

LESSONS ON THE ROAD TO COMMUNITY STABILITY

COMMUNITIES

in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2020 • Issue #186



PICKING UP THE PIECES: NEW BEGINNINGS

Personal, Community, Planetary Resilience
Understanding Group Population Dynamics
Heart-Culture, The Hermitage, Fiji Organic Village,
Love Family, Renaissance, Harmony Society, and More
Dinosaurs, Asteroids, Gardening, and Community
Change, Challenge, and New Directions in Cohousing



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Physician Assistant Amber, her wife Sharon, and their children Skyler (then seven) and Indigo (then two), the first guests at Fiji Organic Village following Hurricane Winston, share lunch. Amber came to give free medical exams, treatment, and consultation to island villagers. (See article, pages 50-52.) Natural builder Niko is at right. Photo by Philip Mirkin.

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New Beginnings and Initiatives for COMMUNITIES

For the third consecutive issue, our theme reflects closely what has been happening in the life of the magazine and its creators.

With the last couple issues, we didn't anticipate this synchronicity. We set the theme for #184, *The Shadow Side of Cooperation*, long before we learned that it could become the final cooperatively-published issue of the magazine; and for #185, *Passing the Torch: Generational Shifts in Community*, with no idea that it would also mark the passing of the publishing torch to GEN-US—rescuing the magazine from oblivion thanks to vital, gratifying financial and moral support from the wider COMMUNITIES community.

This time, with issue #186, we knew when we chose the theme back in mid-October (while still looking for a new publisher) that we ourselves would be *Picking Up the Pieces* and initiating *New Beginnings* if we got to the point of publishing this issue. Fortunately, we did, and we are.

Magazine production itself has required relatively little “picking up of the pieces,” since we on the staff never stopped putting together future issues even when we had no publishing home. We continued to solicit, receive, and edit article submissions, discuss new themes, etc. And the success of our relaunch fundraising campaign meant that we were able to pick up the financial and core logistical pieces to allow the magazine to continue in a process that seemed to be people-powered and, thankfully, to have a life of its own.

What we *didn't* know was the complexity of reconstructing (or constructing anew) some of the system elements (especially technology- and communications-related) we see as necessary for the magazine to thrive. As a result, our projections in the introductory section of issue #185—that our new website at gen-us.net might be “fully up and running” by the time readers received the print edition—proved to be quite off the mark. Similarly, we hoped that we could enact a viable new subscriptions system, at low cost and easily, by altering a mailing list spreadsheet manually. That quickly got out of hand.

In reality, it has taken three months to create a fully-functioning new COMMUNITIES website (at gen-us.net/communities) to which we can enthusiastically refer readers. It has also taken three months to, first, recognize that the contact-form-dependent, manually managed, data-triple-handled system we were trying to use in the absence of subscription software was grossly inefficient; and, second, find and enact a subscription system that, finally, we are really happy with. While it is not yet up and running as I type these words, it **will** be by the time you read them. Really.

On the new website, you'll find more than 400 back-issue articles posted for free public reading. These are accessible several ways. A randomly-generated list of five articles appears in the right sidebar of most pages on the magazine site. This list refreshes with new article titles each time the page itself is refreshed and each time you visit a new page. Each time you click on an article title, you'll be able to read that article, and a new set of five articles will appear alongside the article you are reading. All of these articles are also available through the “Archives” bar (searchable by month and year) and through the “Categories” bar (searchable by article subject—this portion still needs some updating)—both of them appearing in the right sidebar below the

Back Issue Articles list. A general, site-wide “Search” bar also appears there.

The site also includes a new magazine home page, a submissions page (now including a link that allows readers and writers to sign up for the quarterly “Call for Articles” list), and an index page listing every piece of writing that has appeared in COMMUNITIES from 1972 to present—also searchable.

But these aren't necessarily the largest improvements. We have signed up with a subscription software service that allows a much easier online experience for new, current, and renewing subscribers—as well as for those of us processing your subscriptions. If you considered subscribing before but were discouraged by our interim contact-form method, please visit the site to see the improvements.

The most stunning upgrade to the subscriber experience is the easy, complete access to all digital magazine issues (both current and back issues—more than 180 magazines, and more than 10,000 pages of material) for all current subscribers, whether print or digital. Subscribers can download back issues as desired, and, even more conveniently, can flip through every back issue online, in an experience that replicates flipping through a paper magazine—but without the paper.

Those who would like paper copies of back issues (or who are not subscribers but want to order digital back issues) can now access those through a single ordering page (just scroll down through the covers; no need to advance from one page to the next). The “Shop” page at the new subscription software service also makes it easy to purchase pay-it-forward subscriptions (providing subscriptions for those who request them but can't afford them) and to make donations to support the magazine.

We are also ramping up our recently-dormant social media outreach, and have added two people to the magazine team to allowed focused efforts in all of these “other” sides of magazine production (social media/outreach, web accessibility, subscription processing, etc.).

If, like some of us working on the magazine, you are social-media free, prefer to hold a magazine in your hands, and to pay by check, etc., some of the above improvements may not make much difference to you. But in the contemporary media environment, we believe they offer much wider accessibility to the resources we are creating and stewarding. We hope they can move the magazine to a new level of thriving and usefulness in the movement to nurture the evolution of more cooperative, regenerative human societies in which we see ourselves as part of, rather than apart from, the wider earth community, and design and live our lives accordingly.

Every journey is made up of many small steps, and we hope that this magazine can continue to influence the steps that individuals and groups take in that larger journey that we are all on, and in which even a single act of course-correction can ripple out and create change.

Thank you for joining us! 🌱

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.

Editor's Note: We continue our column featuring contributions and news from partners who have pledged ongoing support for the magazine, and whose missions are allied with ours. Featured below: Paul Freundlich of the Fair Trade Foundation has been, at various times, an editor, copublisher, and frequent contributor to COMMUNITIES during its nearly 50-year history. We welcome additional partners; if interested, please contact us at editor@gen-us.net.

Continuing a New Blog, “Notes in Passing”

To Fellow Travelers down life's twisting highway, hoping to discover exit strategies to a path less travelled,

After weeks of battering I've subjected myself to via the House and Senate Impeachment hearings, this second blog post describes events no less strange, but much more benign. Each of these stories suggests connections of Jungian proportions in a universe that leaves me, at least, bemused and curious about what twists are yet to come.

Please find the blog at exemplars.world/blog. (The second entry is “Other Voices,” at exemplars.world/2020/02/06/paul-freundlich-blog-notes-in-passing.)

—Paul Freundlich

Thank You to More Relaunch Heroes!

These individuals and groups donated additional funds to our magazine relaunch efforts since the list compiled on the back cover of issue #185:

Broad Leaf Books
Bruderhof
Andrew Clark
Paula Craig
Gaia University
Goodenough Community
David Innocenti
Morningland Community
Alan Pakaln
Erica Sekuler
Loren Schein and Miaya Sustaita
Summerland Monastery
Kathleen Walsh

We are still soliciting tax-deductible donations toward this campaign. Find information on how to donate at gen-us.net/donate/magazine. Thank you for your support!

Attention Subscribers!

All subscribers, print or digital, now receive full access to all of our digital back issues, 1972 to present, for online viewing and/or download. **If you subscribed before we had this system in place, and haven't received information about how to access this archive, please email subscriptions@gen-us.net for simple instructions.**

Please enjoy this resource!

NEWS FROM OUR PUBLISHER

COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

Through fact, fiction, and opinion, we offer fresh ideas about how to live and work cooperatively, how to solve problems peacefully, and how individual lives can be enhanced by living purposefully with others. We contribute articles 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; email editor@gen-us.net. To obtain Photo Guidelines, email layout@gen-us.net. Both are also available online at gen-us.net/communities.

Advertising Policy

Please check gen-us.net/communities or email ads@gen-us.net for advertising information.

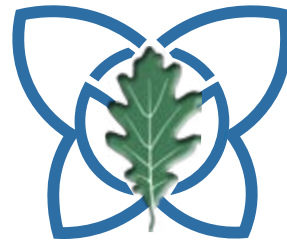
We accept paid advertising in Communities because our mission is to provide our readers with helpful and inspiring information—and because advertising revenues help pay the bills.

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

If you experience a problem with an advertisement or listing, we invite you to call this to our attention and we'll look into it. Our first priority in such instances is to make a good-faith attempt to resolve any differences by working directly with the advertiser/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.

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.



GEN-US

Global Ecovillage Network—United States (GEN-US) is thankful to the amazing COMMUNITIES team, which has relaunched the magazine artfully, with tremendous devotion to the publication's readers, subscribers, advertisers, authors, and donors—the extended community supporting the transition to Cmag's new life.

Serving as Publisher for this unique journal is a joy, and the potential for broadening its reach and bringing practical information, solutions, and networking opportunities to and from communities and learners of all kinds, around the globe, is awesome! GEN-US is keenly interested in expanding awareness of the wide array of education available through our networking partners in North America and internationally. As you get to know us, we'd like to introduce you to some with whom we most actively network, and share the rising impulse and spectrum of opportunities for regenerative community learning and action.

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North American Day of Sustainable Communities 2020

A day of events for a better world. Are you part of a community that is taking action for a more sustainable world? We invite you to host an event and celebrate with us on September 19, 2020:

www.sustainablecommunitiesday.net



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Resources:

Ecosocial Design book (available from leanpub.com/ESD starting from \$0), the basis of our Ecosocial Design Certificate, entices us to upgrade our actions for people, planet, and all life, extending the substantial earth-care notions of permaculture into the cultural realm, and offering tools and examples to transform your own projects and thinking.

Regenerative Livelihoods by Design course, reflecting Gaia U’s unique philosophy and approach to learning and unlearning, explores how to create a right livelihood that benefits people and planet; it includes engaging exercises, access to our community support platform, and personalized feedback and coaching. **See** gaiauniversity.org/rld.

Gaia Radio

Watch webinars with some of the world’s most interesting changemakers, such as Starhawk, John D. Liu, Robyn Francis, Morag Gamble, and Gaia U cofounder Andrew Langford, at gaiauniversity.org/gaia-radio, and sign up to our Newsletter to receive invitations to live interactive webinars.

Lessons on the Road to Community Stability

By Kara Huntermoon



We treated each new person as if they would be the answer to our problems. Our founder, Reba, begged the renters at every meeting to help figure out how to keep the land and community going. “I can’t do this!” she moaned. “It has got to be temporary! I’m near retirement, and I’m going into debt to make this project work!”

One applicant seemed good on paper: In her 60s, she had experience living in community and kept a couple of milk goats using biodynamic methods. She even brought reference letters, which described how it was easy to misunderstand her because she had attention deficit disorder and missed social cues, but we should say yes anyway because she was a great asset to any community. Some of our residents pushed hard for this woman to move in.

My husband was skeptical. “I can’t say exactly why, but I think this is a bad idea. I want to say no.”

“Well, if you can’t say why, then we should say yes! Look at all the evidence that she’s a good fit!” insisted her supporters.

We reluctantly agreed that if Leo couldn’t come up with a good reason, we would accept her as a resident. Within two weeks we regretted that decision.

She was a five-times-a-day Ritalin addict with a gun in her fanny pack. She decided that my husband was the most dangerous person on the farm, and she threatened to shoot him if he came near her. Leo is a large man, but generally soft-spoken, a pacifist, a feminist, and quite shy. We all felt baffled by the woman’s insistence that he was going to hurt her.

The police told us we could do nothing about the gun, because even without a carry permit she was allowed to have guns in her own residence. We gave her an eviction notice, but she didn’t leave. And she didn’t pay. She never signed a rental contract, and

she never paid us anything. (We weren’t using rental contracts at that time; all new residents came in on a handshake deal.)

One night we were awakened at 2 a.m. by a knock at the door. A police officer apologetically explained that the woman had called to accuse Leo of stealing her gun.

“Oh, is her gun missing? Thank God!” I exclaimed.

“No, I didn’t take it, but I’m glad she doesn’t have it,” said Leo.

As this was the fourth contact we had with the police regarding the mentally ill woman and her gun, it didn’t take long to bring the officer up to date. His response? “If someone did take it, we can hope they threw it in the reservoir where it belongs.”

No such luck. She just forgot where she set it down, and she found it again the next day.

Several residents moved out because they could not stay in a house with the gun-toting woman. We did eventually get her to leave, but she wasn’t the only vignette in a six-year saga of community strife.

Ninety percent of intentional communities fail in their first 10 years. Ours was lucky: three of us stayed through the struggle, built relationships with each other, and learned together. Our big turning point came in the winter of 2013–2014, when we used our hard-won experience to reorganize the ownership and decision-making structures with the help of outside advice and investment. Since then, Heart-Culture Farm Community has become very stable in residency, very low in disruptive conflict, and financially secure. We tried and discarded many fixes along the way. Here are some lessons we kept:

Prioritize relationships. Form structures around relationships that are already working.

We tried several financial and decision-making structures based

on idealism. For example, we charged a community resident fee of \$300 per adult, regardless of which living space people occupied. We created committees to make decisions on different topics—but we didn't have enough residents to fulfill the roles on those committees.

When we sat down after six years to see what was working, we noticed that the three of us (our founder Reba, my husband, and myself) were the only long-term residents. Basically all the structural needs of the community were being fulfilled by ourselves, because short-term residents dropped the ball when they moved out. We created a structure that acknowledged our commitment to each other and to the land. More on that below.

Admit to existing power/responsibility structures and form decision-making structures around those.

Reba had her name on the mortgage, so she went into debt to pay bills that would affect her credit. My husband and I built several tiny houses to rent out so the community would have more income. I took on the least-desired job of all: rental manager. Nobody wanted to be the bad-guy authority figure who communicated the rules, collected rents, and wrote eviction notices! Our financial angels put in significant funds to renovate a large house into a rentable living space, and later replaced the barn roof.

Our reorganization acknowledged the responsibility the five of us had taken on. We formed an LLC, and moved the title of the land from Reba's name into the LLC's name. The five of us became LLC members, with clearly-defined powers that mirrored our responsibilities. Since the owners take on more financial risk and responsibility than the renters do, our community's financial decisions are made by consensus of the owners' group. We solicit opinions from the renters, and all are welcome to attend owners' meetings and speak on any topic, but renters cannot block consensus on financial decisions.

Resident consensus for accepting new renters (protect people's sense of safety); Owners' decision to evict (don't make renters "be the bad-guy").

During those turbulent years, we learned an important lesson: if the community doesn't evict someone when we need to do so, half the residents move out in response to the unresolved conflict. This means we lose half our income, and the owners then have to cover the financial shortfall. We encountered this situation repeatedly, because our idealism led us to make all decisions by

whole-group consensus.

Once, when we couldn't figure out how to evict a problematic resident, another resident took him in. Their house, one of the largest on the property, soon became a mini-community of Occupy protesters. One memorable meeting, we discussed the septic tank. It needed pumping, and our income didn't cover the bill. Would we renters be willing to put in any money to help with that?

"I can't," I said. "I don't have anything extra."

Our Occupiers had a different response: "You guys are the One Percent! You profit off our rent and then try to squeeze more out of us! This is oppression!"

"Wait a minute," I protested, "I do your farm chores and take care of things here so you can go stay at the camps. This community is part of the revolution! Why are you turning on us?"

Even after I pointed out the sexism, the Occupiers (who were all men with the exception of one woman who was not a parent) insisted that my work was useless, we were the One Percent, and we wanted the revolution to fail.

Because they had become close friends with the problematic resident, everyone who shared that house ended up moving out after several more months of conflict, during which they insisted that they didn't need to pay rent because we were the "One Percent." Reba went into further debt to pay for the shortfalls.

Eviction is now classified as a money decision, because of the tendency to lose large amounts of income when timely evictions don't take place. As such, it is an owners' group responsibility to decide when to evict. The owners' group makes decisions by consensus, but we have strong relationships with each other and a strong commitment to the land that override any personal preference we may have for one renter. Here's how these conversations often go:

Owner #1: "I can't live with Tom anymore. It's been months, and mediation is not resolving the problems. I know he is your friend, and I wish I could keep doing this, but it just isn't working."

Owner #4: "Yes, he's my friend, but you're probably right. I've noticed other residents are stressed by him, too, and he's not the easiest for me to get along with either. I just so wanted to help him!"

Owner #3: "Sometimes we can help people, and sometimes we can't. We have to take care of our community first. Do you have other friends who might want to help him?"

I'm oversimplifying for the sake of brevity. We understand that it isn't fair to ask an owner to live with someone they simply can't get along with. It's usually nobody's fault; just not a good fit.



Photos courtesy of Kara Huntermoon

Our general rule is: All residents decide who moves in. Any resident of any status can block a new person from moving in. They don't need to have a rational reason. We don't want to force people to live with others who will trigger them. This protects the current relationships that are working.

Once someone is accepted for residency, the owners' group decides if there needs to be an eviction. Only one owner needs to be certain that eviction is the right decision; the other owners will support that choice after conversation makes the thinking clear. This is technically a consensus decision to evict, but Reba came up with the following analogy during our conflict years: "We need consensus to put this pencil in my ear, but we don't need consensus for me to pull it out." The reason "owners' consensus" works for evictions is because we all agree that only a single owner needs to feel that the problematic resident is like a pencil in her ear. We will support the removal of the pencil.

We solicit the input of renters on eviction decisions by having all-group mediations before the decision is made. In mediation, nobody is directly asked if they want another person to move out. Rather, we engage in a good-faith effort to resolve the conflict. Sometimes it becomes clear that we are unable to resolve the conflict with our current resources, or that the current conflict violates our residency policies. We have evicted men for perpetrating domestic violence on women and children. We evicted a woman who refused to consider the possibility that hitting her child was something she should learn to stop doing. We have also evicted people who are unable to see that their complaints about another resident are simply projections that they are personally responsible for healing (e.g., "she's just like my mother").

Encourage long-term residency by focusing on long-term life projects: child-raising, permaculture.

Some communities are set up as educational centers, and while these are vital to our movement, they also tend to have a large proportion of short-term residents. People move to these communities to learn something, and move out again when they feel they have learned it. Others move to educational communities to teach or administer programs, and move out again when they find a different job that meets their needs.

Heart-Culture is set up to support long-term life projects, most notably child-raising and permaculture. Our infrastructure, social systems, and economic agreements are designed to support parents and children. For example, we built children's play areas in every indoor and outdoor communal space. The living willow fence has keyhole playhouses built into it; trellises are designed to accommodate climbing children. The large Douglas firs support a climbing pole and tire swing, with a picnic table nearby. A fenced swing-set yard attracts the smallest children; shade trees allow parents to fall asleep in the grass while gates keep toddlers from wandering off. Instead of a living room, our largest house has a play room, where kids can move the furniture and hang tapestries to make playhouses.

By focusing on parents and children, we attract people who want to stay for 20 years

or more. We provide social support including free childcare trades and carpooling. It seems strange for me to describe how we co-parent each other's children, because it mirrors the traditional "village to raise a child." I've lived at Heart-Culture so long that it seems normal to me, but I hear a lot of visitors commenting that parents are a lot more isolated in other settings. All we are doing is having long-term cooperative relationships and helping where help is needed, but that seems to have become an unusual opportunity in many parts of the United States.

Owners can never get their money out: discourage medium-term "investment residents."

Another way we encourage long-term residency is by discouraging "investment residents." In practice, it is usually middle class people who want to know how they could get their money out again "if it doesn't work out." We tell them they can never get their money out again. Like most intentional communities, ours is built by committed idealists who give everything they have to a project with no excess income. If we were required to buy out owners who leave, that would create an undue hardship that might cause the community to financially fail.

We try to avoid this situation by taking three years or more to approve a new owner. We focus on building relationships that can last before we become legally and financially committed. This means everyone who moves into Heart-Culture starts as a "renter," with a month-to-month contract. Only after we have weathered conflict, tested compatibility, and witnessed the resident's capacity to put the well-being of the group before their own individual desires do we invite a renter to become an owner. Some people don't qualify, even if they live here long-term. We unabashedly make new ownership decisions "by relationship."

Our LLC agreements have not been tested by legal challenges. It's possible that we could be required to pay off an owner after a court invalidated our LLC agreements: specifically the clause that says we don't have to pay someone for their ownership equity if they leave. So far, we have avoided that by being up



front about the fact that we are investing in our relationships at Heart-Culture. We are not an opportunity for investment with financial returns.

Ownership buy-in accessible to low-income residents: eliminate the financial barrier to long-term commitment.

Because we make decisions about new owners based on relationships and not finances, we need a way to make ownership financially accessible to low-income residents. We do this by giving the new owner a loan for the amount of their ownership buy-in, which they pay off at the same rate they were paying rent. The base amount to buy in is \$40,000 for an individual, and \$70,000 for a couple. The loan's interest rate is the same as our mortgage interest rate, which in our case is pretty high (6.5 percent).

This works out to a "mortgage" of 19 years and 8 months at \$300 per month for an individual living in one of our smaller spaces. That's shorter than a typical 30-year mortgage, and a lot cheaper! After the ownership buy-in is paid off, the owner continues to pay monthly utilities and community fees (\$130), but no more "rent" or housing expenses. Of course, all owners are liable to pay any bills that are not covered by the rental income, so in practice we end up shelling out for improvements, repairs, and maintenance, even after we pay off our buy-in loans.

Because all land and buildings are communally owned by the LLC members, an owner buys a "right to inhabit" on the land, not any particular structure. That allows owners to move from one housing unit to another if needed.

Address conflict rigorously and effectively: core residents with skills + outside facilitation; conflict-resolution a requirement of residency.

The number one piece of advice I give people who are starting communities is to require mediation in conflict situations. Find a mediator who lives outside the community and pay for their services. For cash-strapped new communities, this might seem like a luxury, but in my experience skilled conflict resolution services are a requirement.

If the core community members (in our

case, owners) have conflict resolution skills, that makes the need for outside mediation less frequent. Smaller conflicts can be addressed by asking for third-party assistance from onsite people.

During our high-conflict years, we had several residents who refused mediation. We decided to require mediation as a condition of residency. When someone requests mediation, the parties to the conflict must participate, or face eviction. We tell everyone this rule before they move in.

At Heart-Culture, we assume that a conflict that requires outside mediation is big enough to affect the entire community. For this reason, every resident is notified and invited when a mediation is scheduled. After one recent mediation, a new resident told me, "I didn't even know there was a problem, but I'm glad I came to watch. Now I understand what it means to live in community. It was so beautiful to see everyone be vulnerable and open to connection."

Conclusion:

These lessons learned during our high-conflict years led to structural solutions that create stability. We no longer treat each new person as if they will be the answer to our problems. Rather, we take time to get to know new residents to see if a reciprocal relationship is possible. We encourage new residents to get settled into their lives and make relationships with their farm-mates in an organic manner. In our fast-paced society, some people find this process too slow. We will not be your instant family.

We could (and do) become truly committed "chosen family" over time. Our stability allows us to offer a type of social support that meets real human needs. Several residents have used that support to stop smoking, or to stay clean and sober. Some individuals have truly blossomed at Heart-Culture. Healing and connection leading to long-term commitment is very gratifying.

Others find that we are not the right fit for their family's needs. This discovery is like the tide flowing out: just a part of nature's cycles. Because we don't need new residents to solve our problems, and a single problematic outgoing resident no longer takes half the community with her, there's no threat; just a curiosity to see who might join us next. 🌱

Kara Huntermoon is a co-owner of the community land at Heart-Culture Farm Community, near Eugene, Oregon. She has lived at Heart-Culture for 12 years with her husband and two daughters. Kara teaches Liberation Listening, a form of co-counseling that focuses on understanding and ending systems of oppression.



We Left Our Community but Our Community Never Left Us

By Daniel A. Brown



Renaissance Community founder, Michael Metelica at the height of his power and influence, 1974.

Thirty years after the demise of the Renaissance Community (see *COMMUNITIES* #184, Fall 2019: “Whatever Happened to the Renaissance Community?”), its hundreds of former members are still trying to figure out what happened. There is no unified consensus and there probably never will be one. Renaissance lasted 20 years. I was there for 14 of them.

The fate of the Renaissance Community was tied to its charismatic founder, Michael Metelica, who founded the community at the age of 18 and within five years, had gained 300 dedicated acolytes and assets worth over a million dollars. At its height, the Renaissance Community owned properties in several towns, was featured in mainstream print and television media, operated over a dozen businesses and contracting companies, and often changed its identity to suit the needs of the times. It began in a treehouse and ended as a planned self-sufficient village on 80 acres in the bucolic village of Gill, Massachusetts.

The collapse was ugly but hardly unique. How the community fell follows a pattern that has played out in myriad others both large and small. A spiritual teacher has a vision to improve the world and through his love and wisdom, slowly gathers a coterie of followers. As the group expands, the teacher falls into the deadly trap of power, ego, and entitlement and begins to abuse and manipulate. The once-adoring followers become disgusted and leave the community. The remainder stays with the teacher until the bitter end when he/she is finally ousted or self-destructs. Were Shakespeare alive today, he would pen a play about it.

When Renaissance imploded, it did so in incremental stages. One small group would rebel against Metelica’s increasingly erratic behavior (he was increasingly addicted to

cocaine and alcohol) and demand an end to his omnipotent leadership. They would be shouted down by his loyal majority and leave in frustration. A few years later, another small group would rise up with the same result. It was, thus, not unusual to have been both a supporter and a challenger of Metelica’s authority. This dynamic continued until only a tiny minority remained. Had we all risen up at once, Metelica would have been expelled early on and the Renaissance Community would most likely exist to this day.

In the course of his downward spiral, Metelica resorted to bullying, shaming, and in some isolated instances, physical violence towards those who challenged him. The conflict shook the community whose members were either divided into adversarial sides or refused to get involved. A common phrase the rebels heard was “Why don’t we all just love each other?,” which insidiously translated

as “Shut up and don’t rock the boat.” As more fled, Metelica, aided by a few die-hard adherents, surrounded himself with guns and vicious pit bulls. The land itself degenerated into filth and squalor as nobody remaining had the energy or inspiration to continue the communal ethos.

Finally in 1988, Metelica was bribed to leave and never return. Although he took steps to clean himself up, he never apologized to those he hurt and would often express how we had “betrayed” him by leaving. There was little if any show of accountability. He died of colon cancer in 2003 at age 53.

One would think that with him gone, veterans of Renaissance would have flocked back to the Gill property to make their dream of spiritual fellowship come true. Nothing of the sort occurred. While

we wax nostalgic at our annual reunions, deep inside, we haven’t forgotten the shadow side of our group and not all of it can be laid at the feet of Metelica.

And so, we surrendered into our new lives, raised our nuclear families, and found pleasure in having our own coffee pot and not having to attend endless meetings. Those who settled on the Gill land after Metelica’s departure had optimistic plans to revive the community. They were told by the battered survivors that no resurrection would be welcome. The Renaissance Community was done. The property in Gill has since reverted to private ownership.

We soon learned that while we had left the community, the community never had left us. For decades, I and my comrades have struggled with often-contradictory feelings of betrayal, regret, nostalgia, and romanticism.

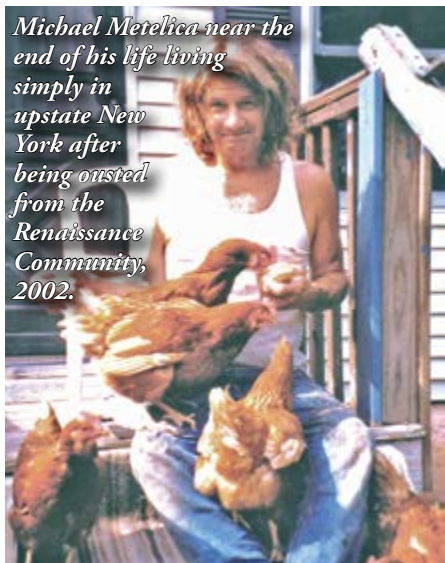
I believe that the experience of our community rearranged the psychic DNA of all who were a part of it. Those of us who had joined in its early days went all in. We viewed our decision to cast our lot with Metelica as a lifetime commitment and planned to inhabit Renaissance for the rest of our lives. Such a powerful pledge resulted in a deeply emotional toll when that dream was overturned. Among our many losses was a sense of trust. Some have expressed shame or guilt for having followed a corrupted leader and wish they had left or called him out sooner than they did. Others have a hard time accepting that the power Metelica wielded was freely given to him by us. There will always be a continuing debate as to whether Michael Metelica was a true



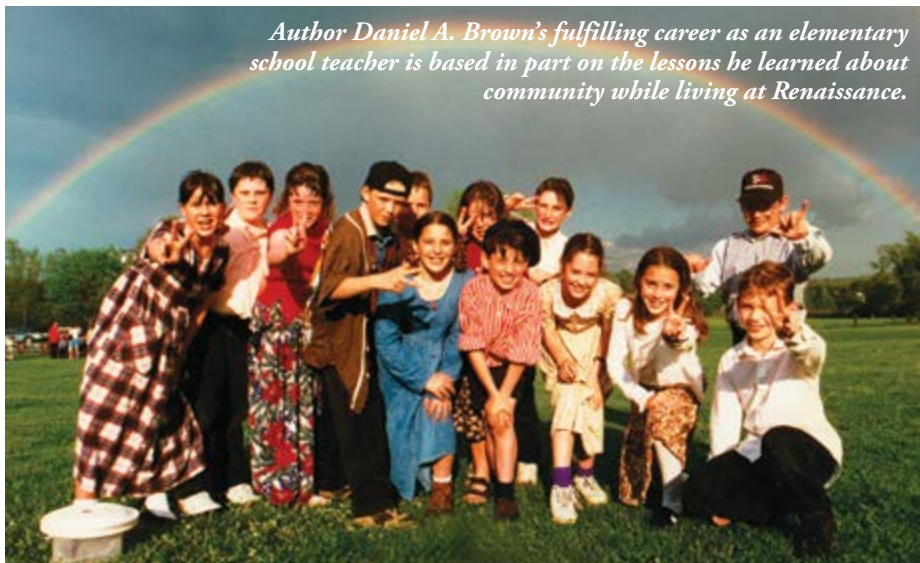
Former members of the Renaissance Community still converge for annual reunions. The author, Daniel A. Brown, is on the left in the blue shirt.



The children of community members provide a vital perspective of Renaissance’s legacy.



Michael Metelica near the end of his life living simply in upstate New York after being ousted from the Renaissance Community, 2002.



Author Daniel A. Brown’s fulfilling career as an elementary school teacher is based in part on the lessons he learned about community while living at Renaissance.

Photos courtesy of Daniel A. Brown

Veterans of the Renaissance Community include Brother Towbee Keyes of the Leverett Peace Pagoda Buddhist order and painting contractor Phil Dowling, both engaged in repainting the Pagoda's stupa.



Gatherings of former members, their children, and their neighbors still occur at the former Renaissance Community property in Gill, Massachusetts.

I had believed we were saving the world by our example of love and fellowship.

visionary who spiraled out of control or a manipulating con-artist from the get-go.

Another result was the discrediting and disbelieving of the spiritual precepts that formed the basis of Renaissance. If the leader was corrupt, then it stood to reason that so were his teachings. Therefore, while some of us have continued our spiritual path in other venues, others have discarded the concept of spirituality as just another airy-fairy pipe dream promoted by shysters.

The need to recover from and reflect upon the demise of the Renaissance Community began even as the community was still in existence. Reunions of former members began as early as five years before its end along with a monthly newsletter which included written testimonials and updated addresses. There was a great deal of bitterness expressed and many former friendships were broken between those who had either confronted or enabled Metelica. Strangely,

many of the former included those who had been part of his inner circle.

The reunions are currently an annual event. Unfortunately, nobody who attends has much interest in confronting the issues that led to our downfall or to address some of the uglier accusations that have surfaced about Metelica. Not surprisingly, the forum has moved to a private chat site on Facebook where the conversations become quite volcanic at times. Two interpretations of Metelica and Renaissance hug the fringes; “We were the most spiritual, loving people ever” is countered by “We were brainwashed by an evil cult manipulator.” Our children, now in their 40s and 50s, occasionally weigh in, a few calling us to task for unpleasant experiences they had had. Others reminisce about the fun and adventures they enjoyed as kids living on the land with various surrogate mothers and fathers. Most of our colleagues, however, are content merely to chat with old friends or coo over group and individual photographs taken when we were young and idealistic.

I lived at Renaissance from age 20 through 34, joining after dropping out of college in 1970. Therefore, I re-entered the “real world” in early middle age. It took some adjusting for me to navigate renting a house, paying bills and taxes, opening a bank account, and negotiating insurance policies, not to mention the daily chores of working a job, cooking meals, and raising my son without the communal safety net. An additional adjustment was inhabiting a tiny rental in town after having 80 acres of rural beauty at my disposal.

Equally distressing—for Renaissance was a “spiritual” community—was a sudden lack of purpose. I had believed we were saving the world by our example of love and fellowship. Upon my departure, I found myself merely surviving.

Luckily, I was living with a woman who wasn't associated with the group. She eased me through the transition and together, we created a summer program for children which created its own tribe using Native American rituals, structures, and values (supposedly, my partner had Native blood). I also returned to college to earn my teaching certificate. After she and I separated, I began a long and rewarding career as a teacher in the public school system. In both the camp and the school, I focused on the creation of community, valuing the children in my care both as individuals and as a collective family.

I feel no embarrassment about my behavior as a true believer in the community and I caution my friends not to be too hard on themselves. Growth is a process of trial and error, making mistakes and hopefully learning from them. Our communal endeavor grew out of the 1960s when there was no roadmap, guidebook, or “Spiritual Communities for Dummies” to help us along. Like most from that era, our commu-

nity wanted to change the world but found that we were more human than could be admitted. Instead of berating myself over following a “failed dream,” I chalk it up as a painful, yet necessary growth experience that made me a better person. The spiritual values of Renaissance are now accepted in our broader society and I hold to them because they work and have aided me in my life to this day. As a wise friend recently observed, “The Guru had to fall in order for the seeds to spread.” How true. I believe that a vast majority of my communal friends are doing good, positive work in the world.

In retrospect, I’m glad the Renaissance Community came to an end. Had we remained in the community, our lives would have fallen into stagnant patterns of existence, hermetically sealed and institutionalized by the limits of our ideology. Worse, I would have been denied the rich and varied experiences I’ve enjoyed since my departure. Collectively, one of our peers observed that we of Renaissance have been “inoculated” against relinquishing our personal authority to charismatic leaders, no matter how enlightened. Myself, I have made my peace with Michael Metelica, appreciating what I learned from him while holding him accountable for his unsavory treatment of others.

I remain open to living in a multi-generational community although I would be far more discerning and pragmatic in my choice. I would not be so naïve as to expect moral perfection among my peers nor would I abide any kind of charismatic leader. Fortunately, few communities nowadays are based on a solitary personality. They were a product of the 1960s when leaders were necessary to herd the cats of so many strong and diverse personalities. Communities that lacked a concerted focus soon relapsed into sloth, degradation, or mere boredom. Someone needed to be the vision-keeper at a time when such a concept was unknown.

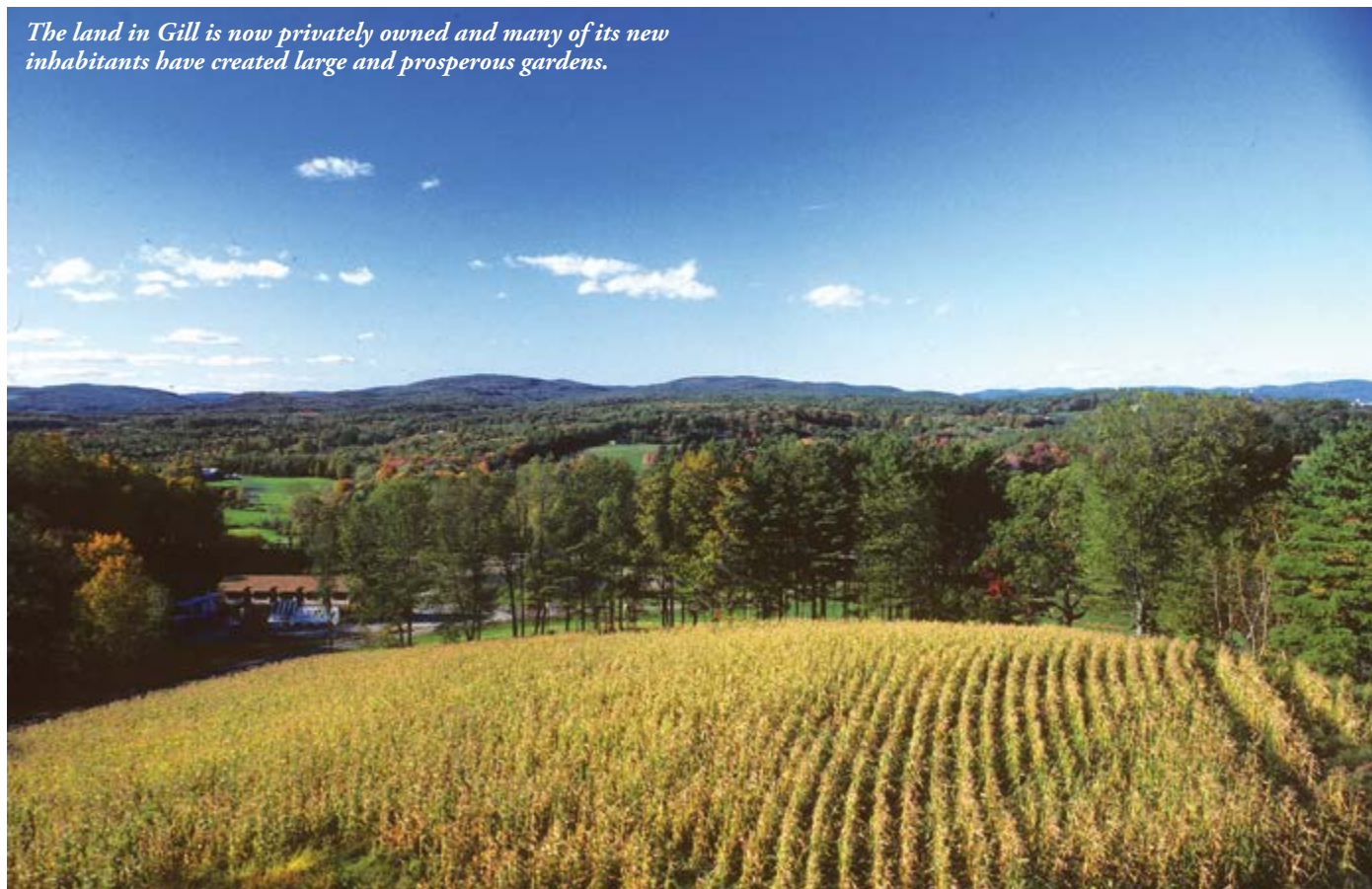
As participants of the original communal movement advance into older ages, some see community as an alternative to assisted-living. This can be seen as a matter of survival or a return to the idealistic values of their youth. I would choose the latter and prefer to share whatever wisdom I have gained over the years with those of a younger

generation. It would be a matter of giving back and perhaps helping others attain the worthwhile goal of creating community. And this time, doing it right. 🐦

Daniel A. Brown was born in New York City in 1950. He lived at the Brotherhood of the Spirit/Renaissance Community from 1970-1984 and is one of its archivists-history keepers. Since leaving Renaissance, Brown has been a classroom teacher, general aviation pilot, drum circle leader, published author, and exhibition artist and photographer. He currently lives in Taos, New Mexico with his wife, Lisa and dog, Cody. Brown's artwork can be seen at www.intothewildblue.com.

**As a wise friend
observed, “The Guru
had to fall in order
for the seeds
to spread.”**

The land in Gill is now privately owned and many of its new inhabitants have created large and prosperous gardens.



Picking Up the Pieces of the Love Israel Family: Dead or Alive?

By Understanding Israel

In 1984 our community (founded in 1968) went through an almost complete collapse, for a complex set of reasons both financial and communal. We went from 300 members living in a dozen-and-a-half houses on Queen Anne Hill in Seattle, to fewer than 100 (and about 40 percent of that number were young minors). We crawled ourselves back through mud, near starvation, and grit only to see our subsequent 300-acre ranch in Arlington, Washington lost to foreclosure in the early part of this century. Yet we are not totally gone. Something valuable and bonding has emerged. The autopsy, revival, or evaluation is now in the hands of our writers and performers.

We are a people broken by court battles, foreclosures, our charismatic leader (and his death in 2016), and sagging spirits. Our cultural meaning and values have distilled to the basics: if you bonded to others in the community deeply then most likely you are still bonded even if separated by miles and generations.

Where once we actually dreamed of taking over Queen Anne Hill, now we are scattered by the winds of bankruptcy and infighting. Ours is a tale of caution and hope. Caution because our foundation did not protect the vulnerable in a concrete manner. Hope because there are many of us who are still linked by heart and social gathering and ceremonies.

In the late '60s Paul Erdmann, through a vision, renamed himself Love Israel and stopped everything non-essential in his life; he sat alone in a simple wood frame home in Seattle waiting for his people to "come home." Arrive they did. One by one through chains of friendship links, visions, gathering events such as the The Rainbow Gatherings, and what we termed "Love Patrols," our numbers grew to about 300 or more counting the casual visitors.

Once members began having children, community individuals began to reexamine themselves. What was an exciting, idealistic way of life as a single person became a pitfall as a parent. In addition, the drugs and substances that were elixirs to our hippie generation became the poison at the table of our growing personal family life. We were clearly destined to disintegration. It came in the form of betrayals, media hype, addictions, and abuses; the crash was painful and public.

One group stood up to our leader and left mostly as a united force when spurned. They remain close to this day. Some such as myself, for various reasons from loyalty, faith, or just plain stamina, remained. We also remain close to this day.

Any community, including mine, is defined, characterized, and remembered in history by those brave enough to break the silence and tell their story, their perspective. Here are links to a variety of stories about my community. Were we good? Evil? Mis-

guided? Dead? Alive?

Several insightful books are available written by women who were born into our Love Family and/or spent much of their childhood in our community:

Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family by Rachel Israel.

Completion by C. Abigail (Abbey) Pingree, our most prolific and recognized writer. Her articles have also appeared in *Huffington Post*, *Elephant Journal*, and *Rebelle Society*.

And of course what would our story be without a professor and historian who also wrote about us: **The Love Israel Family: Urban Commune, Rural Commune** by Charles Pierce LeWarne.

Here is a link to a performance in late 2019 by this author and a member of our younger generation that should also provide insights: youtu.be/tE2t_bKztcU.

Were we evil, good, misguided, still together, or deceased? Only those brave enough to write, perform, or create in a meaningful form of communication are the witnesses. You are the judges. 🌸

Understanding Israel holds a Masters in Education and has completed many hours towards her doctorate in Educational Leadership. She spent approximately 26 years in the Love Family mainly caring for the children. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest and is developing a stand-up comedy routine on her life.

Photos courtesy of Love Israel Family



Counterculture Crossover

By Rachel Israel

When the Love Family broke up in the mid-1980s, I was almost 15 and had spent the majority of my childhood growing up in community. I was raised communally, under the care of community caretakers, and home-schooled by designated communal teachers. The food and the clothes I wore were culturally appropriate to the norms and standards of my community. I slept each night in communal houses and then later tents and yurts on the communal farm. Everything about my social world, from how members behaved and related, I viewed from a communal lens. It was all I knew.

Then, suddenly, when I was almost 15, my community, the only family I had ever known, broke up, and I was thrust into the outside society. My life, as I had known it since early childhood, was over. I was a stranger in a strange land. There had been little interaction between my community and the outside world.

The culture shock was severe, and suddenly, I came to a profound understanding: the community I had been raised in was not “normal” but considered fringe or alternative, and wasn’t actually how most people lived. In the outside world, there was a much larger society with a completely different government, leaders, and laws. It was a very confusing and terrifying adjustment to have to make without the community supports I was used to. Once the community disintegrated, my former caretakers were no longer a part of my life.

In the community, communal ties were emphasized, so once living on the outside, I was taken care of by my biological parents. My mom had only had a peripheral role with children in my age group within the community, and she was going through culture shock too. I didn’t know my dad, because he had never been a member, and contact with outsiders in the community was limited.

High school was a harrowing experience. It was a lot of pressure to avoid social condemnation and ridicule from other kids who had no understanding of where I came from. Culture shock was the beginning of the rest of my life. Adult ex-members had

pieces to reassemble. They had the pieces of their former lives, their former identities; childhoods raised in secular, conventional families. I didn’t have any pieces to pick up. I was too young to remember much of my former life in the hippie counterculture. My family was gone, my school was gone, my friends and community were gone, and life as I knew it—was gone. The amazing and at times excruciating details of my life growing up in community and my experiences transitioning into the outside world are illuminated in my memoir, *Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family*. 🌿

Rachel Israel holds a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology and a Master’s degree in Counseling Psychology. She was raised communally in the Love Israel Family from age six to nearly age 15. Presently, she lives with her family on a small farm in the Pacific Northwest, working in the mental healthcare field and raising her two daughters. This past year, she published her first book, a memoir, Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family, available on Amazon.



Photos courtesy of www.newswire.com

Picking Up the Torch

By Chris Roth

Issue #185's "Seizing the Torch" (pages 38-42) described Maple Creek's near-collapse from an ill-advised torch-seizure, and promised a future article about the community's recovery. Space constraints do not allow that story to be told in its entirety here; instead, at the risk of promoting a "tell, don't show" philosophy (still preferable to "don't ask, don't tell" or "do as I say, not as I do"), here are key points this article would have made:

- A complete enough collapse of a community governance system that is not working provides ideal conditions for the birth or rebirth of something that does—including the resurrection of a past system that did, for the most part, work, with modification to meet new conditions and past shortcomings.

- When left to experiment, to engage in a process of trial and error, to take advantage of collective wisdom, a group rebuilding from collapse may well end up replicating elements of governance and culture that distinguished its pre-collapse success. This may happen even if the majority of the people involved in designing these new systems have no personal experience or even knowledge of the previous systems.

- When used with proper training and understanding, democratic decision-making and governance systems such as consensus and sociocracy are much more likely to result in a resilient community than systems that concentrate power in the hands of a few. This is especially true in an organization which attracts self-actualized individuals who distrust unearned power and question authority when it is not aligned with the common good.

- Clarity of vision and the ability to articulate it can be crucial in attracting what one wants in a community and its members, and discouraging what one doesn't want.

- Clear guidelines about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior in community can be essential in encouraging more of the former and less of the latter—especially in groups that are too large and fluid in membership to be able to rely on personal trust and connection to maintain a culture that works for all.

- Making room for each person's agency, providing ways for each individual to access roles that allow them to contribute to the group, can create a community of leaders rather than one fragmented into those with and without significant power or influence over group life.

- Especially when certain tasks or areas are delegated to smaller

groups or to individuals, transparency in decision-making and group process is essential in maintaining trust and connection.

- A healthy group incorporates practices and formats that encourage individuals to share honestly with each other, devotes time to building personal connections among members (both in organized well-being-focused meetings and in less formal settings), and makes self-disclosure and vulnerability not only an acceptable element of the group culture, but one that is valued. This approach creates more security in community than any amount of material improvement in circumstance (except when actual physical survival is threatened, in which case first things need to come first).

- It is possible to balance emotion and rationality, feeling and thought, compassion and fairness, adaptability and consistency, spontaneity and predictability, art and science, work and play, reassuring harmony and creative dissonance. A properly functioning group within a supportive structure organically self-corrects and balances itself out in all of these areas—not always in the moment, but over time. Groups learn from their mistakes and, when given an opportunity, improve in their ability to address both familiar and new challenges.

- Food—meals prepared for one another and eaten together—is a powerful bonding force. Frequency of and attendance at shared meals

often correlate directly with the amount of connection members of a community feel.

- "Progress" is not linear and it is always possible to slip back into patterns a group believed it had transcended, or to confront anew challenges it imagined it had left behind. But, especially when members stick around for the long haul, these patterns and challenges do become easier to address.

- Accepting the cyclical nature of community issues and the predictable fluctuations in community mood also becomes easier the more we experience them. Repetitions of patterns can provoke new or deeper insights; circling back around to something temporarily left behind may result in new appreciation. Despite his mirth-inspiring fight with Ezra Pound in the captain's tower, perhaps the poet had it right: the end of all our exploring may be to arrive where we started (or at least where we have already been) and know the place for the first time. 🐦



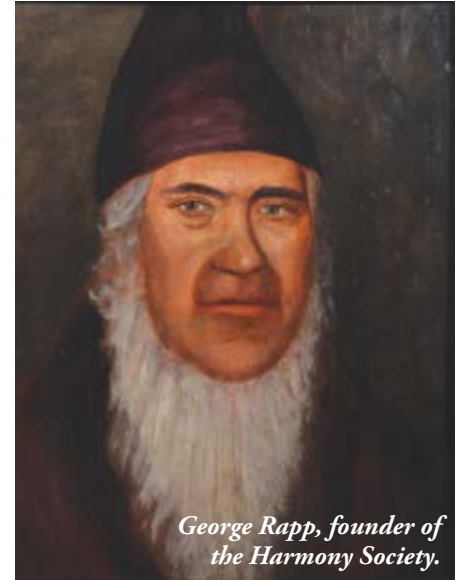
After the tribulations described in "Seizing the Torch" (COMMUNITIES #185), Maple Creek founder (not really) shows Fir Ridge founder (not really) how to go with the flow.

Chris Roth

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do (and Unpredictable)

By Tim Miller



What happens when a commune closes its doors? Lots of scenarios are possible, of course—staying closed, reorganizing and reopening, and watching members scatter to seek new communities (or give up communal living altogether) are all possible next steps, among others.

But sometimes it isn't that simple. Sometimes the breakup itself is aggravated by people whose intentions are less than noble. There are several cases on record in which bad actors have raided the communal treasury, or tried (and maybe succeeded) to take possession of the communal real estate. Breaking up is not only hard to do, but sometimes disastrous.

Here I am going to tell a true story from American communal history, the story of the tragedy that surrounded the closing of the Harmony Society. The Harmonists emerged among the Pietists of 18th-century Germany, fervently devout Protestants who found the dominant state church (Lutheran) too cold, lacking the burning spirit that they believed should drive the true Christian. As with many such uprisings, some Pietists sought to reform the established state church from within, and some separated from it and started their own religious movements. One of the Pietist groups that eventually became separatist was the Harmony Society, which took shape under the leadership of George Rapp, a commoner from Iptingen in the German province of Württemberg. Before he was 30 years old he publicly denounced the faults he detected in the official church and its rituals, including baptism and communion, and soon declared himself a prophet. By the turn of the 19th century thousands had come to follow Rapp's teachings.

In 1803 Rapp traveled to America to seek a new home for his following. With persecution increasing in Germany, more Rappites fled to the United States, where in 1804 Rapp secured land in Pennsylvania at a site he called Harmonie. Soon the Harmony Society officially entered into a communal economy. The community grew and prospered, but Rapp wanted the group to resettle in the West, and in 1814 they purchased 30,000 acres of land on the Wabash River in southwestern Indiana. There they built New Harmony, to this day one of America's most beautiful museum villages.

But Rapp was still not ready to settle down permanently. Possessed by millennial anxiety and mindful of the biblical image of the Sunwoman (Revelation 12) who fled into the wilderness, he decreed another move, this time to a site in Pennsylvania not far from the original Harmony. The relocation began in 1824. The new communal village was called Economy, and there the society settled into its final home. Economy became a village of nearly 1,000 members, a center of music and the arts and of learning, with a museum of natural history and a labyrinth whose tangled paths and dead ends pointed believers to the arduous path they had to tread before reaching paradise. But no matter how attractive this community was, and how committed its members were to their Pietist ideals, after a few years dissension began to surface. There were the kinds of personal conflicts all too well known to students of communal history, and for some, disillusionment with Father Rapp's leadership.

The most notable episode of conflict in Economy's first decade came with the arrival in 1831 of the self-proclaimed "Lion

of Judah” (actually one Bernard Mueller) from Germany, who had become convinced that he would be the leader of all the faithful when Christ returned, something that was due to happen almost immediately. Upon arrival Mueller took the name of Count de Leon, and, amazingly, managed to win Rapp’s endorsement. Rapp soon became disillusioned with the Count, but by then dissent was growing among the Harmonists, and when Mueller left, he took some 175 unhappy Harmonists with him, along with a large cash settlement. Mueller led his large group of former Harmonists to a series of communal settlements that finally closed in 1871. Shortly after Mueller’s departure some of his following became involved with yet another splinter group, headed by Dr. William Keil, who led them to Missouri, where they founded a new colony, Bethel. Two decades later Keil led some of his followers to Oregon, where they founded yet another settlement, Aurora. Despite this fracturing of the Rappites, Economy would endure until the early 20th century, even though its earlier unity had been shown to be tenuous. The demise of the Harmony Society was averted.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Society’s businesses and investments were so profitable that the Society’s fortunes mounted into the millions. The community’s onetime agricultural economy became based in oil, railroads, and other industries. Stories of Harmonist vaults of gold circulated for many years. George Rapp died at age 89 in 1847, but hundreds of members persevered. Nevertheless, because the Society’s members had, at Rapp’s insistence, taken a pledge of celibacy early on, eventually a decline set in; moreover, the Society had, with few exceptions, quit accepting new members. By the late 1880s members were few and aged. And then, in the face of what appeared to be the inevitable death of the community, several new members were admitted.

Gertrude Rapp (the founder’s granddaughter) and Jonathan Lenz, stalwart Harmonists, had kept the community faith alive until their deaths in the winter of 1889-90, but then the floodgates opened, probably because of the widespread rumors of Harmonist wealth. The membership of the seemingly moribund colony was reopened, and one of the first new members was John Duss, who had been a student in the Harmonist schools when his mother was a hired worker in the communi-

ty. Within a few months he managed to have himself appointed as one of the Society’s trustees, and when Jacob Henrici, who had been a close friend of George Rapp and after Rapp’s death a community member and trustee, died in 1892, Duss in effect became the absolute head of the community. He hired expert accountants and lawyers to transfer the communal assets, heretofore indivisible, to the private and personal ownership of John Duss. With control of the community’s considerable wealth, Duss sold community property and paid some members to leave. He proceeded to spend some of the Harmonist wealth on such ventures as national tours of an orchestra of which he was the conductor. His most spectacular venture was the building, at a cost of \$100,000, of a watery replica of Venice in Madison Square Garden in New York as a home for one season’s performances of the Metropolitan Opera.

The Harmony Society finally closed in 1916. Although Duss had seized the society’s personal property, including its financial resources, the real estate of the beautiful communal village was transferred to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Today it remains a museum village and the best memorial, along with New Harmony, of the amazing century of the Harmony Society.

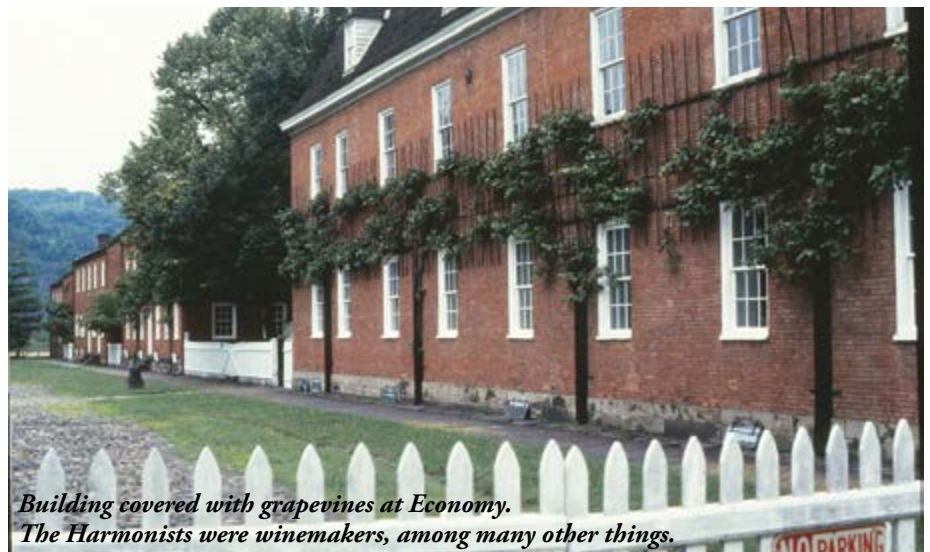
Duss later published his own version of the Harmonist history in *The Harmonists: A Personal History* (Harmonie Associates, 1940). But by then the Harmonist story was long over.

The story of Duss and the eviscerating of the Harmonist assets was not lost on other American communitarians. Several of the Shaker villages have put their properties into trusts, to preserve their built legacies, as they have closed. Although some of the Shakers have received new members, they have not let the property fall into the hands of possible scoundrels. America’s communal history is glorious, and even John Duss has not destroyed that legacy. 🍷

Tim Miller is a research professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas and a historian of American intentional communities, with a focus on the communities of the second half of the 20th century. His most recent book is Communes in America, 1975-2000, published by Syracuse University Press in 2019. An earlier volume in that series is The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond. Tim is also author of The Encyclopedic Guide to American Intentional Communities.



John Duss.



Building covered with grapevines at Economy. The Harmonists were winemakers, among many other things.

Putting the Hermitage Back Together

By Johannes Zinzendorf



The Hermitage in 2011.

The Hermitage broke down; we put it back together; and then we wrote about it. That summarizes our past few years at our Harmonist community in central Pennsylvania. (See also our previous COMMUNITIES articles “Creating Spiritual Community at the Hermitage,” issue #154; “The Hermitage Now and To Come,” issue #157; “Moving ahead at the Hermitage,” issue #169.)

The breakdown was not sudden but the culmination of years of issues that piled on until cofounder Zephram de Colebi and I simply couldn't take any more. We decided, like many Americans confronted with seemingly intractable problems before us, to flee to France; after all, it worked for Josephine Baker and James Baldwin.

The answer was that the France of our dreams—a quiet, thatched fisherman's cottage on the coast of Brittany—no longer existed. We were at least 50 years, and possibly a century, too late. I have an etching of the place I wanted; it's dated 1926. Talk about living in the past.

We found the entire northwest coast of France despoiled by condos, vacation homes of English ex-pats, and way too much traffic, people, and noise. You couldn't get away from it except by going inland, where there are plenty of old, available farmhouses for sale, but no one wants to live there, not even the French. We asked French youths where they wanted to go and the answer was, inevitably, “America!” This was BT, Before Trump, but I bet that, even now, the answer would be the same.

Still, something unexpected happened to us. Standing on the eastern shore of the Atlantic and looking back towards the US, our isolated, rural Pennsylvania valley didn't seem so bad after all. In fact, put in context of the France around us, it actually looked quite good. Maybe there really is no place like home, at least the home that one has made.

So we returned and started putting things back together, beginning with the realization that it was time to start afresh while making our original vision work in a new way. Our goal in 1988 was to create a sacred place where earth and spirit could unite in harmony and beauty, and where the spirit was visible.

That vision, which existed so clearly before us, was difficult for others to see, understandably since we lived in a barn on a barren, wind-swept hillside for two years until we dismantled an abandoned log cabin eight miles away and rebuilt it here. That got us out of the barn and we continued to move old structures to the property and rebuilt them for the community of brothers we knew were coming. Many did, but all eventually left, some voluntarily because it wasn't what they wanted or expected; others we asked to leave because they weren't what we wanted or expected. None ever matched the family of lovers and brothers with whom we wanted to spend our lives.

That was the beginning of the breakup. Fracturing continued as we tried various ways to make money from the land, including retreats, residences, and gatherings. Nothing worked, and we were increasingly depressed, which resulted in more fractures.

A terrifying series of vandalisms followed, and as a result we felt completely assaulted and violated. Our one consolation was that the perpetrators were apprehended, charged, and sentenced. And they weren't from this valley but from coal-mining towns beyond, so at least they weren't our neighbors, an illusion soon shattered by the horrific and brutal massacre of our pet turkeys by two young local men who wanted to hurt us by killing what we loved, and they succeeded admirably. That was when we decided to leave; that was the breaking point; that's when we fell apart. Identifying the culprits and publicly shaming and humiliating them was effective in our small, close-knit area, but it didn't bring back the dead. That particular trick I have yet to learn.

On returning to the valley, we were surprised and touched by the outpouring

Our innocence was gone but our commitment to protect our non-human family was stronger and deeper than ever.

of community support as many were horrified by the deed and wanted us to stay. Who knew?

But something was different; our innocence was gone but our commitment to protect our non-human family was stronger and deeper than ever. Our former desire for an exclusively human family was transformed into a broader understanding that this 63-acre piece of the planet was our family in a way we had never adequately understood before. We willingly assumed guardianship to sustain and nurture it.

However, we did want to share our story, which we actually started doing back in the 1990s with our first manuscript written, without irony, to tell how to start a community. Well, we did know how to start one—we had the vision thing down pat. We also knew how to physically build one, developed from years of moving old structures here and re-purposing them. Where we fell abysmally short was in not knowing how to successfully attract new members who shared our vision. It only became gradually apparent, and not that long ago, that we actually didn't want new members, at least not human members. Our community was successful at creating a family that included the land and everything that grew and lived here, like old engravings of Adam and Eve in the Garden surrounded by loving creatures, a place both paradise and family. No longer a monastic order, we now recognized ourselves as hermits and brothers of the spirit, incarnated as everything around us, both seen and unseen. As one of our hymns says, the Hermitage is an ark passing through time.

We rewrote the manuscript and submitted it to prospective publishers and literary agents without success. A large photo-memoir, a coffee-table type book, was a hard sell, especially by unknown authors. We realized we needed publicity and the visibility of public recognition, and what better way than an article in *The New York Times*? So we found a sympathetic staff writer who interviewed us and wrote a great article, with great photos, and it went viral as the most shared story of the day.

But to gain that popularity, we downplayed our spirituality. The reporter could only write what she was told and so we became little more than two rural gay men with a lot of stuff and a humorous story. That was a real mistake and readers didn't understand the real reason we were here. We attempted a fuller explanation to the many who contacted us, but it didn't match the story and made things hopelessly complicated.

Still, our 15 minutes of fame got us two potential publishers; one was a famous, major publishing house, while the other was a small, independent press we had never heard of. We sent the manuscript to both and the big publishing house immediately rejected it, disappointed that it wasn't an expanded version of the breezy *Times* piece.



The Hermitage in 1990.



Johannes with Nefretiti, the queen of our flock, 1991.



Photos courtesy of www.atthehermitage.org

The small press publisher was more encouraging, but with caveats: it needed lots and lots of work. We agreed and completely rewrote it three times following her suggestions. However, by the time the manuscript was polished, cohesive, and effective, the publisher ran out of money. We had a great book, but no one to print it.

We went back to sending submissions to dozens and dozens of literary agents. They have a hard job because, like a casting director, much of a literary agent's time is spent saying "No," politely of course. And that's where we are today. We've been through the list, it's a long list, and we've heard "No" so often it sounds like an echo chamber.

Still, we are not ones to mope, so our daily lives continue with ongoing projects. We've just finished rebuilding the outhouse from an abandoned one-room schoolhouse to go with our own one-room schoolhouse we moved here 25 years ago. We're also restoring a small, late-19th century general store/post office we moved from the nearby village that will provide new exhibit space for our collections, since the museum in the barn and three other exhibit buildings were full. (Upon returning from France, we had decided to turn the barn into a local history museum called the Mahantongo Heritage Center, emphasizing the self-reliance of the Pennsylvania Germans who settled here and whose descendants influenced us to learn self-reliance as well.)

We've been interviewed for a podcast on queer spirituality, and a short documentary has been made about the Hermitage. A much-anticipated feature film didn't get past the option phase; however, a play about us premiered in England without us even knowing it. A Google search for something completely different turned up that surprise.

In a reaction to the *Times* piece, we have started emphasizing our spirituality, both to the outside world and on a daily basis here at the Hermitage, with new hymns, new tracts, and a revived awareness of the immanent union of earth and spirit. We have also had the mature revelation that living in and staying in that union is not easy, as there is no magic wand or incantation to make us better people. When we slip, we really slip. But now we also understand that forgiveness is an important part of life, and it's the onward journey that's important.

Plus, we're aging! Who are those old men in the mirror? I refuse to acknowledge age, but it certainly acknowledges me. All things are passing; one beloved dog is gone, another is increasingly arthritic, yet a new puppy forces us to recognize that life continues, a fact I must acknowledge as he eagerly pulls me across the hay field.

The hoped-for family of human brothers disappeared as morning fog in sunlight, replaced by a new and expanded family that includes turkeys, ducks, chickens, geese, farm cats, and all those things that come around at night of which we, usually, remain blissfully unaware. The family includes the land itself with all its growing things. As I look up at the stars at night, I realize I am home because they are as much a part of me as I am of them—as well as multiple universes, simultaneous time lines, time going BACKWARDS in some of them. Bring 'em on. Bring 'em all on. Walt Whitman was right: we are vast; we do contain multitudes.

Connecting with the spirit, having it work through us, having it use us, is a daily journey

One beloved dog is gone, another is increasingly arthritic, yet a new puppy forces us to recognize that life continues.

through uncharted waters. No guidebook here. We move ahead with hope and courage because we are part of, well, everything. That is a life worth living.

And what is coming after our lives are done for the ark we have built around us? Zephram says it doesn't matter. Even if the land is sold and a new owner tears everything down and plants soybeans where buildings and trees now stand, Zephram says something will remain, an echo of what was here, shadows seen at a slant, words whispered in the ear, similar to those said of Camelot, that there once was a place where earth and spirit united in beauty and harmony, words hovering in the air for those who would hear. 🌿

Johannes Zinzendorf cofounded the Hermitage in 1988 and is coauthor of, among other works, The Big Book of Flax, published by Schiffer. Contact the Hermitage at 75 Grove Road, Pitman, PA 17964, www.atthehermitage.org, brojoh@yahoo.com.

COMMON HOME FARM: An Interfaith Catholic Worker Community

By Laura Lasuertmer



Photos courtesy of Laura Lasuertmer

Greetings from Common Home Farm, a newly formed Catholic Worker community that stewards 10 acres of land just north of Bloomington, Indiana. Our farm sits on Persimmon Ridge in the hills of southern Indiana, an area that the Miami, Shawnee, Delaware, and Potawatomi people used as their hunting grounds before their forced removal from the land. We recognize the Miami, Delaware, Potawatomi, and Shawnee people as past, present, and future caretakers of this land.

The more recent history of this land involves the Countryman family, and specifically Amy Countryman, who farmed the land organically for a decade, years ago. When she offered us the use of her land, she said she did not want to sell it. Ever. But we could join her in ownership as we worked to cultivate it and build community. With the help of a lawyer, we are figuring out the details of our collective ownership structure. I imagine we will be figuring it out for the better part of this year.

As many readers know, the work of starting a rural intentional community is immense. I spent much of the last year saying the words, “I can’t do this,” while simultaneously calling the planning department and organizing fundraisers. Doubt and determination wrestled for my attention. I found myself wondering why we had chosen a difficult journey for ourselves when we could have stayed in the warm embrace of the urban Catholic Worker community where we had lived for nine years. We didn’t have to move our family 10 miles outside of town, renovate a building, and begin tending 10 acres of land. Never before has a “normal” life—a steady job and a mortgage—looked more appealing.

But the vision and the journey matter. At the heart of what matters is creating community, being in solidarity with the marginalized, and tending the earth. In our move to the farm

we are figuring out what it means to live in community with the earth and all its inhabitants. This is challenging. It’s a challenge to trade people for plants and animals whose communication style is quieter and more subtle. While the work of the urban Catholic Worker house is intensely people-oriented, and it can make it appear that the rural Catholic Worker house is peaceful, relaxed, perhaps on a perpetual retreat, I have not found this to be true. If anything, I have found the challenges of the rural Catholic Worker, perhaps just because we are new to it, to be more daunting than what we faced in town. There is a large learning curve to rural life and there are more expenses, at least at the beginning. We have relied on our extended community to help us gather the resources and skills that we need to make it work on the land.

We have also relied heavily on the hope of our dreams. When we feel lost in the weeds, we keep the big picture in mind. We can see the giant sunflowers blooming, though we have not planted them yet. We can see the front field finally cleared of bamboo. We can see the pond filled with water deep and clear, though it has not yet been dug. Little by little we get better at enacting our visions. This last year, as a result of many daily efforts, we saw the “shed” become our new home. Even though it was full of clutter, dust, mice, and snakes, though it had no water or septic, we could see quite clearly that it was possible to convert the shed into a home. I think this is also why we choose the difficult journey rather than the easy one: in facing challenges we create our strength. In response to dreams, we create the world we want to leave for our grandchildren. 🌱

Laura Lasuertmer is a founding member of Common Home Farm, a rural Catholic Worker community near Bloomington, Indiana.

Who We Are: Common Home Farm is an interfaith community founded in the tradition of the Catholic Worker movement, with an emphasis on hospitality to strangers and guests, social and ecological justice, and spiritual transformation. You can read more on our website: commonhomefarm.org.

Live-in Members: David Watters and son, Huck (8); Laura and David Lasuertmer and children, Alice (7) and Leo (5).

In-town Members: Amy Countryman and Jeff Mansfield and children, Henry (13), Wendell (7), Auri (5), and Robin (5).



Dinosaurs, Asteroids, Gardening, and Community

By Chris Roth

In the past year alone, my tiny home caught fire, my laptop computer was flooded by hot water, a family member was hospitalized, a former community-mate had a stroke, I lost (temporarily) my sole source of income, the swath of older trees nearest to me was clearcut, chronic physical conditions became more obviously chronic, my favorite childhood sport was beset by scandal, plastic straws got popular again, belligerently this time, the foundations of democracy weakened further, and statistics about climate disruption, species loss, and the prospects for a livable human future on the planet became ever more dire. My home community lost some members, and some of those who stayed saw their intimate relationships end. On top of it all, despite a few bright spots, I saw some of the best minds of my generation destroyed by civilizational madness (or at least their insights, wisdom, and compassion largely drowned out in the modern cyber-dominated fray).

After enough decades on earth, it can be easy to conclude that:

- Love is always a prelude to loss.
- Success is a temporary stage on the path to failure.
- Wholeness is followed inevitably by shattering.

The nature of that loss, that failure, that shattering can differ from instance to instance. Sometimes the pieces of what was formerly whole may need to be let lie; the brokenness is a signal to set off on a different path. Sometimes the pieces can be picked up and what is broken can be mended, perhaps even made stronger. Sometimes the reality falls somewhere in between, or may in fact depend on how we respond to the situation.

There's another way to look at things too:

- Every love flows from loss.

- Every success is built on failure.
- Everything that's whole emerges from brokenness.

From this perspective, loss, failure, and shattering are *essential preconditions* to the emergence of new beginnings. This way of experiencing the world can feel equally true, equally powerful.

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That may be no accident: human beings, primates in general, and most other mammals—in fact most life forms as they exist today—owe their flourishing to the most cataclysmic shattering ever to befall life on earth: the asteroid impact 66 million years ago that brought an end to the Cretaceous, wiping out more than 99.9999 percent of all living organisms on earth, and 75 percent of all species entirely (including the dinosaurs, who up until then had kept our mammalian ancestors

in check). Without that unimaginable event of near-total destruction of life, I would not be around to read “[The Day the Dinosaurs Died](#)” in *The New Yorker* online (March 29, 2019), nor would Douglas Preston be around to write about it, nor would paleontologist Robert DePalma be around to decode that day’s events by exploring the KT layer at a dig in North Dakota. Nor would any of the trappings of civilization that allow us to be creating and you to be reading this magazine exist, let alone the intentional communities and other cooperative projects that are this journal’s focus.

Life obviously “picked up the pieces” after that asteroid impact, though it’s taken 66 million years for one species (ours) to achieve such an astounding level of success that we (like the dinosaurs, perhaps, before us) can be said to “rule the earth.” In fact, our success as a species is so massive that it’s starting to look a whole lot like failure. Our success is precipitating catastrophic collapse in the earth’s self-regulating mechanisms and our own life support systems, triggering the sixth great extinction and unprecedented climate chaos whose effects we are only starting to experience. Everything that we have loved is in real danger of being lost; every illusion of wholeness is in danger of being shattered. If this were happening only in our personal lives, that would be one thing. That it is happening on a species-wide, planetary scale is something else altogether.

Loss, failure, and brokenness is looking like the foundation on which we as human beings need to build whatever comes next—or perhaps, rather, the ground from which new possibility will spring, since we will likely need to be guided (by our connections to the whole) rather than to guide (by imposing preconceived notions on a world that is spiraling out of our control, out of our grasp, the more we try to dominate it).

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Contemplating a time scale of millions of years, or assuming a planet-wide perspective, can be enlightening but can also serve as an escape from dealing with the reality that is right in front of us. We can look at the “big picture” all we want,



without necessarily deriving wisdom about how it applies to the practical decisions we make in our own lives—how we ourselves live and relate when our focus returns to the only scale that we can really comprehend: that of our own human lives together.

In other words: how does this all relate to life in cooperative culture?

The same patterns that affect individuals, our species as a whole, and our planet manifest themselves in groups. The experience of loss, of failure, of brokenness is not significantly different when it happens within a group than when it is confined to an individual, a few individuals, or a family—or than when it is shared with a large portion of humanity or the biosphere. And our options for response are similar as well—although we may have substantially better odds of responding effectively in concert with (or with the support of) others, compared with our chances of dealing with these setbacks alone.

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For each of us, certain types of shattering can be particularly potent. For some in the modern world, intimate relationships hold the most joy and disappointment; they form the map, the home ground, on which happiness is measured in this time of widespread fragmentation. Communitarians may feel the same kinds of impact, the same swings between connection and disillusionment, from a broader range of relationships: within their home group; with their group as a whole; with their community land; and with certain projects and work about which they are passionate. Non-communitarians can feel those same strong attachments to certain groups, places, and vocations too—the difference is that in community, they more often come in a bundle, amplifying the potential for both wholeness and brokenness.

My own path through life has had more to do with purpose than with intimate connections. With few exceptions, my relationship with myself, the world around me, and how my own particular qualities, skills, interests, and passions can contribute to (or at least attune me to) a greater whole has been far more of a guidepost in my relative sense of fulfillment than whether I have managed to meld interpersonally with someone else. As a consequence, I am especially vulnerable to outside circumstances that can throw a wrench into my accustomed ways of fulfilling my particular purpose.

The cessation of a work role or project I am involved in (within or outside of community) can be for me not merely an inconvenience, a temporary economic setback, or a logistical hurdle to overcome, but instead a minor or major existential crisis. I am unclear on why this is, although the first times I remember feeling unexcited about life and unclear

about my place in it (a generalized “blah,” at least in the moment) were coming home as a freshman in high school with nothing apparently better to do immediately after school than watch an hour of bad television. Fortunately, I soon discovered purpose and a tribe through the cross-country and track teams, and through connections with equally out-of-place-and-time fellow students immersed in academia. But this sense of purpose, connection, and fulfillment seem to have been absolutely dependent on activity and on my roles. Since then, the most difficult times in my life have happened when my accustomed work and roles have fallen away or been taken away, either by others or by circumstance.

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Enough time has passed since one such instance of loss that I seem able, finally, to write about it. In doing so, I’ve discovered that reflecting on it helps me come to grips, as well, with similar experiences of loss and change that both preceded and followed it.

“Seizing the Torch” (COMMUNITIES #185) described the Fir Ridge community’s ordeal with its charismatic founder, whom most of us experienced as wielding unhealthy amounts of power before his departure. But that founder’s eviction did not mark the end of the group’s dysfunctional dynamics.

Trying to model and educate about radically different approaches to ecological living than was mainstream at the time (or even now) came with its own set of challenges.

For one thing, we participants were all molded by mainstream culture before landing at Fir Ridge; we couldn’t escape its influence entirely even if we wanted to. Even in its less hard-core version following the visionary founder’s ejection, our way of life was so far beyond a “Recycling will save the world” mentality that it still could cause the average American consumer to run the other direction. We all had strong ideas about the way things “should” be done—almost as strong, in many cases, as the founder’s previously sacrosanct ideas—and now that our own ideas could be ascendant, they caused internal divisions in a group notoriously strong on visionary world-changing ideas and technologies but short on interpersonal and group relationship skills.

We were better at communicating the benefits of rocket stoves and hayboxes than we were at communicating among ourselves. Each of us, passionate about our own area of work, found ourselves to varying degrees siloed within our own spheres of activity.

We ran a three-month-long ecological living apprenticeship program, with separate sessions in Spring, Summer, and Fall. Apprentices typically spent half or more of

their course time each week (i.e., at least five or six half-days) working and learning in the organic vegetable gardens, with the rest of their time divided between appropriate technology and ecoforestry. As organic garden coordinator and teacher of the gardening portion of the program, I found that my work was my life. I lived, breathed, and dreamed the garden and the gardening program. I was responsible for from six to 12 apprentices, as well as one to three garden interns, and for making sure the gardens grew all the vegetables (and much of the fruit) we consumed on site (we didn’t buy off-site produce). Understandably, everything else was secondary for me. Per my own choice, I was fully consumed by my role.

Other staff members, too, were focused on their individual departments, but because they had the apprentices an average of one day a week rather than three, they also had more time and energy to spare. At the end of most days, I went for a walk alone and then retreated to my cabin. Fundamentally an introvert, I needed to recharge after full days of engagement and extroversion-for-a-cause (education and food-growing). I knew I was giving the role my all and never questioned my place there. Others, however, tended to gather for dinner and socialize afterwards, as well as on free weekends when I also often kept to myself and might still be found in the gardens. On one weekend outing involv-



I went through a number of days of feeling mostly devastated; unable to talk at times, physically shaking as I deconstructed the cabin I'd been living in.

ing a staff member and some of the apprentices, the conversation turned to the somewhat single-focused garden manager and his particular eccentricities, and some jokes, including deprecating ones, were made at his expense. Since other staff members rarely if ever stepped into the gardens or witnessed the educational program there, the story that emerged from that conversation seemed to hold particular sway as being representative of how the program participants felt.

The apprentices making those jokes later apologized for the fallout, which included my dismissal as garden manager by a staff group organized by the group's *de facto* leader (who had, in essence, replaced the ejected founder). This individual believed that I was too out of step with others to continue to be a viable garden manager, and reported to me that the apprentices had given me "bad grades." This staff group had met in private without informing me of the concerns or allowing me to respond. Ironically, they handed me the news *after* they'd distributed a questionnaire to the apprentices asking for their feedback on our educational programs, but *before* they'd received the apprentices' responses.

I could not believe what I was hearing, as I was engaging every day with all of these apprentices, working tirelessly to teach them as much as I could about gardening and to maintain a thriving garden for the community as a whole. I felt I had a positive personal connection with every one and that, despite my gardening mania, I did not place undo work expectations on them, but accepted what each could contribute; my worst offense may have been taking them on multi-stop field trips that were so full of experiences that not much of the day was left when we returned. All I knew was that I was giving my all; it was a shock to have it seemingly taken away from me.

The staff assured me that I could stay around, continue to live at Fir Ridge, write, edit the group's newsletter, etc. From my perspective, this reflected such a lack of understanding of my passions in life that I finally recognized that this leadership group could not possibly be my "tribe." The process behind my discontinuation as garden manager exemplified

such a different way of making decisions, communicating, and treating one another than that which I valued and wanted in my own life, that I knew immediately I needed to leave, not stay around as they'd invited me to.

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It was simultaneously reassuring and further maddening to read the results of the apprentices' actual assessments of our educational program when they came in a few days later. Organic gardening earned an overall satisfaction rating of (as I recall) 3.7 on a scale of 0 to 5; ecoforestry received a grade of 3.9; appropriate technology, 4.2. Many positive comments were made on the evaluation forms about all three courses. The fact that up to a dozen apprentices could spend more than half of their week working and learning in the garden, in inherently demanding physical conditions, and still rate their satisfaction so close to that for the less physically demanding, more focused and time-limited classes in areas where one day's work is not subject to being undone by the next day's weather or pests, seems in retrospect a minor miracle.

News of my dismissal was met with a semi-rebellion on the part of some of the apprentices, a few of whom apparently issued scathing critiques of the process to other staff upon their departure. While the *de facto* leader remained firm in his opinion, some other staff members seemed to start to consider that a mistake may have been made, and expressed regret to me. But for me the betrayal of trust, and my apparent invisibility to some of my peers, had a feeling of finality to it. Moreover, the decision had already been made, and one of the garden interns was already set to replace me.

I went through a number of days of feeling mostly devastated; unable to talk at times, physically shaking as I deconstructed the cabin I'd been living in (as mandated by the County, who'd been cracking down on unpermitted structures—a different story, and another facet of this challenge-filled place). Fortunately, I already had a fall-back plan, which I'd considered a couple times before. I would move to Maple Creek, where a culture of transparency, honesty, connection, commitment to true community seemed to hold sway—inoculating it, in my estimation, from the kind of imbalanced workaholism and silo-ing in individual departments that was a way of life at Fir Ridge.

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Within a few weeks, I had left my home of the past three-and-a-quarter years (and, all told, of half of the previous 11, including several previous residency stints





there), and moved to my new home, where I swore to start over—to never again become so associated with my work role that the prospect of losing it would so profoundly undermine my sense of well-being and purpose. I was determined *not* to be the sole garden manager in my new location, to hold back from taking on too much responsibility.

I wanted to develop the other parts of myself as a human being that I'd neglected or deliberately held back in the interests of mere survival at Fir Ridge, where our culture made little room for vulnerability, the honest sharing of emotion, or attention to communication processes. At Fir Ridge, the standard for interpersonal connection, the best we dared to hope for (as enunciated by the *de facto* leader at the time), was, "If we don't kill each other, if we can *tolerate* each other, we're doing OK." And in fact, this (murder or the threat of it) was our actual line in the sand: the two people who were required to leave during my final couple years there had each threatened to kill another person in the group. (I was on the receiving end of one of these threats, for bringing attention to violations of our smoking policy—not imagining that my chances of dying through secondhand smoke might be eliminated in one fell swoop by a maul-wielding smoker, if he had his way. This episode created its own tobacco-related residue in my inner world—again, a separate story.)

By the time of the events I've described, Fir Ridge was no longer describing itself to the outside world as an intentional community, but rather as an ecological-living research and education center, although this didn't change the fact that we were living and working together as a community. By contrast, Maple Creek consciously and deliberately embraced its identity as an intentional community, while also being just as active as an educational and conference center. Whereas Fir Ridge distinguished itself by a laser-focus on matters of physical sustainability, Maple Creek took a much broader approach, with personal, interpersonal, and social sustainability in the mix of our focus as well. Spiritual retreats, personal growth workshops, well-being meetings, group songs before meals, "calling in the spirits" before meetings, and multi-generational community that welcomed families and children—these were all unheard-of at Fir Ridge, but core parts of the culture at Maple Creek.

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Given my experiences at Fir Ridge, even I had started to conclude that, after 10 three-month rounds of apprentices and a couple previous years being the main

gardener/garden educator at Fir Ridge, my days of teaching organic gardening and coordinating community vegetable gardens might be over. I initially wanted to dissociate myself from being a gardening maniac; I felt that this "must not be who I was," for me to get such shocking feedback and such an unanticipated result from my previous efforts.

Yet, despite my initial expectations when I joined my new community, I ended up coordinating gardens at Maple Creek for the following dozen years, dwarfing the time I put in at Fir Ridge. For the majority of those years, usually in conjunction with other staff members and/or interns, I taught similar-sized groups of apprentices—but this time, they were with us almost every day, not just for half the week. For all but one of those dozen years I was working with one, two, or three garden interns, even in those last several years when we'd stopped offering garden apprenticeships in favor of higher-priced, more academically-focused programs.

Ultimately, both for me and for Maple Creek, this position and this program ran its course. After much membership turnover at Maple Creek, through which work was one of my only constants, I again became siloed in that gardening role, found myself less connected to other community members, encountered physical challenges resulting partly from overwork, and ultimately concluded I needed a major change (even as the community was recasting how it wanted to hold its gardens—de-emphasizing education in favor of simple food production). I finally decided to leave not only the Maple Creek gardens, but Maple Creek itself, for reasons extending far beyond my increasing need for a new work role (again, see "Seizing the Torch," COMMUNITIES #185).

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This transition, a dozen years after my departure from the Fir Ridge gardens, was another shattering of sorts (though a slower one), and I have never since returned to a role of being garden coordinator and garden teacher. However, despite the earlier apparent move to retire me as a gardener but keep me in a community, I had spent many additional

years engaged in work that I felt passionate about until very near the end of it—buoyed by a much healthier community support system and culture.

In a further irony, my replacement at Fir Ridge reportedly fell into similar siloed patterns to the ones I'd experienced there, as did most subsequent garden managers—and was subject to similar derogatory behind-the-back talk by other staff members (though this time I heard some of it directly). The problems there seemed systemic, not personal to those of us who took on high-responsibility jobs—except in the sense that our particular ardor to change the world through our chosen passion and role opened us up to investing so totally in an ultimately uncertain enterprise that a crash was inevitable for each of us.

And when our time in each of these places came to an end, we each needed to pick up the pieces in our individual lives, rediscovering or molding an identity separate from the gardens and the work with which we'd become so enmeshed. Those of us who left our community as well in this transition (because of job burnout or because of other conflicts or changes in us or the group) had even more pieces to pick up.

For those of us who identify so strongly with the work we do and the communities and movements we participate in—who don't feel "ourselves" unless we are in roles that align with our senses of purpose and passion—this loss or change of role can feel almost like death. As every gardener knows, death and material transformation within the living world are the basis of all new life, but this does not necessarily make the processes of displacement and loss any easier when a cherished activity, role, and specific purpose fall away.

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The trials and tribulations described above seem in some ways as real as yesterday, still carrying some emotional importance as I finally revisit them through this writing decades later. Simultaneously, they seem so cosmically insignificant as to be comical.

Why are human beings so consumed and pained by questions of purpose?

Why are we plagued by senses of failure, loss, and brokenness—often struggling to avoid them at all costs? What is so important that its shattering leaves us so devastated, and picking up the pieces so essential and/or challenging? And conversely, what keeps us persisting, not giving up, when confronted by adversity? What allows a new day to dawn for us after a dark night of the soul?

As I contemplated stories I might share on the theme of this issue, I was struck by *how many* I might tell—not just in the context of community, but in life in general. Nearly every major change in my life seems to have involved picking up the pieces after one loss or another, one shattered dream or another, one uninvited or unanticipated transition or another, even if I have resisted feeling the full weight or gravity of what has been lost (often involving a much wider sphere than just my own life). In some cases—the most difficult cases—something has been lost beyond recovery, whether that is a person I have loved, a place that has been desecrated, a way of life that will never be fully reconstructed, a physical capacity or sense that I had hitherto taken for granted and that has proven incapable of being healed or restored, an innocence or trust that everything will work out OK.

Many of our activities and our efforts are clearly going to result in ultimate "failure." Yet the successes on the path to failure still seem to hold lasting value to us, even if we spend more time being incapable than being capable. The Satchel Paiges of the world notwithstanding, most professional ballplayers retire before the age of 40. Most organic garden coordinators I knew in positions similar to mine (combining full-time hands-on manual garden work with managing and teaching apprentices) seemed to retire even earlier, finding more lucrative and less physically punishing lines of work, usually by their mid-30s. Through the grace of community, I continued another dozen years in that kind of role, hopefully with more positive than negative results. When I was ready to let those particular pieces rest, rather than picking them up again, other pieces were waiting for me to pick up. Some of them came to me only in the emptiness of being without familiar purpose and without familiar roles.

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Why am I driven to write thousands of words about a personal "asteroid crash" that created the conditions for what was to follow in my own life, but which only a few dozen people experienced directly and personally—while allocating fewer than 200 words in this article to a cataclysmic event that affected all life on the planet, forever? A good question...to which I can only say:

My understanding of life may come only in bite-sized pieces. The "asteroid crash" for me at Fir Ridge, which seemed like a tragedy at the time, actually led me to a life in which I was much happier, often in unanticipated ways. Among other things, it provided Maple Creek with adequate qualified staffing to publish a community- and eco-focused journal with which I took on a role that prepared me to edit another, longer-lived magazine—itsself not immune to "asteroid crashes," as I was to discover. I've learned the value of trying to pick up the pieces, even if ultimately, all things must pass, including our major and minor personal dramas and (though we may prefer not to think about it) every person, place, or thing we hold familiar, at least in their current forms. There may be no permanent solution or salvation from the losses ahead for each of us individually and for us collectively, on the small or large scale.

And at the same time, for some strange reason, all does not seem pointless to me, at least as long as we're able to share our stories with one another, discover new ways of looking at life, find connections where we didn't know they existed, find joy in the midst of challenge and pain. It continues to be true: something is happening here, and we don't know what it is. 🐦

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.

The Hope in Breaking

By Laura Killingbeck

We all live with each other. We all walk the same earth and wake to the same sun. In a crowd of seven billion, we all identify as humans. In seven degrees of separation, I know you.

And we also live with just ourselves. Each individual is by definition alone. No one ever really knows what goes on inside anyone else, and then each of us dies.

So this question of how to live in community is one that expands both outward and inward. We are all deeply connected and also very much alone and this is a paradox that happens all at once. The question of how to live together is also a question of how to be alone with just ourselves.

I was born in 1985, five years before the invention of the world wide web. My generation grew up in a time of extraordinary change. In grade school we did our homework by flipping through encyclopedias, and then there were no more encyclopedias. The Twin Towers fell, icecaps melted, priests were put on trial. People got smartphones and friends became virtual. Things that had always been there disappeared, and things that we always believed in fell apart. The force of these changes continues to move us faster, faster.

In my own life I have dealt with this by exploring. When I was 18 I stuck out my thumb and got into any car that would take me somewhere. Doors opened and strangers carried me, zigzagging the US, bouncing rutted roads across Mexico. I deck-handed sailboats across the Sea of Cortez, jumped a freight train to Guadalajara. I knew that if I loved people hard enough nothing could go wrong. This did not always work but I

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re-invent the world
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create something
no one had ever
created before.**



Photos by Laura Killingbeck



I developed a strange, subtle nausea. It sat inside me like a dark ball and ate away at the best parts of who I was.

never stopped believing that it would.

In the years that followed I just burned through life. It was easy to become a part of whatever surrounded me, and in this way I moved through many identities. I was a university student; a Las Vegas showgirl; a trekking guide; a superhero mascot; a sawyer. I rode my bike across Canada, hitchhiked down to Panama. In a world of change I became a particle of motion, and this sustained me.

Then when I was 24 I stepped into a new reality. I was in rural Central America with my boyfriend, and one day we found ourselves on a dusty road in front of an unmarked gate. We peered inside, trying to figure out if it was the place we were looking for. And it was—it was exactly the place we were looking for. We went in, and it changed our lives in a way nothing else ever had.

Technically The Branch¹ was an education center and an intentional commu-

nity, but really it was a wild dream come to life. The air itself seemed to be full of something, an energy that pulled you in. People laughed and smiled and helped each other. There was a feeling that we could do anything, that we could re-invent the world and ourselves and create something no one had ever created before. Fascinating people drifted in and out, or stayed for long stretches of time.

My boyfriend and I stayed, and became co-directors for almost nine years. We created and directed new programs, designed food systems, and taught thousands of people about sustainable food and agriculture. The Branch gave me the confidence to imagine new possibilities and create new realities. It became my home and it became who I was.

But as the years passed something else began to happen inside of me. I developed a strange, subtle nausea. It was a thing that sat inside me like a dark ball and it was also a thing that ate away at the best parts of who I was. I did not know what was going on. I thought there was something wrong with me. Over time the feeling grew and grew and grew until there was no escape.

This community that I loved, and these men that I adored, struggled with the same problems of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination that are now surfacing all around the globe. These behaviors festered in the way we worked and played and made decisions; they erupted as a series of serious incidents and an inability to acknowledge or address them. These behaviors affected me deeply and directly. It was not a little thing. It was a big thing, and even before I could articulate this, I felt it, and it ate me.

At first I thought these behaviors were genuine mistakes in judgment. I believed that people “just didn’t realize” what was happening. So I threw myself into understanding gender and power dynamics. I brought in resources, taught workshops, hired a facilitator. But the harder I fought to bring us together and keep us growing as a community, the less social power and influence I seemed to have. People who previously valued my perspective suddenly questioned its most basic cogency. Education about gender and power was met with denial, retaliation, and gaslighting. Instead of alleviating my nausea, this experience drew it into a sharper point; working to keep us together as a group became one of the loneliest experiences I’ve ever had in my life.

I lived in this community for seven years before the Harvey Weinstein case broke. And I will never forget the moment when I read that first article. I was sitting at the kitchen table and as I read the story my body began to tingle. Everything that had been lodged deep inside my gut suddenly seemed to be out there, on my skin. I put down the paper and looked around the room. Even though I was alone, I felt as if I no longer was. And I still remember my first thought so clearly: *Finally, someone told. Finally someone told the secret.*

Someone said the thing we all knew but no one could talk about. That this is happening. That this is happening and it matters.

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Weinstein was a crack in a dam, and as the dam started to break I was hopeful. In the months that followed I was sure that this new information, the new stream of voices and stories and perspectives would change all of us. I thought it would help us reckon with the incidents that had already happened in our community. But it didn't. It didn't change the way people thought about the past, and it didn't change their behavior moving forward. Two years later I sat, ashamed, as I listened to the people I respected and loved cling to the same strange denial that people everywhere still cling to:

It happened, but it didn't really happen.
It happened, but it didn't matter.
This is just a witch hunt.
The good work I do nullifies my bad behavior.
Men can't help it, it's biological.
If you talk about this you will hurt everyone.

This was a radical, forward-thinking community. I respected these people and I believed in them. But as time passed, I had to face a truth that I did not want to face. This community was not going to change. I could not make this community change. And therefore this was something I could no longer be a part of.

So I left. I left behind my home, my garden, my job, my business, my boyfriend, my community. I left behind the trees I had planted and the programs I had created. We had no legal documents so when I left I forfeited nine years of investment. Previous agreements about co-ownership and finances languished or disappeared. It was the biggest failure of my life.

In the scheme of a larger story the economics of this loss weighs heavily. When women stand, we often stand to lose a lot. And thus the tilted scale tilts further. I watched as my



work was quietly subsumed by the same thing I no longer wanted to be a part of.

But to understand this moment of exit you also have to understand that I would have given everything away anyway. I didn't work at The Branch for the money. I worked at The Branch because I believed we were being the change we wanted to see in the world. Losing that belief broke me. It broke me at the core of who I was in a way I did not know how to fix. Something about everything had gone wrong.

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Patriarchy is a social and political system that is male-identified, male-dominated, and male-centered. Patriarchy outsources power to men and care to women. It replicates itself through our personal and professional relationships, organizational structures, and identities. It becomes us in ways that are difficult to see and let go of. It becomes us in ways we never intended.

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When I left The Branch I no longer existed as a coherent person; but rather, as a group of fragments that didn't make sense. I didn't know how to think or feel or speak about anything. I didn't know who I was.

Friends gathered me up and took me in. They listened to me and cooked for me and housed me and hugged me. People I

knew and people I didn't know showed up and showed kindness. And this is, of course, the weird miracle of humanity. That even when you are a pile of nothingness, people still figure out how to hug you.

Shortly afterwards I received a writing fellowship in a nearby town. The town was called *Concepción*—conception, the place of new beginnings. It was all rainforest, real and big and wild, with no stores or facilities. For the next four months I lived in a tiny cabin on the side of a mountain overlooking the jungle. My plan was very basic. Every morning I would wake up and walk to the top of the mountain. I would sit there in the dark, watch the sun rise, and write. I would write about what had happened and why it mattered.² Every day I would write until the stories made sense again.

The difficult part of this scenario was of course myself. To write a narrative about one's own experiences requires a perspective of ownership. You have to believe in yourself enough to own a certain essential element of your own identity. And broken people don't have that. I didn't have that. All I had were my fragments, so this is what I focused on. I centered on the scattered pieces of who I was.

However, I quickly found that these pieces of myself did not float freely. When I examined them closely I found each one connected to a longer thread. These threads wound down and deep; they tangled themselves into knots; they led to unexpected places. The threads were all the stories that I told myself and believed in. And as they tangled themselves downward they also tangled me back in time. They were every experience I had ever had, and every lesson I had ever been taught about who I was and who we are together. They ran like nerves, like balls of twisted yarn, like strings of a harp. I could see them, I could feel them, and they were me, all at the same time.

Every day I sat on that mountain and I sorted the fragments and I followed the threads down, down into the deepest parts of who I was, into all the nooks and crannies I did not want to see. I opened doors that had been long shut. I saw things about myself that I did not like. Sitting on that mountain and sorting through those threads was the most terrifying thing I have ever done in my life.

Patriarchy is so deeply embedded in our identities that to rebel against it means to rebel against ourselves. This rebellion is a reckoning with the way we do power, the way we do care, and the way we understand human connection at its core. This reckoning is terrifying because as it draws us closer to the foundations of who we are, it also exposes our deepest fears about what that might actually be.

Being a good girl means that men come first. Men choose first and talk first, and when men get upset I soothe them. When they are insecure I build them up. Being a good girl means I smile and nod when men tell the story. It means I laugh at the jokes that men think are funny. Being a good girl means that I protect the men I love by letting them





tell the story the way they want to tell it.

Eventually the threads and fragments began weaving into coherent narratives. And as they did, I finally started writing from a perspective that felt like my own. But even though this moment felt real, it did not feel good. The realization, “My story is no longer under his power,” was also the realization, “His story is no longer under my protection.” Empowerment felt the same as abandonment. And this led me to a terrible possibility: that telling my own story meant that I really didn’t care about the men I loved.

This was the worst of all the possibilities, because it pointed straight at me. What if I was wrong? What if this whole situation was all just my problem, my fault, my own inability to care? What if the bad thing was me, and had been me all along? The possibility of it felt deeply, devastatingly real, and it blocked me in a way I could not sidestep.

So I renounced myself to face this fear and find this monster that was me. I called forth all of my worst threads, and I followed them down into the depths of my own bad behaviors and bad decisions. I followed them into memories of lies I had told and people I had hurt. I followed them into rooms full my own deceptions. The farther I went, the worse it got, until I knew that if I went any further, I was going to find it—I was going to find the core of the most terrible thing about myself.

I went to that place. But what I found was not the beast that I had expected. Instead it was a soft warm animal, full of light. It was a creature that wanted to hug and be hugged. And when I saw this small thing suddenly all of my fragments and all of my threads knit themselves together in a way that made me think, oh. Oh, here I am. And here you are too.

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Patriarchy is just a big pile of rubbish. It’s a bunch of trash stories. Our society is filled with these trash stories and our brains and bodies are filled with these trash stories. These stories scatter their little trash fragments down into our identities and our businesses and our relationships. They tangle their trash threads into the way we do power and the way we do care. We feel them on the inside and they feel as if they are us. But they are not. They are not us. Beneath all the trash we are human. We are warm hairy animals who are full of light. And this is what makes us so alone, and this is what makes us so connected, and this is why breaking is so terrifying and also so very hopeful.

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We are connected inside and out by patterns: patterns of thought, patterns of behavior, patterns of feeling. These patterns expand inward and outward and they link us in a great paradox of being. We are alone but we are together. We are hurt but we are healing. The same way we heal alone is the same way we heal together.

This essay is a love letter to all the men and women and folks I have ever loved. And it is also a love letter to myself. It is permission to tell my own story from my own perspective. It is permission for all of us to speak, to listen, and to feel. And this is the change that I want to be in the world. 🌸

Laura Killingbeck has spent most of her adult life in community. She writes frequently on the themes of gender, adventure, and ecology. You can connect with her on Instagram at @laurakillingbeck.

Resource:

“Sexual Misconduct in the Sphere of Power: The Nexus of Gender, Intimacy, and Discrimination,” pages 17-23 in *COMMUNITIES #183* (see gen-us.net/back-issues).

1. Some names have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy of individuals.
2. Some of this writing was later published as the essay, “Sexual Misconduct in the Sphere of Power: The Nexus of Gender, Intimacy, and Discrimination,” pages 17-23 in *COMMUNITIES #183*.

The Last Punks of Dupont Circle

By Bryan Allen Moore

I was having a difficult time writing this article because of the conceptual restraints imposed by the disintegration of my home, at least as it was casually egalitarian. The theme of this issue, Picking Up the Pieces, seemed timely and surely other authors appearing within also struggled from having to write from a position of despair.

Like the Boiling Frog, I have been stunned by ineffectual, apathetic attitudes and the individuals who no longer support a sense of community. It was almost as though one morning I awoke and realized that the agreements and traditions of the past were truly gone (this was not just a passing impression), and parties who used to care for our physical structure were simply not going to do this anymore.

We have been trying to get the owner of our property to fix the brick facade of the building since March 2019 but they and their physical property manager have been unresponsive, both disappearing for months at a time. On August 23, 2011, an earthquake in DC damaged our building; over the years since, it has been patched but never fully repaired. We are at the point in the cycle where the owner would step up to do this work in the past.

The member of our community tasked as liaison to the owner has become distant and passive, as opposed to actively advocating for us as tenants. For example, I found it difficult to arrange a face-to-face meeting with this roommate—it took three weeks—and when we finally met in the end of September they could not take 10 minutes away from video games to speak to me about the exterior and interior of the house collapsing, or the lack of communication with the owner and their maintenance staff. It is December and I am still waiting to hear back from them about, among other things, my bedroom wall collapsing. As an author my catharsis is this public document, or how I have perceived the failures of others to fulfill their responsibilities within our informal arrangement. Writing is a way to process my own failures within our community and instead of attempting to exonerate myself I will try to pass on the lessons I am being taught.

This article picks up immediately after the story shared in COMMUNITIES #177 (Winter 2017). One week after extolling the virtues of my (un)intentional community we were served with a \$5,000 fine for running a for-profit, 400-person capacity concert hall. This crackdown was part of a larger operation conducted city-wide by the DCRA (Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs) that targeted several DIY house venues throughout Washington DC. Though we were able to get the charges dismissed, in hindsight this six-month-long process marked the end of the golden years.

An important part of our community has always been sharing the privilege of our generous space. Unlocking our doors and inviting the public to see our friends make art or put in labor towards progressive causes has not been without consequences. Hosting parties and living with acquaintances is not necessarily a useful component to build community. As the most senior tenant, perhaps I have allowed our selection and accountability processes to deteriorate.

Several years ago I was given some advice that is often present in my mind. In communities, sensitive people who feel opposition from others will likely move on, whereas insensitive members stay put despite resistance or criticism. The emergent property is a situation where stubborn people have a negative influence on the whole

As our building crumbles and our community withers down to the most limited definition of a group house, I have been forced to reorient my thinking about what community means to me.

group. I can look back and see ways that I have contributed to this but I do not think it is possible to get here alone. In our home, the gradual erosion of the formal structure (i.e., chores) has caused the “we” in “we take care of this house” to break down to the point where our original, verbal tenant agreement has been breached.

In 1997, Michael I. Niman wrote the book *People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia* and introduced The Drainbow. I understand this term is often used in a derisive manner, but I would like to adapt it to illustrate a point. Attracted to leftist communities because we hold acceptance and tolerance as core values, these individuals as either housemates or guests are more commonly known as freeloaders. Hospitality and community are the antithesis of capitalism and consumerism. When hospitality is expected or taken for granted it becomes a drain on that community and when this behavior is institutionalized in the form of a new tenant, the percentage of the home they represent will at best be a black hole sucking up resources.

Allow The Drainbow every opportunity to contribute and find their useful or appropriate skills, but if they are insensitive to these requests it will be extremely difficult to make it clear that their behavior won't be tolerated in the long run. In the short five years I have been exposed to various intentional communities, it has been my experience that without an ironclad agreement that contains legal mechanisms to force behavior, apathy and deflection are the most effective ways to destroy an egalitarian environment. Though I have pressed the issue in discussion with peers outside my home, we have not yet solved this bad actor dilemma.

Even our charitable works were not immune to the indifference created by taking our hospitality for granted. The Washington DC chapter of Food Not Bombs had cooked in our kitchen for more than four years, directly benefiting from not only the space provided by our home, but my organization and fundraising initiatives. Our kitchen was open nearly every Saturday for the past four years and I personally have raised over \$10,000 for this organization with fundraisers.

One evening in the late spring, members who stayed late to wash dishes neglected to keep the entry doors shut and allowed entry to two or three rodents. Every surface was contaminated by their presence, including cookware and containers. I would not take responsibility for making 30 or 40 individuals ill, who relied on the food we prepared every week, and so I forced the move to a new, temporary location. After we resolved the intrusion there was still the issue of the contamination. I solicited help and was regarded with silence and have been discouraged by the narrative being spread that I had kicked the chapter out of my home. When there was work to be done outside of

socializing over the chopping of potatoes, it became easier to scapegoat me than pick up a mop.

This is part of something that I have experienced over the years and have come to call The Activist Promise—enthusiasm for shaping the world in your own image creates a condition that I would like to connect to the tech writer Linda Stone and her concept of Continuous-partial Attention. Committing equal energy to multiple progressive causes with which you resonate will inevitably divide your time in a way that makes it impossible to keep all your commitments. The folks let down by unfulfilled promises will double the burnout, so to speak, as the stress from overextension will reach into the community that needs the help.

The platitude that “No good deed goes unpunished” has come to mind too often. Once individuals have come to expect and even rely on the generosity of others, there is a chance they will be resentful when asked to reaffirm their fair measure of contributions. There is a dark thread within the understanding of what an intentional community is, and I have encountered individuals who have forced me to rethink my role in this community. Among them was a highly recommended yet highly inappropriate choice for a roommate—their “temporary” stay with us lasted 10 months and featured mild hoarding and boundary-violating harass-



Photos courtesy of Bryan Allen Moore



ment, with a little hypocrisy regarding expectations. Conflict resolution is difficult and this recommendation was poorly made, but just because someone is enthusiastic about intentional communities does not mean they can adjust to every variation.

A more insidious example is where another member of our home used the vernacular of intentional community as a confidence scheme to move in for the low rent. They contribute very little, even outright resisting group-led efforts to care for the home. The painful lesson for me is that I can no longer take recommendations from members of intentional communities at face value, and must be wary of well-meaning individuals who may have convinced themselves they can benefit from egalitarianism without participating.

Somewhat related is the realization that I have to reevaluate my approach to the coupling of roommates. Interpersonal conflicts and their collateral damage are inevitable within groups of people that spend an inordinate amount of time together, but infidelity within the social circle is incredibly destructive to the community. Returning from a much needed vacation in the beginning of 2019, I learned that a great roommate had moved out. I slowly uncovered evidence that one roommate had not only separated from their partner under dubious circumstances, but essentially forced them out of the home with no accountability or deference to how their actions would affect anyone else. I have lost somewhere between six and a dozen friends to this single act of cruelty and selfishness; I'm uncertain about the actual number because of how uncomfortable these individuals are discussing this situation and continuing to participate in our community.

As our building crumbles and our community withers down to the most limited definition of a group house, I have been forced to reorient my thinking about what community means to me. Trying to identify my principal life experiences that created strong positive memories, I can be in a better position to move on. Without expectations that I can recreate the past, it is easier to identify ideas that may generate positive goals or at least new thinking in the reader.

To this end, I have chosen to focus locally instead of opening my thinking up to broad generalizations. Suppose the most important member of my community is me—by focusing locally and really quantifying what my time is worth, I can develop a new kind of routine. I have started regularly checking in with people I have come to trust. I attend events that I would normally have not given a second thought about in the past, now that my home is no longer the center of my social life. I have reconnected with friends and got to experience the communities created by their idiosyncratic activities and through this I have started to develop new customs.

We all know folks that always seem to want to be anywhere except where they are currently, possessed by nostalgia for a “better time” or a fantasy lament about a less-

mundane environment. Pining for the restorative energy of a vacation or thinking about where it is “hot” right now can obscure genuine local opportunities. Enabled by the denial of what I had lost in my community, I did most of those things and missed several months of great opportunities. Rather than lament the loss of a situation, I will try to feed on the energy of something new instead.

Even with newfound positive and confident attitudes, the physical structure that we have used to create our community for the past dozen years is still falling down. I imagine that many intentional communities are not so intrinsically tied to a building, but we are. Perhaps it is bad advice, but I would argue not to expend effort fighting battles for which you are not equipped. For me, I thought about the energy I would spend fighting a legal battle vs. the energy required to move on to the next gig. Does it take more energy fighting for what you have built than it does to create something new, even better utilizing the experiences we already have? Find what you're good at—cooking, hosting, making, experimenting, collaborating, documenting, mobilizing, cohabiting, connecting, teaching, technical skills, publication/design, promotion, activist support.

If you are DIY, stay mobile or adaptable and do not embrace the limitations of your “scene.” I am fortunate that I was raised with the train and the automobile, so my life has had a natural motion of

relocation. Once DIY gets too big, you'll find no shortage of antagonists who want to shut you down because anyone viewing a community from the outside would see it as an unregulated threat.

When we put in the work towards building a community, are we taking a curatorial position to make something interesting or gatekeeping to force things to stay the same? It took a lot of mental and emotional energy to confront or resist all the people that wanted to interfere with our efforts to host both an activist group and a space for the arts. There were government investigations, we dealt with harassment from alt-right and hard-line social conservatives, neighbors and roommates with no interest in harmonious living through compromise, leftist friends who wanted to drag the home into their personal conflicts because it was a community center, flaky artists, inconsiderate roommates, and just bad actors attending our events because they were open to the public for a time.

Moving on...

Choosing one positive aspect, or an anecdotal thread from my experience, I will try to illustrate what it means for me to move on. I have chosen to view "community" both past and future through the lens of a local photographic music historian, roXplosion. When it comes to the art and music events I have hosted, more thoroughly

covered in COMMUNITIES #177, they are a considerable portion of my total social-creative output. Viewed from the outside they are only a small and fleeting point that makes up the Washington DC music scene as roXplosion has documented it since 2003.

Stepping outside my own context, that of hosting and supporting artists at the 1605 Commune for several years, and using roXplosion's chronicle of an entire music scene over the better part of two decades is a perspective that reduces the weight of my role and allows me to see the big picture. What I did was important but not irreplaceable and I can think about my community in the same way. There was a long season for our 1605 Commune, but it has changed into something else and the failure to acknowledge that would halt my own continued growth. While some individuals within an individual community may preference themselves over others regularly, there are an even greater number of people living "out there" that would embrace a new opportunity to enhance a different community. To put it another way, the community I unintentionally created for myself around the local music scene can become more important than the housing-based "intentional" community I have lost.

How far in the future should we plan to exist? I do not know if I will ever be able to take a long view of intentional communities again. The reader can and should disagree, but experience has taught me that they are ephemeral. The wear and tear of this lifestyle invites entropy, but perhaps that is just a role I have chosen for myself over time. I have spent some time focusing on the physical structure of our intentional community, but that is not what makes a home.

Where is home? I think about a trailer park I worked at for a while years ago and when I do, I ponder the phrase "mobile home" and think maybe there is a connection to intentional communities that I can draw. A lot of the folks that I value have moved on from my home and have been replaced by individuals who do not seem as interested in the preservation of continuity. Perhaps I have judged my community unfairly, though I have no way of knowing if that is true beyond what my instincts and experiences tell me. What I do know is that the emergent property of dozens of indiscretions is the breakdown of community. The aggregate made of negligence, laziness or neglect, and a little cruelty is a targeted poison to egalitarianism.

My final piece of advice, when an individual is strained by these shearing forces, is to think about your community as it exists beyond the handful of individuals with whom you split the rent and utilities. 🐦

Bryan Allen Moore is an artist living in Washington, DC.



PONDERING PARETO: Understanding Group Population Dynamics

By Walt Patrick

Probably the most common question we get is, “How many people are there at Windward?” I’m never quite sure how to respond, so if you’ll bear with me, I’ll try to unpack my thoughts and share my musings about the role that Pareto plays in community dynamics.

My first problem is that the question seems to presuppose that one person is pretty much the same as another, whereas my experience is that people are incredibly diverse and not interchangeable at all, at least not at the level at which meaningful relationships evolve.

*People are such lovely things,
Like snowflakes in design
Each the same, yet different
Loving, kind, yet diffident.
Heaven not yet quite divine,
Like gods with plastic wings.*
—WSP

I experience authentic community as a kaleidoscope of dynamic human potentials rather than as array of interchangeable widgets. So attempting to distill that interactive complexity down into a simple number feels wrong.

And yet, numbers are valuable ways to describe things, however truncated the resulting description may be. My favorite example of an absurd but true description would be that the sound of a violin is what’s created when you drag the tail of a horse across the guts of a sheep. When you get to truly know someone, my experience is that the labels commonly used to describe people seem to offer about that level of accuracy.

The only normal people are the ones you don’t know very well.
—Joe Ancis

My experience is that Windward is at the center of a series of concentric communities ranging from barely involved to all in. Individuals regularly step from one circle to another according to the seasons of the year and the seasons of their lives. In part that’s because we’re committed to helping each of our members become financially independent, so there’s a good deal of coming and going as economic opportunities unfold. For example, because our living costs are low, a person can work away from Windward for a few months, and then spend the rest of the year here pursuing their bliss.

Well, your patience was appreciated as I went on a mini-rant about the way the system tries to reduce people to interchangeable widgets, but that aside, there is merit to the question. Over the past three years, there have been as many as nine people

living on site, and as few as three. It was when I thought about those particular numbers that Pareto came to mind.

Many years ago, economist Vilfredo Pareto observed that 80 percent of the land in his region of Italy was owned by 20 percent of the people. He looked around and found a similar ratio in a wide range of seemingly unrelated systems. Perhaps you’ve heard people say that in volunteer organizations, 80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people. That’s an echo of Pareto in action.

The principle shows up in so many seemingly disparate systems that people got to seriously investigating the concept. It seems to apply to completely unrelated situations such as the productivity of composers of classical music and the size distribution of stars in our galaxy.

In time, it became evident that the principle is more accurately stated as, “Half of an organization’s productivity will be generated by the square root of the people involved.” For example, in an organization with nine people, Pareto says that you’ll find that three of them will be creating half of the value. It even seems to apply in the reverse, in that half of a vendor’s customer complaints will come from the square root of how many customers it has.

Overlay that on community, and out of nine members, three of them will be creating half of the social stress. If Pareto is correct at the small community scale, then out of nine people, three will be creating half the productivity, three will be creating half the discord, and the other three will be caught in between. Lose the discordant three, and the community can move ahead. Lose the productive three and the community can crash. And who could possibly be disinterested enough to decide which subgroup is which?

Natural systems are inherently fractal, so by the time an organization grows to where it’s employing 80 people, nine of them will be generating half the revenue. And out of those nine, three of them will be generating half of that half.

The implications of this are staggering, especially for a small community that wants to grow large enough to achieve notable economies of scale. One implication is that increasing the number of participants renders the organization less sustainable when viewed on a per-person basis. Said another way, growth for growth’s sake is counter-productive.

Another implication is that a community that is committed to egalitarian relationships is going to be stressed by the growing disparity in productivity between the various members. One way this expresses itself is with the members who are highly productive coming to feel that they’re being exploited by the less productive members, at which point they’re likely to withdraw from the community.

If your organization has 80 members, then Pareto posits that three of them will be responsible for a quarter of the productiv-

ity. If that's true, then the loss of those three members—a mere four percent of the membership—will have a huge and unpleasant impact on the organization.

Throughout history, poverty is the normal condition of man. Advances which permit this norm to be exceeded—here and there, now and then—are the work of an extremely small minority, frequently despised, often condemned, and almost always opposed by all right-thinking people. Whenever this tiny minority is kept from creating, or (as sometimes happens) is driven out of a society, the people then slip back into abject poverty.

This is known as "bad luck."

—Robert Heinlein

Here's another way this principle can stress a community. Let's say that a conflict arises between a member who is busily installing a concrete foundation for the organization's latest building project, and an individual who wants to spend most of their time sitting at the picnic table drawing. Should the desires of each member carry the same weight?

Or perhaps it's a dietary issue: Suppose one person wants a meat-centric diet, and the other refuses to eat meat. Should the organization manifest the same commitment to accommodate each person without regard to how productive they are?

Groups that are organized along democratic principles have a hard time coping with Pareto. To take the above example, if you have nine people and three of them are producing half the work, they're going to be under a lot of pressure to slack off from the six people who are doing the other half of the work. A democratically oriented group is most likely going to cater to the wishes of the six at the expense of the three. If that is allowed to continue very long, it's likely to turn off and drive away the group's most productive members. Enough of that, and the group will fail.

It's my guess that this is one of the reasons why so many intentional communities fail. When the community's governance system fails to protect its most productive individuals, productivity crashes and the community dissolves.

Windward has undertaken to strike a balance between the needs of the more productive and the less productive members. One reason for that is the question of who defines productive?

Another is that life is unpredictable and what works great today, may not work at all tomorrow. The development of new systems is both necessary and resource consumptive in the short run, but it's vitally necessary in the long run—if the group's going to have a long run.

Also, life close to the land is risky, and anyone can become injured and need to convalesce, so over-focusing on short-term productivity can be detrimental on a variety of levels. On the other hand, it takes capital to create sustainable systems, and a community's only sustainable source for capital involves producing more than it consumes.

We try to balance authority with productivity by structuring our board of directors so that the seats go to the individuals who have put the most time and money into the community, but that power is balanced by each seat having only one vote. So while credits count, they only count up to the point where they warrant a seat on the board—beyond that, each director has no more authority than any other director.

Also a group of newer members can pool their credits and claim a seat on the board. Enough new members can outweigh the old members, so reaching out to new people who share one's vision is the best route to influencing the organization's future.

For now, Windward's at anchor watch. That's when a ship returns after a long voyage, unloads its passengers, and drops anchor in the harbor. The part of the crew that considers the ship home does repairs and rests up from the stress of the voyage past.

And while they're waiting for a new crew of adventurers to arrive, they give thought to what course to take next. We're on the search for a viable alternative to patriarchy; it may prove as illusive as the search for the Northwest Passage, but we believe it's important to keep trying. For now, the key thing is that our bylaws proved strong enough to weather the storm and hold the organization together (see following page), but while a ship in harbor is safe, that's not what ships are built for. 🌊

Walt Patrick has been living in intentional community for more than four decades. These days he focuses his time on promoting natural burial in the Herland Forest Natural Burial Cemetery and developing ways to convert forest waste into community-scale, sustainable energy systems.



Photos courtesy of Walt Patrick

Seeking a Viable Alternative

Generally, people undertake to create an intentional community because they're dissatisfied with the status quo and want to create a viable alternative. In Windward's case, I'd describe our goal as figuring out how to create a viable alternative to patriarchy, i.e., how to create a sustainable organizational structure in which men and women share power and responsibility. Groups such as the Oneida Nation and the Oneida Community offer tantalizing glimpses into how to make that work; the current challenge lies in adapting their organizational structure to modern times.

At best, creating an intentional community is a dicey proposition. Any study of the movement shows a daunting record of failed attempts, and when a community crashes, did it cleave like a diamond, or shatter like glass?

I believe that the outcome depends on the community's underlying structure, in that when a severe storm strikes a structure, the outcome depends more on the foundation than on the facade. Creating a solid set of bylaws may not be sexy, but it seems to be the key as to whether the community can pick up the pieces and continue.

Our community has been through four major organizational crashes in 40 years. We're still here because our structure enabled us to fall back on the fundamentals, weather the storm, and regroup.

I've come to see the challenge of putting together a viable structure for an intentional community as something akin to playing a video game in which you make a series of choices at the start of the game, and then watch as the consequences of those choices play out.

Very few people who start out playing a multilevel video game actually expect to "win"; they know that their character will eventually run out of resources and crash. But along the way, the player can gain a greater understanding of how the game is played, and then start again in hopes of being able to build on that knowledge and move up to the next level of play.

When the game is "Let's Create a Community," the levels run something like this:

| | |
|----------|---|
| Level 1: | A group of people feel the "Let's all room together next semester!" impulse so they form a discussion group to put together an actionable plan. |
| Level 2: | They rent or buy a house together. |
| Level 3: | Over the next three years, they create a core group that's committed to making the community work. |
| Level 4: | Over the next 30 years, they keep it together and build their asset base. |
| Level 5: | They find a new generation that's ready and able to take over their assets and continue working towards the community's goals. |

Each time the group tries to proceed on up to the next level, they encounter a new set of challenges. I'd estimate that at each level, the difficulty of play goes up by a factor of 10. Another way to say that is that for every 10 discussion groups, one will advance to the "let's buy a house together" level. For every 10 groups that buy a house, one group will still be on track three years later.

Where this gets really tricky is that the organizational structure that best facilitates getting from Level 2 to Level 3 may well prevent the group from advancing to Level 5. For example, a common

Level 2 strategy is for a married couple to use their credit and connections to purchase a house for the group. Over time, the mortgage gets paid down, the land accrues in value, and things are looking good.

Then life takes its toll. Suppose that one member of the founding couple dies, or becomes addicted to alcohol, or decides to return to their birth family to nurse an ailing parent, or has a change of heart and wants to pursue some other path. In a community property state, the group would have to raise enough money to buy out the departing founder's 50 percent interest in the land and buildings. If they can't, then they'd have to put the community's assets on the market.

The way we addressed that potential problem was to vest the land and buildings in a private operating foundation organized as a 501(c)(2). As a "title holding and rent collecting" nonprofit, a 501(c)(2) manages assets on behalf of the 501(c)(3) that's in charge of the mission. That way, if any one member of the (c)(2) has a change of heart and decides to head off in some other direction, their decision won't crash the community; the community will cleave but not shatter. That's not to say that the loss of a key person isn't going to hurt—it will—but at least the organization will have a core structure to support it during the transition.

That raises the question of who controls the (c)(2)? Technically, the answer is its board of directors, but it's the derivative question of "How are the directors chosen?" that's key.

In most nonprofits, new board members are chosen by the existing board, a mechanism which can deprive the general membership of a voice if the sitting directors don't want to listen. We chose a different path, one that we feel grounds authority within demonstrated commitment.

Rather than being selected by their friends, the five board members are seated based on how many credits they've earned; contributing a month's worth of work and dues towards building the community earns a member one credit. Those who've earned the most credits will most likely gain a seat on the board.¹ While the directors will differ in the number of credits they've earned, each seat on the board only gets to cast one vote. The goal is to diminish the role of charisma and emphasize the role of demonstrated competence and reliability; we call it "representative consensus."

Most of the time, trust is what moves a community forward. But, whenever trust is broken, for whatever reason, that's when you find out if the bylaws are strong enough to hold. If not, then generally efforts made to try to rebuild trust will prove too little, too late.

Creating an intentional community is a gamble, and there are so many things that can crash even the best of intentions. The historical record offers examples of organizational formats that held up and formats that didn't. While studying bylaws may be dry and unappealing, it's some of the most essential work that people can do when starting. Being aware of how things played out for other groups can lower the likelihood of making the same mistakes. The bits we've learned are incorporated into our bylaws, and everyone is welcome to download and copy them (see www.windward.org/windward/bylaws.htm).

When Sir Edmund Hillary failed at his first attempt to summit Mt. Everest, he's said to have observed, "I'll be back. The mountain can't get any bigger, but I can." If the goal of creating a viable alternative to patriarchy intrigues you, then please get in touch. As we tweak the bylaws to incorporate what we've learned so far, we're looking for boon companions for the next leg of the journey.

—WP

1. I qualified that because under our system the newer members can pool their credits and claim a seat on the board. Check out our bylaws for more details on how this works.

The Journey Home: From Ennui to Ecstasy

By Josh Wolf

*The sky is gray
The sand is gray
And the ocean is gray*

*And I feel right at home
In this stunning monochrome
Alone in my way*

*I smoke and I drink
And every time I blink
I have a tiny dream*

—Ani DiFranco, “Gray”



I was heading south on the I-5 freeway, returning to the home I had grown up in, when I started listening to an audio book that would transform my paradigm on the depression I'd dealt with throughout my life. This new outlook has continued to drive my journey to create HOME. (HOME is being developed as a residential micro-community and regenerative business incubator founded on Permaculture design principles in Nevada City, California; see www.growinghome.life.)

For the past year I had been coming to terms with the fact that San Francisco—the city I'd dreamed about since I was a small child—had ceased to feel like home. My apartment felt like a jail cell with doors that remained open to a larger prison where I was both financially and energetically locked out.

In the search for belonging, I'd decided to recommit a third of my time to Wrightwood, the town I grew up in—a beautiful village tucked an hour outside of Los Angeles that had felt more like the setting for a horror movie when I was growing up than the bucolic destination it purports to be.

Even through my adult eyes, it looked like a distant cry from paradise, but I was determined to find new connections and rekindle ones with the people I knew who were still there. While I was making new friends during my semi-monthly sojourns, it didn't feel like home and I was growing more and more depressed feeling there was nowhere I belonged.

It was at this point that I pressed play and began listening to Johann Hari's book *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—and the Unexpected Solutions* (see thelostconnections.com).

I had heard about the book during a Permaculture Design Certification training when my teacher had described Hari's definition of depression as “unmoved grief.”

Hari's TED talk “Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong” had opened my eyes about addiction a few years earlier, and I was eager to hear what he had to say about depression.

Hari's core thesis was the same: although we live in a society that appears to be more continuously connected than ever before, our online interactions are the equivalent of empty calories that make us feel emotionally satiated momentarily but in reality do nothing to weave the fabric of community and connection. Hari believes that this crisis of alienation and our growing need for real authentic connection is the cause of much of our modern samsara, including addiction, depression, obesity, and a variety of other serious ailments.

Coincidentally, a few years later I had a chance to hear Patch Adams—who was immortalized by Robin Williams in the film that shares his name—speak in Sacramento. He pretty much had the same

**Before we can
heal society we
must work through
our past traumas
with love, honesty,
and respect.**



message: the nuclear family was the worst idea in the history of social engineering. Humans are biologically wired to live in tribes and tight-knit intergenerational communities. Adams believes that the rates of modern diseases are a direct result of this crisis of belonging.

HOME is an acronym. It stands for Healing Our Mined Ecology. Its mission is to demonstrate how we can co-create something beautiful together that serves to help us heal from our past, present, and future traumas but also to prototype and champion a viable alternative to a modern status quo that mines our time, energy, and lives to perpetuate a system that is extractive and inhuman.

We can replace these flawed systems with regenerative solutions that will change the world, but before we can heal society we must heal ourselves and work through our past traumas with love, honesty, and respect. We each carry within us a unique history of unresolved traumas that we can heal from, and learn to rise above, only by letting them come to the surface and resolve.

Sometimes the results can be volatile. Overcoming the instinctual call for fight or flight in the face of these traumas is incredibly difficult. But an amazing thing happens when we don't walk away. When we instead come together as a community to hold and support instead of tearing each other down, we can accomplish the sorts of things we only dream about.

But in order to make our dreams come true, we must also allow the nightmares to come along for the ride. Only together can we vanquish these night terrors and co-create another world we believe to be possible. 🌱

Josh Wolf coordinates HOME (see www.growinghome.life).



Photos courtesy of Josh Wolf

The Land of Misfit Toys

By Dan Schultz



Photos courtesy of Dan Schultz

The intentional aspect of our intentional communities paints us outside the borders of mainstream, in vibrant and varied colors. All sorts of wandering souls do find their way to our alternative spaces; visionary leaders who can imagine a different way; potent, solution-oriented contributors seeking service to humanity; starry-eyed idealists searching for a way to apply novel and foreign concepts; discontented gypsy wanderers and the undisciplined pre-adults in need of real life-lessons. They are those who otherwise do not end up fitting very well into the industrial-monetary-competitive mainstream world, for one reason or another. I sometimes refer to our communities as the Land of Misfit Toys (as depicted sympathetically in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*).

Our Mountain Village has seen over 250 WWOOFers and interns over nine years with thousands of visitors, and I sense there is a common thread that unites them—Hope. They pray to be self-completed by a newfound family. They long for the security and support of a tribe only their imaginations can conjure. A process churns inside to find themselves while they learn from their brush with community. Unlike our ancestors, people do not stay put in one place so very long and I suspect I understand the origin of this discontent.

Our western culture (or lack thereof) did not imprint the necessary life-skills of living with others, nor the value of it. The contented grounding of land-based life values died long ago with our ancestors. Our culture favored the rugged individual and the abundant wealth (in America)—built on the backs of foreign and domestic slave labor and by oppressive military imperialism—which allowed us to independently hole up into our little castles. We don't need to know our neighbors, let alone cooperate with them much. Now technology separates us even further. All this has failed us miserably. I don't need to prove it with statistics.

Chances are the reader feels this, as most people do.

So, then, we pine for empathy, a selfless harmony, and a cooperative (noncompetitive) spirit.

This hope of community is the sole motivation for our weekly practice of Heart Club at Maitreya Mountain Village. We practice Withholds and Appreciations, Admissions and Acknowledgments, Requests and Agreements. There is a safe space for vulnerably sharing what is true in thought and feeling. Heart Club has a Nonviolent Communication focus and humanist values. It is a relearning and also an unlearning process. It is a glue that binds us (closer) to tribe through compassion, understanding, and trust.

Historically, our Heart Club practice is the single most memorable act in our visitor's stay—even more notable than our common vision of cultivating a sustainable, responsible living with the land. Retooling with life and communication skills proves itself a most powerful catalyst for change. Our visitors write me years afterward to share how they applied their new community skills within their circle of influence with family, friends, and peers. And this fills me with joy.

What do we do when things fall apart, one way or another, in the evolution and devolution of community? We keep practicing and living the principles that inspired us to want to become more fully human. More misfit toys will come. And we'll all learn to fit in together. 🐦

Dan Schultz is director of Maitreya Mountain Village (www.maitreyamountainvillage.com), which creates intentional, caring community and farming in an off-grid, wilderness setting. Dan hosts and produces a talk radio program called New Culture Radio focused on sustainability, and leads Transition Del Norte in northwestern California.

Personal Resilience for Community and Planetary Resilience

By Hannah Apricot Eckberg

*S*oftly in through the nose, and gently out through the mouth. In and out, following our breath with no effort, just nice and relaxed. Letting any thoughts fly away like birds continuing on their way, not letting the thoughts stay to nest.

Breathing in as if smelling flowers and exhaling as if blowing a kiss, I was joined by over 100 people breathing together during our *Soft Belly Breathing* exercise.

Over the past two and a half months, this simple breathwork technique has become a lifeline for me—a practice to help calm and ground me quickly in any situation using just my breath. It has become, if you will, a “good trigger button” to quell my stress, anxiety, and depression, or to help me fall back to sleep at night.

I learned this and many other useful tools during a two-part intensive training offered through the Center for Mind-Body Medicine (CMBM) in the northern California town of Redding in Shasta County. A year and a half ago, the community was devastated by the Carr Fire which burned over 800 homes and over 83,000 acres, killing six people including three firefighters. Sonoma County, a few hours south, had offered the CMBM training to aid their community in the healing after deadly fires of their own. A few passionate participants were inspired to bring the training to their own community in Redding and founded The Shasta Resilience Program. Members from nearby Butte County also participated in the Redding training with the intention of hosting such an offering to help in the recovery of the unprecedented Camp Fire which wiped out many rural communities and the entire town of Paradise in November of 2018.

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Until one has experienced it oneself, it is hard to imagine the extreme trauma when a community is wiped out by such a disaster. Unfortunately, more and more communities are facing such unthinkable realities, as climate change and social unrest intensify around the world. Picking up the pieces and beginning again can be extremely challenging and take years.

As humans, we are very communal and tribal creatures. We tend to grieve deeper and heal faster together. When one person experiences trauma, that ripples through the community. When a disaster hits an entire community, the effects spread even further beyond geographic boundaries.

Most people have had some kind of occurrence in their life that can be considered traumatic. Great adversity can come in the form of teasing in school, the loss of a loved one, sexual abuse, a mass shooting, loss from a fire, flood, hurricane, or other disaster, living in a war zone or in a refugee camp. These days, it feels as if just watching the news can be traumatic. While this should be a joke, it sadly is not.

Unconsciously, we lock disastrous experiences in our bodies, where they loom until triggered by something that reminds the subconscious of that event. When Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) is activated, our mind doesn't distinguish between the actual event and a memory of it. I can personally testify to this. As I drove through the burnt forests along Highway 299 to get to the training in Redding, the sight of the scorched hillsides that once were lush forests activated a pain deep within me from when I lost my home in a fire a

Holistic self-healing practices shared in a group offer a means to reset our mind and body to be able to mentally and physically move the trauma out of deep places within us and better move on with our lives.

decade ago in Santa Barbara. Unless we put the effort into releasing these pent-up triggers, they linger and can affect our health and well-being, our interactions with members of our community, and our overall ability to move on with life and reach our fullest potential. Without proper support and tools, picking up the pieces can be a difficult and lonely road.

Holistic self-healing practices shared in a group offer a means to reset our mind and body to be able to mentally and physically move the trauma out of those deep places within and better move on with our lives. By joining together in a community based on confidentiality and compassion, people are able to have a sense of safety that they may not have experienced since their original ordeal. Through breathing exercises, movement, meditations, visualizations, drawing, writing, sharing with group members, mindful eating, looking at family patterns, and other practices, we can gain skills that will help us regain our wholeness and heal the damage from our past so that we can become stronger and more resilient as we move forward in our lives.

When many people in a community participate in these practices, a more resilient community emerges. From this place of personal and community strength, we can then look to how we can be better stewards and members of the planetary community and be better equipped to navigate the uncertainty that lies ahead as we deal with ongoing climate chaos and other unprecedented upheavals.

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When we consider our place in the global community as inhabitants of this planet, a new level of awareness is causing great emotional and even physical pain for people. It has been called Extinction Illness, Collapse Trauma, Eco-Anxiety, and I am sure other clever terms for a traumatizing reality of what the future most likely holds and the calamities that communities around the world are already going through.

The realization of mass species extinction, which could include our own species, and the collapse of entire ecosystems, on which we and all animals and plants on this planet depend for survival, are notions that would have been inconceivable in the past. Too big to fail is how people have thought of the planet, yet now we are starting to see that is not true. Rampant consumption of the planet's natural resources and abuse of its ecosystems have reached a point where no community is immune from the unpredictable consequences of our collective actions. While other great civilizations have failed in the past, such as the Aztecs and the Roman Empire, this has never happened on a global scale, affecting all of humanity. The knowledge that our consumption and pollution habits, starting with the Industrial Revolution, are at fault for the potential collapse of the planetary community adds to the guilt and pain that many are feeling.

The power of the internet and television to instantly share the devastation experienced by others around the world



Photos courtesy of Hannah Apricot Eckberg

leads to a constant bombardment of traumatizing information. While the news can sensationalize devastation it also leads to desensitization that can lead to buried emotions within our subconscious.

As one example, the fires of Australia and the unimaginable loss of animal life have spun many people into depression. Even after the news moves on to the next shiny thing, even after Facebook feeds fill once again with other babble, the triggers from the trauma of the Australian fires will live on. For those on the scorched continent, the pain may last a lifetime, while the rest of us may hide it deep within to fester in our unspoken sorrow.

Movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for the Future, and Fire Drill Friday are creating a new community of activists from around the world who want to stand up and do something to heal the planetary systems, before it is too late. However, it is hard to act when one is paralyzed by depression, anxiety, or guilt. For the youth of today, this is an even bigger issue: finding ways to move forward when their future is so uncertain. Joanna Macy and her program The Work that Reconnects have proven helpful for those seeking ways to deal with this sorrow and anxiety. CMBM is another tool for you and your community to gain strength and move forward.

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Founded in 1991 by James Gorden, M.D., who had studied clinical work with traumatized people for the previous three decades, the nonprofit Center for Mind-Body Medicine works to help some of the most devastated communities around the world, as well as individuals trying to regain their well-being. Throughout the year, Dr. Gordon

and an ever-growing team of practitioners travel the world “training the trainers” as they share this group model for empowering healing and wholeness. “Teaching thousands to heal millions” is how the website describes the work, which combines healing traditions and modern medicine. From the refugee camps of the Middle East to Puerto Rico and Haiti, to the fire-destroyed communities in California, the CMBM training helps individuals and communities rise from the ashes and regain their inner and communal strength.

From a scientific perspective, these tools help the body to process the stress hormone cortisol, which is produced by catastrophic experiences, and instead activate the vagus nerve in order to let the relaxing parasympathetic system override the fight-or-flight response we experience when trauma or stress is activated in our mind or body. The practices also help activate the brain’s hypothalamus, which





controls the autonomic nervous system and engages the parasympathetic nervous system. In other words, they turn on the healing signals in the body and turn off the stress-releasing signals. Incorporating a holistic approach through multidisciplinary practices, the CMBM website (CMBM.org) includes copious scientific studies describing the relevance and health benefits of this work.

Since taking the training, I spend 10-15 minutes each morning doing first *Soft Belly Breathing* and then *Shaking and Dancing*—another transformative exercise, this one based on active meditations such as those used by the whirling dervishes and other ancient cultures to produce ecstatic states during prayers. When I practice this way in the morning, I have felt more energized, yet calm, throughout the day. It has helped to release some of the deeply hidden trauma I was unconsciously carrying and to flush out the stress hormones that impair well-being. If an animal is able to escape from being

chased, it will often shake, sometimes for very long periods of time, to physically turn off the fight-or-flight reaction and reset the nervous system. *Shaking and Dancing* is the modern-day adoption of this nature-based practice of self-care.

It is my intention to incorporate these lessons into my work to help people and communities deal with Extinction Illness and other traumatic feelings around the ecosystem collapse that the world is teetering on. For it is my belief that through self-resilience, we can strengthen our community resilience and we will be better equipped to help planetary resilience as well.

Blessings on your healing journey! Together, we can rise from the ashes and soar to new heights! 🍀

*Those interested in Personal Reliance for Planetary Resilience offerings may email Hannah at Info@AbundantEarthFoundation.org. To explore a wide range of practical tools for increasing personal and community resilience, or to inquire about setting up a training for your community or about participating in an online course, please visit CMBM.org. Also available on the website is Dr. Gordon's recently published book sharing many stories and practical applications of these techniques from five decades of practice around the world, *The Transformation: Discovering Wholeness and Healing after Trauma*.*

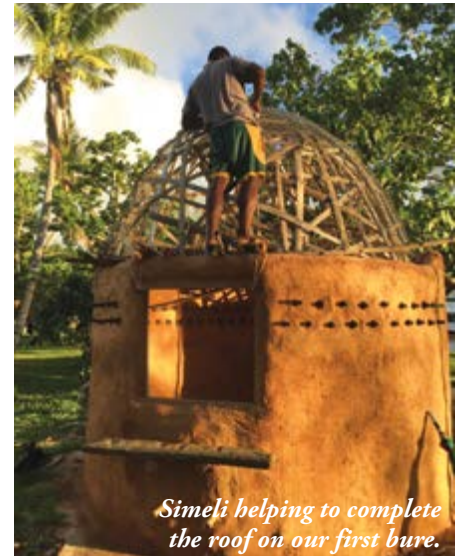
Hannah Apricot Eckberg has studied permaculture and natural healing practices for over 20 years. She has been nomadic since she lost her home in a fire 10 years ago and travels the world visiting permaculture communities and raising funds for grassroots regenerative projects through the organization she cofounded, AbundantEarthFoundation.org. She cofounded the North American version of Permaculture magazine and is now a contributing editor to the international Permaculture magazine.

Picking Up the Pieces at Fiji Organic Village

By Philip Mirkin



Ecovillage children celebrating our renewal. Note skeletal cottage in background.



Simeli helping to complete the roof on our first bure.

By 2017 our ecovillage was shattered—devastated by disaster, deserted, with only pieces remaining. How would we begin again? Here's the background:

Fiji Organic Village (FOV), formed in 2007, went through some incredible challenges. In 2011 European cybercriminals stole our website and diverted funding from our homestay program, eliminating most of our income. This split the community and peeled off a few members who were convinced by the conmen to help their nefarious plan.

Then my mother had a heart attack. This sent me, the manager and one of the co-founders, to the States for years to be there for Mum. Then she suffered a series of strokes. As a result I would not be able to return home to Fiji for over five years. The income evaporated. The farm was hit by Hurricane Evan in 2012, sinking our smaller boat, and scattering some of our members to other islands in search of jobs and income.

Then in February 2016 we took a devastating blow: Hurricane Winston slammed us (and much of Fiji) with 280 kph winds, destroying seven of our aging cottages, including my lovely home that was built for me as a thank you for donating that (now sunken) boat to the village. Other islands like Koro Island suffered much worse. The villages and homes across Koro were literally flattened.

Many of the trees in our food forest were blown over (breadfruit, banana, and papaya farm crushed), and our cassava fields were flooded, destroying much of the rest of our livelihood. All we really had left was coconuts, yams, and a few pineapples. For us the cleanup process was long and intense and is still not complete. Most of the farm has recovered, but still awaits fruit on most of our new banana and papaya trees.

When I finally returned to FOV in the summer of 2017, our beautiful 17-acre ecovillage was completely abandoned. Two of our *bures* (cottages) were barely standing there on the beach in skeletal form, just some posts and beams teetering at odd angles, a stark reminder that we were all lucky to have survived. The rest of our homes had already been torn down by the younger members as they were damaged beyond repair. All the organic parts of these buildings were cremated: burned, buried, and returned to the earth.

There was not much left but a few pieces of window and door frames, scavenged from the debris, plus the PVC pipes from our community bathhouse. My personal home was wiped off the face of the Earth.

It broke my heart. After all the work I did to fund and build the ecovillage, collecting our extended family and other ecovillage members to join us, everyone was gone. The bath house was heavily damaged by a massive tree, another direct hit; only the community kitchen, dining room, and office/first aid clinic survived intact.

As a founder I had put all my energy and money into FOV for six years including the mortgage payments I received from selling my hand-built home in Colorado. Bit by bit I tracked down the main builders of FOV on the telephone trying to convince them to come home and rebuild. I paid some of them out of my own pocket, to recreate jobs and get things going again. Little by little it worked.

I was joined by my intern, protege, and dear friend, Niko Kush, after his graduation from UC Santa Cruz. We set up a large tent I brought over for glamping on our own land. On the Big Island of Fiji I

met a couple Americans staying at backpacker lodges near Nadi town who were eager to learn sustainable building and do something positive. After days of shopping we powered our remaining boat from Lautoka several hours home to our island on the Blue Lagoon with food stocks, tea, and first aid gear.

We began picking up more pieces, but this time to rebuild, not to bury or burn.

These new building interns were energetic and positive. First we reused the adobe blocks to rebuild the walls of the bathhouse, picking them up from a huge pile. Then I designed a very simple structure to begin our housing, an experimental adobe structure that would change my life (see “Rebuilding Remote Island Communities, One Adobe Cottage at a Time,” *COMMUNITIES* #179, pp. 57-59). We had no building materials around and brought almost nothing with us to rebuild with, as my plan needed few modern materials. I knew that nearly everything we needed was already there: pumice, sand, clay, bamboo, and high quality fibers: *voi voi* (long leaves used to weave floor mats) and *woolo* (gridded coconut fiber). I laid out the floor plan on one of the concrete pads and we began again. We worked in a consistent and relaxed way, breaking for meals, siesta naps in the afternoons, and swimming. We enjoyed live Fijian music, dancing, kava, and quiet walks in the evenings.

As the walls rose I began picking up the pieces from some of the former *bures*. I cut 2x4s down into custom window frames which I nailed together, and inserted them within the adobe walls. The walls rose higher to the level of bond beam and were plastered before all our interns went back to the US before Christmas.

Then it was only Simeli Ratu, our farm manager, and myself left to add the roof (helped by some of the village teens). After I split and wove the bamboo into a giant domed basket atop the adobe walls, we picked up the metal fencing from a former pigpen to cover the bamboo basket. Then we added layers of *woolo* as a base for the layers of adobe plaster, forming a lovely adobe dome.

Some small hurricanes came that season but there was no damage at all to this round building. Boldly I made my way to Suva, Fiji’s capital city, to present our success to the acting Prime Minister. She asked that we use these techniques to build a Women’s Resource Centre (WRC). Our reinvigorated educational organization, Fiji Institute of Sustainable Habitats (FISH), has committed to training local women to build the WRC—as



Our beloved “Flying Fish” longboat was sunk in hurricane Evan, then raised from the bottom of the sea, no longer functional.



Teenage grandkids of one of the founders came from the village to replaster the bathhouse



Organic lunch from the farm.



We lived in donated tents while we rebuilt.



Resupplying evacuation centers and villages after the cyclones.

Photos courtesy of Philip Mirkin

well as their own homes—themselves, and to make the buildings strongly hurricane-resistant. Now we are gathering some of our old ecovillage supporters into an educational team to return to Fiji again in May 2020 to train the builders of that first WRC at the Provincial Headquarters in Sigatoka town.

Since building this first cottage, I've been able to recruit more of our original members (including the cofounder Paulo) back to the farm to restore what we had created so lovingly together (see "Building an Ecovillage in the Friendly Islands," *COMMUNITIES* #171, pp. 56-60). We are still picking up the pieces. We are planting a lot more mangrove to protect our eroding beach, replanting our banana and papaya groves, and weeding out the *vai vai* (small invasive trees that threatened the whole farm). I've already personally eliminated ALL the goatheads, what we call "bad grass," that also threatened to fully invade our lovely parklike grounds, digging them up one patch at a time.

By plastering the adobe *bure* in December 2019 with its final exterior plaster, and adding storm windows and bamboo eyebrows over the windows and doors to divert torrential rains, we have completed the cottage.

I am still paying Simeli and Kuini, our farm and kitchen managers, to stay on the land and keep going. They are very hard workers, committed to the ecovillage, and need a small income to stay there. They have children now themselves. Hurricane Sarai (December 2019) did no real damage, but fortunately knocked down 20 huge bagfuls of coconuts we collected and sold at the produce market in Lautoka, bringing in income for the extended fam-

ily. With my recent return and the solidity of the new *bure*, the ecovillage members are now suggesting to me we build two more cottages and get our homestay going again. We still need to rebuild our plumbing system for the bathhouse as well, but now the momentum has picked up greatly, and overseas friends are planning their visits. We will host them as our guests as a thank you for supporting the ecovillage, including some friends, such as Buddhi, who were firm supporters from the outset in 2006.

Things are truly looking up. Knowing that our buildings won't come down in future cyclones has given energy to all of us. Now our long-term members are motivated without my urging, wanting to go back to rebuild their own homes just as I have done. Simeli is sleeping in the *Vale ni Lage Sere* (the Singing Cottage) these nights, studying the design to improve on it so he can build a home for his parents. Then he plans to build himself, his wife, and his son a permanent home where they can again live in peace and harmony...without cars, roads, or noise; with just the plantation, food forest, and farm animals to manage as we joyfully sing our favorite songs again.

We are still picking up the pieces of our loss, but now there is no stopping us. Friends are planning to visit and help. It's a new beginning, pregnant with possibility and opportunity.

We will export this building method throughout Fiji; the Ministry of Women, Children, and Poverty Alleviation, as well as the Ministries of Education and Native Affairs, support our mission to train builders to build Resource Centres for the nation. Then it will be onto other island nations on the frontlines of climate change.

More than just picking up the pieces, we have been requested by the highest levels of government on a mission to sustainably build Fiji for the future, without imported concrete blocks or the destruction of pine forests. We are using good old Mother Earth in a fashion that has worked in Africa and other regions for thousands of years—and now adding pumice and local fibers in a site-specific fashion.

Sometimes disaster brings renewal. Our loss will be the gain for many as we empower women and families to build stronger, more sustainable homes. Fiji will be more resilient after Super Cyclone Winston as our communities rebuild together. We are now a model for the nation, building prototypes. Fijians love this direction, as it's affordable, truly sustainable, easy, and beautiful.

Our work is within the abilities of all, children included, to do some serious "barn-raising" together. Community building is the glue that holds nations together. It has brought new life to our ecovillage after near total destruction and abandonment. And it's brought inspiration to Fiji, already a leader in responding to climate change.

As Native American elders have said: "We are the future we've been waiting for." 🐦

*Philip Mirkin is the founder and executive director of the Fiji Institute of Sustainable Habitats (www.SustainableFiji.org), cofounder of Fiji Organic Village, and a designer, educator, and author (see *The Hybrid Adobe Handbook* and now *Hurricane Lunch*, available in 2020). His articles in *COMMUNITIES* have appeared in issues #171, #172, #174, #179, #181, and #184.*



*Tevita (David)
replastering the
walls of the
bathhouse.*



*American volunteers helping to build
our first new cottage.*

THE FUTURE OF COHOUSING IN AMERICA: The Case for Certification

By Chuck Durrett



Photos courtesy of Chuck Durrett

Organic farming needed certification before it really took off in the US. I firmly believe cohousing needs to be certified for continuing success. When it comes to real estate, Americans often play fast and loose with the language they use to describe it. Examples abound: the business plaza without the plaza, the industrial park without the park. By the same token, there are lovely housing communities that mistakenly call themselves cohousing communities. These places may be cohousing-inspired, or even cohousing-like, but they are not cohousing. I firmly believe cohousing needs to be certified for its continuing success, just as organic farming needed certification before it really took off in the US.

I get many emails from folks saying how their cohousing community failed or never worked in the first place. This is invariably because some of the six considerations were not employed, usually one, two, or three. When cohousing is firing on all cylinders there is not a more beautiful habitat to see—people know each other, care about each other, and support one another over time. Cooperation is easy and natural and the community is obvious; you can measure it. This is especially true when it comes to senior cohousing—no one wants to buy a pig in a poke, especially later in life.

This raises the question: What is cohousing (hence, validating its certification)?

The answer comes in the form of six definable principles, or criteria. These criteria ensure that cohousing is not conflated with other housing models. Please note the following principles for what determines a cohousing community. If these principles are not followed, it isn't cohousing.

Our ultimate goal with this is to expand the existing certification for senior cohousing to include multi-generation cohousing. This certification, created with Sage Senior Cohousing Advocates and numerous seniors that live in senior cohousing and want to maintain its integrity, is critical consumer protection. Certification ensures that cohousing continues to be a concept

that people can rely on.

To ensure that cohousing remains somewhat authentic and is not conflated with other housing models that are not cohousing, please note the following principles when creating your cohousing community or please do not call it cohousing.

Criteria that Define Cohousing

1. Participation: co-developed, co-designed, and co-organized with the future resident group. First and foremost, the future residents are an integral part of creating the future community. A housing community that does not include the active participation of its residents is not cohousing.

2. A private home but also extensive common facilities that supplement and facilitate daily living. Common facilities are perceived as an extension of each resident's house and supplement each home. There must be practical reasons to bring people together to use these common facilities—for example, common meals held at least once a week in a common house. The timeless tradition of breaking bread together is how a community is created and sustained.

3. Building and site designs that facilitate naturally oriented community interactions over time. By design, the site is child-friendly, senior-friendly, family-friendly, and is built on a human scale. The interior of the site is free of automobiles, except on rare occasions.

4. Almost entirely resident managed. The residents—owners or renters of their own homes—in a cohousing community have the privilege and responsibility of determining how to organize themselves, how to engage in the work (and play) of managing their own lives, homes, and community.

5. No hierarchy in decision-making. Cohousing is about cooperation rather than a type of ownership. And, as it turns out, cooperation transcends ownership type.

6. No shared personal economy. Unlike that of the commune

or sometimes a co-op structure, cohousing community members do not share personal income.

Some have suggested that additional criteria for cohousing involve universal design and some defined level of spirituality and accessibility. These additional criteria are not necessary or even desirable. We find that future residents of a cohousing community define these criteria very well themselves. The senior cohousing communities of Oakcreek Cohousing in Stillwater, Oklahoma; Quimper Village in Port Townsend, Washington; Mountain View Cohousing in Mountain View, California; Wolf Creek Lodge in Grass Valley, California; and Silver Sage in Boulder, Colorado are great examples and models. Being clear about what cohousing is, and by contrast what it isn't, preserves the integrity and credibility of cohousing. It is a form of consumer protection. The certification of a cohousing project, provided by Sage Senior Cohousing Advocates, is a critical aspect of this consumer protection for seniors. Certification ensures that cohousing continues to be a concept that people can rely on. Having an actual certification documentation can prove to be beneficial in helping city officials see that cohousing is not just a soundbite, it's a movement.

A case in point can be found with the Village Hearth Senior Cohousing project. In the fall of 2017, the city of Durham, North Carolina, asked the residents of this community to provide proof that they were in fact a cohousing community. That was critical because residents were asking for favors from the city to save money, and in return the city wanted to see a certification. The city wanted to cooperate, but they did not want to be hoodwinked. The certification provided the reassurances the city needed.

By contrast, a developer in Petaluma, California, called his project cohousing, even though it featured no resident participation and the design did nothing to promote community interaction. He told the city council it was cohousing, because he wanted to ride the coattails of a very successful legitimate cohousing community in a neighboring town. The project was approved. The developer hoodwinked the city council and they were angry. How was the city council to know? They did not have a certification that said, "This is the genuine article." The upshot is that when a real cohousing community came to their town, the head planner said, "Whatever you do, do not call it cohousing." They had been fooled once but would not be fooled twice.

Another example is in the city of Bellingham, Washington. Bellingham is home to a sweet, 33-unit cohousing community, a village really, that is reminiscent of a traditional settlement, where people know, care about, and support each other. The city council admired this project so much that they passed some code variances for the next developer who proposed a new cohousing project, allowing for a number of breaks. The developer took advantage of the breaks (less parking, more units) but did not build cohousing. They gamed the system, and gamed the city council, the proximate neighbors, and the consumers. As a result, building another new cohousing community in Bellingham

might prove to be difficult if not impossible. Interestingly, the two projects are right across the street from each other. One feels like a conventional suburb, except with too many houses and too few parking spaces, and is devoid of life between the buildings. The other one feels like a village bustling with life.

We have already seen the marketplace try to sell "new and improved" senior housing, labeled as cohousing but without the "co." The truth is that such projects fit the prejudices of the developer and do so at the expense of the residents. The common houses in these facilities get less than 100 people-hours of use per week, instead of 300 people-hours in a genuine, high-functioning senior cohousing common house. Wrong-sized and ill-designed rooms diminish the use of common facilities, and therefore diminish the community itself.

The temptation to build housing without the "co" is based on the misconception that co-designing will slow down the process. The truth is, resident participation actually speeds up the process. For instance, the Cotati Cohousing was co-developed and co-designed in less than three years. Cotati Cohousing outpaced the other three conventional housing projects surrounding it. Those three neighboring projects took five, five, and seven years (respectively) to develop. The projects took longer to get through city approvals because they did not involve the future residents.

We must thank Pat Darlington, of Oakcreek Senior Cohousing, and David and Pat Hundhausen, of Quimper Village Senior Cohousing, for co-authoring the aforementioned certification program. It is through individuals like these and the dedication of Sage Senior Cohousing Advocates that senior cohousing will become readily accepted as a successful model for seniors in the US and around the globe.

Thank you for adhering to the above criteria when naming your project "Cohousing." Please consider checking in with the Cohousing Association of the United States (cohousing.org), to support certification for multi-generation cohousing. The Cohousing Association has been instrumental in moving cohousing forward in the US. We are grateful for the many advocates and active advisors who contribute to this positive process. 🌱



With his wife, Kathryn McCamant, Chuck Durrett is credited with coining the English term "cohousing" and introducing the cohousing model to North America (a type of intentional community, composed of small private homes with full kitchens and supplemented by extensive common facilities, that is planned, owned, and managed by its residents, groups of people who want more interaction with their neighbors). In recent years he has focused on cohousing for older persons. He is author of The Senior Cohousing Handbook: A Community Approach to Independent Living (2009, 2nd edition), and is co-author with Kathryn McCamant of Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves (1988) and Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities (2011). Visit McCamant & Durrett Architects at www.cohousingco.com. This article is adapted from one that first appeared in their e-newsletter of August 16, 2019.

Change, Challenge, and New Directions in Cohousing

By Karen Gimnig

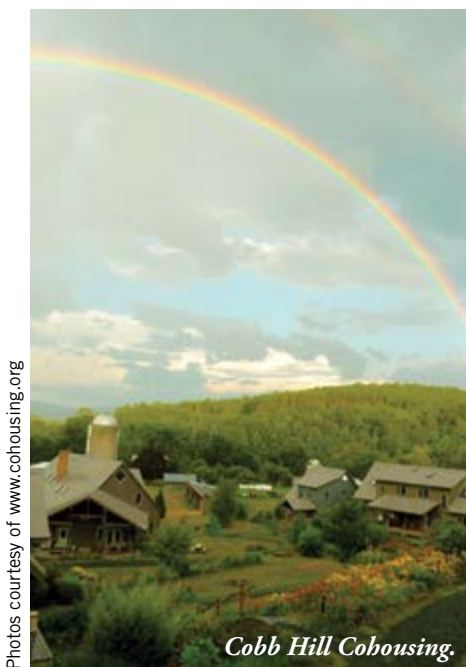
Resilient communities must adapt to change. The Cohousing Association of the United States, as a community of communities, is no different. Change is all around us and within us. The factors that lead to a successful cohousing movement, and even the definition of that success, are shifting and evolving. Change is opportunity and growth and vulnerability, lifeblood and danger, health and trauma, beautiful and inevitable and never-ending.

At CohoUS we are thinking a lot about change. We want to be conscious and transparent in the change that is coming and the ways we are engaging with it. Our focus is on the growth of the cohousing movement, the needs of our communities, both established and aspirational, and the ways in which cohousing can be an essential element in solving the problems the world faces today.

As a community of people passionate about the power of cohousing, we are aware of the need for change, know that it won't be easy, and believe that together we can find solutions. As board member Ann Lehman says, "We know that living in cohousing enriches community life, and diminishes loneliness. The next 30 years is figuring out how to make it affordable!" Cohousing developer Jim Leach adds, "For the cohousing association to be wildly successful in these times it needs to offer an easily understood housing alternative that addresses the current crisis in housing cost in the urban markets where people want to live."

Internally, we are finding that the diversity we've always sought is beginning to arrive. It brings new perspectives that are looking at cohousing as it is today and saying, "This does not work for us." Early in the cohousing movement our primary objective was to spread the word about a little-known approach to housing. We were successful, as evidenced by articles in major publications, a new film, and multiple TED talks and podcasts, even if there is still incomplete understanding of what cohousing is. In short, we have taken the concept to the people, and many have heard it. The people

Many have sought a place in cohousing for themselves and their families, and have not found homes they can afford.





Casa Verde Commons.



Belfast Cohousing and Ecovillage.



Puyallup Cohousing.

Creating cohousing without new construction could significantly reduce costs.

most like “us” (current cohousers) are rejoicing and stepping up to build more cohousing. The people less like us, in race, in age, and particularly in financial resources, are saying, “What about me?” Many have heard our vision. They have read the statistics about loneliness, they have sought a place in community for themselves and their families, and they have not found homes they can afford. We want cohousing for all who want it.

A major barrier to “cohousing for all” is cost. Inflation in real estate prices has accelerated in recent years. The majority of cohousing is made up of market-rate homes with owners who expect that our homes will increase in value and build our wealth. This is reassuring security to those who can access it. To a lower-middle-class family it makes cohousing further and further out of reach.

There is a nationwide crisis in afford-

able housing and the factors that affect all housing impact cohousing in exactly the same way. Costs of new construction and home prices in general are climbing fast while relative wages fall. Seniors and young families (among others) find they can’t afford to live in cohousing. As the cohousing movement expands, external conditions are making it even harder than it has been before to include lower-priced homes in the neighborhoods we are developing.

The reality is that if we are going to make things different, we are going to have to do some things differently. Change will require looking, in part, to new ideas and approaches. It can be tricky to do this in a way that fully honors the work and the people that have gotten us this far; with a message of gratitude and appreciation for a foundation so strong that it can now support a whole new chapter in the movement, a new branch of growth not yet imagined.

The CohoUS staff and board of directors are really excited about what is coming for the cohousing movement in 2020 and beyond. This is what we see:

We are a group of folks who care about building community and connection using the cohousing model. We began as an association of professionals with a common interest in cohousing. While we continue to rely on our professionals for wisdom, vision, and support, we have grown to be more. We see those who experience the benefits of cohousing becoming more engaged in the cohousing movement.

We are growing partnerships with other groups that share our values. As a community of communities our partnership is not only with those who want to build or live in cohousing, but also communities of people who grow connection through other models. We see connections with new allies.

We’re looking closely at our assumptions. We’re sorting the essential elements that define cohousing from the ideal traits that may not be possible for some communities. In particular, we are considering whether the social value of cohousing can be achieved while letting go of some architectural elements, home ownership, and development by future residents. We see lively discussions and blossoming ideas.

We’re considering ways to use existing housing stock. Approaches that make cohousing possible without new construction are particularly promising for reducing the money and time required to create cohousing.

- While clustered parking away from residences helps communities implement cohousing ideals, we wonder whether it might be possible to have cohousing in existing homes that have attached garages.

• A building in which all residents are members of a cohousing community is ideal, and we wonder whether a core group of cohousers within a building might enjoy the benefits of cohousing while gradually enticing the remaining residents to join them.

• The pedestrian walk is useful not for the concrete itself but for the relationships that form in that space. We wonder whether there are other ways to achieve those relationships. Perhaps the design elements that almost force us to hang out with each other (a good thing) could be replaced by less costly alternatives like social practices, other kinds of sharing, or even some new ideas in design.

We're finding the parts of our foundation that remain essential as we grow.

• Intention remains key. "What differentiates cohousing from the other housing configurations is shared values, consensus decision making, and acceptance of others," explains board president, Alan O'Hashi. People come together with a clear and actionable intention to know, support, and share with one another.

• We're also holding tightly to proximity. Clustered homes on a single property foster community in a way that just doesn't happen when you are spread across multiple acres, a town, or the country.

• It is private space that most distinguishes cohousing from other forms of intentional community. While we are considering where "coliving" with shared kitchens might fit to make cohousing more accessible, private homes remain a key element.

We are looking to grow more of what matters most in the communities we already have. Architect and board member Mary Kraus' dream for cohousing is "that all existing communities will become more successful over the years—with more common meals, greater connection between neighbors, and a thriving culture of compassion. The more I live in cohousing," she says, "The more I value the little connections—the ride given, the baking ingredient received, the smile shared on the pathway—and how deeply these bring us together." We see established communities sharing their models for success.

We are focusing on affordability in our programming. We welcomed Eli Spivak's tour of affordable cohousing at our national conference in Portland. Our first online conference, an Affordable Conference on Affordable Cohousing, happened on February 22.

We are identifying that we are a movement with impact far beyond housing. Loneliness is one of the most significant threats to health. Democracy desperately needs the collaborative skills learned when we practice consensus decision making. Work ranging from software development to community farming depends increasingly on the kind of teamwork experienced on community workdays and in the cooking of common meals. Our social fabric desperately needs the kinds of skills and experiences co-

housing offers. Cohousing, like all intentional living, is a movement that makes the world a better place one community at a time and in expanding ripples across states and nations. We see ourselves as more than cohousers.

We at CohoUS are asking questions and exploring possibilities. 2020 begins a bright new decade for the cohousing movement. We have real challenges and we are looking forward to addressing them together. We are excited about the possibilities. We are clear that the experience of community is too important, too vital, and too essential in our world not to consider every barrier and find ways around it together. 🐦

Karen Gimnig is the Communications Director for CohoUS, a nonprofit organization that educates and advocates for cohousing in the US. Your donation at cohousing.org will support their mission.

Our social fabric desperately needs the kinds of skills and experiences cohousing offers.



Why I Left Cohousing

By Carolyn Schlam

I had high hopes for cohousing and rather leapt into the opportunity to join a budding community and start a new chapter in my life. I longed for fellowship, the family I no longer enjoyed, a way to live alone yet surrounded by loving friends. I gave it a go, built a new house, and lived for five years in the community. Yet, in the end, I chose to leave—I sold my house and set up a new home in a neighboring state. Now, three years later, I reflect upon what was missing, and why cohousing failed as the dream of engagement I sought.

My fellow cohousers did not share my disappointment, relishing as they did in the small town life, and feeling a part of the community. I never got there. The town was too small and confining for one used to urban life and the anonymity and serendipity it provides. I was bored, often out of sorts, dissatisfied. Walking the same streets, seeing the same folks at community and town events, made me restless. I simply wanted more stimuli, and found the sameness and repetition stultifying.

Community potlucks were tiresome. Though the community made a valiant effort to bring us out of our houses into the common space for meals and meetings and events, I came to realize that, though there was conviviality, there was no connection. Where there was friendliness, there was no friendship.

We had the same conversations, got to the same level of relatedness each and every time.

This is not startling or even unusual, I think. In any given community, be it an apartment building or over-55 condominium, or in any random grouping of strangers, there will be a precious few to whom you will resonate, take the time to seek out, and who may in the end become true friends. And the others...they are familiar faces, acquaintances, and this is really OK, as it should be.

A cohousing community, I found, is not too different from these. It is a random selection of people who have in common that they wish to commune, and this is notable and admirable. But it does not mean that they **will** commune, will want to become friends, will be more than...well, just neighbors.

I found the endless meetings where rules and regulations were discussed actually defeated the sense of communion I sought. I couldn't wait for them to end, so I could escape back to my refuge. A city denizen, I could not relate to the community fixation on gardening, weeding, and issues with the resident prairie dogs—considered a nuisance by most and not a concern of mine at all. I just was not on the same page as my fellow cohousers and this increased my sense of isolation. More and more I felt I didn't belong.

The tyranny of “togetherness,” hoped for but not achieved, made me want to take a step back.

And in the end, I decided I didn't do well in a group context. I realized that I favored strong one-on-one engagements and that, as my father told me many times, I could be happy with a few good friends, and the deeply satisfying connections only true friendships could create. Being a member of a group, without the true connection, felt like I was faking comradery, and I just did not feel comfortable with that pretense.

I now live in a 55-and-over community where I meet my neighbors on the pathways walking my dog and at the swimming pool, and we say good morning and smile at one another. I am content with this. I have met a few people with whom there is

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enough chemistry to take the next step—go for coffee or dinner, or sit and talk on a park bench. Perhaps one or more will become true lifelong friends, but I can be content here even if that doesn't happen.

The difference is that it is entirely up to me how much I wish to engage, and I will not be judged if I choose not to. That freedom makes me more likely to do so, obligation thankfully removed.

Perhaps I am a contrarian or a rebel, but the inherent premise of cohousing, the group mentality, was the very factor that discouraged my participation.

I respect the intention and effort of cohousing participants to create a community life, and I champion their efforts. But I have found that there are many ways to experience community. You can be part of a community of three people working on a project. Or a million sharing an ideal. You don't need a certain number, or a common house, or weekly potlucks or any mandated kind of grouping or activity.

And you can live in a group setting and feel as solitary as if you lived alone in the woods. Or you can live alone in the woods and find the trees and animals to be your community. There is no magic formula to achieve it.

Community is a dream of relatedness and however you find it or make it is OK. You have to know yourself and what setting suits you best. Though I was not a candidate for cohousing, my experience brought me to a better understanding of what works for me as I continue to look for honest communion, friendship, and love wherever I may find it. 🌿

Carolyn Schlam is a professional artist and author now living in California. Her latest book, The Joy of Art: How to Look At, Appreciate, and Talk about Art was released by Skyhorse Publishing on March 3, 2020. You may find Carolyn's work at www.carolynschlam.com.



Photos courtesy of Carolyn Schlam

The House of Rebels

By Cheryl Gladu



I live in a corner of North America, the Canadian province of Quebec, where a lot of good news is missed by the wider English-speaking community for a lack of translation; the history of La Maison des RebElles is one of those stories. La Maison des RebElles, which translates to The House of Rebels (Elle is capitalized as it means “her”), is a collective that has been working for over four years to establish North America’s first affordable collaborative housing community for 55+ women—in particular, lesbian and bisexual women and their allies.

The group has 11 founding members, ranging from 60 to 72 years of age. The final community will include 20 units for singles and couples and will include a co-designed common space for meeting, exercising, and dining together. This project will be part of a larger complex of buildings that include market condominiums, social housing, an early childhood center, and commercial space. One quarter of the 400 units of housing destined for the site will provide some form of accessible housing. The project is in a bustling urban location, walking distance from the metro, and next to an extensive network of bike paths along the Lachine Canal.

Many of the women have long been active members of the social justice community, working on the front lines of women’s liberation and gay rights in the ’60s and ’70s. Their initial goal in creating La Maison des RebElles was to create the first affordable housing project oriented towards aging lesbians, who face specific challenges while aging. For example, one member of the com-

munity had visited a retirement community and asked if they accepted members of the LGBTQ community, and was told “well, we aren’t allowed to discriminate.” Not the kind of welcome one would expect in friendly, open-minded Montreal. This set off a process of reflection on the process of aging, as well as supportive aging in community.

One of La Maison’s founding members, Lou Lamontagne, suggests that straight and gay people of her generation have had very different lives. Many elderly members of the LGBTQ community face the possibility of a return to the closet as they age. Not so for the community behind La Maison des RebElles. While many members of the community do not have support from their families, they have instead learned to rely on one another over the years. They wanted to formalise this commitment via the creation of a physical community and after four years of meeting and talking, the project is slated to start in 2022. This model of development allows for people of low and modest means to live together and leverage the financial capacity of some members of the community to develop something more functional and sustainable than otherwise found in social housing projects in the city.

How did they manage to pull this off? I’ve spoken with many people involved in the development of cohousing and other forms of intentional communities and have encountered the same notion time and time again: “there is no such thing as free money.” This has been a limiting factor in the development of financially accessible communities for many years. North Americans look

longingly to European models of community development and sigh, “but not here.” Yet here—in North America—members of La Maison des ReBElles will pay below market rates, and low-income members will never pay more than 25 percent of their income on rents, even within the current real estate market. Few people in the English-speaking world are aware of how Quebec serves as something of an international model for the “social and solidarity economy.” It’s a peculiar network of services paired with a cooperative financial ecosystem that makes projects like La Maison des ReBElles possible. It’s part of the reason that more than half of all cooperative housing in Canada is in the one province of Quebec.

There is such a thing as free money, but it’s not what you think. Some people have been lucky enough to inherit family wealth, be it a few thousand or million dollars, simply by virtue of their birth into a given household. Over time, this wealth can accumulate and compound disparities between those with who have access to this money and those who don’t. Communities that have faced historic oppression are particularly vulnerable to the chronic insecurity that emerges without wealth. But, as Lou put it, “any survival situation can breed solidarity and a system of co-care and support.” And that is what happened in Quebec, where a social economy was developed to sit alongside the profit-seeking economy and the public sector. This tends to happen where there is a pairing of significant unmet needs and a shared collective identity. Both of these exist in any number of underserved communities in both Canada and the US.

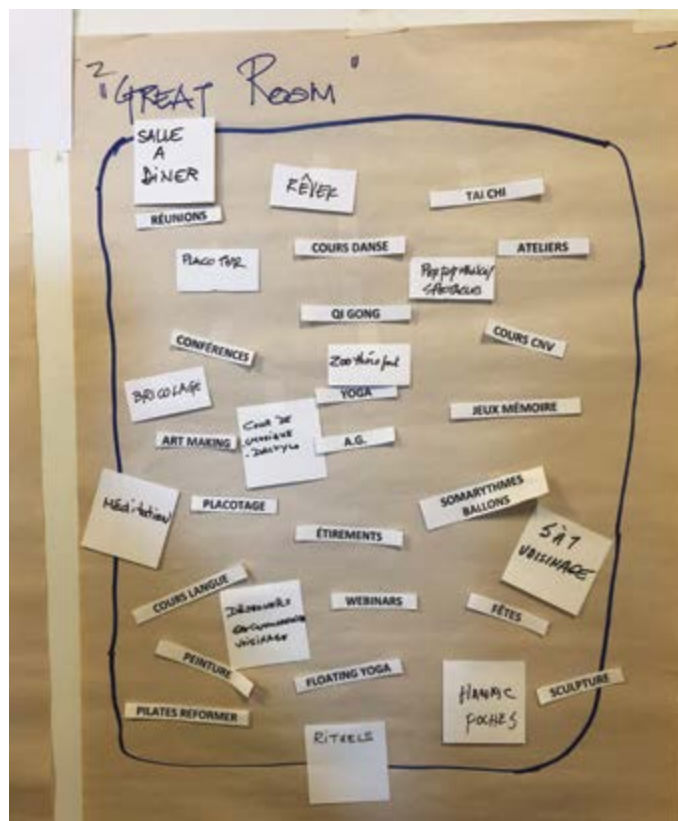
In the Quebec context, where French-speaking Catholics were for generations excluded from wealth-generating activities, an interconnected system of non-market actors emerged to help communities out—typically via the creation of mutual support organisations, such as cooperatives, mutual societies, and enterprising not-for-profits. People create these when they want to transform individual wealth into collective well-being. Today, these organisations employ 220,000 people in 11,200 companies and generated revenues of \$ 47.8 billion in Quebec last year. Most of this system was developed over the last 30 years when important structural changes were reshaping the economy and society, a context similar to the situation today—conditions of social exclusion, growing inequality, and entrenched individualism. While individuals within the larger community were tugging at their own proverbial bootstraps, there was a desire to bring everyone up together.

How this looks today is exemplified by the development of a

non-market project like La Maison des ReBElles. Real estate is a challenging industry and a key predictor of success is previous experience, making it hard for middle- and low-income people to take control over their own housing on a project-by-project basis. In the case of La Maison des ReBElles, when they decided they wanted to build their community, they contacted a local non-profit technical resources group, Bâtir son quartier (BSQ) and were paired with Manon Bouchard, a development agent. She has years of experience and a whole team of experts to help. BSQ is one of 25 technical resources groups in Quebec and is a social economy enterprise that doesn’t just manage the development of space, they also provide training on cooperative management and communications. Since 1976, BSQ has made almost 12,000 units of not-for-profit and/or cooperative community housing in Montreal. Their funding largely comes from a development fee appended to the budget of successfully completed projects, though part of their expertise includes understanding how to leverage grants or subsidies for accessible housing made available through foundations and all levels of government.

One lesson we can gather from how La Maison des ReBElles has come to be is that social justice issues require a systemic approach with a vision of community-level transformation. The Quebec model demonstrates that this is possible in conditions of systemic oppression—but it takes time and commitment to the larger vision of raising everyone together. 🍷

Cheryl Gladu, B.I.B., M.B.A. is an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Candidate at Concordia University where she studies collaborative design and the creation of places and objects that encourage long-term sustainable behavior change. Cheryl teaches, keeps bees, and builds communities on the side. You can reach her via www.cgladu.com.



Photos courtesy of Cheryl Gladu

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VALLEY OF LIGHT is a community for Cultural Creatives that rests along the New River in the



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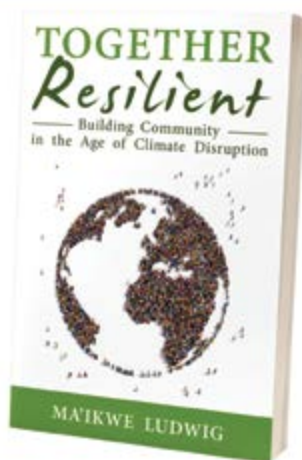
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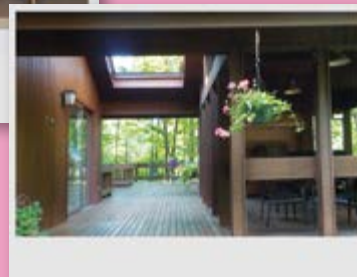
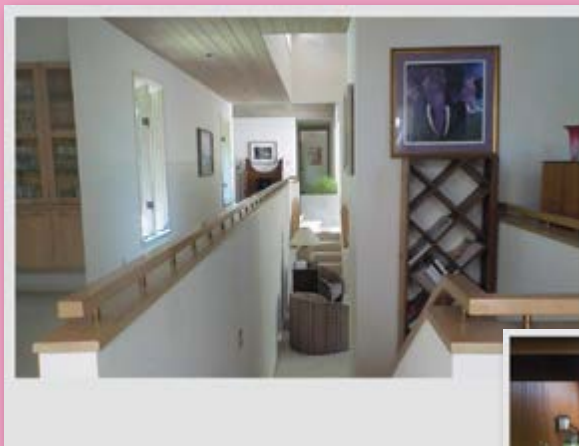
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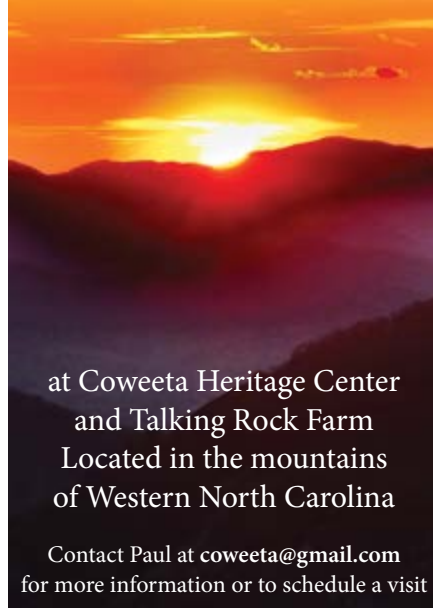
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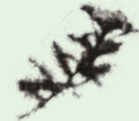
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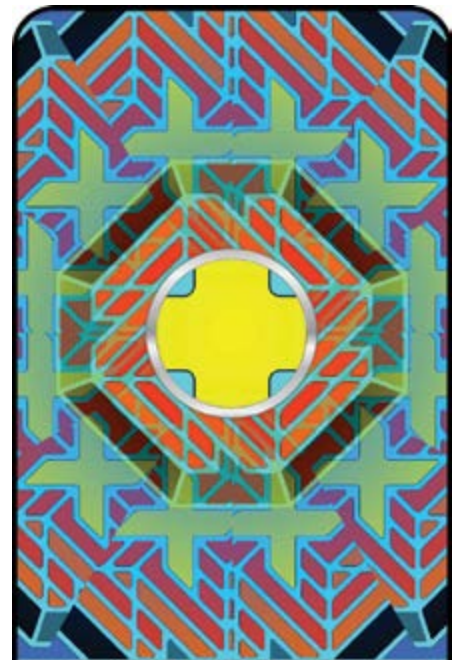
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BELONGING AND A LIFE IN SERVICE: REMEMBERING NATHAN

(continued from p. 76)

tened to the news avidly, but with impatience that none of the political candidates was a true radical. He structured his life according to what he believed a good feminist man should be: kind, caring, listening, and working in underpaid and under-appreciated traditionally female jobs, including cleaning friends' houses and providing free childcare. He believed sexism deprived men of essential human qualities, including the ability to bond deeply with other humans and share emotions freely. His main revolutionary tactic in his later years was to live a fully human life.

Only as a fifth thought did Nathan identify himself as an individual. He didn't want to be one person, especially not the only person he knew who (fill in the blank). But he was one person. One person who lived life, and who could die. To our sorrow—for he was not only the only person he knew who (fill in the blank), he was the only person anyone knew who blended his particular insightful, cutting intelligence with a heart as big as the land. His first four identities, that of belonging to a family, a place, a community, and a social movement, caused him to live his individual life in service to others. He felt most himself when he belonged and was loved.

I am grateful to have been an integral part of Nathan's sense of belonging in his last years. For perhaps the first time in his adult life, he was truly happy—as part of my family, our intentional community, our Liberation Listening co-counseling community, and our beautiful communal land. He could give to his full capacity, and deliver his gifts to those who appreciated him. He is irreplaceable in our community, in my family's life, and in my life. We need him as much as he needed us. 🌱

Kara Huntermoon is a co-owner at Heart-Culture Farm Community (near Eugene, Oregon), where she has lived for 12 years with her husband and two daughters. Kara teaches Liberation Listening, a form of co-counseling that focuses on understanding and ending systems of oppression.



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Belonging and a Life in Service: Remembering Nathan

The following eulogy was given on February 2, 2020 at the Celebration of Life for Nathan Nelson. Nathan died on December 16, 2019.



Nathan Atwood Nelson (1979-2019) was hit by an SUV while walking on the sidewalk in Springfield, Oregon. He died six hours later in the hospital.

Nathan's first identity of himself was as part of a family. When we told life-stories during co-counseling sessions, he always started with his parents, or even his grandparents. He described their lives and their ways of being as shaping him irrevocably. He often ran out of time before he even reached the event most of us would start out with: his own birth.

Nathan tried over and over again to make an adult family for himself. He wanted to raise kids more than anything else, but never had a relationship with a woman who would do that with him. So he helped raise other people's kids, only to have those people move away and fail to keep in touch with someone who they thought of as a friend or roommate. He finally found Heart-Culture Farm Community about seven years ago, and made relationships with families who welcomed and appreciated his commitment to our children. We asked him to become a part of our

families, and to stay as a co-owner of the community land.

Just six months ago, I was teaching my six-year-old daughter how to make family in other ways than birth. Marriage is an obvious way, but what is marriage? It is a *decision* that you will be family for life. We have other people who are family by decision: kaseja wilder, my children's goddess-mother, is family because we made a decision. Reba is family because we made a decision, and formalized it by putting me on her end-of-life paperwork. Who else is family? Tegra said "Nathan," and I agreed: he was already my partner in so many ways, and a third parent to my children. But I realized we had made no formal decision. So that night I asked Nathan if he wanted to make a decision to be family for life with me. He said quietly, "that's my goal." We made a formal decision that his enmeshment in my family's life could be counted on. That was a great comfort to him. We had each other for life. We just had no idea that would be so short.

Nathan's second way of thinking of himself was as belonging to a place. He grew up in Springfield, and his most treasured childhood memories took place at Mt. Pisgah. These memories were not necessarily events or moments, but relationships with specific trees, animals, waterways, and people. Nathan never travelled, and only left Oregon once to live in Colorado briefly in his early 30s. He was miserable there. The seasons, the weather, the plants, the landforms, were all wrong. *Blackberries* would not grow in Colorado! He came home to Eugene as quickly as he could, and found his place at Heart-Culture, where he could garden and be with the land he loved. He worked outside every chance he got, and went barefoot in all weathers so his feet could touch the soil.

Nathan's third identity of himself was as belonging to a wider community. He wanted to live a fully human life, and history told him that most humans throughout time grew up in intact communities, where they knew the same people from birth through death, and existed in a deep web of reciprocal relationships. Capitalism had broken our ability to be human in that way, he believed, and part of his goal was to rebuild that intact community in Eugene. It troubled him that aside from his parents, nobody who had known him in his youth still played a large role in his life.

Nathan's fourth identity of himself was as belonging to a social movement. A radical feminist and a revolutionary, he lis-

(continued on p. 75)

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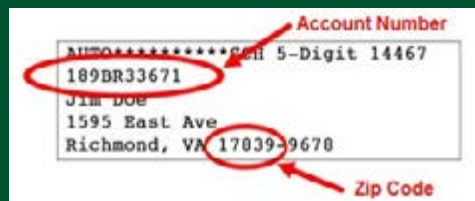
Welcome to COMMUNITIES #186!

This is our second issue published by GEN-US (Global Ecovillage Network-United States), following our Winter 2019 issue, *Passing the Torch*. Because transferring and upgrading our subscription system, communications systems, and website have proven complex, we haven't been able to contact all those past subscribers to whom we sent sample copies of that issue. Therefore, we are also sharing this new issue with some of you, in either print or digital form, hoping you may enjoy it and be inspired to subscribe!

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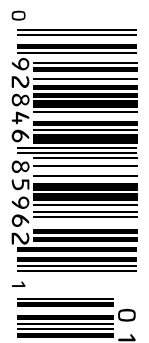
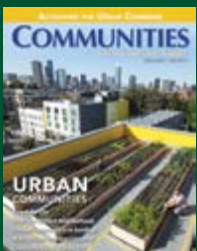
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We are excited to share the wealth of new content *COMMUNITIES* writers are generating, as well as the wealth of old content that also holds numerous lessons for us all. Now, finally, it is easy to have access to all of it by subscribing to *COMMUNITIES*. The magazine exists because of you, and your support is invaluable.

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