the laws of economics and physics support good insulation. Four squares (of whatever size) joined together to make one big square have just as much square footage and half the surface area. Wrap the outside of that larger square in a highly insulating material (my preference is straw bales, but many other methods work), and you have highly insulated community buildings.

It is always cheaper to save energy than to generate energy. For the average American house, a stunning 98 percent of the energy the house uses over its lifespan is spent

post-construction. If only a tiny fraction of the cost of that 98 percent were invested in insulation and other conservationist measures, then total energy/resource use would be dramatically reduced. Why don't we? Because greed and ostentatious display is “human nature,” so we are told. That is the other strength of community. With one's identity invested in a real social network, people no longer seek symbols of display. The need for a massive private house and accoutrements simply goes away. Not only that, but the economics shift. Buying a lawnmower for your own small private house? Something cheap and crummy will do. Buying a machine that a number of people are going to share? You want something better, sturdier, made to last and be repaired, something more efficient as it will be used intensively.

## 3) Making Renewable Energy Actually Renewable

In the US, our environmental leadership ignores the laws of physics to play politics. It is difficult to challenge consumer society. So instead of doing that, our leadership focuses on “renewable” energy production. A few books have been written about why that does not work. (See Ted Trainer, Ozzie Zehner, Alexis Zeigler.)

The industrial consumer society has a voracious appetite for energy and resources. It is no coincidence that using more resources, however wastefully, supports a greater flow of money and material



through our industrial economy. Waste = profit. That is a theft from our children of mind-boggling proportions. We are loath to admit that our values and beliefs are heavily impacted by crude economic facts, but alas, they are. We are not innately greedy, but our current economy is. Trying to energize that voracious machine with “renewable” energy is at best futile. At worst, it simply adds to the ecological footprint of industrialism as we try to create “renewable” energy systems on an enormous scale.

About 10 years ago, my wife and I decided to start a new community, a prototype that would operate without fossil fuel, and be supported entirely by renewable energy. It has been built at modest cost so it can be widely replicated. We call it Living Energy Farm (LEF), and though we continue to improve the various tools we need to support the community, it is operational. When we first started LEF, we set up a cabin and an outdoor kitchen to support the various members and volunteers working on the project. We put a hand pump (a good quality one) in a small creek to supplement rainwater for washing and solar showers. On a dry summer day, it would take four people working hard for about four hours to fill our storage tank. Then we installed a small photovoltaic (PV) powered pump, a simple little 100 watt affair powering an old piston pump. That little pump could just thump along, and do more work than those four people.

When you try to support modern, spacious, badly insulated homes with “renewable” energy, the results are frustrating (or very expensive). When your goal is to do the work one actually needs to live in a sustainable village, renewable energy become a miraculous and powerful energy source. At LEF, our energy needs are about two percent of that average American demand. Our energy systems are integrated so one set of PV panels can run literally dozens of motors. We have built a unique “DC microgrid” that is unlike any other community of which we are aware. (See [livingenergyfarm.org](http://livingenergyfarm.org) for more detail.) Community context, good insulation, and an integration of systems mean we are fully energy efficient with a very modest energy supply. And our members support each other, physically, mentally, socially.

### A Better Way to Live

For many people, work is drudgery. In my now 40 years of community living, I have never had a “real job,” because mostly “real” jobs are a horrific offense to the human body and psyche. Even something as benign as sitting at a computer becomes offensive to the human body if you do it all day, every day. Heavy lifting? Working with unhealthy chemicals in construction or mechanics? These things I do sometimes, and it would be horrific to do them all day every day.

Certainly, applying the term “utopia” to any intentional community is foolish, but there are many ways in which community living is much, much better than having a private job, house, car, and life. For all of my adult life, I have never had to do an oner-



ous job on a continuous basis. I have—as does everyone who lives in an IC—a great deal of choice in what kind of work I do, and when I do it. Work some, play some. Decide at the last minute to take the day off and take the kids for an adventure in the woods. Not infrequently, I respond to mechanical emergencies, but that is part of the interdependence of community. Each person gets to choose what they are good at, and is responsible to the group for fulfilling their roles so the community as a whole can continue to function.

Not all work is joyful, and not all people are industrious. While the image of people joyfully going about their daily work for the benefit of the community may be appealing, the reality is that a lot of cajoling is often involved. Motivating people, getting a community of people to focus on a task that really needs to be done—these things don’t happen without effort. Some communities resort to various forms of cheerleading or offering incentives to get people to focus on needed activities. Most people in community, left to their own devices, will drift away from income-earning activities or business management. Even in populous communities where there is no absolute shortage of labor, there is almost always an ongoing struggle to find enough management. While the inherent efficiency of community theoretically means that people could work a lot less, the lack of focus on efficiency or efficacy means people often simply fill a full-time work schedule, whether or not they are actually achieving all that much. In the end, the work gets done, but with a lot more effort than utopian writers have imagined.

Drug and alcohol abuse can have a different impact in community than they have in “mainstream” society. Private houses may isolate people, but they also insulate people from each other’s bad habits. At worst, a sociable but drug-addicted group of people can start to drive the sober people out of a community. These things are usually worked out over time, but not without some stress and conflict. Some communities have more of a “party culture” than others. I have spent quite a bit of time trying to help people who are marginalized for one reason or another. It has been a hard lesson to learn, but the most important ingredient that empow-



ers compassion in community is a good expulsion process. A group that knows it can effectively set limits on people's behavior or expel them if need be is able to admit a greater diversity of people. A group without such clear limits is more likely to evolve towards unfair discrimination.

Communities shine their brightest when supporting people with physical ailments. Then the support system allows people who would otherwise end up poor, isolated, and degraded to go on living full lives. Mental health issues are more challenging. Community can be a healing environment, and many people undergoing deep personal transitions are attracted to community for that reason. But in community, one person having a personal crisis can have significant impacts on everyone around them. I have seen dozens of people heal and transform in community, young people who blossom in unimaginable ways. I have seen others rejected, judged, and degraded.

Communities are more environmental by design, but not everyone who lives in community actually cares about that, or about anything else in particular. That is perhaps where modern intentional communities, getting their population from progressive urban centers, differ from traditional villages. While modern progressives are more tolerant of diversity, they are not taught a sense of community responsibility. While "tribal" is often used in derogatory terms, nothing would benefit modern ICs more than a greater sense of tribal unity. In an Amish village, if someone's house catches on fire, everyone will come over and try to be involved if they can. If a building catches on fire in a modern IC, some people will sit in their room and "let the fire department deal with it." Likewise a more metaphorical "fire," a crisis of need in your circle of friends, may not get adequate attention from others who don't want to deal with it.

Some communities are fully economically self-sufficient, operating their own cooperatively owned businesses. Some communities still rely on a lot of "outside work" at paid jobs in the regular economy. The latter situation is harder to maintain in the long run as it pulls people's attentions and loyalties away from the community. LEF is a very small community, and we are eco-



nomically self-sufficient, largely food self-sufficient, and energy self-sufficient. Growing our own food is some work, but the rewards are delightful. The modern commercial food system is based more on addiction than nutrition. We have found growing our own staple foods, including grains, fruits, nuts, and vegetables, to be tremendously rewarding.

Most non-religious communities are operated either by consensus or by some form of highly participatory democracy. At this point, having lived in community for many years, I think there is a bit of deception built into community decision-making processes. Modern industrial society encourages narcissism because that attribute more than any other supports consumerism. It is not coincidence that the level of control an organization has over people corresponds with how much decision-making power the members of that organization are presumed to have. You will not see any consensus meetings in the military, and business is consistently driven by economic coercion. Communities, lacking means of coercion or control, presume to give all members a high level of involvement in community decisions.

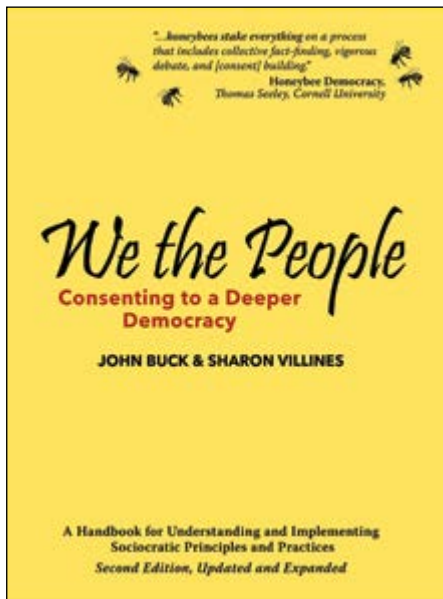
With a set of strong, shared goals, that would work. Given that such is often lacking, many "consensus" organizations operate by benign (one hopes) bureaucratic oligarchy. The most important decisions are made quietly by people in positions to make them, and then the populace spends a great deal of energy arguing over far less impactful decisions. This, sadly, also describes many of the presumed "democratic" institutions in the world at large. Keeping real power out of people's hands while letting the masses quibble over trivialities is something most large organizations and governments aspire to accomplish. As with many issues, life in community mirrors life in the larger world, except the mirror is see-through.

Having seen as many victories and defeats as I have in the world of community living, I hold no illusions about the strengths and weaknesses. I have never lived alone, and I cannot imagine why I would ever want to. In younger days, I wanted to flirt and socialize and party some. Now I mostly just want to try to leave a better world for my children. I am deeply dismayed by our modern environmental leadership who chooses to ignore the powerful solutions right under our noses while offering palliatives to consumer addiction. We have the answers, and they involve embracing our true human selves. We did not evolve as humans in apartment blocks. We evolved in villages and bands where people knew each other, stood beside each other to embrace a fundamental loyalty to the well-being of all, regardless of the conflicts of the moment. The Sacred Earth on which we live demands that we reclaim our true selves. And it is a profound joy to do so. 🌱

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*Alexis Zeigler was raised on a self-sufficient farm in Georgia. He has lived all of his adult life in intentional community. He has worked as a green builder, environmental activist, and author. His book Integrated Activism explores the connections between ecological change, politics, and cultural evolution.*





# We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy

By John Buck and Sharon Villines

A Handbook for Understanding and Implementing Sociocratic Principles and Methods

Second Edition, Updated and Expanded  
Sociocracy.info, Washington DC, 2017, 344 pages.

It was great news for me when the newly updated and expanded version of the Sociocracy book, *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*, was published by authors John Buck and Sharon Villines. I studied the first edition extensively, and this new second edition does seem more engaging than the first one. It was a pleasure to read.

John Buck brought Sociocracy to the English-speaking world by translating Sociocracy texts from the Dutch. Sharon Villines is a long-time resident of Takoma Park Cohousing and retired college professor. Since the publication of their first edition in 2000, Sociocracy has increasingly been used as a self-governance and management system worldwide, including more recently by some intentional communities too.

This new edition has deepened and broadened my understanding of Sociocracy. Here are two of its clear, concise definitions:

*“A method of governance that gives people the power to consent and object to the conditions under which they live and work.”*

*“A unique combination of values, social theory, and scientific method that produces harmonious, respectful, self-organizing and self-correcting organizations.”*

I appreciated their exploration the growth of Sociocratic ideas from by 19th-century French philosopher August Comte finally to Dutch electrical engineer Gerard Endenburg, who in the 1970s de-

veloped the form of Sociocracy used today. And I learned from their explanation of how Endenburg was influenced in this process by cybernetics and the principles of self-organizing systems—which they describe in depth. More benefits include sample Bylaws of organizations using Sociocracy as an LLC or nonprofit, and a glossary of Sociocracy terms. I loved the short article by Gerard Endenburg on how and why he developed Sociocracy. All of this was helpful and inspiring.

However, I recommend *We the People* for community-interested readers who are already familiar with Sociocracy or already use it in their group, rather than newcomers to the process. For one thing, the book appears to be written exclusively for businesses, and nonprofits managed like businesses. I think community people would need to understand Sociocracy already in order to translate this business application to an intentional community context. I also think people new to Sociocracy could be confused because how Sociocracy works in practice is described in different ways in different parts of the book, and some of these ways contradict each other, or contradict how John Buck usually teaches this method. For example, chapters in the how-to part of the book are different in some ways from descriptions of the same processes in the “Short Guides” section of brief one- and two-page instructions in the appendices.

A few years ago John Buck told me that *We the People* (referring to the first edition) was not written so that people could learn and then apply Sociocracy in their organization, but to motivate readers to become interested in the method and engage a So-

ciocracy consultant.

The authors say this too, using the sub-head, “Principles, not Recipes,” in the introduction to the section of Short Guides. They go on to say the Guides are not prescriptive and “may be changed, modified, and sometimes ignored as long as the result achieves the purposes of the...principles.” This is another reason I recommend this book to communitarians who already know Sociocracy well. Other Sociocracy trainers and I who teach intentional communities have often found that changing and modifying Sociocracy tends to not work well in communities.

I hope to see a third book on Sociocracy with three aspects: a suggested clear, step-by-step way to use it, success stories of communities using it effectively, and cautionary tales about communities that had problems and how they resolved them. A Sociocracy trainer colleague, John Schinnerer, may soon publish a brief and straightforward how-to guide, called something like “A Concise Guide to Sociocracy.” I’m also writing a book on how Sociocracy can be learned easily and practiced effectively, though specifically in intentional communities.

In any case, in my view *We the People, Second Edition* is another valuable resource for those who know Sociocracy already and want to learn more. 🍷

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*Diana Leafe Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, teaches Sociocracy in the US and internationally through webinars and workshops, and is currently finishing her book on Sociocracy for intentional communities. See [www.DianaLeafeChristian.org](http://www.DianaLeafeChristian.org).*



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**DANCING RABBIT ECOVILLAGE** is an intentional community and educational non-profit focused on living, researching, and demonstrating sustainable living possibilities. We live, work and play on 280 acres of lovely rolling prairie in Northeast Missouri, and welcome new members to join us in creating a vibrant community and cooperative culture! Together we're living abundant and fulfilling low-carbon lives. We use renewable energy, practice organic agriculture, share vehicles, utilize natural and green building techniques, share some common infrastructure, and make our own fun. Come live lightly with us, and be part of the solution! [www.dancingrabbit.org](http://www.dancingrabbit.org) or 660-883-5511 or [dancingrabbit@ic.org](mailto:dancingrabbit@ic.org).

**THE VALLEY OF LIGHT** is a community of cultural creatives that rests along the New River in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. With over \$2 million invested, our 22-acre campus is debt-free and includes 3 homes, 8 building pads, campground, barn, garden, "Peace Pentagon" conference and community center, and other amenities. We share our campus with The Oracle Institute, a charity that operates a spirituality school, award-winning press, and peacebuilding practice. We seek co-founding members in five Paths: Native (farmers and landscapers); Scientist (we love geeks!); Artisan (artists and builders); Peacemaker (teachers and activists); Oracle (spiritual students). Please visit [www.TheOracleInstitute.org/about-our-community](http://www.TheOracleInstitute.org/about-our-community) & [PeacePentagon.net](http://PeacePentagon.net). Contact [Katie@TheOracleInstitute.org](mailto:Katie@TheOracleInstitute.org).

**DURHAM, NC 55+ COHOUSING VILLAGE HEARTH COHOUSING** welcomes LGBTs, straight friends, and allies. Building 28 accessible, energy-efficient homes clustered on 15 beautiful acres. Only a few left. Construction started November 2018 in culturally vibrant progressive Durham for move-in late 2019. Join us now! [www.VillageHearthCohousing.com](http://www.VillageHearthCohousing.com)

**ROCKY CORNER COHOUSING, THE FIRST IN CONNECTICUT!** Here is what makes us unique: We are the first cohousing in southern New England, the closest to NYC. We are 5 miles from the small vibrant city of New Haven where political action and fine arts are thriving. We have been using sociocracy as our governance and decision-making model since 2012. We use permaculture principles to decide how to use our land. Neighbors can garden and farm together as much or as little as they want. We will own our individual energy-efficient homes and co-own organic farmland and a beautiful common house. Here are some of our values: We strive to create a neighborhood that is supportive and inspiring for individuals and families. We support people of all ages to enter, stay and participate in the community throughout their lives. We value our children as members of the community encouraging their participation and leadership. We work cooperatively for mutual benefit. The community promotes the physical and emotional health, safety and security of our members and guests. We make space in our lives for play and artistic expression. We encourage continual learning, skill sharing and teaching. We consider the Rocky Corner community, the wider human community and the health of the Earth when making decisions and choices. Does this speak to you? We have Affordable and market-rate homes for sale that will be ready to occupy in spring 2019. Construction has started. Come join us now! Find out more at [www.rockycorner.org](http://www.rockycorner.org).

**COWEETA HERITAGE CENTER AND TALKING ROCK FARM** are located in the mountains of Western North Carolina in a beautiful and diverse temperate rainforest. CHC is looking for others who would like to join together to form an Intentional Community embracing the principles of Voluntary Simplicity and Healing the Earth and Each Other. Simply put, we wish "to live simply so that others may simply live." It is a recognition that nature



Caddis PC has been designing cohousing, cooperatives, and eco-village communities, both nationally and internationally, for more than a decade. We take a highly adaptive approach to strategy and design: catering our services to your needs.



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**"Your workshop was fantastic! You are a master at taking complex Sociocracy material and making it simple."**

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**"You're a sparking trainer and a joy to work with. LA Eco-Village was energized for a year following your workshop."**

—Lois Arkin, Los Angeles Eco-Village

**"I was riveted! You hit the fundamental, untold truths about cohousing and decision-making."**

—Mark Westcombe, Forge Bank Cohousing, Lancaster, UK

**"Quite simply the finest workshop I've ever attended. You quickly cut to the chase, providing hours of practical answers about Sociocracy."**

—Denis Gay, Champlain Valley Cohousing, VT

**"I don't think I ever learned so much in such a short time."**

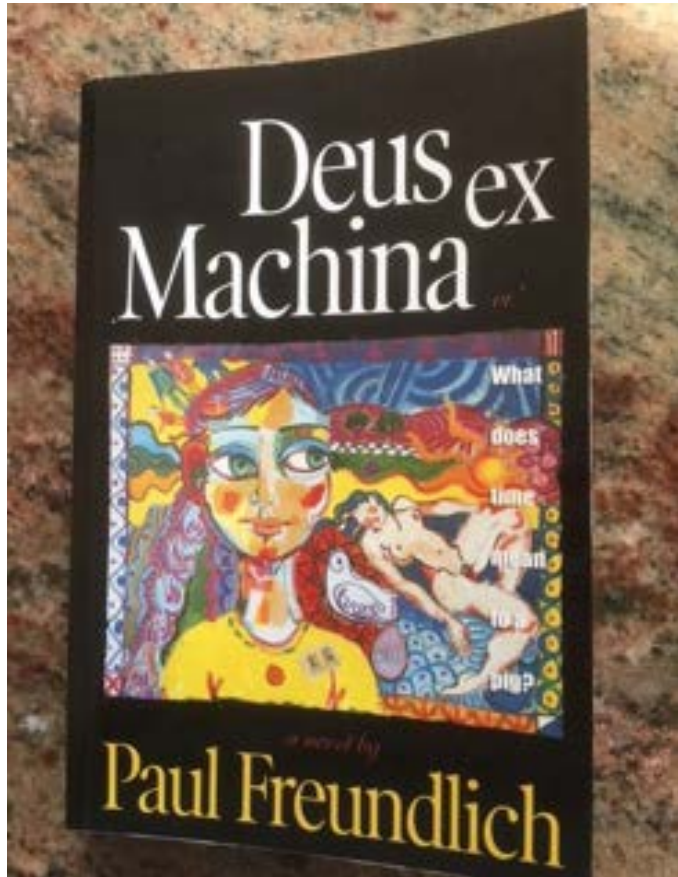
—Susanna Michaelis, Pacific Gardens Cohousing, British Columbia



[diana@ic.org](mailto:diana@ic.org)  
[www.DianaLeafeChristian.org](http://www.DianaLeafeChristian.org)

November, 1963. In the middle of the Pentagon's grey corridors, the inner courtyard is a green haven for civilians and military on their lunch break. On a crisp fall day, an attractive young matron waves to her naval lieutenant husband. It is 12:15 pm, and Kay has nothing on her mind except the small picnic basket she has brought. Along with the rest of the United States, she is oblivious to preparations in a Dallas office building, perhaps on a nearby grassy knoll, which at this moment remain suspended in time, subject to intervention and choice, if...

## ***If we only knew then what we know now...***



Plunked down in the middle of the 20th century, reverted to his childhood body, but his memory intact, Joshua Leyden takes a run at revising his own life, and changing a future that needs some tinkering.

**“Held me every step of the way. A great read, challenging ideas, fascinating and seductive.”**  
– David Kahn, Harvard Faculty.

Consider two trains heading in opposite directions, but stopped in a station. While the trains wait, it is possible to change between them. Transferring passengers would then head down their own timelines, reviewing past images incrementally. So it is with memories. So it is with dreams.

**“Wonderful, touching characters, reworking our fate.”** – Hazel Henderson, Economist.

*Each night, the sun went down, Nora to bed, and Josh prowled around her soul, searching for a key to unlock their mystery. While Nora slept beyond a narrow wall, Josh fought the need to break on through to the other side – replaying every mistake he'd ever made in either life. Rising, hitting the brandy, writing in a notebook lest the typewriter wake the girl. He couldn't even feel sorry for himself when he knew Nora had it far worse.*

***It's about time: A love story, both provocative and playful...***

Paul Freundlich, Founder of Green America and Dance New England; for a decade an Editor of “Communities”; filmmaker, essayist and activist has created a journey that transcends time and reworks reality.

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provides us with valuable services and resources that we can use to enrich our lives. Utilizing local resources, appropriate technology, and working cooperatively, we can discover creative ways to meet our needs as "directly and simply as possible." Come join Coweeta and learn how to live lightly on the land and enjoy the Earth's bounty! Contact Coweeta for more info or to schedule a visit!! Contact Paul at [coweeta@gmail.com](mailto:coweeta@gmail.com).

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## COMMUNITIES FORMING

**RALSTON CREEK COHOUSING ARVADA CO** - Imagine an energetic group of eclectic families who value treading lightly on the land. They come together near Old Town to design a vibrant common house and 20 private dwellings. Envision a modern three story building with an outdoor courtyard in a rural setting with urban amenities. What if this whole urban village called Geos was powered by solar and ground source energy (net zero), had a community garden and a view of the mountains. Picture being near a creekside bike path with 300 days of sunshine. It heads to both the light rail and open space parks. You unplug your electric car, hop onto I-70 to ski and come home to relax with a glass of wine and dinner with friends. [www.ralstoncreekcohousing.org](http://www.ralstoncreekcohousing.org)

## LAND, HOUSES, AND REAL ESTATE

**NEW JERSEY SUMMER CABIN FOR SALE.** 500SF on 21 acres with field, pond, woods. Join land-based cooperative shared by 9 households. 60 miles from NYC. Ruth: [spikydoc3@gmail.com](mailto:spikydoc3@gmail.com)

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## SERVICES/OPPORTUNITIES

**FITCH ARCHITECTURE & COMMUNITY DESIGN** is internationally recognized as one of the most experienced firms in cohousing programming and design. Working with over two dozen communities across North America, we have evolved an effective and enjoyable participatory process. Laura Fitch is a resident of Pioneer Valley Cohousing in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her experience as a member helps her to understand the issues facing other cohousing groups and gives her unique insight into the group dynamics that affect the design process. Laura served on the Cohousing Association of the US board for five years and regularly leads workshops at their conferences. Contact her at 413-549-5799 or [www.facdarchitects.com](http://www.facdarchitects.com).

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Since 1942, we have welcomed and shared with anyone and everyone regardless of race or anything else that divides people. We have a rich history, from the Jordans and the Englands founding the farm, to the bullets, bombs, and boycotts of the mid century, to the birth of Habitat for Humanity, and other ministries.

**Want to join us for lunch and a tour, stay a few days for some rest, or work alongside the community during our busy season?** Call or register at [koinoniafarm.org/visit-koinonia/](http://koinoniafarm.org/visit-koinonia/).

**We also have three internship terms—spring, summer, and fall.** Live, work, and learn alongside the Koinonia community. [koinoniafarm.org/internship](http://koinoniafarm.org/internship).

**And don't forget to shop in our new online farm store—[koinoniafarmstore.com](http://koinoniafarmstore.com).** Biologically grown Pecans, Fair Trade Chocolate and plenty of great gifts!

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**Y'ALL  
COME!**





## The Valley of Light A Community for Cultural Creatives

Seeking Farmers, Builders, Techies, Artists, and Activists

The Valley of Light is located along the New River in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. With over \$2 million invested, our 22-acre campus is debt-free and includes 3 homes, 8 building pads, vegetable garden, barn, chickens & goats, campground, trails, labyrinth, kiva, medicine wheel, and many other amenities. We share our campus with **The Oracle Institute**, an educational charity that operates a spirituality school, award-winning press, and peacebuilding practice.

Become a Founding Member of our Evolving Campus

One of our founders manages the **Peace Pentagon**, where we hold retreats and our community meetings. Another founder created **Manna**, an alternate currency for social good. We are seeking more social architects involved in progressive and cutting-edge movements!



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[www.PeacePentagon.net](http://www.PeacePentagon.net)  
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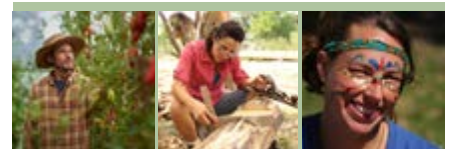


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 276-773-3308



**COME LEARN HOW TO LIVE LIGHTLY,  
AND BE PART OF THE SOLUTION!**

Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is an intentional community and educational non-profit focused on living, researching, and demonstrating sustainable living possibilities.



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FOUNDATION FOR  
 INTENTIONAL  
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You can help the Foundation for Intentional Community support & promote the development of intentional communities!

**JOIN AS A MEMBER** - Membership provides financial support for our core programs - Communities Directory, Magazine, & Bookstore. Membership options for Individuals, Communities, & Organizations. Benefits include access to all past magazine issues & discounts on advertising, subscriptions, & purchases!

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**SHARE AND LEARN** - FIC's mission is centered around the sharing of information & resources on cooperative living. Explore our worldwide communities directory & visit our bookstore!

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 to build the pathway to a more sustainable & just world.

For more information contact Carrie Rasmussen,  
 Development Director at [development@ic.org](mailto:development@ic.org)



**THE ECOVILLAGE INSTITUTE** – Want to learn about Organic Farming and Communities? We are offering Organic Farming Internships from May to October. All our programs take place at the heart of our community, La Cite Ecologique of New Hampshire. Learn more at [www.citeecologiquenh.org](http://www.citeecologiquenh.org) or email [info@citeecologiquenh.org](mailto:info@citeecologiquenh.org).

**LIVE-IN OPENINGS: THE LUKAS COMMUNITY** seeks compassionate, hard working folks (with or without children) to live with and help care for developmentally challenged residents in extended-family homes and participate in therapeutic programs. Gardens, crafts, animals, expeditions, music, art. Send resume and cover letter to Kristen Stanton, [lukas@lukascommunity.org](mailto:lukas@lukascommunity.org).

**MORNINGLAND COMMUNITY IS OFFERING A FEW SPRING/SUMMER WORK/STUDY OPPORTUNITIES** for those interested in deepening their meditation practice to include contemplative service, puja + study of Bhagavad-Gita + spiritual astrology. Some co-housing available. Our community is offline, digitally unplugged, and a great place to catch your breath. Call 562.433.9906 for more information and to apply. "Simple living and high thinking" – Yogananda. 2600 E. 7th St, Long Beach, CA 90804.

**INNISFREE VILLAGE IS SEEKING ONE-YEAR RESIDENTIAL CAREGIVERS** to live, work and play in community with 40 adults with disabilities. Experience the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains on our 550-acre farm in Crozet, VA and build lifelong friendships and memories. Together we bake bread, weave scarves, raise chickens and lifeshare! For more information, visit [www.innisfreevillage.org](http://www.innisfreevillage.org)/volunteer or email [nancy@innisfreevillage.org](mailto:nancy@innisfreevillage.org).

**FREE NATURAL BUILDING INTERNSHIP IN MOAB, UT!** Join us for our five-month internship, where 16 interns will work together under natural building instructors to build two straw bale homes from foundation to finish. Homes are built for low and very-low income residents of the community. Housing and food stipend provided! Seasonal internship dates are typically February 1st – June 30th, and July 15th – December 15th. Contact us directly at [coordinator@communityrebuilds.org](mailto:coordinator@communityrebuilds.org) or (435) 260-0501. More info at [www.communityrebuilds.org](http://www.communityrebuilds.org)

## PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEBSITES, WORKSHOPS

**TOP-RATED, ONLINE PERMACULTURE DESIGN COURSE.** For 10 bucks! Permaville Course. See: [www.udemy.com/permaville-course/?couponCode=UDEMYPDC](http://www.udemy.com/permaville-course/?couponCode=UDEMYPDC)

**PARENTING: YOU LEFT THE "WAYS OF WORLD" FOR A BETTER FUTURE...** but ever wondered what needs done to prevent them from re-emerging in your family or community? "The tiniest, biggest, and most uncommon book on parenting" contains fresh perspectives to address this dilemma. Learn more at [www.bluestarway.com/parenting](http://www.bluestarway.com/parenting)

**WISDOM OF COMMUNITIES** – SINCE 1972, Communities magazine has been collecting and disseminating the lessons learned, and now we've distilled them into a four-volume book series on the following topics: Starting a Community, Finding a Community, Communication in Community, and Sustainability in Community. With over 300 pages each of hundreds of our best articles, this series is intended to aid community founders, seekers, current communitarians, students, and researchers alike in their explorations. Available in print and digital format: [www.ic.org/wisdom](http://www.ic.org/wisdom)



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**SAGEWOMAN** magazine, celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman, still going strong after 30 years. **WITCHES&PAGANS** magazine covers Pagan, Wiccan, Heathen and Polytheist people, places, and practice. 88 pages, print or digital (PDF). Mention this Communities ad for a free sample. 503-430-8817, P O Box 687, Forest Grove, OR, 97116. [www.bbimedia.com](http://www.bbimedia.com).

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA-CENTER FOR COMMUNAL STUDIES (CCS)** - The Center for Communal Studies (CCS) was created in 1976 as a clearinghouse for information and a research resource on communal groups worldwide, past and present. Located on the campus of the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, the Center encourages scholarship, meetings, public understanding and learning about historic and contemporary intentional communities. **ARCHIVAL RESEARCH COLLECTION:** We invite researchers to use the Center's Collection of primary and secondary materials on more than 500 historic and contemporary communes. Our Collection is housed at Rice Library and has over 10,000 images and a reading room with an extensive library. Online resources may be found at [www.usi.edu/library/university-archives-and-special-collections](http://www.usi.edu/library/university-archives-and-special-collections). Email the archivist at [jagreene@usi.edu](mailto:jagreene@usi.edu) for information. **REGIONAL RESEARCH:** The CCS is part of a rich array of historic communal resources within a 30-mile radius of Evansville that includes the famous Harmonist and Owenite village of New Harmony. New Harmony's Workingmen's Institute Library and the State Museum collection also offer unique research opportunities. **PROGRAMS:** The CCS sponsors lectures, conferences and exhibits. The Center will sponsor a Communal Studies Minor in the USI College of Liberal Arts beginning fall 2019. **WEBSITE:** The CCS website ([www.usi.edu/liberal-arts/communal-center](http://www.usi.edu/liberal-arts/communal-center)) serves scholars, students and the interested public. **CENTER PRIZES AND RESEARCH TRAVEL GRANT:** The CCS annually awards a Prize of \$250 for the Best Undergraduate Student Paper on historic or contemporary communal groups, intentional communities, and utopias. Deadline for submission is 1 March. The Center also annually awards a \$2,000 Research Travel Grant to fund research in the Communal Studies Collection. Applications are due by 1 May. **LOCATION AND CONTACT:** The CCS is located in Room 3022 of Rice Library at the University of Southern Indiana. Evansville has a regional airport with jet service from Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas and elsewhere. You may contact the Center by phone 812/465-1656 or email director Casey Harison at [charison@usi.edu](mailto:charison@usi.edu).

**FREE GROUP PROCESS RESOURCES AT TREE BRESSEN'S WEBSITE:** [www.treegroup.info](http://www.treegroup.info). Topics include consensus, facilitation, conflict, community building, alternative meeting formats, etc. Workshop handouts, articles, exercises, and more!

**FRIENDS JOURNAL** is a monthly Quaker magazine for spiritual seekers. Our mission is to communicate the Quaker experience in order to deepen spiritual lives. Read Friends Journal in print and online. Watch short interviews with modern Friends at [QuakerSpeak.com](http://QuakerSpeak.com). Sign up for our weekly e-newsletter and receive Quaker stories, inspiration, and news emailed every Monday. Thank you for reading!

**JOIN FORMING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY**  
embracing the principles of Voluntary Simplicity

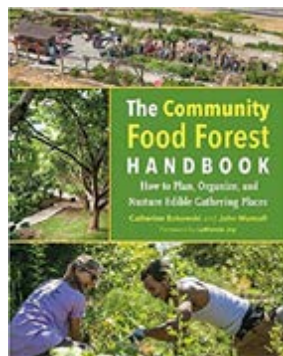
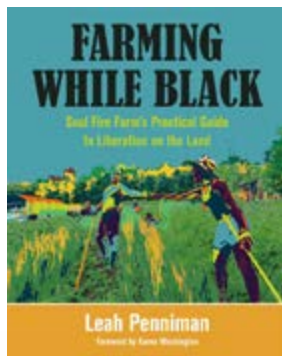
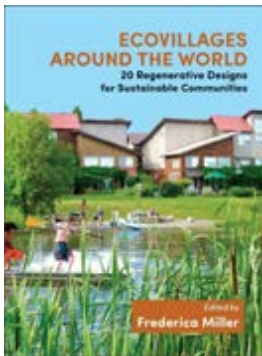
at Coweeta Heritage Center and Talking Rock Farm  
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Contact Paul at [coweeta@gmail.com](mailto:coweeta@gmail.com) for more information or to schedule a visit

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**FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY**

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Cohousing provides the community we need to thrive while ensuring the privacy we enjoy.

CohoUS is a national non-profit raising awareness of the benefits of cohousing and supporting the development of cohousing communities nationwide.

We link people with the resources they need to create and nurture cohousing communities while helping them connect and share with each other.

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

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Founded in 2010, WolfStone Ranch is a licensed nonprofit animal shelter that has so far saved the lives of over 250 dogs and cats. And now I want to form an Intentional Community with Kindred Spirits as passionate and committed as I, to help me expand WolfStone Ranch into a **SPIRITUAL RETREAT CENTER FOR PETS... and their people!**

WolfStone Ranch's overall goal is to become a deeply spiritually-based, passionately activist community dedicated to making the rural Midwest a much more compassionate place for all the animals (and people) who live in this region.

First, please see my online ad at [www.ic.org/advert/wolfstone-ranch...](http://www.ic.org/advert/wolfstone-ranch...) and then check out my website, [wolfstoneranch.org](http://wolfstoneranch.org).

**DIVERSITY** is crucial to the success of the new WolfStone Ranch. Therefore, I am enthusiastically seeking people of all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual identities... and religions that do not practice torture or sacrifice of animals. (Being a vegetarian is required.)

**IF YOU RESONATE WITH MY VISION** for WolfStone Ranch, then you will be welcome here! Prospective members may be invited for a one-week work and visioning stay at the ranch.



## INGENIUM



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## FREE STORE MAGIC

(continued from p. 76)

for what is donated, and there have been times when items destined for the landfill have made their way in large number to the free store for volunteers to deal with. There are also times when something that looks like trash gets a new home, so not having a barrier to what gets donated has its upside. Sometimes there is a learning curve for new residents to understand the culture of the space, which includes a responsibility to keep things tidy and accessible. This culture is defined by longer-term participants' use of the space, obvious signs regarding the guidelines, reminder posts on the neighborhood Facebook page, and talking with participants who regularly misuse the space. Even with these provisions in place, several folks with extra time and enthusiasm for the resource organize the free store monthly to keep it tidy and easily searchable. After items have been sorted into piles to be recycled, cleaned, repaired, or donated to the thrift store, very little goes to the dumpster.

You might wonder, what about hoarding? I can speak for myself that hoarding happens on occasion, but the feeling of abundance and the ability to try stuff a while then whisk it back to whence it came keeps things flowing freely for me. Kids love raiding the free store toy box just as much as parents love leaving their kids' thinned belongings there. One family I know has a rule that if a child wants to take something from the free store she has to donate something from home in exchange.

In spite of occasional misaligned expectations at the free store, it's an invaluable resource in our semi-communal neighborhood that is worth the challenges. When we are open to freely giving and receiving, we experience a sense of connection and abundance that is grounding and freeing. I hope you're encouraged to find a space to exchange goods in your community and experience the wealth and connection a free store can bring. 🐦

*Rachel Lyons is using her obsessive-compulsive tendencies to create community in the Ozarks of northwest Arkansas. You can reach her at [tinyhappypeopleblog.com](http://tinyhappypeopleblog.com) or [rachelyonswrites@gmail.com](mailto:rachelyonswrites@gmail.com).*



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# FREE STORE MAGIC



Rachel Lyons

Ever have the realization that the unique outfit you're wearing didn't cost you a dime? This occurs to me frequently, ever since I started a neighborhood free store. A free store—also known as a swap shop, free box, free shelf, or just free pile—is a place where people drop off what they don't need or want, and freely take what they do. It can be temporary or permanent: on a curb by your house, in a (often cooperative) household or neighborhood, or in a public space. Ours simply consists of a utility shelf and a clothing rack under a shed roof in the 50-person farm-rental neighborhood where I live, which works just fine as an accessible space for keeping goods out of the weather. Establishing a free store is a great way to share goods, create more equity, reduce waste, and build connections.

I felt the need for a free store since returning to the Ozarks from a transient lifestyle of semi-communal living at retreat centers and farms. Many of these places were in northern California and the San Francisco Bay area, the supposed birthplace of the free store concept. Free stores filled most of my clothing and reading needs during those years of volunteer and low-wage work. (I still wear a pair of Chaco sandals I found almost a decade ago at a Zen center free shelf.) From my current neighborhood free store, I've picked up clothing, dinnerware, art supplies, toys, books, furniture, and a beloved glittery portrait of the goddess of compassion, Kwan Yin. I've donated clothes and jewelry, extra starts of plants, household goods gifted to me, and random items purged during bouts of minimalist mania. Similar to thrift store shopping (ex-

cept free and just a short walk from home), it's hit-or-miss, but the magic and mystery of what one might find is a thrill.

In addition to being just plain fun, a free store has the potential to spread wealth among its users. Many Americans are regularly bombarded with material goods passing through our lives. This applies even in this low-income rental situation, where most of us have chosen to live simply, on small budgets. These rentals are also somewhat geared to people in transition, so some folks move in without many basic household goods. Recently, a newcomer was able to find an office chair, oven mitts, and a mug on her first day at the free store. A mom of four supplied her entire summer wardrobe from there. And I now have a play area for visiting children provided almost entirely by free store donations.

Another benefit of free stores is that they build connections among participants. Seeing my neighbor wear a dress I dropped off last week makes me want to stop her to say how great she looks, and tell her the dress's history. I often hear people express gratitude for things they've received and satisfaction about giving to their neighbors. There is a sense of mutual reliance, abundance, and appreciation among partakers and a feeling of wonder at the awesome scores we make.

While it's a perk for residents to easily drop things off while doing spring-cleaning, the quantity of items left at the free store can sometimes overwhelm those of us who keep it organized—especially those with obsessive tendencies (*raises hand*). There is no filter

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