

STORYTELLING AND CATCHING • SHARED SPIRITUALITY

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2021 • Issue #190

## FAITH IN COMMUNITY

Camphill's Evolution

My Life in Co-operatives

Perils of Individual Ownership

“Spirit Is the Guest and the Body Is the Home”

Pigs and a Broken Leg in a Multifaith Community



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# Welcome

First, we want to thank the donors, subscribers, writers, and advertisers who make this magazine possible. While we have not yet met our donation goal for this year, the generosity of many of you (you know who you are) has made it possible to pay our basic costs. Pandemic economic relief programs have also helped staff navigate these difficult financial times, when advertising income in particular is down and many readers/supporters are not able to contribute as much financially as they might otherwise, or are not able to contribute at all. We are all navigating uncharted territory together, and we appreciate that with each person contributing what they can, we are finding a path forward.

In fact, the pandemic may hold some silver linings for the magazine: lacking most outside activities, some people have found more time to write. We pushed some articles forward from our Winter issue because we ran out of space, and we faced the same situation with this Spring issue—more material that we definitely want to publish than we have room for in the print edition. At times in the past, we've addressed this situation by posting an extra article or two online in blog form.

With this issue, we are trying something different. We've created a separate, magazine-formatted digital supplement containing **four** articles, which is available free to anyone for online

viewing and/or download and printing. These articles are less theme-specific than the rest of the articles in this issue, and in fact most had been shuttled from the Winter issue, so we decided they were suitable candidates for this new experiment. They are referenced in the Table of Contents of this print edition, and appear not only in the separate digital supplement available at [gen-us.net/190.1](http://gen-us.net/190.1), but also as extra pages (numbered 70 through 81) in the digital version of issue #190, which is available online for viewing and download to all subscribers and to any others who purchase it as a digital download.

As noted also on page 68, this issue contains various interpretations of the theme Faith in Community. Some authors address their personal faith in intentional community itself, and how their life experiences have led them to affirm or question that faith. Others discuss the benefits and challenges of living in religious faith-based communities. And other authors blend pragmatic or secular perspectives with spiritual elements in their treatment of the theme.

We invite you to share COMMUNITIES with others and we continue to welcome any support you can provide for this ongoing, nearly 50-year-old project based in the faith that we *can* learn from one another and that we *can* evolve collectively to meet the challenges of changing times.

SPECIAL DIGITAL SUPPLEMENT • FAITH IN COMMUNITY

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture  
Spring 2021 • Issue #190 • Supplement  
[gen-us.net/190.1](http://gen-us.net/190.1)



The Queen, the Gardener, and Me  
Community Events: The "We" of "Me"  
Life Project 4 Youth  
College-Based Senior Cohousing

**Note from the Editor:** To accompany our Faith in Community print edition of COMMUNITIES, we've created this separate digital supplement containing four articles, available free to anyone for online viewing and/or download and printing. These articles are less theme-specific than the rest of the issue's articles. We welcome new readers who may be seeing only this digital supplement, and hope you'll seek out the main issue (available in both print and digital versions) and consider subscribing at [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities). Thank you!  
Photo by Richard Getler

### The Queen, the Gardener, and Me: Reflections on Community-Forming Processes

By Elizabeth Stern



**A**fter the first year of the pandemic, I found myself in a garden. I had been told that the garden was a good place to go to feel better, to feel connected to the earth, and to feel like I was doing something good. I had been told that the garden was a good place to go to feel better, to feel connected to the earth, and to feel like I was doing something good. I had been told that the garden was a good place to go to feel better, to feel connected to the earth, and to feel like I was doing something good.

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### Community Events: The "We" of "Me"

By Greg Shivers



**W**hen the pandemic hit, I found myself in a garden. I had been told that the garden was a good place to go to feel better, to feel connected to the earth, and to feel like I was doing something good. I had been told that the garden was a good place to go to feel better, to feel connected to the earth, and to feel like I was doing something good.

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### Cultivating Community in the Neighborhood: Life Project 4 Youth

By Candice Bro



**H**ow do we cultivate community in the neighborhood? This is a question that has been asked for a long time. It is a question that has been asked for a long time. It is a question that has been asked for a long time.

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### College-Based Senior Cohousing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Cultivating Values by CHARLES SHIBATA AND DENNIS GONZALES



**Y**ou may have heard the phrase "senior cohousing" and wondered what it meant. It is a new idea that is gaining traction. It is a new idea that is gaining traction. It is a new idea that is gaining traction.

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Special Digital Supplement Available at [gen-us.net/190.1](http://gen-us.net/190.1)

# FAITH IN COMMUNITY

## 4 Letters

## 6 News from Our Partners

## 8 Storytelling and Catching

**Looby Macnamara**

Storytelling is not just a part of our culture; it defines our culture and makes it visible. Through our stories we shift our culture. Permaculture, ecovillage, and community designs are stories we are creating in the world.

## 11 Ducks as a Symbol of Letting Go

**Andrew McLean**

These half-inch-high morsels of surprise and mild amusement are more than a silly little mystery on a small community in Australia. These ducks have started to represent for me the leap of faith that is required to start a community.

## 14 Faith in the Experiment

**Lee Warren**

Time and experience have turned blind faith into something more real and embodied. This deeper sense of knowing has been borne not from the communities movement getting better, although it has, but frankly from the world getting even more insane.

## 18 Pigs and a Broken Leg in a Multifaith Community

**Joyce Bressler**

I can't say whether it was our religious beliefs or our human bonding, working and living together with common goals, that helped us reach this level of caring for each other. What I do know is that we grew together.

## 20 "Spirit Is the Guest and the Body Is the Home": Faith and the Brotherhood of the Spirit community

**Daniel A. Brown**

We were convinced our house rock band, "Spirit in Flesh," would become more popular than the Beatles and thus, save the world. Our friends and family members thought we were stark raving mad. Fifty years later, most of our supposedly wild beliefs are commonplace—except that one.

## 24 The Hermitage as Shared Spirituality

**Johannes Zinzendorf**

We find that the idea of committing one's life to a shared spiritual ideal is a difficult sell in these days of DIY religion when people, quite rightly, want to find and follow their own path.

## 26 Coming Into Unity

**Blue Evening Star**

Many years after we started, we still live with the many challenges of being in a spiritually-based community within the larger dominant culture of materialistic values.

## 29 From India to Nepal to Northern California: Beyond the "Dream" of Village

**Ahkua Huling**

My "faith in community" is not really a faith, but a knowing. I've seen it with my own eyes, and I've felt it in my body, up there in the mountain villages and in my own community.

## 31 My Faith in Communities

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My larger community is a series of interconnecting "intentional" communities and this is truly where my faith in community lies.

### 33 Keeping the Faith in a Forming Cohousing Community Or: Why I keep going on this seemingly endless journey

Jennie Lindberg

What motivates me to continue working on our forming community and helps me have faith in the process is wondering how it will all turn out.

### 35 Leaning into Vulnerability

Teri Lynn Grunthaler

How do we begin to soften our defenses so as to tend to the precious needs beneath our pain? How do we learn to trust our belonging—to our community, to our planet, to ourselves—so as to stay grounded through the unsettling winds of conflict?

### 39 How Can You Know in Advance about Your New Community?

Diana Leafe Christian

As an activist in the communities movement for the last 30 years, I know abusive communities are rare. We can have faith in community living—and faith in our own new community—if we choose wisely by researching communities carefully and thoroughly beforehand.

### 43 The Sharp Rocks: The Perils of Individual Ownership in Aspiring “Egalitarian” Communities

Anonymous

My former community mates had not only coerced me to sell my house under duress, and for less than market value, but now were going around town saying that I’d “swindled” \$50k from Greenville.

### 50 My Life in Co-operatives

Andrew Moore

I can still quote my family’s Co-operative Society membership number from over 50 years ago, 1141585. And my final co-operative experience I hope will be with Co-operative Funeral Services.

### 52 Camphill’s Evolution

Rick Mitchell

Exploring spirituality and disability in the evolving Camphill Village communal movement, Dan McKanan’s *Camphill and the Future* is thorough, thoughtful, and honest about Camphill’s current challenges.

### 55 Camphill and the Future: Another Look

Crystal Byrd Farmer

Communities that operate on an isolationist model of moral superiority will not grow as fast as those that recognize the interrelatedness of the

entire world and focus on inclusion of all forms of diversity. Camphill has elements of both types, reasons for both caution and hope.

### 58 REACH

### 68 Notes to and from the Editor: Testing the Faith

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Elizabeth Barr

Experience shows that ideas about group dynamics and cooperative living, and the skills for developing community, are transferable to groups of all sizes, in different types of places, whether temporary or permanent, old or new.

### 73 Community Events: The “We” of “Me”

Greg Sherwin

“Me” and “we” energies can fully merge in service to the highest good. The question is: What standards of community engagement are we willing to personally and collectively commit to?

### 76 Cultivating Community in the Neighborhood: Life Project 4 Youth

Camille Bru

Reaching out to strengthen neighborhood connections to help excluded young adults may not change the whole world, but it may change one person’s world, and that’s why we catalysts love what we do.

### 79 College-Based Senior Cohousing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Charles Durrett and Bernice Gonzalez

College and university towns are ideal locations for alumni senior cohousing, a model which promotes active lifestyles, encourages continuous learning, and empowers residents.



## ON THE COVER

At Delaware Street Commons cohousing in Lawrence, Kansas, Amy Bousman holds a peacock feather above a pond built and maintained by community residents. Photo by Teri Lynn Grunthaler.

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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## Letters



## We Are All Community

Once again you all at *COMMUNITIES* have “juiced” me with your stories...especially you Chris with your words of obvious love and respect for your Mother who I gather went by the name of Nancy and who I assume is pictured in the lower right hand corner of page 9 hugging a tree smiling out at the world from a sacred “spirit.”

I can appreciate your feelings of loss while at the same time offer up the idea of “celebration.” I don’t know how many years your Mother walked the Earth walk.... I am in my 89th year pushing 90 and facing the issue that she just solved!

Next: with each issue of *COMMUNITIES* I (as I read the various stories) with all due respect without meaning to be unkind get the feeling of having been there done that. I end up smiling at the various ups and downs witnessed by another story teller excitedly sharing deep felt emotion of “pissed off” anger as well as their “shaking hands with God” delight.

We are by some accounts facing the sixth (so called) extinction. And having the blame for its arrival pinned up on the Human-at-fault Bulletin Board. I certainly don’t disagree with that insight. My Indian Friend (the late Rolling Thunder) always said, “Don’t trust the water downstream from a White Man.” Population “experts” say there are too many humans on earth. I think we are suffering from a virus HOMOSAPIEN-ITIS—while not wishing to blame ourselves for it but rather first doing our best to be more loving and careful to do unto others as we would be done to.

Finally I have come to the conclusion that I AM Community! as is every other form of life (plus Rocks) I run into. :-)

**Roger Ulrich**

Lake Village Homestead  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

## Call for Papers: “Sustainability, Justice, & Inclusivity” Communal Studies Association Annual Conference

September 30–October 2, 2021, Yellow Springs, Ohio  
Submission deadline for proposals: May 9, 2021

How do intentional communities attempt to build more sustainable, just, and inclusive micro-societies? How can those efforts serve as models or inspiration for the broader society? What are the challenges to scaling up or scaling out the efforts of intentional communities in the areas of sustainability, justice, and inclusivity? What does the interface between intentional communities and the broader society look like and how can we gauge the “success” of intentional communities in creating change?

We are also interested in proposals that concern any other aspect of communalism or intentional communities past, present, or future.

Current communitarians are eligible for reduced registration fees upon request. Due to pandemic uncertainties, the format of the conference may be modified from in-person to hybrid or entirely virtual; you may be asked to make your presentation virtually.

Please submit your proposals for individual papers, whole sessions, or other possible unique formats via [www.communalstudies.org/annualconference](http://www.communalstudies.org/annualconference) by May 9, 2021, including an abstract of 150 words maximum describing your presentation and/or session and a biographical statement of 100 words maximum for each presenter or participant. For information please contact Program Chair Joshua Lockyer at [jlockyer@atu.edu](mailto:jlockyer@atu.edu).



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- 2) Brainstorming Zero Carbon ASAP Project now in progress...  
 Sample Outreach Letter, accessible on [www.cpcsi.org](http://www.cpcsi.org) homepage, charts a course for collaboration with 1000s of positive tipping point organizations, by seeking 5-10 page overviews from each on how to achieve Zero Carbon ASAP in their specific fields (a clearinghouse of such overviews will surely accelerate local Climate Emergency Action)
- 3) "Growing Wisdom and Compassion in Small Communities (13 Steps)" (78 pages) All documents and resources are FREE at The Community Peacebuilding and Cultural Sustainability (CPCS) Initiative homepage ([www.cpcsi.org](http://www.cpcsi.org)) -Stefan Pasti, Founder and Resource Coordinator (I'm looking around for people to assist me with projects—or for projects I can assist others with as a volunteer.)

### 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](mailto:editor@gen-us.net). To obtain Photo Guidelines, email [layout@gen-us.net](mailto:layout@gen-us.net). Both are also available online at [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities).

### Advertising Policy

Please check [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities) or email [ads@gen-us.net](mailto: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.

## Tales from the Tr#mpery

### June 14, 1946: In Utero

At his birth, prescient gods gathered to survey the future damage. An argument arose, principally between Ares and Athena. The crux of it was whether to smite the child stillborn.

The Goddess of Wisdom cited defense of the American Constitution as justification for such a drastic step. “All the careful work we have nurtured will be compromised. The Lords of Chaos already have their hooks into his DNA. He will grow soulless, foisting blame for every failure on others, destroying what stands in his way as a simple reflex. What possible excuse could lead your defense?”

In response, Ares hurled a spear at the shield she raised. Shield and spear shattered, with the shards scattered at their feet.

Ares immediately apologized.

“Winston Churchill's ‘Iron Curtain’ speech has me distracted. The Chaos Lords are trying to align me with one side or the other—they don't care which. I like this Truman fellow, but he's going to have his hands full with the Soviets. I'm always up for a good war, but that's not what I'd call a nuclear exchange. There'll be plenty of immediate action that makes 70 years down the pike with this baby hard to get too bothered about.”

Athena nodded. “Forgiven. I suppose you're right. It's not like I enjoy killing babies. His rise stretches probabilities, so we'll have other chances to intervene. Anyone else want to weigh in?”

Demeter, the Goddess of the Seasons, raised a graceful hand. “He's a wild card, and will be on the wrong side of every issue I care about. Yet the opportunities for mischief he seizes will be the product of other choices. I say save our interventions for more immediate threats.”

Hera and Zeus conferred and rendered their verdict: “The child is born, the man will live.”

For more, read Paul Freundlich's blog at [exemplars.world/blog](http://exemplars.world/blog).

## An Invitation to Share Your Story

“The stories we tell literally make the world.” —Michael Margolis

In this time of global unraveling, millions are losing hope that a regenerative, meaningful, and just future is even possible. But those of us putting our shoulders to the grindstone of this “Great Turning” know better because we are actively manifesting the change we wish to see. Sharing our personal narratives can help others live into this emerging New Story of our being in community with each other and all life.

**So, what's your story?** How did you come to find your passion or purpose? How has living in community transformed you, surprised you, or challenged you? What moments have scared you, humbled you, or made you laugh out loud?

Even if nothing immediately comes to mind, please register at [gen-us.net/stories](http://gen-us.net/stories) to join an intimate and entertaining online story sharing circle with other community members from around the world. Following some general guidance you can choose to bring a story to share or join a circle with a mystery prompt only given on the spot!

During and after the circle, you will receive feedback and support to further develop, record, and—if you like—share your story in a local or global storytelling event along with peers and luminaries from across the globe.

Together, let's remake the world through our stories of personal and cultural transformation!

—Daniel Greenberg



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\* Central, 7-9 pm \* Eastern, 8-10 pm

“I’m excited for each week of Diana’s sociocracy course. She’s an engaging trainer who truly understands how to teach sociocracy for intentional communities in a way that people actually get it; I feel like I’m learning from the best.

I think she should charge three or four times more though — I’m finding her course that valuable.”

—Chris Herndon, Life Coach, Irvine, California. Sociocracy webinar, Oct-Dec, 2020

“Learning sociocracy from Diana has easily been the biggest catalyst in helping our community thrive.”

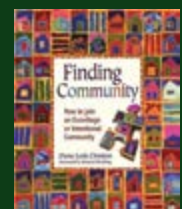
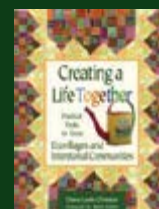
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[diana@ic.org](mailto:diana@ic.org)

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# Storytelling and Catching

*This article is adapted with permission from the Looby Macnamara's new book, Cultural Emergence: A Toolkit for Transforming Ourselves and the World, published by Permanent Publications, November 2020. See [permanentpublications.co.uk/port/cultural-emergence-a-toolkit-for-transforming-ourselves-the-world](http://permanentpublications.co.uk/port/cultural-emergence-a-toolkit-for-transforming-ourselves-the-world).*

Stories are for catching, collecting, telling, interpreting, creating, inhabiting. Stories come in many shapes and sizes: fairy tales, media stories, fantasies, love stories, crime thrillers, biographies, nature stories, social media posts. Each and every one of us tells stories, stories of our everyday life, our travels and adventures, our friendships and conflicts, our successes and challenges, the mundane and trivia of our lives as well as the exciting, unusual, and bewildering. Our lives are a collection of stories. Every day we share stories with people—stories of our journey to work, what happened at a family dinner, a retelling of a friend's date. Being a storyteller isn't just a label or role for some people, it's part of our blueprint for being a human. As a human being who talks to other human beings, you have always been and always will be a storyteller.

Storytelling is one of the core routines that sits in the middle of all of the phases of Cultural Emergence. There are stories that CHALLENGE & AWAKEN, that stretch our understanding of the world. Stories that MOVE & INVIGORATE, that activate our imagination and inspire our visioning and make us want to be proactive in the world. And stories that NOURISH & EMPOWER us, that connect us with the more-than-human world, and help us to see our place in the bigger picture of life, stories that SUPPORT OUR EMOTIONS TO FLOW, stories TO SURFACE GIFTS.

## Stories and Culture

Culture is transmitted through our stories. They convey hopes, phobias, biases, attitudes, expectations, gender roles, and so much more. They are units of transmission. Storytelling is not just a part of our culture, it defines our culture, it makes our culture visible—it is our culture. Through our stories we shift our culture. Storytelling surfaces values and beliefs and dresses them up, and in doing so our values and beliefs can be redefined. Through our stories we find and define ourselves. Our stories are our past, present, and future. Permaculture, ecovillage, and community designs are stories we are creating in the world. Through our stories we set our direction of travel into the future.

As Hugh Lupton<sup>1</sup> puts it, “Stories are the tools we use to make sense of the world.”

Father Oleska<sup>2</sup> describes culture as “the story we are born into.” He highlights the difference in attitudes to the animal world between the Western culture epitomised by animals' portrayal in Disney films, and the stories of the indigenous cultures in Alaska. In Disney and modern fairy tales, being turned into an animal is usually portrayed as a curse. In traditional, indigenous Alaskan stories, turning into an animal is an honour and an adventure where you gain superpowers. Being steeped in the modern world, I hadn't even noticed this until he brought my attention to it, and shared the story of the boy who turned into a mink and played happily ever after. The indigenous cultures of Alaska, and many more around the world, respect animals; they see people as the newcomers to the web of life, dependent on animals for food and clothing. Animals have superior senses of smell, sight, sound; they can move faster in the air, water, and underground. There is a deep respect for the more-than-human world embedded into children from a very early age through stories.

This is just one example of how cultural narratives are drip-fed to us through stories, without us really being conscious of it.

Sharon Blackie<sup>3</sup> has this wisdom to share: “Stories matter you see. They're not just en-

tertainment—stories matter because humans are narrative creatures. It's not simply that we like to tell stories, and to listen to them: it's that narrative is hard-wired into us. It's a function of our biology, and the way our brains have evolved over time. We make sense of the world and fashion our identities through the sharing and passing on of stories. And so the stories that we tell ourselves about the world and our place in it, and the stories that are told to us by others about the world and our place in it, shape not just our own lives, but the world around us. The cultural narrative is the culture.”

## Stories We Live By

Stories are the flowers that blossom from the roots that are living within the cultural paradigms. Are the stories coming from paradigms of separation or interbeing, competition or cooperation? Is there a mindset of humankind as superior to nature or humans as a parasite on the planet?

Can we tell stories that lead us to an understanding of people's thriving design for life? Stories of the Great Turning and How Things Turn Out OK?

There are the stories that we were born into, that were part of our culture as we grew up, and then there are the stories that we choose to live by, stories that we actively choose.

As Hugh Lupton<sup>4</sup> observes, “Once a story is learnt it actually works its way into the nervous system. It becomes a part of you.”

## Our Personal Stories

The stories we tell embody our dreams and adventures. They reflect our priorities and the relative importance we place upon aspects of our life.

We can reshape our personal culture

through reshaping our stories. When we release stories it opens up our horizons.

### Belief Cycle

The belief cycle illustrates one of the ways our personal stories come into being. This is a cycle that can start at any point. When we come into a new situation, perhaps a new learning opportunity, we will experience emotions related to learning something new. They can range from exhilaration to wanting to run away, and often we will have mixed emotions. Depending on which emotions we give our attention to, this will influence our reactions and actions in the given situation. Our actions become the basis of the story we have of our interactions and the experience. From this story we extract meaning, which leads to beliefs and assumptions about ourselves, other people, and the world. This leads to patterns of thinking and behaving that will then reinforce the emotions we attend to in further experiences. Each time we go round the cycle the rut deepens.

For example, I might be faced with the chance to learn a new song, and I might feel overwhelmed as well as excited. This might lead me to find an excuse to leave the room for a while. My story becomes that I didn't learn the new song, and then this adds to a belief I might have about not being able to sing. Now my belief leads me to the pattern of avoidance of singing. So next time the opportunity comes up, I feel overwhelmed, and so on. Each time we are faced with similar situations the be-

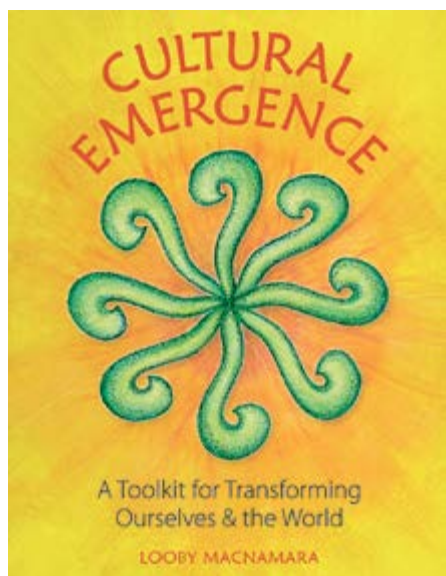
liefs, stories, emotions, and patterns reinforce each other. OR I could feel overwhelmed and excited and choose to follow the excitement; I stay put and sing along with others. Now the story is that I did sing with everyone else. And maybe this shifts an existing belief I have about myself and starts a new belief about myself. These stories and beliefs become part of our personal culture.

### Storycatching

Telling our stories is just one side of the experience; on the other side is the storycatcher, the person or people who are willing to listen and respond. When a child shares an experience or observation they have had, they will interpret the relevance and the importance of it from the response they get. As children get older their stories are a way to express their realities and then to assess whether that is welcome or not: sharing how they interact with the world, what they are noticing, how they are feeling. They might share their experiences from school with their teachers and friends that may reveal some of their gifts, talents, passions, and dislikes. They may share stories from their observations and interactions in the more-than-human world. Imagine a child rushing in to share about the snail tracks that they followed that led them right to the snail, or about how they heard a commotion with the birds and when they went to investigate they found the neighbour's cat about to pounce, and were able to chase it away. If these stories are met with active attention, interest, and questions, then that child will probably come and share another story later. If they are met with disinterest from a parent behind a screen, then they are likely not to come bothering them again, and maybe they will stop tracking snails or wondering about the bird alarm calls.

In this way storytelling and storycatching are building the culture, building the patterns of attentiveness, awareness, observation, interpretation, valuing, and priorities.

Sharing our stories of nature connection is an important part of the whole experience of connection. It deepens our connection with the experience, helping us to fill in some of the gaps of our memory, stretching the edges of our awareness. Sharing stories of our personal experiences, feelings, and adventures can be a vulnerable thing to do. When we share a story with someone, we open our hearts and communicate with our hearts. If this





is not met in a way that nourishes us and gives value to the experience, then it can lead to a contraction, a hiding away, a diminished sense of importance, of both the experience and ourselves. Conversely when our story is truly listened to and caught by another, it can support us to find hidden meanings, give us a sense of worth and honouring, and lead to expansion.

Being a good storycatcher involves us giving full open attention, relaxing, and letting the story unfold at its own unhurried pace. It may or may not involve asking appropriate questions; sometimes questions can bring out more detail in the story, other times it can take the storyteller off track. It is a gift to truly listen and catch someone's story, and yet it is a free and easy gift to give. 🌱

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## Storytelling Insights

### AWAKENING OUR STORYTELLER'S MIND

Storytelling and story remembering are multidimensional. The more we share our senses and use our bodies, the more the story becomes alive for us and the listener. In their mind they are following your sensory descriptions; they can smell the perfume of the roses, feel the thorn puncturing their thumb, see the colour of the petals getting deeper towards the centre of the flower.

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Write a story for How Things Turned Out OK. Imagine the world in a decade's time when we have created regenerative cultures. Include details of your own personal dreams and visions as well as the collective ones. Use the multiple intelligences to give detail and engage your whole being.

### MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

The multiple intelligences are useful in giving us tips for remembering stories and holistic storytelling.

**Kinaesthetic:** Using body and movements

**Spatial and visual:** Create story maps and pictures; remember the story in different parts of the room or landscape

**Mathematical and logical:** Remember the flow of story, numbers, and amounts of things in stories

**Musical:** Are there songs, rhythms, or refrains in the story?

**Intrapersonal (self):** What are the feelings and emotions of characters; how do you feel about the characters?

**Interpersonal (people):** How are people relating to each other?

**Naturalistic:** What is the landscape like? What is the weather doing? What is the season? What animals and plants are around?

**Linguistic:** What are the names of characters, places, etc.? Are there any catchphrases? Repeated sayings? Call and response?

—LM

1. *The Natural Storyteller—Wildlife Tales for Telling*; Georgiana Keable, Hawthorn Press, 2017 (p. 11, Hugh Lipton, Foreword).
2. [youtu.be/i9TtrnkU1s](https://youtu.be/i9TtrnkU1s): Father Michael Oleska talk.
3. *If Women Rose Rooted—Reclaiming the Power of Celtic Women*; Sharon Blackie; September Publishing, 2016 (p. 13).
4. *The Natural Storyteller—Wildlife Tales for Telling*; Georgiana Keable, Hawthorn Press, 2017 (p. 11, Hugh Lipton, Foreword).

# Ducks as a Symbol of Letting Go

*By Andrew McLean*

A few months into the establishment of our little intentional community in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, ducks started appearing in cracks and crevices of our buildings. Not real ones. Little yellow plastic ducks, about 12mm (one-half inch) high.

They just magically appear. Glued in obscure little holes in posts and ledges around the ecovillage. A few get added every few months.

We have no idea who our mystery avant-garde artist is. Every now and again, bemused community members wonder who it might be. It could be a resident, but it could also be one of our wonderful repeat visitors. Only yesterday, I found two more in the workshop while encouraging some visiting preschoolers to find the ducks using the well-worn, “hot and cold” method.

But these small morsels of surprise and mild amusement represent more than just a silly little mystery on a small community in Australia. These ducks have started to represent so much more for me. They represent the leap of faith that is required to start a community and relinquishing of the most precious of our western world’s dogmas: control. We control our micro-climate in our homes and cars. We control our diet, holidays, experiences, and hobbies in a way that would make our pre-war ancestors’ heads spin. The internet has created little online newspapers that reflect our society’s only one true obsession: Me. Through simpler technologies such as 10-foot-high fences, and electric roller doors, people control their social interactions. We have even started to believe fantasies that we can control the uncontrollable; other people, our biology, and nature.

I cofounded Eco Villages Australia, where our model is centred around what I would see as First Nations principles of land ownership—that is, there is no way that humans can actually own land. If anything, it’s the land that owns us; we are but a pimple on the timeline of history. But we live in western society, and so something or someone has to own land. We created a nonprofit so that all residents and friends of the village are custodians and stewards of the land (see sidebar for a fuller explanation of our model).

It’s interesting to see people’s responses when we describe our model:

“So how can someone buy in?” No one can buy-in, but you can loan.

“I have \$200,000. When I can move in?” Oh, we don’t want your money; this project is about relationships, not transaction. Come and get to know us first.

“So what about equity? What about making money from the property?” If you want to make money, there are literally millions of ways. This is not one of them.

“So, can I build my own house on the land?” No, the land and all the buildings are owned by the collective.

Our model requires a large leap of faith. It requires residents to recognise that social capital is just as much, if not more, important to humans than financial or material capital. Our model requires the founders to let go of many of society’s misplaced bastions of security—land ownership, a bloated bank balance and inheritance—which fuel unsustainable growth and inequality. The model seeks to overturn the tightly-

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**Our model is centred around First Nations principles of land ownership—that is, there is no way that humans can actually own land. If anything, it’s the land that owns us; we are but a pimple on the timeline of history.**

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*The duck artist posted this anonymous poster on our community notice board.*



*One of the unknown number of ducks around the village. This one is on a wall on our outdoor eating area.*

held belief that land is a commodity that can and should be speculated on rather than a basic human right. In order to truly create community, the founders felt we had to place ourselves in a place of vulnerability and so the model rejects individual ownership in favour of collective stewardship. Community requires us to share power in a way that means you can't control everything yourself. It requires us to place our faith in the wisdom of the collective rather than the individual.

I know that many people just aren't ready to give up control. They need to believe that land "ownership" is the key to security. I have three independent adult children. In these strange times of COVID, climate change, and corporate control of government, I sometimes struggle to know how to guide them. I was a successful business owner. I know how to make money, buy a house, and capitalise. But the knowledge that I gained from my own father seems discordant in the new world. I need to prepare my children for a different reality. Learning to work together, learning to create circular economies, learning to localise will be our next challenge as a species. If we don't learn this, we are unlikely to survive the next 100 years. After all, independence is perhaps the mother of all deceptions in our modern world.

But a wonderful thing happens when one releases control. There is a freedom, a lightness, a joy that comes from investing in others. I suddenly don't have to be an expert on finances, conflict resolution, cooking, growing food, plumbing, electrical and mechanical repairs, or artistic pursuits. We can help each other to achieve more than any one person could achieve alone.

I'm not saying it's easy. Don't join a community if you don't want to grow, have your faults pointed out, or don't like listening. But I see a future world where our society may not have a choice but to rely on others. Those of us who are already living in community will have an advantage. We are already learning to work with an expanded network of people. We are already learning how to love ourselves in community. Those of us living gently and graciously on the land—we will lead the way in a world where the zeros and ones that make up our bank balances may have

disappeared. It's easy to imagine a world where future generations try hard to contain the rage directed fairly and squarely at their parents and grandparents for leaving a world in a much, much worse state than when they found it.

And now back to the ducks. We have obviously created a culture here where people feel comfortable to add their own flourishes, their own artistic and quirky touches without the normal "permission." That would have never happened in my old life in suburbia.

And as for the identity of the incognito artist. In truth, I actually prefer not to know who you are. The mystery is better than knowledge. But if you are reading this, I have a little message for you. Our outdoor composting toilet was the lucky recipient of one of the first ducks. That duck has gone missing. Perhaps it was an unknown inquisitive child who couldn't possibly have understood how I drew a strange kind of comfort and familiarity every time I, as we Aussies say, "sit on the throne." Without controlling the situation too much, I'd really love it if you could please put another duck there.

But, if I need to learn another lesson in relinquishing control, letting the community go where the community wants, guiding energy rather than controlling it—well, I'm ok with that as well. 🐥

*Andrew McLean is the cofounder of Eco Villages Australia and Maleny Eco Village. Maleny and surrounds was the site of the famous bunya festivals for thousands of years, then post-colonisation it became a logging area, then the lush rainforest was completely destroyed in favour of the dairy industry, which collapsed in the '60s. Then the hippies arrived and made Maleny the co-op capital of Australia. Now the town is being gentrified. Andrew is deeply involved in the local community, and politically active, running for The Greens in the last state election. Andrew is a proud advocate of cooperatives, voluntary simplicity, and the "eight forms of capital." He has also coined the term "Economic Permaculture" to reflect this model. He likes cartoonist Michael Leunig, who also likes ducks (ducks, for Leunig, represent all that is well with the world). Andrew was also a Lutheran pastor—working daily with the positives and negatives of faith.*

## The Eco Villages Australia (EVA) Model

EVA is a nonprofit organisation that holds land for intentional community living in harmony with the environment. Those who wish to can loan whatever amount of money they are comfortable with to EVA to raise the capital for property purchase and infrastructure. Some people who make loans will be residents; some won't be. The founders of the Maleny Eco Village have chosen to loan for zero percent interest, because we understand that when you introduce interest into a system, you introduce the need for growth. (Read *Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein for an excellent summary of this concept.) We are happy with a steady-state economy here!

All residents, whether providing loans or not, pay a weekly contribution (rent). Rent is based on the needs of the project and the needs of the individual. We are moving away from a transactional model to a relational, needs-based model. Some people are happy to pay more than what rentals cost in our area, and some can only afford to pay a lower than average amount but have capacity to contribute in other ways. We even have someone who lives almost 1000 miles away paying \$100 a week because she believes in what we are doing.

When the loans have been paid off, the community could decide together to pay a lot less rent, or to continue paying rent to sponsor another community or buy adjacent land.

The genius of this model is that when the loans are paid off, the residents who have loaned have received all their financial resources back, while still being able to reside on the land. They are then free to cycle the money back into the project again or not.

We invite people who are interested in starting an intentional community to contact us about possibly making it an Eco Villages Australia project. You can find us online at [www.ecovillages.com.au](http://www.ecovillages.com.au).

—AM



Photos courtesy of Andrew McLean

# Faith in the Experiment

By Lee Warren



Believing something is true doesn't always make it so. During my early years in community, visiting many and living in a few, I believed that the movement was the answer to so many of our collective social ills and that in short order we would soon solve all the world's problems. My journey over the years has led to a much more sober, measured, and realistic perspective. Time and experience have turned blind faith into something more real and embodied. This deeper sense of knowing has been borne not from the communities movement getting better, although it has, but frankly from the world getting even more insane.

The name of my farm at Earthaven Ecovillage is Imani Farm. Imani, a word borrowed from the Kwanzaa tradition, means "Faith" in Swahili. Specifically, it implies faith in our teachers, faith in our leaders, faith in our movement, faith in the righteousness of our struggles, and faith in our community. It's a unifying message; one of hope and a reminder that we are all in this together, that we're pulling for the same thing, and that we need each other.

Little did I know that Imani would be an apt word for my own ongoing process of dismantling my trust in the culture I was raised in, and slowly beginning to believe in the systems the communities movement was building to replace them. As with most processes that require faith, there were many moments of doubt and even outright lack of faith.

I inherited the farm with this name and decided to keep it. The Swahili definition of faith seemed richer and more multi-dimensional than how I had always interpreted the word. Coming from a Catholic upbringing, the concept of faith lived in my mind and heart as believing in an unseen and more importantly an "unrelated," far-away god that I couldn't feel in my own heart.

In my childhood, Catholicism was central to my existence. For the first four years of my life my mom and I lived with my grandmother, who attended Church every day of the week, carried rosary beads in her pocket, had statues of Jesus and Mary in every room, and was my primary caregiver. When I went to church with her in the early 1970s, women, including girls, were still required to wear head coverings and of course had to be silent through a 40-minute mass. I found the entire process meaningless and disconnected from my life.

Fast forward to my early 20s: my draw to the counterculture and my travelling in other countries brought a much deeper education as well as a shocking awareness that both the Catholic Church and the American empire have wrought untold damage on land-based peoples and intact cultures around the world for centuries. These awakenings were part of what radicalized me and drove me to looking for saner and healthier alternatives to life in the mainstream. I rejected religion and also rejected parasitic capitalism. My exploration of all things alternative, including the intentional communities movement, began in the early 1990s and hasn't yet stopped. Additionally, my critical analysis of our corporate, industrial, and militarized culture hasn't let up either.

Because of this analysis, it became clear to me, relatively early on in my life, that every system I had been raised in was not to be trusted. Our culture, I realized, is not for the best interests of the people nor is it focused on long-term health and sustainability. I discovered that things are backwards and upside down. Here are some ways in which some of the fundamental pillars of the US society are structured in less than whole ways:

- **Health:** The US has the most ex-



pensive health care system in the world, spending more than \$10,500 per person in 2018<sup>1</sup> (compared to an astounding-to-us-now \$151 in 1960), with a lower life expectancy than countries that spend half as much.

• **Diet:** Unfortunately, despite our outspending the world on healthcare, our health outcomes in the US are dismal. About half of all American adults have one or more preventable diet-related chronic illnesses and diet is the leading cause of death.<sup>2,3,4</sup> In fact, as a direct result of the decades-long support of the food pyramid, an excess of carbohydrates and sugars has led to an epidemic of obesity and diabetes, the latter of which costs the US \$245 billion in health care expenses a year.

• **Wealth:** The US has the most billionaires in the world<sup>5</sup> and yet many Americans live below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup>

• **Agriculture:** The USDA, backed by industry, government, and reductionist science, created an industrial food system based on intensive tillage, monocropping of commodity crops, synthetic fertilizers and chemical controls, extensive irrigation, genetic modification, and factory

farming of animals—all of which we’re now understanding are a dead-end approach. Not only has the industrial food system caused broad-scale environmental problems in the form of devastating water and soil toxicity, it has actually created hunger, health problems, inequality, and loss of local systems, the result of which is likely to be near fatal to our species.

• **Medicine:** The predominant medical system, focused primarily on pharmaceuticals, views the body as a machine and treats the symptoms instead of the cause of every problem. There have been scientific breakthroughs for sure, and there are some things the system is great at (fixing a broken bone and emergency life-saving in acute situations, to name two), but with regard to complex, chronic, or lifestyle-related illnesses, the system is an abject failure with more people sick than ever before.

• **Economics:** Free-market capitalism and central banking at home, as well as extractive and colonialization-based foreign policies, have had a devastating impact on everyone, everywhere.

• **Politics:** Our national political system can be aptly described as a gerontocracy, a form of oligarchical rule whereby the leaders are significantly older than the rest of the adult population,<sup>7</sup> which causes all kinds of out-of-touch behavior on the part of our leaders. The two-party system often described as “two wings of the same bird” can also be seen as a corporate dictatorship, prioritizing corporate interests over human interests.

• **Social Systems:** We have many marginalized people in the US, such as black and brown folks, indigenous peoples, LGBTQIA, and undocumented people. These folks suffer longstanding systemic and institutionalized oppression (racism, sexism, and homophobia, etc.) with very little recourse for rectification.

• **Media:** Our media tends to run on anxiety, fear, stress, and enemy-making to promote ratings. This has no doubt had a profound effect on how we view our lives, the world around us, and our fellow citizens.

• **Religion:** Patriarchal religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, play a central role in many Americans’ lives. These institutions feature a male god, male head of the family, and a church controlled by men. Religious structures often emphasize



Photos courtesy of Lee Warren



guilt, sin, and blame as a way of controlling their followers and tend to be oppressive to women, children, and anyone who might be following an alternative path.

These are just a few of the main nonholistic features of our culture. One of my dear friends calls these systems “the death culture.” Paul Shepard, an American environmentalist and deep ecology author, suggests that humans are capable of transcending this madness when he says, “It is time to abandon the fantasy that we are above the past and alienated from the rest of life on earth. We truly are a successful species in our own right that lived in harmony with the earth and its other forms for millions of years—a species that has not changed intrinsically.”<sup>8</sup>

If this is indeed true, we have everything we need to create either paradise or destruction right here, right now. In this context, I have faith in any project that is willing to think in complexities, design in systems, and trend toward the holistic. Even after 25 years in community and with a long list of mistakes that my community and I have made (see my article “Village Building Stumbles” in the *Shadow Side of Cooperation* issue of *COMMUNITIES*, #184), I very much still have faith in community. At the very least I still have faith in the experiment of community—in the attempt at community.

In fact, I believe we need tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of these experiments in every setting imaginable. In rural, urban, and suburban environments; in developed and developing countries; with all kinds of missions and visions. At a minimum, these projects resist the standard pathological cultural narrative. And at their best, they fill the coffers of the collective knowledge base about how to do better. There’s no one right way to do community, but there are a million ways to live a saner life.

Here’s a look at the same cultural pillars described above but with a sense of how we’re approaching things at Earthaven Ecovillage.

- **Health and Diet:** Most of us are experimenting with healthy diet and exercise that almost always includes fresh, wholesome, organic foods. These diets range from vegan to carnivore and everything in between. We also value an active lifestyle and one in which physical labor is integrated into everyday life through tasks such as hauling wood, gardening, and walking to our destinations, etc.

We acknowledge that health extends to mental and emotional well-being and positive personal relationships. To those ends we navigate those realms with care, intention, and investment in systems that speak to the whole person.

- **Wealth:** Earthaven is fairly homogenous in that most of us come from a white, educated, middle class background. When there are differences in economic ease, the folks

with more are often generous to the folks with less, offering employment, loans, gifts, and other opportunities. A strong and central value at Earthaven Ecovillage, and other intentional communities, is toward “right livelihood” endeavors or triple-bottom-line companies, where earning a living is of benefit to the person, the community, and the planet.

- **Agriculture:** There are multiple farms at Earthaven Ecovillage that provide nutrient-dense animal and vegetable products.

Our strategic plan says, “We adopt support structures to enable long-term success for farmers and land stewards in our valley, and in our bioregional network (i.e., cost expectations, incentives, policies, cultural norms, and personal support).”

In addition to food, folks are also growing their own fiber, forestry, and medicine products. All are done in an ecologically regenerative, bioregional culture and network.

- **Medicine:** While there are certainly folks using conventional medical solutions such as pharmaceuticals and surgery, our medical choices tend to run toward the alternative, with acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal care, naturopathic, homeopathic, and holistic care being the go-to approaches.

- **Economics:** The economic system of the community is based on independent income with a local exchange trading system (LETS) that is an Earthaven-specific currency used to exchange goods and services.

Many of us depend on outside income, which ranges from retirement funds to telecommuting to travelling elsewhere to work.

Small businesses have existed on the land since Earthaven was formed in 1994 and the gig economy is strong, with people piecing together odd jobs around the village to form a livelihood.

Earthaven’s idea, over the long term, is to develop and support a thriving local economy by supporting local spending of resources, exchanges of goods and services, alternatives to the US dollar, living-wage employment opportunities, and ongoing creation of community infrastructure with local resources.

- **Politics:** As with many small intentional communities, Earthaven has its own

governance system to guide the decisions for the community. Our governance systems are striving toward a fair, participatory, and engaged self-governance. There are numerous guilds, committees, and subgroups guiding the process and there is a strong flavor of consensus-building among members. Collective action is sometimes slow but it embraces intuition and non-rational processes.

• **Social Systems:** Taking care of each other is a strong ethos at Earthaven and a reason that many of our current members joined. Potlucks, rituals and ceremonies, workshops and classes, as well as small informal gatherings, are a weekly occurrence. In addition, folks are there for each other, fully and regularly. Over the years we have developed incredible support systems for parents, for birth, and for dying (see my article “Community Grief” in the Passing the Torch issue of COMMUNITIES, #185).

• **Media:** While we have high-speed internet access almost everywhere in the community and folks do stay up to date, most community members limit their engagement with mainstream media and focus instead on a curated diet of information, mostly tending toward media with a whole-systems way of seeing.

• **Religion:** Religion and spirituality are viewed through the lens of this core strategic goal: “To encourage diverse spiritual practices and awareness of our interconnection with all beings.” That often translates to respecting land, each other, and self, as well as seeing ourselves in the web of something larger. Practices often include celebrations of beauty and pleasure, and awareness of the more-than-human and sentient world around us.

In addition to those mentioned above, Earthaven values:

• **Change Agency:** A goal in our strategic plan is to catalyze local and global change through learning, teaching, and networking. Through educational programming the group has a transformative

impact and encourages a dissemination of the skills and knowledge being gained in the process of building the ecovillage.

• **Relationality:** Intra- (inner) and inter- (other) personal relating is a core tenet of many intentional communities, and Earthaven is no exception. As a group we tend to value empathy, awareness, respect, and accountability as well as dealing directly, openly, and honestly with each other. One of our core goals is “To nurture personal growth, interpersonal understanding, and mutual trust, as the foundation for a deeply connected human community” and emphasizes well-being for all, conflict resolution, and transformative solutions to our endeavors.

• **Multi-Generationality:** At Earthaven we recognize the need to have interdependence among folks of all ages and stages. Our design systems encourage activities and value strategies for all phases of the life cycle.

• **Anti-Oppression Work:** Our mostly homogenous group recognizes its privilege and is committed to racial and gender equity and working to end oppression in all its forms. Specifically, the community has pledged to center marginalized voices, illuminate our blind spots, continue growth and learning both individually and collectively, offer both compassion and accountability, and offer ongoing educational strategies. A strong sentiment and a written part of our goals is, “we remember that no one is free until everyone is free.”

While many of these approaches and strategic plans are aspirational, it is certainly true that our hearts, minds, and actions are in the right place and at least we’ve got enough collective, holistic, and systems thinking to point us in the direction of something resembling salvation. We’ve approached these understandings through trial and error mostly—but also through threads of wisdom embodied in leaders and teachers who have come before, our own and each others’ ancestors, longstanding traditions, and our inner guidance.

These beautiful intentions are not everything, but they are a start—and a beacon for many. My faith is not in the finished product; we are a far cry from living in harmony with each other and the natural world. But my faith resides in the attempt and in the threads of intact wisdom that guide us along. As many of my elders have stated, building an ecovillage is a multi-generational project.

Paul Shepard says, “All around us, aspects of the modern world—diet, exercise, medicine, art, work, family, philosophy, economics, ecology, psychology—have begun a long circle back toward their former coherence. Whether they can arrive before the natural world is damaged beyond repair and madness destroys humanity, we cannot tell.”<sup>9</sup>

Imani, my farm, will pass on to others’ hands over time and morph and reshape. So will Earthaven Ecovillage. Time will tell if our creation lasts centuries into the future where it can be honed into a more elegant expression of human settlement or if the death culture will have its way with us. If the outcome is dire, we’ll at least have good company and a much more integrated life. And if the outcome is sanity, we can trust that we’re slowly building the road as we travel. 🌱

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*Lee Warren lives at Earthaven Ecovillage near Asheville, North Carolina in the great southeastern forest. She helped to found, design, and build an off-grid, hand-built cohousing neighborhood and five-acre pasture-based cooperative farm at Earthaven Ecovillage. She is also the founder of SOIL, School of Integrated Living, which teaches organic agriculture, regenerative systems, and community living. She is an educator, herbalist, writer, conscious dying advocate, and food activist with an avid interest in rural wisdom and sustainable economics.*

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# Pigs and a Broken Leg in a Multifaith Community

*By Joyce Bressler*



**W**hat does religion have to do with it?

I have been living in an intentional community for the past seven years on the property of an existing retreat and conference center owned by a nationwide church. The original idea in 2008 was to bring primarily Christians, Jews, and Muslims together to live on the property of the conference center as an experiment in multifaith encounters and understanding, the study of nonviolence in each tradition, social action, and earth care. The intention was also to be intergenerational, multiracial, and multicultural. The founders included church leaders, a rabbi, and a Muslim chaplain. They were not trying to create a new religion or to convert one another, but to share and learn from a space grounded in each tradition, naming it the Community of Living Traditions.

The group invited people to join who could provide service and work hours to the conference center in exchange for food, housing, and other basic needs. The conference center and the community created a small farm that produced food for our dining facility that served thousands of guests each year. We helped to operate a Fair-Trade Gift Shop and provided support for a conference staff of 40 to 60 people at any given time. However, COVID-19 has caused significant downsizing; it is difficult to operate a conference center in a pandemic. As the world recovers, there may be a story to tell about how it all worked out. But this story is about two events I was directly involved with that, to me, reflect the theme of “Faith in Community.”

When I first arrived as a new Jewish member of the community in 2013, I noticed that the farm had pigs. I thought that if we were a Christian center trying to recruit Jews and Muslims to join and to bring groups to the conference center through their networks, it might not be the right message to send. Although most people of all faiths here were comfortable with the pigs on campus, some of us began to ask questions about whether it was kosher or halal to raise pigs. Both Jewish and Muslim dietary laws prohibit the eating of pork. After some research we concluded that it was only the eating of the pigs that was not kosher or halal, not so much the raising of them. However, the public relations factor still left an open question, which led to a learning process that marked a turning point in our development as a multifaith community, and in the relationship of the center to the intentional community that lived there.

It made perfect sense from a farming perspective that pigs were good for the farm: they ate anything, dug up the soil, and left their manure. These pigs were really cute and were an attraction to the many guests, especially the children. They were being raised for meat, and some folks got attached to them as pets, giving them names such as “Dirty Butt” and “Less Dirty Butt.” Their presence also sparked a conversation about eating meat in general. This entire subject led to a process of learning about each religion’s practices around food, dietary laws, and culture. Speaking for myself as a new Jewish member, I felt a little uncomfortable discussing these questions in a predominantly Christian space, and didn’t exactly know how to bring up the subject. Was I being too sensitive or making a big issue out of something that was minor?

The conference center had an advisory board made up of volunteers. It met a few times a year to support the project. At one of these meetings the question of the raising of pigs at a multifaith community dominated the conversation. It gave everyone from each faith an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings on the subject. Having been raised in a family that observed kosher dietary laws I appreciated

hearing how other people had cultural attachments to eating pork, at Christmas dinners and other holidays. It opened up a dialogue that was healthy and made it safe to share our differences. It was still important from the farming perspective to include the raising of animals. We did agree that from a public relations point of view, if the center was truly trying to be open to Jews and Muslims, the farm could raise chickens instead. This felt to me to be a happy compromise. It also brought the community closer to our goal of discovering and embodying how living in an intentional multifaith community could bring about mutual understanding.

Our community was in a growth phase, and we were still figuring out how to be in community together. Most conflicts at the time did not have much to do with religion, but with personality, expectations, and the general issues that arise when people live together. We worked to support the operation of the conference center, and spent time building community and doing activist work in the world.

But when a huge ice storm hit the East Coast in January 2015, most of the region shut down. Highways closed and hundreds of accidents sent people to the hospital. Several people fell that day on campus and were injured, including me. I fell on black ice leaving my house, which was down a long driveway into the woods. My housemate had moved out and I was in the process of moving to another part of the campus. In fact, I was to move the next day. I broke my right femur in multiple places and part of my pelvis. Lying on the ground in the rain I had the wherewithal to dial 911. Since I was hidden behind my car in the driveway the first time the police drove by, they did not see me. It took another 20 minutes or so before they found me. As I lay there waiting for the ambulance the police officer went inside and got me a blanket and an umbrella. He

slipped on the ice and fell coming out, but didn't get injured. Once in the ambulance I knew immediately a bone was broken; my leg swelled triple in size and was paralyzed. They started a morphine drip, and we began the ambulance ride to the hospital on icy streets.

When I arrived at the hospital one of the community founders was waiting for me. He stayed with me the eight hours I was in the emergency room hallway waiting to be given a room. This unusual storm had caused so many accidents that the hospitals were over capacity. The morphine caused me to share my life story and he was a good listener. I had surgery the next morning, receiving pins and posts and a titanium rod. When I awoke from the surgery, several community members were waiting in my room, including my son who also is a part of the community, and had been unable to reach me until late the night before because of the storm. I was there for three days before I was moved to a rehab facility, where I remained for six weeks until I could leave in a wheelchair and use a walker. I was extremely depressed. But the physical and occupational therapists and my support network pulled me through. People came with food every day. I had a constant stream of visitors, and I am sure the nurses were thinking that I was a celebrity.

Once I was able to leave the rehab facility and return to the community, the center arranged for me to be moved to a lodge room near a handicapped bathroom, until I was able to use a cane and move to my second-floor apartment. My goal was to get up those stairs and be able to dance again—one of my favorite things to do.

A help team formed to make sure I got to the dining hall for meals, or had food brought to my room. When I finally was able to move to my apartment in May, my new roommate and another community member had painted the space and all my stuff was moved in. Not only was this a major event for me, but a major event for the community. It was the first real challenge of this nature, that brought people together in a crisis and helped demonstrate how we could be there for each other. It changed how we handled emergencies. We had a practice of sharing "appreciations" in a weekly meeting. When my son and I shared how much we appreciated the community for their support of both of us during this crisis, most of us were in tears. It meant so much to us to have had the faith in this community to come together in a crisis, bringing us closer to our goals of finding common threads in our faiths and building intentional community.

I can't say whether it was our religious beliefs or our human bonding, working and living together with common goals, that helped us reach this level of caring for each other. What I do know is that we grew together as we supported the Muslims when they celebrated Ramadan and when the Jewish members celebrated Shabbat, or when we learned from one another's sacred texts. Our unique experiment drew people to our conference center and brought a meaningful message to those coming to learn from our experiences and to those we encountered when acting for justice in the world. As 2020 comes to a close, we don't know what lies ahead during a pandemic, but whether it is the incident with the pigs, coming together in a crisis, or the many shared experiences that followed, we are stronger for having lived into our faith traditions together. And I feel blessed to have been and to continue to be a part of it. 🐦

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*Joyce Bressler is a Core Member and the Co-Chair of the Community of Living Traditions, an intentional community in Stony Point, New York. She has been a longtime activist, leader, educator, and fellow traveler and is COMMUNITIES' new Advertising Manager. Please contact her at [ads@gen-us.net](mailto:ads@gen-us.net).*



**Joyce and her son Matthew.**

Photos courtesy of Joyce Bressler

# “Spirit Is the Guest and the Body Is the Home”: Faith and the Brotherhood of the Spirit community

By Daniel A. Brown

*A group meditation in October 1971 on Blueberry Hill in Leyden, Massachusetts where the Brotherhood of the Spirit began in a treehouse in 1968.*



In 1970, my community, the Brotherhood of the Spirit (renamed the Renaissance Community in 1974) espoused the following spiritual values. We believed in the concepts of reincarnation and karma and that the power of thought was such that one could heal another by sending them positive energy. Spiritual entities such as Jesus the Christ and others could be (and were) channeled through the elderly trance medium who mentored our group. The Brotherhood practiced daily meditation and held the unorthodox theory that catastrophes called “Earth Changes” would soon ravage the planet as Nature’s way of rebalancing the negative behavior of the human race and forcing them into a more spiritual condition. This would be the dawning of the Age of Aquarius that the popular song warbled about. Oh, and we were convinced our house rock band, “Spirit in Flesh,” would become more popular than the Beatles and thus, save the world.

Our friends and family members thought we were stark raving mad.

Their opinions weren’t helped by our convictions—enhanced by the passion and certainty of youth—being expressed with an arrogant self-righteousness that could cause your gums to bleed. Fifty years later, however, you can drive into any strip mall in America and find a yoga studio or meditation center. I have hundreds of friends to whom our supposedly wild beliefs are commonplace (except for the rock band saving the world part) based on their own spiritual journeys. Even our own children accept that we’re not nuts.

The Brotherhood, founded in 1968, was an intentional “spiritual” community in that its specific mission was to provide an example of transcendental unity. It embraced a belief system that was a mix of Buddhism, New Age thinking, and Gnostic Christianity. This made it unique at the time when several American spiritual communities followed the more Hindu approach first brought into the mainstream by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Beatles fame

(or infamy). Our community had strict rules banning drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, equally unusual for the time period.

As was true for most members of the Brotherhood, my spiritual search began years before I joined that community, but growing up in the Eisenhower Era, there was little room to express such convictions, especially if your father was a Freudian psychologist. The urban, upper class Jewish communities of the United States in the 1950s and ’60s were prone towards the secular as cosmopolitan American Jews wanted to fit into the mainstream society. Links to mysticism like the Kabbalah, Hasidism, or the more arcane aspects of the Talmud were ignored. Going to synagogue was a rote ritual with sermons that contained no mystery, magic, or acknowledgment of the mystical. Friends of mine raised in the Christian faith expressed the same frustration. A strong and unmistakable spiritual vibe was calling out to all of us, but there

was nowhere to go with it.

My family raised me with no notion of spirituality, reincarnation, or the afterlife. Reports of out-of-body experiences or people “Going towards the Light” had yet to enter the public domain. The one occasion when I asked my father what happened to you after death, he looked aghast as if further rumination would turn him into a pillar of salt. “Nothing happens!” he spat. “You go back into the earth and turn to dust!” I never broached the subject with him again.

I got my sole answer from Ricki, the best friend of my high school sweetheart. She drowned in 1967 during an Acapulco vacation halfway through our senior year. Her death was a rarity in our upscale culture. Having grown up in the city with public transportation, few of us drove cars. Drug overdoses and mass school shootings had yet to become a threat.

I wasn't surprised when Ricki appeared to me in a dream several months after her death. By then, I had come to accept

dreams as pipelines for otherworldly information. In this one, she and I walked together in order to catch the bus to school. Ricki was clad in the same bright yellow dress she wore to a party I had hosted six months before she died. Her wavy, dark hair framed a thoughtful face. She looked quite pretty.

“So, what was it like to die?” I asked as we reached 96th Street. After Dad's anguished response, I never would have dared field this question to a living person.

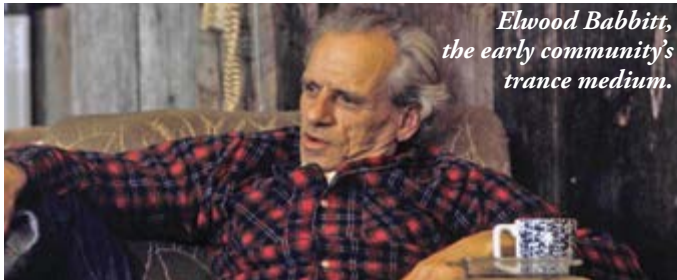
Ricki kept her stride but met my eyes. “It was like the roaring of a thousand locomotives.” She said this with utter detachment.

I thought about her words for a very long time. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross was decades away from reporting such occurrences.

Over the summer of 1970, my sister joined the Brotherhood of the Spirit, then situated in Warwick, a hamlet in northwestern Massachusetts. Through a string of letters to me, she sent impassioned reports of a community of spiritual comrades who were on to something big. One sentence leapt out. “It's a place where everyone lives openly and honestly.” I had just dropped out of college so decided to visit her for a weekend before heading to California. Arriving at dusk, I found the community members sequestered for a group meeting. I stood outside and waited.

The *OM* began without preamble. I had never before heard such a sound. It had the effect of a giant fist which smashed through the wall and knocked me sideways onto the grass. This crescendo of energy, caused by the sonic vibration of a mass of people chanting in unison, transmitted a physical sensation like a monstrous tuning fork placed against my skull. Even the trees seemed to shake. The tremor shuddered up my backbone for half a minute before it diminished.

I recovered and signed on for a trial membership period. There, I was lectured on the Brotherhood's belief system which sounded as strange to me as it would have to my par-



*Elwood Babbitt, the early community's trance medium.*



*Renaissance Community members, 1976, as conviviality with each other and mainstream society grow.*



*Spirit in Flesh album cover featuring entire Brotherhood of the Spirit membership, December 1970.*



*The Renaissance Community offered its members a respite from loneliness and isolation.*

Photos courtesy of Daniel A. Brown

ents. The idea that Earth Changes would destroy much of the planet and the human race as part of some spiritual rebirth struck me as utterly demented. Convinced they were all as crazy as bats, I fled, returned to my former college, and flagged a ride heading west to Colorado.

East of Ogallala, Nebraska, our car refueled at a rest area off Interstate 80. While the attendant monitored the pump, I got out to stretch my legs. I walked over to the edge of the pavement and looked towards the western horizon. No clouds were visible in the widest blue sky I had ever seen. The golden prairie grass glistened under the sun and filled up my entire field of vision. The cicadas and birds merrily chirped. After my growing-up among the enclosed concrete edifices of New York City, such an empty vista might have caused a panic reaction. Instead, the limitless plains filled me with peace and a sensation I never would have imagined—familiarity.

I stood and took it all in. As I did so, the vehicles, road, telephone poles, and gas pumps behind me slowly dissolved into faint holograms. They became both there and not there. An inner voice whispered that the present century had receded. Although I could sense the modern artifacts, the aura of 1870 enveloped me. I knew this instinctively and would not have been surprised if a wagon train, a cavalry troop, or a band of Lakota warriors had thundered into view across the billowing grass. My consciousness assumed a split screen; one

connected to 1970, the other reaching back a hundred years. I stood still and let the past wash over me. To have slipped through time felt like the most natural thing in the world. It was my first conscious reincarnation experience. The first of many seeds planted at the Brotherhood were beginning to sprout.

A month later, I flew back to the Brotherhood of the Spirit and made a “Lifetime commitment to the Energy.”

The Brotherhood was one intense environment. For the first few years, deliberately cut off from any outside influences—television, radio, and even magazines were forbidden as distractions from spiritual growth—we lived in a pressure cooker that allowed us to undergo the kind of esoteric experiences that one usually associates with consciousness-expanding drugs. As all our work took place on the community properties or in remote rural areas, there was little interaction with the outside world, which we loftily referred to as “The Negativity.” Our faith became inseparable from our day-to-day existence. Transmitted to us by disembodied entities, the “Seven Laws of the Universe”—Order, Balance, Harmony, Growth, God Perception, Spiritual Love, and Compassion—were painted on our walls and accepted as guidelines and goals to attain. The only songs we sang together were written by community members and expressed devout sentiments. One lyric, “Spirit is the guest and the body is the home,” was particularly popular. Despite our insularity, however, we made sure not to establish any dogmatic structure and nobody was forced to accept anything they didn’t believe in.

The Brotherhood admitted all individuals, no matter their identity or temperament, which in the wildly anarchic 1970s, called for a great deal of openness. Open it was and the upside was that it forced members to be adaptable and tolerant to whoever showed up at the door. There were those who came to the community in a state of emotional distress, especially single mothers, and were given a non-judgmental setting in which to rest and heal. Gay men and women could out themselves without fear and as the sign at the main entrance proclaimed, “All races, religions, and peoples are welcome.” The downside came later, when membership slackened and those who arrived did so only for a meal and a roof over their heads. The lesson was that a structure was needed to be in place and gently but firmly enforced. If there was a social ethos to the Brotherhood it was that “Everyone contributes and everyone is taken care of.” All members were expected to help out in some manner and all did. A parent with four children could work in the nursery while their kids were provided for and a paraplegic, confined to a wheelchair, could peel potatoes for the evening communal meal. Conversely, everybody was guaranteed food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. More importantly, they were guaranteed community as an antidote for loneliness and isolation. As such, the Brotherhood demonstrated how an equitable and functional society



*Commune Gothic:  
Two members of the community  
posing as they did in 1970 and 2008*

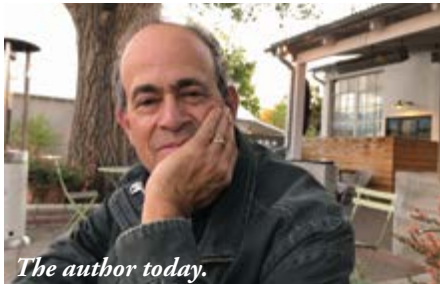


*The author, aged 10,  
celebrates Passover, 1960.*





*The author with his son, Ariel, in 1980.*



*The author today.*



*A gathering of former Renaissance Community members, June 2002.*



*1981.*



*Early members listen to Spirit in Flesh.*

could be created and maintained.

But while we had the spiritual path down (or so we thought), our financial realities suffered to the extent that our membership was eventually forced to find jobs or create business ventures in order to survive. This necessity transformed the community. Being forced back into “The Negativity” meant that we had to rediscover basic societal and communication skills, previously eschewed when we first joined up. It was like relearning a former language. The community did relearn but at a cost. The profound spiritual experiences came to a standstill. Our rock combo meant to save the world disbanded. Former prohibitions were relaxed as community personnel found that going to the movies, vacationing on a beach, or sharing a beer at a local restaurant was more fun than deep group meditations or exploring one’s inner self. Still, the community became quite successful as youthful entrepreneurs created numerous commercial enterprises (some of which exist to this day), learned valuable material skill sets, and in 1976 had plans to create a self-sufficient entity using clean energy sources in the tiny town of Gill, Massachusetts.

As reported in my previous COMMUNITIES articles, “Whatever Happened to the Renaissance Community?” (Fall 2019, Issue #184) and “We Left Our Community but Our Community Never Left Us” (Spring 2020, Issue #186,) the Brotherhood of the Spirit/Renaissance Community self-destructed in 1988. To this day, its membership is still trying with limited

success to come to terms with its birth, life, and death.

The spiritual principles upon which the community was founded were jettisoned by many disillusioned members who figured that if the teachers were tainted, so was their message. Others continued to meditate and explore spiritual avenues. I still adhere to the Brotherhood’s belief system because it has proven itself in pragmatic, if not actual survival, situations. And while I shun some of the wilder nonsense out there on the New Age wavelength, I have no doubt that the human race is undergoing a traumatic, yet necessary ascension. What we called “Earth Changes” has a new name, “Climate Changes,” and few can deny that it will drastically alter the Earth if the negative behavior of humanity doesn’t change.

I spent 14 years at the Brotherhood of the Spirit/Renaissance Community and am both glad I was there and glad I departed. Since my departure from the community, which coincided with the demise of the community itself, I have incorporated the spiritual lessons learned there, and have realized that they are universal in nature. The community confirmed and reinforced the esoteric values and strivings I enjoyed from an early age and that have since influenced my later life. Although I’m involved in activist politics, I veer towards those with a faith-based foundation. In times of despair, my long view allows me to believe there is hope for the human race. My ultimate goal is to incorporate the principles of love and compassion that the community embraced. After 70 years, it is impossible for me to imagine my life without the spiritual core of faith that was enhanced by my living in community. 🌸

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*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](http://www.intothewildblue.com).*

# The Hermitage as Shared Spirituality

*By Johannes Zinzendorf*

It's difficult to interest people in a spiritual community they know little or nothing about, and whose spirituality they've never heard of either. That's the situation here at the Hermitage in central Pennsylvania, a Harmonist community whose two founding members are the only Harmonists on the planet.

Our goal is to recognize the unity of earth and spirit by practicing harmony between them. Now, that's all well and good, a noble calling, but it's hard to convince people to commit to a life of such holy work in the best of times, and these times are far from the best.

It would be difficult even if we were well known, with a brand that people recognized, like Buddhists, Hindus, or Christians. And it isn't like Brother Zephram, the cofounder, and I make this stuff up; there is history, lineage, and tradition behind us. Originally we spoke to prospective members about our origins and our plan to reestablish an 18th century Moravian community of Single Brothers that existed in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. But we eventually realized that our past is not as important as our present, and while it may be interesting (to some), it's not relevant to being a modern Harmonist.

We've come a long way in spreading the word about us from the community's early years in the 1990s, when we had only a hand-operated printing press to make flyers and newsletters. Now there is a website, a blog, and even YouTube videos so, in that sense, anyone, anywhere, can learn about who we are and what we do.

Still, we find that the idea of committing one's life to a shared spiritual ideal is a difficult sell in these days of DIY religion when people, quite rightly, want to find and follow their own path. That is what we have done ourselves, going where the spirit has led us.

While many people like the idea of a simple life on the land, we've found they don't want to come to the Hermitage to be a Harmonist; as one prospective member told us, "This would be a great place if you guys weren't here."

While all religions and spiritualities start small, it seems as if most new religions stay small and wither away, perhaps because their good ideas and intentions never catch on among the general population. At least there are two of us instead of one; it has been a shared creation. But, yes, one must be a Harmonist to live here, just as one must be a Buddhist to live at a Buddhist monastery, or a Catholic at a Franciscan monastery. Yet Harmonists don't have to live only here. One can be a Harmonist anywhere on the planet, and in any kind of living arrangement. Nor does one have to go through any ritual to become a Harmonist; there is no official "decoder" ring, secret handshake, or initiation ceremony. Living a Harmonist life doesn't require permission; one simply adopts it, or recognizes it as a calling, perhaps similar to what we felt in the 1980s before establishing the Hermitage.

It may have been easier and more widely accepted to follow a shared spiritual calling in the 18th and 19th centuries in America, when most intentional communities were spiritually based. I'm thinking of the Moravians in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Ohio; the Seventh Day Baptist communities in Pennsylvania; the Shakers in New York, New England, and Kentucky; and the Harmony communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Those settlements, at first, had no problem finding people who wanted to join and live together in shared spiritual settings.

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**Many people like the idea of a simple life on the land, but don't want to become a Harmonist with us. As one prospective member told us, "This would be a great place if you guys weren't here."**

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Yet life here at the Hermitage is not as conformist as perhaps I've made it seem. Yes, we have core principles. In a dozen words: we are one in the spirit and the earth is our family. Or, in seven words: all are one and one is all. To us, the earth is incarnated spirit, and everything on the planet is joined together and, in a very basic sense, part of each other. So the spirit expresses itself in infinite variety and diversity. One never knows, and certainly can't predict or control, where the spirit will lead. Early Quakers and Moravians certainly found that out. Just how far afield can the spirit lead so that one can still be called a Quaker or Moravian before one is starting a completely new spirituality? That's why, for example, we call ourselves Harmonists and not Moravians, because spiritual change has taken us so far from our early Moravian brothers and sisters to the point where they probably wouldn't even recognize where we are.

And even Brother Zephram and I have our own approaches and flavors towards being Harmonists. For example, he feels close to the old Norse and Egyptian pantheons, while I'm drawn to certain Hindu gods and goddesses for inspiration.

That's one reason our emblem is a flower (a lily, actually) growing in the earth, which represents the planet, a divine incarnation of the spirit spinning in space that is both whole and holy. As Harmonists, our holy work is to tend the sacred garden that is the planet, to nurture it so that it and everything living on it can reach their fullest potential. We are both conscience and consciousness for the earth. It knows and sees itself through us. No longer do things have to happen by chance alone. No longer must a seed be forced to grow among rocks or infertile soil, stunted, if not actually dying a too-early, miserable, and useless death. Yes, such tragedies will continue to happen, perhaps for millennia to come, but each of us can care for and nurture our immediate, admittedly small, part of the planet. At least it's something and at least it's a beginning. As a species still finding and understanding its place in the cosmos, we have to start somewhere.

So that's our job, our holy work, as Harmonists here at the Hermitage. Our way of viewing the planet as a unified whole is certainly not new. As I said, we don't make this stuff up. But it is transformational, and an ongoing process to which we've dedicated our lives, while being changed in the process.

That is why we need people pulling in the same direction instead of against each other. There's enough mutual opposition already in the world. Now it's time to work together, to devote ourselves to a larger cause; to work with, and in, the spirit.

Our lives here have changed following our dedication to this particular spiritual

life and, of course, we have no idea where it will lead or how it will end, but that's okay because no one else does either. Uncertainty is part of life, but so far it's been an amazing ride and one we never could have predicted. And while it's natural to look towards the future with trepidation, there is hope as we join in the unfolding of the spirit. 🌿

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*Brother 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](http://www.atthehermitage.org), [atthehermitage.blogspot.com](http://atthehermitage.blogspot.com), "At the Hermitage" on YouTube, [brojoh@yahoo.com](mailto:brojoh@yahoo.com).*

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**We are both  
conscience and  
consciousness for  
the earth.  
It knows and  
sees itself  
through us.**

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Photos courtesy of Johannes Zinzendorf

# Coming Into Unity

By Blue Evening Star

I have faith in the concept of community because I believe we are destined to flow in harmony with one another and the natural world. Everywhere I look in the cosmos of nature I see patterns of relationships that provide divine blueprints for humanity. I think people are meant to live in communities that are defined by their bioregion and watershed. I also see that the most successful motivation for any group of people to cooperate together is a shared faith in higher ideals.

Our beautiful planet—dancing in the cosmos—inspires me to know that there is divine pattern in all of God’s creation. If we humans choose to step out of it, that does not diminish the truth of where we came from or where we are going.

My personal faith journey has always been linked with the study of Fifth Epochal Revelation—*The URANTIA Book*—and nurtured by my deep connection with the natural world. As a young woman in the 1970s, I decided to enroll myself in the “University of Life” with *The URANTIA Book* as my primary text book. My relationship with God was born a few years later, at the age of 19. My name for the Creator is Christ Michael, but I have never quibbled about how others relate to God or what name they use, because I recognize a fellow sojourner when I see one, and diversity of cultural expression is one of my favorite things in life.

I searched for a community that would match my ideals for many years. After gaining some life experience, I realized that decent and wise leadership is a prerequisite for any successful organization. I developed a lifestyle of living in tipis and yurts, which fit my budget and my rejection of “the system” and also afforded me a way to live in beautiful places with lots of trees. For a long time I preferred trees to most people but always had a circle of friends with whom to journey and play music.

One day in the early 1980s I was standing on my porch in a rented house in North Hollywood, California and calling out with all my heart for my tribe. I, my new husband, and baby child had been forced to move to the city to make money for land payments after an intentional community in the mountains of northern California, which we had helped to form, blew apart due to lack of spiritual maturity and leadership. That very day I wrote a song with the lines, “What happened to my circle? I feel it powerfully. But when I look out my front door I see no one that loves me.”

It was not until the early 1990s that I was invited to step onto the deck of a good ship of faith, fellowship, and community. At that time the community was called “Aquarian Concepts” and was a new seed of vision, which I believe was given by celestials to a very special human couple. When this couple embarked on their new community experiment, first in Prescott and then in Sedona, Arizona, they had mountains of faith, a set of toddler twins and another infant, very little money, tremendous love

and concern for others, and lifetimes of obedience to carrying out what they thought to be the will of God—no matter how challenging the voyage turned out to be.

Now, more than three decades later, the ship, built from the shared faith of hundreds of people, is called Global Community Communications Alliance (GCCA). Our vessel has steadily increased in size over the years to make room for all the newly arriving babies and people, and to accommodate all the ministries that have been created—little life boats being sent off to bless the world.

Every one of us arrived with baggage. Some of the items we carried on board caused harm to ourselves and others. At some point we either realize that some of it is better tossed overboard—in a purification process that makes our minds clearer, our bodies healthier, and enhances our ability to serve others—or we leave. Most of us walked on board the ship of collective faith being oblivious to the soul gifts God had secretly tucked into our baggage. For example, I had never considered teaching children but, when encouraged to do so, discovered I loved it.

When I became a student of the spiritual concepts, which are the foundation of the GCCA community and are taught in the courses offered in what is now known as The University of Ascension Science and The Physics of Rebellion, I had the opportunity to expand my study of *The URANTIA Book* into Continuing Fifth Epochal Revelation (*The Cosmic Family* volumes) and Vanetics (universal truth found in various ancient and current sacred teachings and philosophies).

## The Sincere Prayer of Faith

I personally have experienced how “the sincere prayer of faith is a mighty force for the promotion of personal happiness, individual self-control, social harmony, moral progress, and spiritual attainment.” (*The URANTIA Book*, 91:6.43) My fellow community-family members have expressed that this is true for them too in their own faith walk.

Our community has gone through plenty of stormy weather over the years. It is primarily our faith and union of spirit that keeps us afloat. Also, a well-established foundation of making decisions based upon spiritual principles has steered us through many rocky shoals. I have often told visitors that what makes our community materially and psychospiritually sustaining is the revelation that we study (and do our best to integrate into our lives) and the quality of our leadership. Without acting on our faith in these two things, we probably would have sunk a long time ago; or, as one of our beloved elders used to say, “fall[en] apart like a cheap watch.”

Our two spiritual directors, along with all the other Elders and ministers they have trained, teach daily how to apply ascension science, divine-administration principles, common sense, and, above all, our love for God and one another to solve the

myriad challenges of our daily lives. What I discovered is that walking in faith means being teachable and acting on the spiritual direction we receive from our own inner spirit leadings as well as from other human teachers.

As I am currently involved in writing a book on the history of this community, which has always been faith-based, I recently asked one of our spiritual elders to describe what faith ministry looks like. I was gathering the story of her early history in the community for the book, as she has been a part of it since 1993. She has worked closely with the financial side of our community throughout the years. She told me:

“We in the US grew up with capitalism, which encompasses the idea that you’re supposed to hold tight to possessions and control all resources, be it coal or gold or the air that we breathe. If there’s a way that you can harness it and make people pay for it, that’s the capitalist way. Opposite of the typical capitalist way is the spiritual principle of the ‘cosmic law of reciprocity,’ which is about giving. The more you give for others’ highest good and well-being, the more you receive of eternal value.

“I’ve been part of this community for a long time and am still pretty amazed to see leaders with so much faith and so much conviction do what they think God is asking them to do. I have not always initially understood some of the direction given, but the more I’m here, the more I know it pays off (in both the short-term and long-term) when we submit to the guidance from the Spirit of God within us, as well as from our human spiritual elders. The payoff might not be immediate, but when I look back, I see how much ‘corn is grown,’ how much is harvested from hearing and following the leadings of our Creator.

“It’s so rare for people to listen for spiritual direction and act upon it. It’s just not usually how decisions are made. But I’ve seen what that kind of ‘hearing’ manifests. I’ve seen how a new

paradigm emerges when we resign our more materialistic agendas and let go of old traditional patterns of thinking on how to do business or how to build something. The paradigm here is much more about giving and what manifests for the whole rather than for one individual or for one small group.”

One of my favorite stories from our community history archives that illustrates what a faith walk looks like describes what our community’s leading spiritual visionary did many years before founding GCCA:

“When running Sonlight Ministries for the homeless in Tucson, Arizona in the 1970s, he had been given a house (from a sympathetic businessman in Tucson) to carry out this ministry on Fourth Avenue, where he housed, fed, and took care of many homeless persons.

“One day, he was thinking that if he could just knock out a wall to make two rooms into one large one, it would make the house more comfortable and serviceable for sheltering the crowds of people passing daily through his doors. In a moment of inspiration, he picked up a sledge hammer and started tearing down the wall. This was a pure act of faith, as he had no money to complete the reconstruction that he was setting into motion. But, as is often the case when we act boldly in faith and for the purpose of serving others, the spiritual living forces responded in circumstantial reality.

“The very next day a carpenter knocked on the door and asked if he could offer his services for any projects at Sonlight Ministries. The carpenter also ‘just happened’ to have the exact materials needed, including a ceiling beam that fit perfectly where needed.”

Around 2007, after we in GCCA had been living in Sedona for about 18 years, this same visionary heard from God that the community needed to move. It was a lot like taking the sledge

*“The Soul Sisters Society,” a group of teens all born in the Global Community Communications Alliance community.*



Photos courtesy of Global Community Communications Alliance

hammer to the wall, as it seemed like an illogical and impractical thing to do. But he understood that the community family needed to live together on one property, in order to fulfill the vision and the ideal of a cosmically-inspired community where we were able to “walk from house to house and break bread together.” The building codes kept us from living at Avalon Gardens in Sedona, which we had acquired and built through faith, serendipities, and the sweat of many brows.

The search for our new location led to a property near the border of Arizona and Mexico. It was purchased in 2007 with faith that the money would manifest to pay for it. It took two years to move the entire community to southern Arizona, and in the 12-plus years since then we have discovered countless serendipities that confirm the rightness of the move. For me, one of the biggest is being fully welcomed and embraced from Day One in this vibrant border culture that understands our mission as a faith ministry. (There has been a long history of similar missions in this region, starting with Father Kino in the 17th century.)

In an article titled “Successfully Moving an Entire Community by Applying Permaculture Principles,” another one of our Elders, whose spirituality includes the practice of Indigenous spirituality and sacred ecology as a master organic gardener, commented on the amazing process of moving about 120 people and our projects and ministries:

“Before we had even physically begun moving to the new location, with our land still in escrow, we, as individuals and as an intentional community, began to form alliances with a variety of individuals and groups already in the area who were doing their part in contributing to a more sane and sustainable world. We were pleasantly surprised at how many and diverse environmental and social activists there are in such a rural area.

“During the two-year move that was done in phases, and the following two years of the entire community finally living together again in one place, ‘life’ continued to happen amidst the challenges of moving, being separated, and adjusting to a different environment with its increased demands. In those four years, we experienced the passing/graduation of several of our beloved members to the next stage in their soul ascension, welcomed the arrival of four newborns, celebrated seven weddings, and struggled through one divorce. Also during these transitional four years, several members left to pursue new or old things, and several others have joined us, invigorating our community with a sense of freshness in their newfound sense of higher purpose and destiny.”



*PiSeen, MasSa’Seen,  
and child.*

Many years after we started, we still live with the many challenges of being in a spiritually-based community within the larger dominant culture of materialistic values that lack a spiritized perspective. From the first day I arrived, almost 30 years ago, the foundation of all that we do is based on universal spiritual principles, many of which are also part of the world’s major religions. However, we are very aware of how religion, throughout history, has been used for political and material gain through distortion and misappropriation of spiritual principles. Our university studies encompass the actual teachings of sacred texts without the doctrine of selfish materialism, nationalism, fear, exclusiveness, and so on. We embrace what we consider universal spiritual laws of each religion and philosophy and identify what we consider contrary to the true nature of God and His/Her laws of love, mercy, and justice.

**Note:** Camp Avalon Spiritual Nature Retreat now sits on our old garden site in Sedona, providing camping and access to Oak Creek, and attracting families and congregations of faith from all over. Through Global Alliance Properties, many of our former homes in Sedona have become vacation rentals, which bless all who stay in these beautiful abodes we created, renovated, and made sacred over the years of living there. We still have a strong presence in Sedona, but our primary home is now well established in the south.

With the help of many, GCCA has also started constructing a beautiful Global Temple to house The University of Ascension Science and The Physics of Rebellion. The outward structures and facilities are built on a foundation of people who desire to continually grow in purity and dedicate their lives as missionaries within this faith ministry of service to others. 🌿

*Blue Evening Star (a student at The University of Ascension Science and The Physics of Rebellion, missionary, and change agent) has been a member of Global Community Communications Alliance since 1992. Over the years, she has served in many capacities of community building. Her current areas of service include Human Resources; Transportation Coordination; teaching in The Global Community Communications Starseed Schools for Teens and Children; storytelling classes and events; interviewing activists on KVAN Visionary Radio; writing articles for the Alternative Voice; and being on the board of directors of Friends of the Santa Cruz River. Her favorite pastimes are walking with friends, studying revelation, hanging out with little people, and playing folk music.*



**The Global Temple, currently under construction**  
(see [uaspr.org](http://uaspr.org)).

# From India to Nepal to Northern California: Beyond the “Dream” of Village

*By Ahkua Huling*



Photos courtesy of Ahkua Huling

Last spring while traveling in India, I spent a month in the city of Rishikesh, popularly known as the “yoga capital of the world.” While there, I was told about an orphanage with its own café, where I could find a leafy green salad which I was desperately craving (it’s near impossible to find a western-style salad in India). I made my way to the orphanage, past the twists and turns of the narrow cobblestone alleys, past the guest houses, construction sites, stray dogs, and children playing in the street.

The pathways inside the gate were paved in stone, along with the buildings housing the orphan residents, school rooms, and kitchens. Children were everywhere playing, with older residents and foreign volunteers supervising, teaching and, in the café, preparing the food. I saw a middle-aged Indian man herding a flock of goats through the dry creek bed next to the café. This was a functioning village, I realized, with multiple generations, schooling, businesses, gardens, and farm animals. Not only the café, but the yoga shala on the orphanage grounds brought in a steady stream of foreigners and future volunteers, and provided a space for residents to learn and teach yoga and make an income.

That’s where I met Veer, the main yoga teacher and resident of the orphanage for 20 years. He was brought there by his father as a young child after a severe accident in his village in Nepal, where he fell into a fire and lost much of his left hand. He grew up in the orphanage, learned yoga, and became a teacher to support himself financially. We quickly became close friends, as I attended his yoga classes in the afternoons and went

out with him and our mutual friends in the evenings. I told him of my dreams of creating a village back home in California, and of my inspiration to somehow help the orphans in India. He invited me to his family’s village in Nepal, with the possibility of creating an orphanage and school there. My visa was soon to run out, and I was planning to head to Nepal afterwards, so I accepted his invitation.

His family’s village was in the far northwest corner of Nepal, a one day walk from the border of Tibet. It took us two rough days of travel by bus and jeep to arrive at his village. Before the dirt roads were built, Veer would walk six days to reach his family’s village from the nearest city. A muddy river of brown water snaked its way through the valley floor, thousands of feet below the mountain villages. Verdant green terraces layered the hillsides, all fed

by flood irrigation from the mountain streams in the drier months.

Veer's family had lived in these mountains for generations. Their homes were built of mud and stone, their food cooked over a wood fire, with wood harvested from the hills around them. They drank straight from the mountain streams. Even though packaged foods were beginning to make their way into these distant villages, they were still mostly self-sufficient. If industrial civilization all of a sudden stopped, these people would survive. Veer's family kept a water-buffalo for milk, chickens for eggs, and goats for milk and meat. Each day children and elders would thresh grain, milk the animals, plant or harvest in the fields, with ample time for standing around, drinking chai, chatting, and playing in the hillsides. The kids were expected to help with the chores, like corralling the goats, but I often witnessed them running free throughout the hillsides, climbing trees, or braiding each other's hair.

One afternoon, some villagers were harvesting wheat from a nearby field when it started to downpour. They appeared at our door and were invited in for dinner. We sat around a fire, about 10 of us, sharing the abundance of food that was cooked: rice and vegetables, chapati bread, buttermilk, and yogurt. The rain

didn't let up, so everyone slept on the mud floor of the hut together. This is just how it works here. Everyone's well-being is tied together. If your crop fails, you share your neighbor's crop. If it's time to build or repair a home, the men in the village show up and help each other.

One sunny day as I walked with Veer around the mountainside to a neighboring village, observing the people managing their grain harvests and carefully tending to their rice terraces, I realized that I was observing what I had been dreaming about for over a decade: Village! My heart was filled with joy. My college friends and I had talked about community and village for years, and here it was! I found what I had been looking for.

Even though I still wished this life for myself and my friends, a part of my spirit was now able to rest, knowing that there are people living this way with each other and the land. It's not just a dream, but a reality, and a reality that works. My friends and I had heard the stories about the "failed" communities in the '60s and '70s. I myself was part of a community experiment that ended after one year. Yet, I don't look back and see that time as a failure. I look back on it as one of the happiest times of my life. How could that be a failure?

So, my "faith in community" is not really a faith, but a knowing. I've seen it with my own eyes, and I've felt it in my body, up there in the mountain villages of Nepal, and in the community I lived with in Northern California. Community exists in many places around the world, as it has for generations upon generations. It's a very real and grounded reality. And I'll continue to carry that knowing in my heart, as I continue to rally my friends to buy land and build village together! 🌱

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*Abkua Huling currently lives in the Pacific Northwest, splitting time between Northern California and Washington. Dissatisfied with "the system," Abkua left graduate school in 2007 to travel throughout Southeast Asia. He returned two years later to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, afterward joining his friends to start a community near Sebastopol, California. There he began farming and building, and experiencing the joys and challenges of co-habiting on land with many friends and inadequate infrastructure. Over the years since, Abkua has lived in different iterations of community. These days, he spends his time playing music, romping through the forests, and rallying friends to live the life our hearts know is possible! Abkua can be reached at [jrhuling@gmail.com](mailto:jrhuling@gmail.com).*





# My Faith in Communities

By Joan McVilly



Photos courtesy of Joan McVilly

*The half full glass  
Is broken  
So I will drink dew  
From the leaves*

I'm feeling an overwhelming sadness about the state of the earth, about the state of governments and democracy—what we, collectively, are capable of in our ignorance. I know that I'm not alone in that. I'm also not alone in knowing that I can't *not* do anything.

For years now, and increasingly, I have been aware that action has to come from the ground up as well as from established leadership. It certainly hasn't been coming from political leadership in general. So leadership is something that each of us, seeing need, can give.

We will need to adapt personally and collectively to the enormous changes that will get even larger because of the nature of the world in which we live. I don't believe we have the luxury of time, and I want to respond now in the most powerful way I can.

I recognise that some people do see that they can contribute in the formal political sphere. I'm not one of them. My faith in community isn't about community being a solution that will "solve climate change," whatever that means. Instead, I believe that community, connection, relationships in general are what make it possible to keep going with dignity and care for myself and others, and that through it I can contribute

meaningfully to the jigsaw puzzle of living together in this beautiful world.

It's an easy choice to make, although the ramifications of the choice are far-reaching. The choice for community means for me that I have given up living in one community, an "intentional" community, and after allowing myself time for pondering, chosen to live in a larger (and non-intentional) rural community where I can be involved in the day-to-day life of the township without driving my car.

I'm a country girl. I love trees and lots of quiet, I love living a slower life, and as I've got older I've realised how much I love people. The intentional commu-

nity that I left answered those surface needs. But if I wanted, or if the community needed, anything more than what it could offer, we were too far away from services and with no public transport in the area. The result was that fossil fuel vehicles—of which every adult had one—were always being used. I felt a not-so-subtle sense of cognitive dissonance each time I drove by myself in my car.

The low population of our group and different motivations for being present were amongst other things that led to my decision to leave. The story of the functionality of small intentional communities is a narrative well explored in COMMUNITIES.

When I intentionally untethered from my community I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing. I questioned myself during this vagabonding (a period of nine or 10 months) and finally boiled it down to three simple points to assist me in making my decision about where to tether myself again. I have had to be clear about my vision and be able to align my actions with it. I have learnt the importance of keeping within my capacity to act and to be able to be supported in that.

I recognised that for my own survival (my capacity!), my new place needed to be cooler in temperature than where I'd been—quite an ask these days, especially in Australia! The answer here is elevation and not too far inland where it is hotter and drier. Also, I wanted to be somewhere with enough population to carry the possibility for meaningful community involvement and relationships as well as needed services. And finally, it needed

to be limited to such a size so that I could walk everywhere and not have to use my fossil fuel vehicle on a regular basis. Carpooling and sharing and public transport needed to be available, leaving my old car as an option to be used only in a pinch.

I have been able to achieve these three points in a small town where I feel comfortable and am able to engage productively. I am able to slake my thirst for trees and quiet by volunteering at a local nature reserve. I also have several volunteer and social engagements in town and am finding myself jamming way too much activity into my time and available energy. Living a slower life is completely up to me, I have discovered!

At the same time I am recognising that to thrive I must satisfy the inherent need, in this larger, non-intentional community, to find allies who share my vision of a world where all beings can exist with respect and dignity, and which includes deep mourning for that which is passing (truly, this allows space for joy and movement).

I am living in a share house which by no means is as eco-friendly as it could be. However, I can control my personal footprint at least. The mother of a co-tenant here lives in town and recently thanked me, saying that since I have lived with this person he has, in her experience, become softer and more generous. If this is due to my influence it has not been intentional but this is an illustration of the power of community, of simply living a vision.

There is a very small pioneering ecovillage 15 minutes' walk away which I visit and am involved with in a supportive role, both as a facilitator for the group and quite separately as a friend with individuals. This is one source of allies! I have also met many others since living here, such as through a community choir, the neighbourhood centre where I volunteer, the nature reserve, and a group of local people getting together to organise community forums on topics of concern raised by the community. So this larger community is a series of interconnecting "intentional" communities and this is truly where my faith in community lies.

At this time I am feeling no shortage of allies although I'm recognising that mine is not a straightforward community-living experience (if there is ever such a thing!). My sphere of influence is not determined only by my willingness to take on tasks. In fact, it's mainly predicated on my own willingness to trust my ability to show up as I am, genuinely aligned with my vision, where my love and respect for other beings around me can be exhibited authentically, honestly, without pretense, not endeavouring to be so self-righteously confident that I know just how to do it. My faith is actually that the community will continue to be the context in which I can contribute to the earth. 🌱

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*Joan McVilly lives in South East Queensland, Australia. Her abiding interest is in community—small "c"—and what makes it. Over four decades she has explored this through direct environmental action, membership in a religious group, an environmental education centre, an intentional community, and now through living in a small rural town in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. She can be reached at [joan.mcvilly@gmail.com](mailto:joan.mcvilly@gmail.com).*



# Keeping the Faith in a Forming Cohousing Community Or: Why I keep going on this seemingly endless journey

By Jennie Lindberg

I am part of a cohousing community that is currently forming, preparing the ground work for construction sometime in the future. It is a long, tedious process, not without many rewards, but still it seems endless from my current perspective. Having faith that it will all “turn out OK in the end” is what keeps me going.

When my husband, Dean, and I first started researching cohousing we read that it could take three to five years for our community to be built. I was optimistic and concluded that ours could, of course, be built in three years. Why did it have to take longer? Surely, we could be the exception? I was wrong. It's now been four years and will be at least 18 more months, IF everything goes well. The professionals were right.

Dean and I decided that living in an intentional community was something we had each individually been interested in, and that we wanted to pursue it together. There were no existing cohousing communities in the city we live in, so we thought we'd explore the possibility of starting one. We did a lot of reading, and touring of existing cohousing communities to learn more about what it was that we thought we wanted. At the time I was in my early 60s and he was in his early 70s. We decided that time was not on our side. The reality was, if we were going to actually get to enjoy any time living in our community, it would be better to jump in quickly, follow a structured path, and replicate what others have already accomplished, rather than reinventing a new type of wheel.

Frankly, this process takes way more time and energy than any sane person would sign up for. We have spent many hours sitting in meetings, having conversations with people, reading books, attending trainings, writing publicity, writing documents about membership and policies, and have bored probably every one of our non-cohousing friends and relatives with our single-minded focus on cohousing. It's not something that can be done in a superficial way.

Forming a strong group of members has been the biggest challenge for us, with finances being the biggest barrier. Our original core group of friends didn't include wealthy people with huge amounts of equity in their homes, or millionaires who could be investment benefactors. So we had to broaden our audience. We put out some publicity about cohousing and a public meeting day and time, and drew some (amazingly wonderful) enthusiastic folks to a meeting at our local public library. This first group met for several months, exploring ideas and possibilities

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**Frankly, this process takes way more time and energy than any sane person would sign up for.**

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Photos courtesy of Jennie Lindberg

until we began to seriously talk about money and the amounts of money that would be needed as we started to look for land. One by one each of the original participants faded away, some regretfully, some silently, some sad that they could not afford the dream of community we had been talking about.

So we put out more publicity and had several more meetings at the public library and the local food co-op, and once again gathered together an enthusiastic group of (amazingly wonderful) people who believed in community, that is until we got serious about talking about money again. After this same thing happened several times we learned to have the hard conversation up front: it wasn't enough to believe in the power of community, to believe that we can make the world a better place, to believe that working together we can accomplish more good in the world than we can alone. You have to have cash. You have to have equity. You have to be able to get your hands on development money. We explained to people up front about construction costs and engineering costs, and architectural fees, and how much money it takes to put in a road with sidewalks, light poles, electricity, and sewer lines. This approach seemed to help and the people who stick around now are closer to having the financial ability to follow their (our) dreams.

As each of these waves of people came through our lives and shared our vision and then faded away Dean and I would have long discussions.

“Why isn't it working? What are we doing wrong?”

“Are we doing anything wrong?”

“What do the books tell us to do? What did we learn at the conferences and workshops?”

“How can we reach the people we need to reach?”

“Are we doing the right thing? Should we give up? Is this too hard? Is this right for us to continue working on?”

This decision-making point—stop or continue—was something we came to about three times. But each time we seriously had to make a decision whether or not to continue, we had accomplished a little more. First we had a name, an LLC, and a website, then we had property that works well for cohousing, and an architect and a process consultant, both of whom encouraged us and helped us along. Each time we said, “OK, we'll give it until the end of this year and if we don't have a substantial group of members by that time then we'll give it up.” We actually never met the goal that we had set, but by the end of each year

we made enough progress that it seemed a shame to not continue.

When doing one of my favorite activities, walking through the woods, when I feel tired and think about turning back, to motivate myself I begin to wonder what's around the next corner up ahead. Wondering what's up ahead motivates me to continue walking up the hill, or through the patch of alder trees to see what might be around the bend. What motivates me to continue working on our forming community and helps me have faith in the process is wondering how it will all turn out. I have faith that an intentional community such as cohousing can be a wonderful, healthy, nurturing, and inspiring way to live. I also have faith in a) our amazing professional team of consultants and architect, and b) ongoing help and support from existing cohousing communities.

We have enlisted a team of professionals who believe in cohousing and are experienced at getting projects built. We were given the advice: “You may be able to build a cohousing community on your own, but it will take many years more. The professionals will cost you money but will save you a lot more in the long run.” We have certainly found this to be true.

We have toured most of the many communities in our local area. Every community has been full of people who have been patient, helpful, and supportive. I am so appreciative of Libby Carr of Songaia and Jeanine SanClemente of Sharingwood, who have given their time and advice over and over! I feel we have a debt to repay to future forming communities. 🍷

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*Jennie Lindberg is a founding member of Sunnyside Village Cohousing in Marysville, Washington ([www.sunnysidevillagecohousing.com](http://www.sunnysidevillagecohousing.com)). She writes: “Much credit goes to our professional team who support and guide us: Grace Kim, Architect, Schemata Workshop; Chris Scotthanson, Development Consultant; Karen Gimmig, Process Consultant; and the National Cohousing Association, for workshops, conferences, trainings, the Directory, classified ads—and without which we would still be floundering as a nice group of people who get together monthly for potlucks and dream about community.”*



# Leaning into Vulnerability

By Teri Lynn Grunthaner

*The sky above the pond.*



*Whoever holds the Focus Feather has the full attention of the circle.*



Photos courtesy of Teri Lynn Grunthaner

Everyone was beaming with excitement as they lay down their blankets to form a circle on the grass. It was our first official ecovillage visioning meeting and the energy was high. Each of the four couples exchanged giddy remarks about the wonderful weather as the meeting facilitators set the easel up against a tree.

“All right, let’s review our meeting agreements... Listen for perspective, take care of your needs, only interrupt if necessary... All sound good?” Dawn was making eye contact around the circle to see if anyone had any comments before diving into the jam-packed agenda.

“I have something I want to bring up,” Corey projected. He spoke with his usual warm confidence, but I could also sense a little tension in his voice. Maybe this is something tender for him, I thought. We all turned to face him and gave him our full attention.

“I’m interested in forming an agreement around us all showing up for meetings sober and clear-headed, in order to best support our presence and mindfulness.”

My chest tightened and brows furrowed with confusion. Were we not all demonstrating coherence? Was someone getting so high that they were checked out during meetings? Is sobriety necessary for clarity?

I quickly broke the silence. “I hear you’re really valuing each of our ability to be clear and focused during the meetings. Can you say more about your request?” I started to feel some tunnel vision creep in. Confronting conflicts always brings up anxiety

in me. I tuned into my breathing and noticed the weight of my body cradled on the soft ground.

“Yes, I’m wanting each of us to be able to fully participate in these visioning exercises. We’ll be talking about the very foundations of our ecovillage, and I want what we say here to be what we really mean. I want consistency and dependability in what we develop here.”

Dawn interjected. “I want that, too, but I’m confused about how that relates to sobriety. Some people use plant medicine and pharmaceuticals to become *more* mindful and clear.” She spoke with authority, as someone who has extensive knowledge of health and alternative medicine.

The fourth couple was silent and still as more questions and comments were exchanged. I noticed myself avoiding eye contact with them, knowing it was likely that this was a very challenging request for them to hear and I didn’t want to put them on the spot to speak up if they weren’t yet ready.

After a few more minutes of discussion, we recognized that we weren’t going to come to an agreement without a substantial conversation. “Can we table this for another meeting?” Dawn asked. “Sure,” Corey said with a nod and a smile, “I just wanted to get this conversation started.”

• • •

Within a week of the meeting, I had heard every person in the group, apart from Corey and his partner, express

some level of confusion, discomfort, or anger about what they had interpreted from Corey's request. While Corey was trying to center his desire for a group agreement around being clear and present for meetings and commitments, his mention of sobriety overshadowed it and poked some (very) sensitive spots for folks.

One member in particular, Lynn, was deeply triggered and distressed. She and her partner regularly used small amounts of plant medicine to help them regulate anxiety, relax, and get into a flow state with their work. She perceived Corey's comments to mean he wouldn't trust Lynn to make responsible decisions or be a valuable community member if she wasn't sober.

Lynn and Devin were the next meeting's facilitators. As they gathered to plan the agenda, they knew that this conflict had to be addressed before we went any deeper into our visioning. But how?

As someone who professionally supports folks in working through conflicts and repairing relationships, I was consulted on what we should do.

First idea: Lynn talks to Corey directly, outside of a group meeting. While this could be a great approach in many contexts, Lynn didn't want to do this for a number of reasons. She felt too vulnerable and tender to approach Corey by herself.

Second idea: Have a mediated conversation between Lynn and Corey. But what about the other members who also had feelings about this? Does everyone need their own private, mediated conversation with Corey? This seemed like it would take too much time and possibly be very redundant and taxing for Corey.

Third idea: Have a facilitated group conversation to help individual members express their feelings and needs as well as develop a deeper understanding of Corey's intention and experience. This would provide the groundwork necessary to come

up with a solution that met everyone's needs.

Lynn, Devin, and Dawn were all for this third idea. "Compassionate conflict resolution surfaced as a shared core value at our meeting," Dawn reminded me. "Why not start practicing now?"

Lynn looked at me with conviction. "Will you facilitate the group conversation? I have total faith in your ability to hold this."

A wave of excitement washed over me. With years of experience in group facilitation, Nonviolent Communication, and therapeutic support, I was thrilled to lend my skills to our emerging community. In truth, being able to support Intentional Communities in developing authentic, healing relationships was why I embarked upon my journey to become an Expressive Therapist in the first place.

"I would be honored," I replied. "I know just the thing we could do."

• • •

That next meeting I facilitated what we called a Healing Circle, drawing from Marshall Rosenberg's Healing and Reconciliation model of Nonviolent Communication and utilizing resources from John Kinyon and Ike Lasater's *Mediate Your Life Training Manual*.

The goals were simple: to connect and understand one another. The process was also simple, but very different from how we usually have conversations, especially if there is pain or conflict. Luckily, nearly everyone had prior experience using Nonviolent Communication, so I anticipated the circle would be relatively easy to facilitate.

The circle started with me setting a clear intention. We were arranged in a circle for a reason—there was no hot seat, no



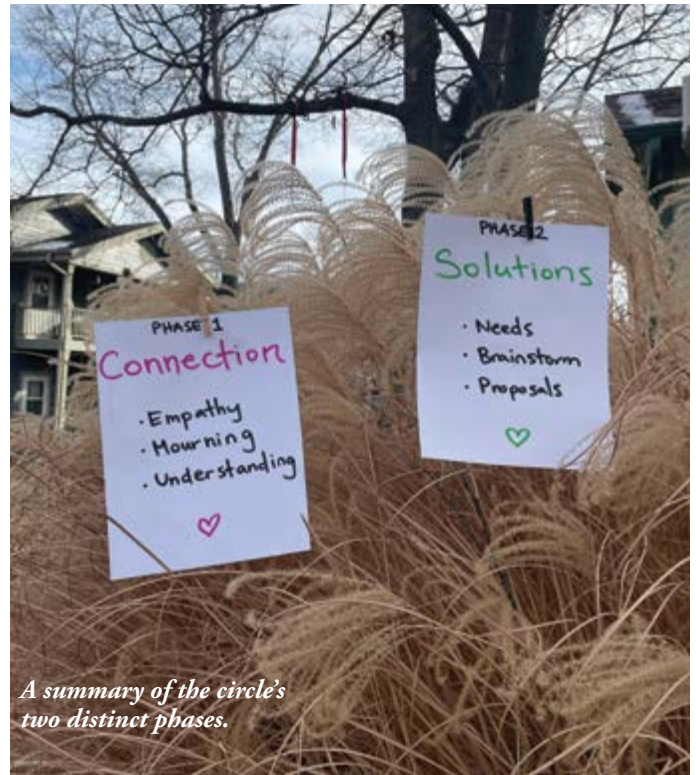
*The author and circle keeper, Teri, prepares for the circle.*



*A reminder to help participants find curiosity and compassion.*



*Examples of connection requests anyone could ask during the circle.*



*A summary of the circle's two distinct phases.*

blame, no “bad” other to punish. We were all equal in power and morality. Even I, as facilitator, was granted only certain privileges to upkeep the responsibilities of the role, and was not to be cast in a position of authority or judge.

We spent a considerable amount of time learning about the process. I prepared reference sheets on poster paper and tacked them up on tree trunks and limbs around the circle, knowing that the more everyone knew about the process, the more smoothly it would go.

Some of the key features of the Healing Circle process we used included:

**1. Focus Feather.** One person would have the group’s focus at a time. We used an object, similar to a talking piece, to concretize this—a colorful and vibrant peacock feather. The person who had the group’s attention would hold the Focus Feather, even when others were offering reflections and response.

**2. Circle Keeper.** The facilitator’s role was to keep the group on track with the intention and process. Interventions included providing empathy to support, model, or redirect others’ sharing; suggesting connection requests to deepen understanding; interrupting when things were going off course; and offering clarifying questions and summaries.

**3. Two Phases.** The first phase was focused on connection and understanding. The person in focus gets to self-express and invites empathy from others. Once they feel complete in their share, they or the Circle Keeper invite others to share how they feel hearing this person’s experience, and then have the opportunity to contribute to mutual understanding by articulating their own needs and intention in taking whatever action impacted the original member. Solutions and agreements come in the second phase, including a brainstorm of solutions and a development of main, supporting, and remedial agreements.

• • •

After answering some clarifying questions, I led a brief meditation to ground us. Our circle was arranged around a small human-made waterhole, so I invited us to visualize our circle being held in a pool of cool, healing water that embraces and connects us. Whenever the water starts to jostle and crash, we’ll pause to breathe and lean back into the supportive container.

“Who is ready to share?” I asked. While I knew Lynn was the most upset, I didn’t want to pressure her to begin. I trusted that however we began would be right.

To my surprise, Lynn quickly raised her hand. “I’m ready,” she said plainly. I passed the Focus Feather to my right and watched it carefully change hands until it settled in hers.

Lynn’s voice was clear, strong, and gentle as she told Corey how his comments and request landed for her. She explained how she views and utilizes plant medicine, and how important it is for her to be trusted to make coherent decisions unless she proves herself otherwise. She shared some of her pain, disclosing the anger and sadness she felt with Corey’s judgment.

Corey deeply listened with care and concern on his face. When the time came, he reflected back what he heard from Lynn with great compassion and grace. I could see a huge wave of relief move through the group as folks’ bodies relaxed. I wasn’t surprised, however, as I knew Corey to be a most skilled listener and communicator with a tremendously capable heart.

The empathic reflection supported Lynn in going deeper into her experience. More and more of Lynn’s vulnerability and wounding was exposed and held in our group container. She touched her shame, fear, and despair from years of unsupport-

ive judgment and punishment from her parents, teachers, and peers. Tears and emotional weight dropped to the ground. She was being seen and being loved at the same time.

As Lynn's cathartic release settled and found closure, others became ready to share what Corey's request brought up for them. Lynn's vulnerability had invited a new level of depth into the circle. Pictures of one another's inner worlds became more full, deep, complex, and beautiful.

With the hurt hearts relaxed and receptive, it was time to shift the focus to Corey. How was he feeling? What vulnerable truths were behind his comments and request?

Corey shared how long he had been holding this concern and desire. For months he kept this request to himself, not knowing how or when to bring it up. He finally gave himself permission to bring it to the group in its imperfection. He didn't expect such a big reaction, and while he regretted not having explored his feelings and strategized his approach more, he also felt sad and discouraged by the turn it took.

"In my family of origin, and in nearly every Intentional Community I've been a part of, there have been folks who weren't able to uphold a responsibility to the group because they were too drunk, hungover, high, or had made some other choice that negatively impacted their ability to follow through on a commitment that I was relying upon," he explained with both sadness and anger.

Another level of tension was released as members found compassion for both Corey's hardship in bringing it up to the group and the deep pain it touched, reaching far back into his early childhood. Several members offered gentle and loving empathic reflection.

"I am disappointed and upset, though," he continued, "in how we handled this conflict."

I stopped breathing. The tunnel vision and hot face came quick. What had I done? I coached myself back to presence: breathe, sit up straight, find the tree leaves rustling in your periphery.

"I was told there would be this circle today, with minimal information about why, other than that I said something that was hurtful. I was stressed all week wondering what I had done, what the consequences might be." He paused to look around at all our surprised and concerned faces. "I wasn't invited into a dialogue about my needs or preferences. I wasn't asked for my consent. I felt like I didn't have a choice."

My gut sunk with guilt and heart tightened with regret. He was right. We didn't approach him with the full spirit of the process. Devin, one of the meeting facilitators, was tasked to call him and let him know that this was on the agenda, without much guidance on how to have that conversation. He let him know that some folks were deeply upset by his request, that I was going to facilitate a circle, and that he wasn't in trouble.

We had rushed the decision to do the circle, announcing it just three days before it was scheduled, and overlooked the most important preparation work: being transparent and gathering consensus from all involved.

My breath deepened and shoulders relaxed as I forgave myself

for my mistake. What valuable feedback, I thought. We definitely won't forget that next time.

Devin responded with great care and deep apologies. I and others also reflected what we were hearing and how we were feeling learning about this. With Corey's permission, we moved into phase two and brainstormed other choices we all could have made along the windy road we walked together.

We ended with a reflection on how the Healing Circle structure supported our goals and what we'd want to experiment with doing differently next time. Many members expressed enthusiasm for doing a circle regularly, without having to wait for a conflict to emerge.

"Radical intimacy and healing is a major reason why I'm here," someone shared. "This is what community is all about. This is it."

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Since 2010, when I first started living in Intentional Community, I could see that my community's vulnerability to failure was dependent upon how able and willing we were to lean into our personal vulnerabilities with ourselves and one another.

If Lynn hadn't received the support she needed to find understanding and forgiveness with Corey, no doubt her family would have dropped out of the visioning group. The conflict wasn't as simple as Corey making a challenging request. It was as complicated as cutting into layers of pain and protection around safety, dependability, belonging, and trust.

As complex, sticky, and sharp as some conflicts may be, there seems to always be a soft underbelly, protected from the anticipated blows of unkind or unskilled people. A beautifully human wound, fear, or longing awaits there that, when held with trust and care, opens up a tender space for a profound level of healing, reconciliation, and resolution to emerge.

How do we begin to soften our defenses so as to tend to the precious needs beneath our pain? How do we learn to trust our belonging—to our community, to our planet, to ourselves—so as to stay grounded through the unsettling winds of conflict? How do we embrace one another's wounds and shadows with compassion so as to create the conditions ripe for healing?

How do we lean into our vulnerability with so much at stake—our community, our livelihoods, our vision for a just, peaceful, balanced world?

How do we *not* lean into our vulnerability with so much at stake?

This community healing circle strengthened my faith that by letting these questions shape our practices and culture, we will live into the answers that can radically heal and transform our world. 🌸

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*Teri Grunthaler lives in Delaware Street Commons cohousing in Lawrence, Kansas with her partner, Samuel, and young daughter, Kylee. She is a Conscious Relating Coach and Expressive Therapist, passionate about helping folks create authentic, healing relationships with themselves and their community. Learn more about her practice and join the support network of communarians doing inner and outer relationship work at [www.radical-hearts.com](http://www.radical-hearts.com).*



# How Can You Know in Advance about Your New Community?

By Diana Leafe Christian

*What kind of people live there? How do they treat each other? How will they treat you and your family?*

Photo by Papaiannou Kostas on Unsplash.com

Let's say you're new to the idea of community living and don't know much about communities yet. You want to believe in communities in general and certainly to believe your new community will be a good place to live. But what if, even after reading everything on their website and one or more extended visits, when you live there the community turns out to be weird? What if you don't like it?

Given the common misconceptions about communities, you might wonder if community members all think alike or must do what they're told, forced to share a kind of "Group Mind." You might remember the Borg on Star Trek—massive half-machine cyborgs suddenly materializing and announcing in their chilling electric monotone:

**"YOU WILL BE ASSIMILATED—RESISTANCE IS FUTILE"**

As every Trekkie knows, as soon as the human-machine Borg deliver their terrifying message you're beamed to their cube-shaped machine community where you become a cyborg yourself—doomed to an endless life as one of thousands of robot-cells in the Borg's "Hive Mind." Is community like *this*?

Fortunately, while members of most communities *do* hold many more values and beliefs in common than a comparable typical group of people, this is only because they're organized around a shared community vision and purpose. However, disagreements about how they'll resolve community issues or how to spend common funds are common in most communities, just as in the wider society. Community members certainly don't have "Hive Mind," but widely diverging opinions. Just ask any process and communications consultant called in to help resolve disputes!

Yet the "everyone thinks alike" idea must come from somewhere, as well as the idea that when joining an intentional community one can be psychologically abused or coerced into doing what you're told.

## NOT The Borg—"High Demand Groups"

A small number of intentional communities are what researchers call "high-demand groups"—intentional communities, usually spiritual or religious, with rigorous rules for conduct and highly structured schedules. Some Christian communities, Buddhist retreat centers, and yoga ashrams can be high-demand groups, because people are expected to follow the agreements about diet, the use of money, or relations between the sexes, and

have set schedules for prayer, meditation, or other forms of spiritual practice.

People join these high-demand communities *because* they offer a clear, strong focus and more rigorous way of life than mainstream life, and people can experience their spiritual path or religious practice in the company of others doing the same. And while this is perfectly legitimate, only a small percentage of spiritual and religious communities are actually high-demand groups.

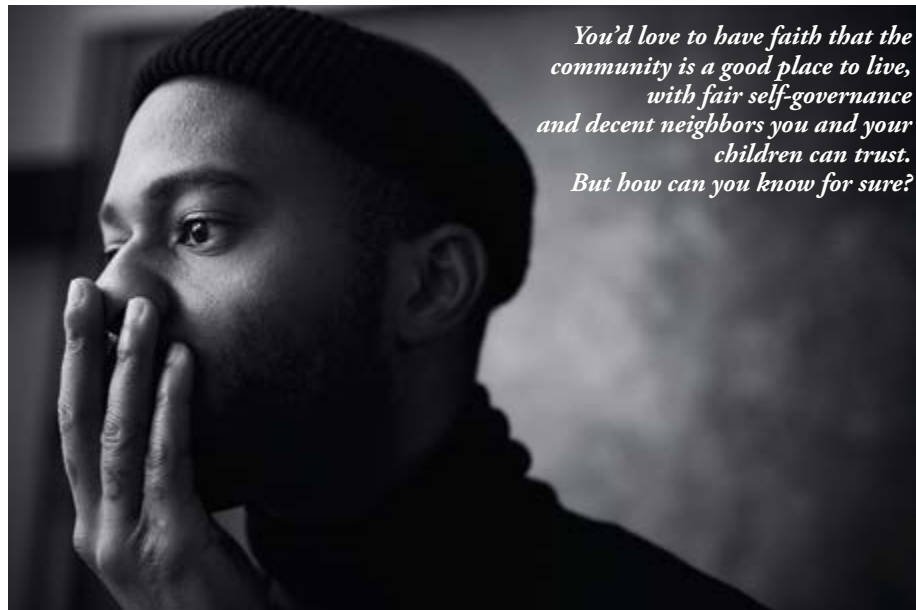
Some of these communities, however, have famously had abusive authoritarian leaders who coerced their members with psychological humiliation or peer pressure. While of course this is *not* good, one misunderstanding about groups like this is that people can't leave them. But members of high-demand communities with abusive leaders who don't want to live there anymore usually just leave voluntarily. If the high-demand group with an authoritarian leader has an *independent-income economy* (members retain their assets and spend their money as they wish), they can leave the community fairly easily. It may be psychologically difficult, but if they don't like the community after a while they can just high-tail it out of there.

However, if a high-demand group with a reputation for authoritarian leadership

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## What is brainwashing anyway? Does it really exist? Research shows it requires extreme circumstances such as physical torture.

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*You'd love to have faith that the community is a good place to live, with fair self-governance and decent neighbors you and your children can trust. But how can you know for sure?*

Photo by Darius Bashar on Unsplash.com

or harshness has an *asset-sharing economy* (members donate all their assets when they join), or an *income-sharing economy* (members' monthly income goes into the common pot and they get a monthly stipend or their expenses are paid by the group), or the group is *both asset-sharing and income-sharing*—meaning community members don't have any money of their own—it can be difficult to leave. It's not because community members are physically forced to stay, but because they're trapped economically they *can't afford* to leave. They probably don't own a car anymore or have savings to draw on for a bus ticket home. Nor would they be able to afford to rent a place or have enough funds for food and other expenses while they get a job.

Please let me emphasize, the asset-sharing and income-sharing aspects of a community are *not* the problem—and if a community is asset-sharing or income-sharing it does *not* mean it has authoritarian leadership! On the contrary, most income-sharing communities have no single leader and usually govern themselves by some kind of fair, participatory method like consensus or voting. The problem is the *combination* of a high-demand group—in itself not a problem—with an authoritarian leader, and the economic dependency of income-sharing and/or asset-sharing.

### Are There...Cults?

The mainstream media's use of the word "cult" comes from the small percentage of

high-demand groups, often but not always spiritual or religious, that engage in physical abuse towards their members or who don't let them leave, and which come to public view when their abuse leads to headlines worldwide. The term "intentional community" then becomes tainted by these groups' harmful practices, much to the detriment of the real communities movement. It's the experience of the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC)—and I agree—that the overwhelming majority of intentional communities are seen as good places to live by their members and good neighbors by the people who live near them.

Tim Miller, Professor of New Religious Movements at the University of Kansas, wrote in the Fall 1995 issue of *COMMUNITIES* that when people call a high-demand community a "cult," they're really saying that they don't like or understand the group's beliefs and practices. Professor Miller and the FIC encourage people not to call intentional communities "cults," which tends to slur all intentional communities, but to just say, "I don't like them," "I don't understand them," or "I strongly disagree with their methods," if that is the case. Describing your dislike and repudiation of such groups this way is more straightforward and more truthful than calling them "cults" and does not slur the communities movement as a whole.

Another source of the use of the word "cult" is the existence of a few high-demand groups which have local reputations for authoritarian leaders who punish community members who question authority or who don't comply—and for "brainwashing" their members and turning them into unthinking zombies (as in a Borg hive!).

What is brainwashing anyway? Does it really exist? Sociological research on this since the 1950s has shown that it literally takes physical confinement, like being a prisoner, combined with painful physical abuse or physical torture to effect brainwashing, as with prisoners of war in Korea. However, both the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion have done research that refutes the idea that high-demand religious or spiritual groups with authoritarian leaders brainwash their members or interfere with their ability to think critically.

But whatever you call such a group, you probably *wouldn't want* to join them. You'd want to have faith that the community you'll join, which seemed benign at first, *remains* benign over time.

### Research the Group's Reputation More Thoroughly

Let's say the websites of communities you're interested looked promising and you enjoyed your visits to each community and found their members warm and engaging.

Or let's say communities you're interested in and have had good visits with have a

shared spiritual or religious practice. Or you're interested in and have visited groups that offer practices to enhance self-awareness and emotional healing, perhaps with one or more therapists as leaders. Or you're drawn to and have visited a subdivision-style community where incoming members buy plots of land and the developer-owner has promised to later build a fabulous community building and other amenities after enough new members have bought plots and built their houses (however, without concrete guarantees that this will happen).

While communities that are abusive or coercive, or those that may trick people into buying land but don't intend to actually create a community, are quite rare, fortunately there *are* ways to get more information about them in advance. You can find out more about a community that seems just great from their website and your visits, as well as those which seemed fine at first, but something about them later gives you a hint of unease. Besides reading everything on a group's website, learning more by email correspondence with them, and extended in-person visits, there are ways you can look more deeply into the group's reputation—information you won't find on their website or in community visits.

### Controversies in the Group's Past

While the community's website may *look* great and its members *seemed* friendly and warm, what if the group has been embroiled in controversy, including, egads, lawsuits by members or neighbors or allegations of criminal activities?

You can find out about this by Googling the name of the community and “allegations,” “abuse,” “coercion,” “criminal charges,” “lawsuit,” or “class-action lawsuit,” and see if any news stories come up. If no such stories can be found, well then, good! But it's worth it to find out.

However, what if, despite the smiling faces on a group's website and no court case for years, still its *iffy* reputation lingers, fueled by the occasions in which formal accusations almost got to court before they were dropped, or by accounts of abuse or coercion by former members?

“The cases were never proven,” or “All charges were dropped against us,” the group's spokesperson might declare to reporters. Court cases can be dropped for many reasons. In one famous incident a state social services agency overstepped its bounds with a large network of communities and violated the group's civil rights. The case was thrown out of court and those particular accusations against that specific community lost credibil-

ity, but allegations against the group kept arising over the years. And as sometimes also happens, community members who report abuse, later withdraw their accusations before their case ever gets to court.

While a group may have been exonerated from various charges, it may nevertheless have a lingering reputation for shady dealings. A group's troubling reputation can follow it around for years, never quite being substantiated but never quite going away either. If this is the case about a community you're interested in, you'd certainly want to know it!

### “Buyer-Beware” Websites about the Same Group

You can also Google the community and see if any *additional* websites about the group pop up—*warning* websites created by former members, or by people raised in the community as children.

The questions on the FAQ page of one large network of communities really got my attention. “Are women subservient to men in our communities?” it read. “Why do our women dress as they do?” “Do we allow our members to get medical help when they need it?” “Are we racist?” “Are we anti-Semitic?” “Do we discipline our children?” (Their answer to this question was, “We beat our children with glass rods when they needed disciplining.”)

I researched this group further online

*You can also check with former members, neighbors, and organizations the community interacts with regularly. You can join your new group feeling peaceful and positive about your community living adventure.*



**What if the group has been embroiled in controversy, including lawsuits by members or neighbors or allegations of criminal activities?**

and not only found past newspaper articles about criminal allegations against them (later dropped), but *four* additional buyer-beware websites about them. These other websites, hosted by outside researchers or former members, posted excerpts from tracts by community leaders, written *not* for the public but for internal member use only; newspaper articles about lawsuits and criminal allegations against the group; and wrenching accounts of community life by former members, including young adults who grew up there. What I read appalled me. Some of the accounts of former members, including from former children in the group, were heartbreaking.

I found more information about another large, famous community. The second website about the group (like the websites about the community noted above) was designed to warn off people who might want to join the community. Reading this website shocked me, as the community was well known and highly regarded internationally. The website showed newspaper articles, in the language of the group's country, about charges of tax evasion and other criminal activities, and allegations by former members of abuse and coercion, including stories by young adults growing up there as children. The website's organizers invited other former members to share their accounts with readers, and offered support and healing for the ex-members in online forms and in-person gatherings.

In addition to looking for websites like these, you can Google research organizations that study groups like these and see if there have been any reports about the communities you're interested in. If not, great! You're still doing your due diligence in the community-seeking process.

## Organizations the Community Interacts with, Neighbors, and Former Members

You can also email the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC), Cohousing Association of the US, GEN-US, Canadian Cohousing Network, Canadian Ecovillage Network, or other community networks and advocacy groups in your country about whether they've received any messages of complaint about a given community, and if so, if they would share those with you. (Please understand that for a variety of privacy and liability reasons, they may not be able to do so, but it does not hurt to ask.)

You can learn more about the group from organizations that advertise work-exchange positions for organic farmers and intentional communities. Organizations such as Organic Volunteers and Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) ask work-exchangers to rate the farms and communities where they lived and worked, and you can view their ratings online. Of course you can also ask anyone you know in the communities movement what reputation the communities you're interested in might have.

When possible, talk with the group's longtime neighbors. Once I lived in a small town in a rural area with a large, well-known community nearby. While the spiritual leader-founder had taken vows of celibacy, he nevertheless had a reputation as a relentless womanizer and also as an authoritarian leader who insisted on getting his way. He was known for this by women who left the group (and later brought a class-action lawsuit) and by the community's immediate neighbors, many of whom were former members themselves.

At one point the leader decided the community should become its own small town, and sought local zoning permission for this. *What* a hue and cry from outraged neighbors! They were concerned the leader's new town would take their property through Eminent Domain and/or make everyone's wells go dry by drilling more wells to create their municipal water system. The leader and the community were shocked by the fierce resistance, as they had no idea of the community's negative local reputation.

"Why do you think the neighbors have said an emphatic 'No!' to the County Planners?" I asked a community spokesperson on my local radio interview show.

"Where there is great light, there is great darkness," she replied piously—still clueless about what happened and why.

If dozens of neighbors have attitudes like this about a community you're interested in, you'll want to know it!

Lastly, you can learn from former community members whenever possible. You can talk with ex-members directly, or read their blog posts or even allegations in local news reports. While I find blogs or news reports by ex-community members fascinating, I know well to take them with a grain—maybe even a whole fistful!—of salt. Disgruntled ex-members, or community members who were asked to leave, can say all *kinds* of untrue and exaggerated things about the place. What are we to believe?

## Your New Community's "Clean Bill of Health"

Regardless of any dropped charges, thrown-out court cases, or tendencies of former members to exaggerate, I personally tend to believe stories like these. Granted, lawsuits can be spurious, newspaper accounts can be sensationalized, and unhappy ex-members can distort. However, with all this smoke, there's probably a fire someplace.

Yet, as an activist in the communities movement for the last 30 years, I know communities like these are rare. The above research methods are suggested if you get a sense something is "off" about a community, or to be extra careful about any community you're interested in so you'll feel assured it has a well-deserved good reputation.

We can have faith in community living—and faith in our own new community—if we choose wisely by researching communities carefully and thoroughly beforehand. 🌿

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*Portions of this article are excerpted with permission from Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community (New Society Publishers, 2007).*

# The Sharp Rocks: The Perils of Individual Ownership in Aspiring “Egalitarian” Communities

By Anonymous

*Note: Some details have been changed to protect identities.*

I stood numbly staring at the email that had popped up on my phone, suddenly unaware of the other shoppers milling about me. The whole dark morass I thought I had left behind in western Washington, all those years of conflict and turmoil, had all come rushing back...preceded by a cheerful little ding from my phone. I was being threatened with a lawsuit for several thousand dollars. Should I even respond to the threat? Should I instead press charges against the people threatening me? This is what my efforts to create community had brought: a gut-wrenching moment of cold sweat in a Hawaiian discount store.

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Let me back way up and then get a running start. Half a lifetime ago, I had spent several years in a Buddhist community in my 20s. It was an incredibly rich period, full of struggle, growth, and friendship. One of the few downsides that I experienced in the community was a power imbalance between renters and owners. Each of our three houses had an individual owner and several renters. Though we said that, in principle, every community member held equal decision-making power, in reality the owners could veto or advance major decisions if they so chose. This happened on a couple occasions and left me, as one of the renters, feeling disoriented and disillusioned. I made a mental note that this sort of arrangement was best to be avoided in a future community.

Almost every other aspect of the community was perfect, though. When I left, I knew that I would eventually find or create something similar. I didn't want another spiritual community—I had gotten what I needed in that regard—but wanted a community that similarly felt like a big family.

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I moved to Olympia in 2009, eager to delve into the progressive scene there. I found exactly what I was looking for. It



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**I had dreamed of home ownership for years.**

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was a nascent urban homesteading community, tucked into a residential neighborhood and less than a block from a bustling thoroughfare lined with shops. The community, dubbed Greenville, was one of those organically-developed affairs, in which neighbors had taken their fences down and turned the middle space into commons. It started as just two houses, but a third house was being built as an add-on in one of the backyards. A little shack had been built behind the other house, with an even tinier shack next to it. The effect was a semi-circle of houses of various size, gathered around large open gardens, a firepit, and a growing collection of fruit trees.

Paths ran between the houses in rambling arcs, layered in woodchips and springy underfoot. When the foliage grew in during summer, the street and surrounding houses would almost completely disappear. Visitors would step off the sidewalk into the network of paths and marvel at their sudden transport to the countryside. Chickens and ducks roamed a large paddock, and beehives buzzed here and there.

When I found it, the community was in early stages of development. Like a child still learning phrases but full of enthusiasm for the business of talking, it showed a lot of promise. Meetings and meals were haphazard and random. Every few days someone would announce that they had cooked a large batch of something, and whoever was in earshot would gather to eat. Periodically, some-

one would announce that we should have a community meeting, and we would converge around the firepit outside if it were nice, or the living room of one of the houses if it were not. There would be no agenda, no designated facilitator, no minutes—just a dozen people talking about whatever was up.

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Then, not long after I moved in, a couple of things changed. The house that was being built was completed, and the original founder of the community moved out. The community entered a new phase. We began having weekly meetings, alternating between “hearts” and “minds.” We set up a regular schedule to share meals, with the cooking and eating rotating between the houses. And we opened a community bank account to purchase bulk staple foods, and supplies or tools for the gardens. Those people who preferred the previous looser structure moved on, and we attracted people who were drawn to a more structured and high-functioning model.

We began to create our own traditions. On Christmas, we would coordinate to cook a giant brunch, everyone bustling around the kitchens of the three houses. We’d gather to eat in the blue house, which had the biggest dining room. Then, we’d don ridiculous costumes from our ample costume closet, and go around the neighborhood singing nontraditional carols. Back home, we’d spend the afternoon playing board games with a pitcher of homemade eggnog. Come suppertime, we’d go out for Chinese to a neighborhood restaurant. After supper, we’d gather in the yellow house, which had the movie projector, and watch a Christmas movie like *Elf* while everyone sprawled sleepily on cushions. We repeated this very pattern every Christmas that I was there. It seemed no one ever wanted to go “home” for Christmas and miss the festivities at Greenville.

And then, something else amazing happened. The founder, who still owned the house I lived in, emailed to ask if I was interested in buying it. Was I? You bet I was! I had dreamed of home ownership for years. There was just one problem: at the time, I had no money.

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I was able to buy the house, finally, after many months of effort and creativity. It was not easy. I do not come from money. I’ve worked hard all my life, as a result of which I had at one point accumulated enough savings for a down payment and closing costs, but I had lost that when trying to help a friend’s startup food business that didn’t do well. I now worked as a manager at a grocery co-op, where my modest salary left nothing over at the end of the month to put in the bank. My salary wouldn’t be enough to qualify for a mortgage, and I would need a co-signer.

I worked with the other residents to find a solution. One of the homeowners, who comes from money, agreed to loan me the down payment, on the agreement that I would find a way to pay it back within a year. One of the other renters in my house agreed to co-sign. The other community members agreed to help with a crowdfunding campaign to help me pay back the down payment loan.

During the many months that these conversations were playing out, the community continued to develop. Our policies and procedures became more refined. The number of committees continued to grow. And our dialogue around the community’s ethos developed. A main topic concerned power and ownership. We all agreed that the current dynamic of renters and owners was not ideal. We had a dream of collective ownership, whereby everyone living in the community would have equal power in the eyes of the law, and equal responsibility for the long-term maintenance of the community and its structures.

Finally, my co-signer and I approached the bank, armed with our combined (meager) salaries and my down payment loan, and put in our application. The bank said yes! We were elated. The whole community celebrated. We set about organizing the

means to pay back my loan. We put together an online crowdfunding campaign and held a few house-party style auctions. Friends and family pitched in, and after a few months we had raised enough that I was able to pay back the whole sum. It felt great to finally own my own home, and to be working toward sharing that ownership with my whole community.



That feeling of elation gradually began to wear off. Part of our agreement in buying the house was that we co-signers would not bear expenses on our own, but would share them amongst the household. At our regular house meeting, I brought a spreadsheet I had prepared to help us organize house expenses. We were going to collectively decide how much “rent” we should all pay each month. I had laid out the monthly mortgage amount, the anticipated maintenance expenses for the foreseeable future (new roof, paint job, refrigerator, etc.) and options for how to meet those expenses. Our house was a century old, well-built in its day but definitely needing a fair bit of care going forward.

I laid out what I saw as three options. The first had us all paying a minimal amount each month, which would cover the mortgage but not build up much of a repair fund. The last would have us paying a maximum amount each month, allowing us to not only cover any anticipated repairs but perhaps do a fun remodel—such as adding a covered patio space. The middle option, and the one I recommended, had us paying just enough each month to build up a reserve for needed repairs but not enough for anything optional.

To my surprise and disappointment, my housemates chose the lowest option. None of them could see the need to pay any more than the minimum to cover the mortgage. The fact that the house would need a new roof in 10 years? Not their problem. They might not still be living there, and even if they were, they wouldn't be building any kind of equity in the house unless they had become owners by then—something that was far from guaranteed.

Other disappointments ensued. The community vetoed paying professionals to do a long-overdue paint job. Instead, we residents ended up doing a sub-par job of it ourselves, all to save a few thousand dollars, or to keep rent from going up \$50 a month. I attempted to get approval to spend \$400 in community funds to build a bike stable to protect our bicycles from the weather and from theft, but one particularly intransigent member kept asking so many questions that required more “research” that the project died after several years of trying to make it happen.

Our power dynamics did not allow me as owner to make this improvement to the property—nor to set what I considered a reasonable rent to maintain the property—because renters had been given equal power to make decisions on home improvements, rents, and virtually everything else. However, I as owner bore the ultimate consequences, both legal and financial, of those decisions. Other homeowners at Greenville had the benefit of either owning a newly-built house with only minor maintenance needed, of being supported by their wealthy family, or, in the case of my co-signer, of having by now moved away. That left me as the sole homeowner who also needed to get consent from renters before taking care of needed maintenance.



By this time, I had been in the community for almost five years. It had taken up more and more of my time as things became increasingly complex, and I was also very involved in activities outside of the community. When the committee formed to study options for collective ownership entities and recommend one to the community, I originally joined it. Recognizing that I needed a break, though, I stepped off the committee, knowing that someone else was staying on who could represent the homeowner perspective. Around this time, one of the other home-

owners announced that she was moving out of the community for a while, also feeling frustrated by our dysfunction and having found the dynamics of power and privilege too stressful.

For my part, I became increasingly aware that we had created an unsustainable power dynamic in the community. We had made the classic mistake of adopting an internal governance structure that didn't match the legal and financial reality. We said that the renters had the same rights and responsibility as the owners, but of course this wasn't true. If someone tripped on the cracked sidewalk out front, they wouldn't sue “the community,” because there was no such legal entity. They would sue whoever owned the house. If all the renters moved out suddenly, “the community” wouldn't have a binding obligation to pay the mortgage that month.

I've actually seen this sort of pattern play out in numerous collectively-run businesses, communities, and activist groups. I think there's a reason for it. The people in those groups do not like top-down, class-based systems of power. They want to move beyond them. But the legal and financial structures of society at large have not yet developed to support more egalitarian power structures in those endeavors. It takes a lot of work to create something that's truly egalitarian. Also, the available options usually involve some kind of equal buy-in from all members, and the finances of aspiring communitarians can vary wildly.

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They simply don't have the money to create the level playing field they desire.

Usually, what's needed is some sort of bridge structure that disperses power but also allows the group to get things done—perhaps some sort of representative governance. The members of the group are so eager to move beyond hierarchical power structures, though, that they don't want to settle for some sort of interim compromise. They therefore try to jump straight to a flat hierarchy by adopting an internal governance that isn't reflected in the external reality. The resulting dissonance can wreak all sorts of havoc.

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I was becoming increasingly concerned that our community was in this same precarious position. I pulled down from the shelf my copy of *Creating a Life Together*, the community-building bible written by Diana Leafe Christian in 2003. I had bought a copy years before and smugly thumbed through it, feeling like I already knew everything there, and put it up on the shelf. Now I read through it closely, trying to find a description of our situation from someone who knew more than I. There it was, right on page 23. A scenario with the kind of power imbalance as ours “isn't community—no matter how badly everyone wants it!” All of the things we associate with “community,” such as consensus, conflict resolution, and the sharing of property, rest upon the fundamental assumption that every full member will hold equal rights and responsibilities. That wasn't true for us, and so the kinds of problems we were

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**The renters were furious. They wanted to know why I had gone behind their backs.**

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experiencing were bound to come up, and would be difficult to resolve.

The collective ownership committee had stalled out. They had been meeting for two years and had brought nothing to the community, save a report that they planned to look more closely at the cooperative model. I realized that the renters had little motivation to change the structure, because, on the balance, it was working for them. We had given them the assumed powers of an owner: the power to choose residents, set rent amounts, and decide how to maintain or alter the property. By contrast, none of them was required to take on any kind of financial or legal risk. None was required to take out a mortgage, borrow funds for a down payment, or assume the liability of having one's name on a deed. Why change that arrangement? In the absence of a collective ownership agreement, the renters would never willingly agree to a scenario in which they had less power.

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I called a meeting of the owners to discuss the possibility of a property-sharing agreement between the four of us. I envisioned some kind of tenancy-in-common. Such an agreement could stipulate that none of us could just put a fence up between houses, or make unilateral decisions about who was allowed to live there.

The other owners were at first receptive to the idea. They agreed that some kind of bridge structure between “individual ownership” and “collective ownership” seemed like a good idea. We laid out some possible structures, timelines, and next steps for moving forward.

Then the renters heard about it. They were furious. They wanted to know why I had gone behind their backs. They felt that I was abusing my power as an owner by calling the other owners together and trying to craft an agreement without the consent of the whole community. I tried to explain the predicament we'd gotten ourselves in: that the story we told ourselves about our governance didn't match the reality. That we were in a precarious position. That we needed to put into place legal protections for the stability of the community. And that those were decisions that, by definition, only the owners could make, because they were the only ones with the real authority to do so—the kind of authority a judge would agree with.

It fell on deaf ears. The renters were so invested in the narrative that they already “owned” the community, by virtue of the agreements we had made, that they couldn't hear anything else. The other owners, seeing the angry reactions of the renters, backed away from the process. I tried to reconvene them, but they said they would just wait to see how the collective ownership process played out instead.

Then, the owner who'd given me the initial loan to buy the house said something that caught me off guard. She told me that when the community agreed to help me raise the funds to repay that loan, there was an implicit agreement that their help would give them a level of control and ownership over the house. I told her I didn't think this was the case, and that I would never have agreed to accept the fundraising help if it meant attaching such strings.

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In retrospect, there was a red-flag moment that should have warned me of what was coming. Midway through the fundraising campaign, I recorded a video update to send out to the people who had already donated. In it, I spoke about the reasons why I wanted to buy the house. Before I posted it, I showed it to other folks to see if it looked all right. They said flat out that I couldn't post it, because it wasn't “me” who was buying the house; it was “the community.” At the time, this seemed like a nitpicky semantic distinction. Yes, I was buying the house with the intention of transferring it to ownership by “the community,” as soon as such an entity emerged. But certainly it was me buying it.

We were headlong into the campaign with just a couple weeks to go, so it didn't



seem like the time to parse this distinction. In retrospect, it would have been precisely the time to stop the presses and have a no-holds-barred discussion of just what it was we were doing. Looking back at the fundraising video, it's now so obvious. Over and over, the people being interviewed talk about "the community" buying the house. This is why people donated. It wasn't so I alone could own the house, but because they loved what we were doing at Greenville and wanted to see it continue. I was aware of this, and had no intention of continuing to own the house on my own—or even with a co-signer.

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**A**s word got back to the renters that I was wanting to exert more of my prerogative as an owner, the conflict intensified. People stopped talking to me. I would receive jabbing emails on our community listserv. I was accused of "holding the house hostage." At one point, a community-wide meeting was called with an outside facilitator. Several former community members also came. The purpose of the meeting was to remind me that the reason why the community had helped raise funds was so that "they" could own the house, not me. In that meeting, I tried to calmly explain the situation as I saw it: that we had set ourselves up for failure by allowing the house to be collectively *managed* when it wasn't yet collectively *owned*.

My daily life had turned into a minor hell. Walking into the kitchen in the morning, instead of a cheerful "good morning!" from my housemates, I would be met with cold silence. Community outings to a nearby pub or movie screening began to exclude me. I developed a permanent knot in my stomach, and an impending feeling of dread. It all felt a bit like a waking nightmare. The hardest part was that I felt like I was just doing what I thought best for the community. I had seen that the way we were going was unsustainable, and was doing what I deemed necessary for our long-term future. But others didn't see it that way, and no amount of explaining on my part seemed to make any difference. They just saw it as me wanting more power.

At one point, a renter in one of the other houses sent an email to the community list. In it, he compared me to Donald Trump. He said that I was acting like a tyrant, and that I was no longer welcome in that house. He said that anyone who felt unsafe around me, because I was acting like a tyrant, was welcome to take refuge in their house.

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**I** realized I needed to try being more diplomatic. I reflected on what it must be like from other people's perspective. It wasn't hard to do. I had been in that position for much of my life. During my six years in the Buddhist community, I had been a renter in a house owned by another member of the community. Many of the same dynamics had been present, and I often resented the power imbalance. During my first few years at Greenville, in fact, I had been a renter, and felt the precariousness of that position. It's not that I couldn't empathize; it's just that I had a perspective that they didn't have, and felt I understood the structural nature of our situation in a way that they hadn't yet grasped.

I emailed back, and said I could understand where he was coming from. At the same time, I said, I thought it was unfair. I said I was struggling with how to hold my power as an owner in this murky situation we had created. I said that I didn't feel like there were any easy answers, but that I was doing my best to try to navigate the conflict. I said I had the well-being of the community in mind, but was trying to balance that with my own well-being. I wasn't willing to just see myself as some "owner on paper" who would let other people do whatever they wanted with his house. My goal had been to own my own house. I was willing to share that ownership, whenever such an option came forth. But in the meantime, I wasn't willing to just roll over and let people take advantage of me.

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I tried to put forth an olive branch, saying I was open to dialogue in whatever creative form it could take. I said it was important to me that other people not feel threatened, and I was willing to look at my behavior to see if there was something I could do differently to put people at ease.

In response, I received a scathing email back from a different renter. In it, he said that I had what was coming to me. He said that I had no choice but to sell the house to someone else there and move out. He threatened that if I didn't, I would experience the full retribution of the community and anyone else they could enlist to make my life hell.

I completely shut down. I realized that dialogue was impossible. And tensions had become so high with one of my own housemates that I realized we couldn't live together. I wasn't about to move out, so I decided I had no choice but to evict her. It wasn't our community's process—normally for anyone to be evicted, it would take a series of community meetings and a consensus decision—but our processes had broken down. I couldn't pursue relational channels to address the situation, and I knew that evicting her was my legal right.

I'd shared my plans with one of the other owners, in confidence, but this proved unwise. She immediately told my plans to the housemate in question, and the community exploded in uproar.

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## Now my former community mates were going around town saying that I'd "swindled" \$50k from Greenville.

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Soon afterwards, a special meeting was called with just one agenda item: to decide whether I should be removed from the community. As I sat in the circle, listening to people discuss the reasons I should be removed—it had to do with what people were calling “micro-transgressions” against our community norms—it all felt very surreal. It had all the trappings of a kangaroo court, as I had no doubt what the outcome would be, regardless of the discussion. I knew that the real reason for the meeting was that I had questioned the narrative. I had exposed the Emperor’s lack of clothes, and called us out for making believe. This was deeply threatening to the group’s sense of its self-imposed identity, as much as that identity might fly in the face of reality.

As the meeting wound to a close, consensus was called for, and a unanimous decision was reached. I should be removed from the community. I felt the absurdity. It was like the passengers deciding that they could fly the plane just fine themselves, thank you very much, and marching up to the cockpit to deliver their news to the pilot. Though I knew the group had no real authority to enforce the decision, I also knew that I would run into major resistance and increasing fury if I tried to fight it.

I realized I was faced with three options. The first was to double down and fight to keep control of the house, striv-

ing for a vision of health and sustainability that I saw for the community and for my place in it. The second was to apologize for my transgressions and beg to be allowed to stay, giving up control of the process and trusting that the group would sort it out. The third choice was to walk away. This meant selling my house, and leaving the community I had spent seven years building. It meant saying goodbye to the place I had called home, the place I had actually lived the longest since moving out of my parents’ house. Moreover, it meant admitting defeat, both for myself and for the community, since it would do nothing to address what I saw as the underlying problem. Yet it was the only option that seemed viable.

It also meant letting go of the safety and security of homeownership. I wasn’t willing to do this lightly. During the three years I had owned the house at Greenville, home prices had nearly doubled in Olympia. If I were going to try to buy a house elsewhere in town, I would have to pay a lot more. And I wouldn’t qualify for another FHA first-time homebuyer loan. I would have to pay 20 percent down and make enough to cover payments on the rest.

After an extensive negotiation process, I sold the house to another community member for \$330k, \$100k more than I’d bought it for but a full \$60k under market value. This meant my co-signer and I would each get \$50k in equity. She was staying on as one of the owners, and so agreed to use her portion of equity to pay all the necessary costs. Yet the \$50k I gained wouldn’t be enough for a down payment on a new house. After six months of failed negotiations with a real estate broker, I gave up on the possibility of owning another home in Olympia.

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I soon discovered that my former community mates had not only coerced me to sell my house under duress, and for less than market value, but now were going around town saying that I’d “swindled” \$50k from Greenville.

I felt deeply depressed. That the people who I considered my family could turn on me so quickly, and with such vitriol. That the happy home I had worked so hard to build could so easily be turned upside down. Worse, I realized I didn’t know who else in our small circles around town saw me as a swindler, a cheat, someone who was “anti-community.”

Everywhere I went, I was reminded of this painful chapter. I realized I needed to leave town. My partner and I made plans to move. We packed up and moved to Hilo, on the Big Island of Hawaii. I wanted to be as far away as I could from Olympia for a while. It was amazing, after the busy-ness of moving had finally died down, to relax on the beach after work, away from the craziness of the last couple of years.

And then, shortly after moving to Hilo and about a year after I left Greenville, I was looking for bargains at a discount store to furnish our little seaside apartment. My phone dinged, and a new email popped up. I glanced at it, and saw it was from my lawyer in Olympia. She said the new owner was threatening to sue me over details of our transaction that he felt hadn’t gone his way.

My jaw dropped. I reeled. Here I thought I had escaped the hardship by selling my house, leaving the community, and moving to an island in the middle of the Pacific. I called my lawyer, who assured me that the new owner didn’t have a leg to stand on. It would be a purely frivolous lawsuit, and I didn’t even need to respond. Moreover, because he was trying to get money from me using threats, I could actually press charges for extortion. This would be on top of a charge for coercing me to sell the house in the first place. Both charges were class C felonies, carrying a full sentence of 10 years in prison. I had good documentation to support my allegations. Did I want to press charges?

I didn’t. I also did, just to prove a point. The point being: you got my house, and everything you wanted—now back off. But that would mean wading back into that morass. I wanted to be done.

I didn’t even respond to the letter. I let it go, and heard no more about it.

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So here it is, four years later, and I've finally had the space to reflect on the whole affair. What to make of it? I know that my story is not unique. I know that many people who have tried to create community have suffered similar fates. By sticking my neck out for the community, I made myself into a vulnerable target. By challenging what I realized to be the false narrative that "we already collectively own it," I had stirred up the hornet's nest.

I can't really blame any of them. I've been in their situation, and have felt the same way they did. I too, have felt the injustice of being in a situation where someone told me I had equal power to them, but then acted in a way that betrayed the falseness of that notion.

I'm aware that this is my story, and mine alone. It's a piece of the truth. Others who were there will have their own versions, which will overlap and diverge from mine. I don't pretend to see an objective version of reality. But I've also done my best to represent events faithfully, and I feel that my piece of the truth is an important one.

I also need to own that my reaction to the basic conflict was frequently not skillful. I was often coming from a place of deep trigger, and am not proud of the way this came across. I could be sharp, dismissive, and arrogant. I often had no patience for the discussion. I too easily fell back on my "power" as an owner, rather than recognizing that we were all in the mess together, and trying to find more diplomatic solutions to it. During my time living there, I was easily frustrated at our inability to get things done as a group, and so would occasionally take unilateral actions that gradually eroded other people's trust in me.

And I have to acknowledge that I helped to create the situation in the first place. As one of the only people with prior community experience when it came time to draw up our agreements, and having been in the same position the renters would soon find themselves in, I should have had the foresight to avoid that same structure.

I should have used my experience in the Buddhist community to suggest that we establish some kind of property-sharing agreement amongst the owners, and a community structure that would recognize different tiers of power and responsibility. For example, renters could have had full authority to arrange meals, meetings, and what was planted in the gardens. Owners, by contrast, would have had the ultimate say on maintenance and improvements, community membership, and any decisions around long-term direction. Of course, this all could change once we had a different legal structure. The idea would have been much easier to implement in the early stages than once the dominant narrative of pseudo-collective-ownership had taken hold.

I didn't do this, though, and so need to take my full share of responsibility for implementing an unsustainable design that in time placed me squarely in the crosshairs.

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I want my story to serve as a warning beacon on the sharp rocks of community disaster. Very often, when I bring up the idea of community to friends or associates who live a much more conventional lifestyle, the response is something like, "Oh, I've heard that community doesn't work. People always just wind up fighting over property rights, or who's going to take care of the place." This is often true. But the reason it's true is that we so often set ourselves up for failure. I also hear people say, "I might want to live in community if it were with the right people." What they don't realize is, even with all the "right people," things can go horribly wrong. I've come to realize that, much more important than the right people is the right structure. I think that any group of people who are reasonably well-adjusted can live together in harmony, given an intelligent and sustainable structure. Without that, the most well-meaning and ideologically aligned group may find itself coming apart at the seams.

I want my story to be a warning then, but not an exhortation to avoid community.

Quite the contrary. For all my struggle and difficulty, I still have faith in community. I believe it's the way we're meant to live. I'd love to see many more people living in community. I myself know that I'll be living that way again when the time is right.

Every time an airplane has crashed, we've learned lessons about air travel. We've learned how to better design the plane, how to fly more skillfully, and how to help people get out of the plane safely after a crash. These days, we do not point to plane crashes and say, "See, we should not be flying." We could be looking at every community disaster the same way. Too many people will hear a story like mine and respond, "See, it's foolish to try to live in community." I'd rather people use stories like mine to figure out how to adopt better thinking and better systems to create stronger and more sustainable communities. I'd rather people take it as a given that we need to be living in community, and simply use every individual failure to create better collective success.

That's what will make the pain and hardship of experiences like mine worthwhile. I crashed, but you don't have to. Just use my story to build a better plane. 🌸

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**Without an intelligent and sustainable structure, even the most well-meaning and ideologically aligned group may find itself coming apart at the seams.**

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# My Life in Co-operatives

By Andrew Moore

I can still quote my family's Co-operative Society membership number from over 50 years ago, 1141585. My mother made all her children learn this number so that we could give it with every purchase we made with our local co-operative store. This routine provided us with a much-needed "DIVI" every Christmas. "DIVI" was short for dividend, an amount the LCS (London Co-operative Society) divided out from its profits every year to all its members in proportion to how much they had spent with the store.

Our "DIVI" number suggests that the co-operative had well over a million members in London.

Although London was the largest city in the world at over eight million people in the 1950s it is likely that half the families were members. I had forgotten how much the co-operative was a part of our lives. When we heard a horse and cart clatter down our road at six in the morning we knew it was the co-op milkman delivering bottles of milk to our doorstep. By mid-day another co-op horse and cart delivered bread, butter, eggs, and potatoes. My mother hearing the commotion in the street would send one of us to stock up with staples, buying "on tick" and remembering to give our number.

If this was not enough, once a month, yet another co-op horse and cart would clatter down the street, this time delivering coal. The coalman would carry enormous sacks on his back from his cart to a hole in our front path and miraculously the contents would appear in our coal cellar which we approached from inside the house. It was a co-operative that kept on giving. My mother kept a bucket and shovel by the front door, and we

were regularly expected to scoop up the horses' droppings and place them around my father's prized roses in our front garden.

Every Christmas my father would take all of us six children to the co-op store in the High Street and cash in our "DIVI" for a huge 20 lb. turkey, an icing-covered Christmas Cake with a snow scene on top, and a Christmas Pudding which we could set on fire with blue flames from Brandy liquor poured over it. We all had great loyalty and affection for the co-op that provided us with essential services so conveniently and then a bonus of "free" Christmas delights.

Twenty years later, still in London, I had qualified as an architect, full of ideas for changing the world but quickly dismayed at the corporate projects I had to work on. I think that it was working with a "starchitect" practice designing a futuristic cigarette factory with very expensive cladding that convinced me that there was a better way to use my skills. With a group of colleagues, I founded an Architects Co-operative focused on finding new ways to design and build affordable housing for a growing proportion of homeless people in the UK. This initiative luckily coincided with a Labour Government in power. A new Minister for Housing, who had been sponsored by the Co-operative Party, was appointed and his first move was to introduce a National Co-operative Housing Program.

The minister called us to his office in Whitehall to tell us that he saw us having a significant role in implementing his policies and getting this movement off the ground. We even assisted with writing the legislation; the 1974 Housing Co-operatives Act and the 1975 Co-operative Finance Act. In my experience

you only get an opportunity like this once in a couple of decades, so we fully embraced it. Our fledgling Architects group, with access to a huge budget, expanded at light speed. Maybe because we had the security of guaranteed work far into the future, we decided not to follow traditional professional ways of working but to experiment.

After a short time where we paid everyone in the office according to classic socialist principles of "if everyone is working to their capacity then they should be paid according to their need," we settled on "equal wages for all." This amazingly worked well for about 10 years largely I think because the practice earned so much money to share out. Our office cleaners thought that we were crazy but never complained at their huge salaries.



I had trained as an architect but found that after 10 years I was spending all my time managing a still fast-expanding office and having to constantly pull in new work to feed the more than 30 architects in our practice. Although everyone loved working in this novel environment, we were getting too big and losing touch with our ideals. We all decided to split the office into three. Each group was given their projects to work on, a large budget, and encouragement to start up again. One group went to East London, another to West London, and the original North London group, of which I was part, let out the empty floors (to other co-operatives) and continued as a small intimate practice again. I am pleased to say that each group continues to thrive as independent architectural co-operatives.

Our co-operative was quite unique in England. It enabled architects to develop new ways of working with their clients, to follow their passions, and to introduce experimental designs. Everyone's devotion to the organisation we realised had a downside. Employees found that they had no life outside the group; many somehow forgot to get married and have children. We introduced a recommendation that you had to take a year off in your seventh year with half pay. If you were still there after 14 years you had to take a year off with full pay, "get a life," and not come back. This is what happened to me. In my second "year off" I married one of my previous clients. She was the chairperson of a housing co-operative I had worked with in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea near Notting Hill. She is Canadian and after our son was born, whisked me off to the other side of the world, to Vancouver Island, where we live now.

Here I worked for Rooftops Canada who specialised in establishing housing co-operatives around the world. I soon found myself in South Africa working in an Informal Settlement of around 20,000 squatters on the outskirts of Johannesburg where they survived under makeshift cardboard and polythene shelters. I was the only white person for miles around and the only male in a thousand-plus Zulu and Xosa women's group called Masisizane Women's Housing Co-operative. After a year of skillful political work enabling us to take over a large portion of land, intensive training on the part of about 50 women in construction techniques, and an offer of government housing subsidies, we started building. The women, building with their own hands, had 14 teams each constructing three houses a month, collectively 500 a year.

Men were encouraged to join the construction teams, but each group had to have a woman leader who attended all our progress meetings and picked up plans for new houses when others were completed. Within two years the original thousand co-op members and their families were housed. The co-operative changed their model to become a building co-operative, negotiated more subsidies, and continued building homes for the rest of community in the settlement. This model, now called PHP (Peoples Housing Process), took off like wildfire across the country.

Back in Canada, I once gave a presentation to MEC (Mountain Equipment Co-operative), a large retail co-operative that is struggling to survive in these times. I had been invited by their membership department as they were desperate to find better

ways to engage with their huge membership—a common problem with large commercially successful co-operatives like Credit Unions. I suggested that they go back to their roots and that each store should be encouraged to become an autonomous worker/consumer co-operative including staff and community members. MEC Headquarters, owned by the stores, could continue to provide support services such as marketing, distribution, and using its huge buying power to provide the highest quality but inexpensive equipment. MEC seems to have gone in an opposite direction and accepted a corporate takeover but if it does not work out maybe there would be a chance to try a "from the ground up" co-operative approach.

My final co-operative experience I hope will be with Co-operative Funeral Services. They are well known for inexpensive but jolly "send offs" to the next world, hopefully a world that is co-operative in nature. If those I have left behind give the funeral services my co-op number, 1141585, they will probably get a "DIVI" which I hope they will spend on a Christmas Pudding doused in Brandy. Setting fire to it they can watch the bright blue flames flicker away in the dark. 🐦

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*Andrew Moore is an architect specialising in community development. Since 2007 he has been employed by T'Sou-ke First Nation working on their reserve in Canada, transforming their visions into reality including building the largest Indigenous solar project in the world. In 2020 he became a regular storyteller for a weekly International Indigenous Zoom Storytelling phenomenon connecting indigenous people across continents, and was also Executive Producer for a Canadian/African Indigenous film co-production which won several awards at the Red Nation International Indigenous Film Festival in Los Angeles.*



*Sibongile leads a team of builders for the Masisizane Women's Housing Co-operative.*

Photos courtesy of Andrew Moore

# Camphill's Evolution

## Camphill and the Future: Spirituality and Disability in an Evolving Communal Movement

By *Dan McKanan*

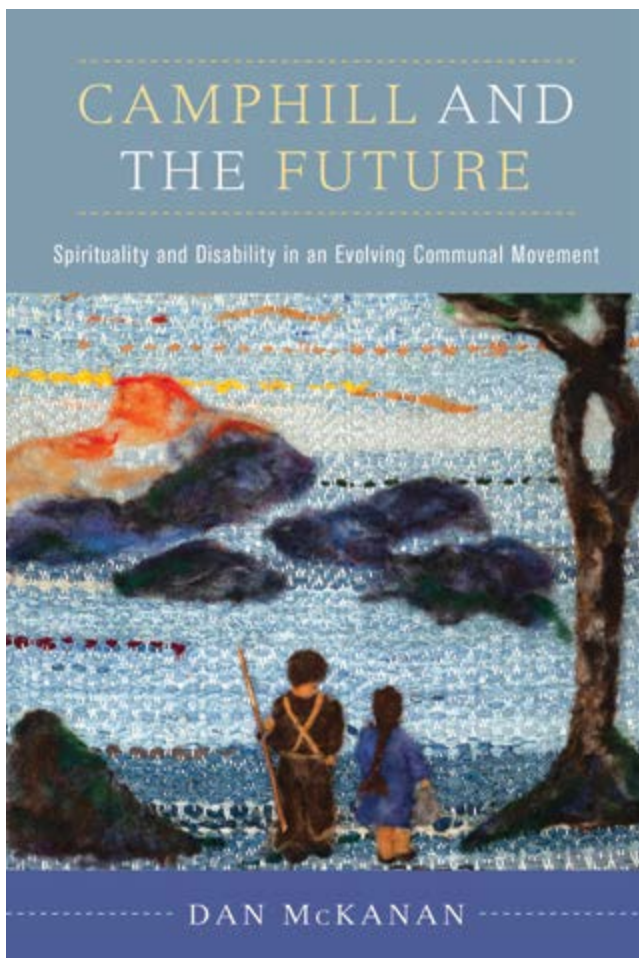
University of California Press, 2020, 250 pages. Available for download or purchase at [www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520344082/camphill-and-the-future](http://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520344082/camphill-and-the-future).

Dan McKanan, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Universalist Association Senior Lecturer in Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School, has provided a picture of the Camphill worldwide movement today; a kind of inventory of stock and status, and some ideas about where the movement is headed four generations after it was conceived in the late 1930s. While his approach stresses perspectives from

the worlds of intentional communities and disability caregiving, he also carefully traces the origins of the movement to the ideas of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, whose range of thought and activity early in the 20th century gave rise to initiatives in education (Waldorf or Steiner schools), agriculture (biodynamics), medicine, architecture, the arts, and, important to McKanan's assessments, curative education and economics: all under the umbrella of Steiner's "spiritual science" called Anthroposophy.

Camphill, dedicated to the care of the disabled and mentally ill, was established in Scotland after its primary founders, Karl and Tilla König, fled from Vienna following Hitler's expansion into Austria in the late 1930s. Karl König, a young medical doctor who became an Anthroposophist in 1925, was inspired by Steiner's experience with a young man with hydrocephalus who thrived under his tutelage and who eventually, himself, became a medical doctor. After rejecting a postdoctoral appointment because he had been asked to keep his association with Anthroposophy "private," König accepted a position at the Arlesheim, Switzerland clinic of Ita Wegman, a pioneer in Anthroposophical medicine.

There, he attended an Advent Garden Festival in which he witnessed his first Advent Spiral, now a ubiquitous December event in Waldorf schools throughout the world. In the Advent Spiral, young children, one-by-one, follow a spiral path defined by evergreen cuttings, in order to light a small candle from a larger one burning at the center atop a mound of green moss. In turn, the children place their lighted candles at places of their own choosing along the path, ultimately creating an illuminated spiral of great beauty. Very moved by the experience, König recalled later, "This was my future task! To awaken in each one of these children their



own spirit light which would lead them to their humanity.”

Steiner’s curative approach, based on “love and observation,” rejected the idea that those with disabilities and mental illnesses should be segregated from normal society. His observations about such people, their spiritual natures, karma, and destinies, underlay his thinking. The Königs, along with a group of young physicians, artists, and caregivers, settled at the Camphill Estate, in the Milltimber area of Aberdeen, and went about establishing a community in which everyone participated according to their abilities. The “disabled,” as full members of the community, were not distinguished from anyone else.

McKanan quotes König describing in 1956 the “three great errors” of modern civilization. König identified the first of these as the belief that Man created God rather than the other way around. This, he said, had led humans to “chain nature with the fetters of modern technical inventions” including “the destructive power of electrical and atomic energy.” “A second error,” writes McKanan, “was the notion of the survival of the fittest, which König saw as the source of twentieth-century tyranny, even to the point that he affirmed, ‘Where Darwin started, Hitler and Stalin continued.’” Third, König regretted the invention in the 19th-century of the intelligence test and “the most ridiculous specialization and segregation” in schooling. Adds McKanan, “Though König lacked the terminology of the twenty-first-century disability rights movement, these errors constituted his diagnosis of the roots of a disabling society.”

McKanan’s consideration of the Camphill movement today started with his personal experience as a young professor looking for a research topic at Camphill Village Minnesota in 1999. Since then, he has visited many sites in Scotland, Ireland, England, Canada, Norway, and the United States, and interviewed scores of community members with varying perspectives on their own communities and the status of the overall movement. His focus in *Camphill and the Future* is to capture today’s thinking with regard to concepts

of community, the care of the disabled, and the economic and organizational structures of individual Camphill sites that by now reflect contemporary lifestyles, spiritual paths, cooperative housing options, and economic realities far different from those in 1939.

The book covers the origins of the movement, particularly its roots in Anthroposophy, and the fundamentals of “lifesharing” and “income sharing.” McKanan explores the generational evolution from the founders, through the “baby boomers,” “Generation Xers,” and “millennials,” tracing the ways they have responded to, and altered, how Camphills operate, especially with regard to the personal commitments of coworkers and employees over the long term, maintaining a livelihood, and living in community.

In a series of 24 lectures delivered under the title “World Economy” in 1924, a year before his death, Steiner expanded on his “Three-Fold” philosophy and suggested that one’s daily work should be given freely and not be connected to compensation, thus creating a model for “lifesharing” and “income sharing” as basic tenets of the original Camphill movement. König, in 1945, penned a definitive statement as to how these principles would be realized through the efforts of “All who work in the Camphill Rudolf Steiner Schools in such a way that they do not claim payment in the usual sense, but: Who do their work out of love for the children, the sick, the suffering, out of love for the soil, the gardens and fields, the woods and everything which is in the realm of the community—Who wish to do the work of their hands out of devotion to the Christ-Being who has reappeared in the ether sphere of the earth—All who are thus willing to act for the true progress of mankind and who are consequently prepared to sacrifice their self-willing to the Spirit-willing.”

The ideals expressed by König gave shape to the economic model shared by early Camphill villagers. Organizational income included then, and continues to include, that which is paid by families who send children there, donations, and the income created by the enterprises developed by the organization, such as farms, bakeries, craft shops, workshops, etc. Revenue from these things has been traditionally shared and not distributed according to job description, level of skill, length of experience, or any other criteria normally associated with work compensation. Rather, it was shared with the simple promise that one’s basic needs would be supplied as long as they remained a villager.

As McKanan traces the evolution of Camphill from 1939 to the present, he notes and analyzes the changes that have been necessary in order to adequately staff and populate Camphill homes. Lifesharing and income-sharing villagers, while still present, have been joined by paid employees who work for compensation commensurate with their abilities and experience and often live off-site. In addition, many if not most of those who work among the villagers have little to no particular interest in or experience with Anthroposophy and that interest/experience is no longer universally required of coworkers or employees. McKanan wonders what effect these changes will have on the future of Camphill; if the separation from Anthroposophical understanding of the spiritual nature of “the human being” and the convention of working for money, rather than working out of love and commitment, will either derail or make unrecognizable the Camphill of König’s conception.

Regarding the effect on future leadership, he writes, “For Gen Xers and millennials, there are significant numbers of people who are deeply invested in lifesharing and income sharing, but uninterested in Anthroposophy. The consequence is a two-fold stepping back. People without a personal connection to Anthroposophy may hesitate to take on leadership (especially beyond their local community) because they sense that Camphill’s thriving depends on its connection to Anthroposophy; meanwhile, people who do have a personal connection to Anthroposophy hesitate because they are conscious of their minority status.” Speculating on the future of the movement, McKanan wonders if it has reached an existential crisis. “Can Camphill truly understand itself as an intentional community if most of the people who inhabit Camphill places during the day do not actually live there? Can Camphill claim to be an alterna-

tive to the institutions that once housed persons with intellectual disabilities, if the people providing care and support do so for the sake of a paycheck? And can Camphill claim to be a community rooted in the ideals of Anthroposophy if it violates Steiner's admonition that work be separated from income?"

As McKanan ponders the viability of Camphill in the 21st century, he considers the linkages the movement has to sister initiatives in the Anthroposophical universe, including biodynamic agriculture, especially in its two roles as 1) harbinger of the contemporary organic agriculture and environmental movements, and 2) a model of healing and renewal. He writes, "None of the Camphill founders were biodynamic farmers, but all were interested in farming as a healing practice and a source of symbolic correspondences that might illumine their own therapeutic work. It is also no accident that the collected writings of Karl König include an entire volume devoted to 'social farming' and another to animals."

Here, McKanan refers to Botton Village, founded in 1955 in North Yorkshire, England to provide a home for disabled adults, and the view there that it would not be appropriate to identify its purpose to be, solely, the care of the disabled. That, says McKanan, "would undermine their dignity as adults with their own vocations of work and service. Botton, with extensive lands that include five biodynamic farms, now provides opportunities for some 230

people, around 100 with learning disabilities, to, according to one of the founders, 'take their place in a community' where they 'can participate in mankind's responsibility towards the earth.' König himself saw gardening, farming, and work in nature as essential and hoped to eventually attract "tradesmen, artists and craftsmen" to the villages, and to "guide parents in such a way that their children may become people who, out of a civilization in decline, are able to be the seed-bearers of a new culture."

McKanan concludes his very thorough account of the history and development of the Camphill movement with three specific examples of current challenges seen in different countries: Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the United States, McKanan points to current dialogue around the ominous-sounding "Final Rule" for "Home and Community Based Services" that was issued by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in 2014. It distinguishes between services provided "in the community" as opposed to "in an institution," thus determining eligibility for Medicare funding. The "Final Rule," writes McKanan, "requires any program receiving funds for services in the community to guarantee participants' integration into the larger community, choice among a variety of settings, individual rights, and as much personal autonomy as possible. But it also contains a passage that describes what "in the community" is not, and this passage reads as if it were designed specifically to exclude programs like Camphill. "Farmsteads or disability-specific farm communities," "gated/secured community for people with disabilities," "residential schools," and "multiple settings co-located and operationally related" are all described as "typically having the effect of isolating people from the broader community," and thus, ineligible for funding. Camphill advocates have responded, claiming people with disabilities have the right to "to live, work and thrive in a community or setting of their own choice." This is a position, McKanan insists, with which it is difficult to disagree.

"The future of Camphill is uncertain," concludes McKanan, having presented us with an array of challenges ranging from the social and philosophical to the financial, but, he says, "It is possible that by 2039 (Camphill's 100th anniversary) Camphill will have decisively reaffirmed its communal identity by creating new organizational structures that empower people of all abilities to choose cooperation over self-sufficiency, sharing over private wealth, and spirituality over bureaucracy." 🌿

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*A member of the Anthroposophical Society in America, Rick Mitchell has spent 35 years as a Board member of three Waldorf schools, including the Waldorf School of Princeton (New Jersey), the Waldorf Association of Greater Kansas City, and the Waldorf Association of Lawrence/Prairie Moon Waldorf School (Kansas). He is also a longtime member/collaborator with the Association of Waldorf Schools in North America.*



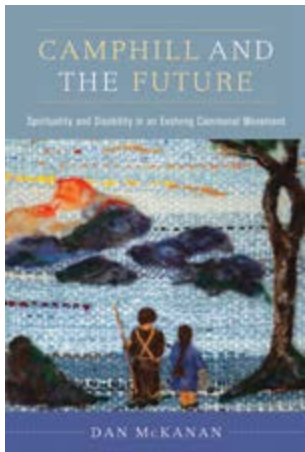
Photo courtesy of camphill.org





Photos courtesy of camphill.org

# Camphill and the Future: Another Look



## Camphill and the Future: Spirituality and Disability in an Evolving Communal Movement

By *Dan McKanan*

University of California Press, 2020, 250 pages. Available for download or purchase at [www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520344082/camphill-and-the-future](http://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520344082/camphill-and-the-future).

**D**an McKanan's new book, *Camphill and the Future*, is an in-depth look at the history of Camphill communities, intentional communities centered around providing education and employment for people with disabilities. The communities are spread throughout Europe and the US as schools, rural residential communities, and urban workshops. Camphill was started by Karl König, who followed an esoteric, vaguely Christian philosophy called Anthroposophy that also inspired Waldorf schools.

As part of writing this review, I attended Camphill's online research conference in November 2020 and spoke with Dan personally. Last year I spent a few days at Camphill Village USA in Copake, New York, during the International Communal Studies Association Conference. I stayed in a house with residents of the village and visited two other Camphill sites during the conference. As a woman with disabilities, parent of a child with autism, and educator at a school for children with disabilities, I was deeply interested in the experience of those with disabilities

at Camphill. We are a long way from the mental hospitals of the 20th century, and intentional communities are a unique way to "mainstream" people with disabilities into the world. Dan takes an honest look at Camphill's approach, pointing out the successes as well as areas that could be improved.

As a religious studies scholar, Dan describes Anthroposophy in detail to help us understand the spiritual life of Camphill communities. He respectfully details the way Anthroposophy influences farming practices, medicine, and engagement with the outside world, but it appeared to me that Anthroposophy is not in step with modern science. The villagers, as they call the people with disabilities, are often the most devoted to the rituals connected to Anthroposophy—for example, attending weekly church services. The coworkers, the people who support the villagers, are now largely short-term visitors or paid employees, so they don't necessarily engage with Anthroposophy the same way that earlier generations of coworkers did. The inner community of people who devote time to studying and discussing Anthroposophy is

smaller and at some Camphills no longer exists.

Dan also gives a good analysis of how generational differences influence the growth and decline of the movement. The first Camphills were founded by Austrian refugees from World War I who wanted to recreate a rich cultural and spiritual life in Scotland. Generations that followed were more affluent and willing to try new things, which led to growth in the number of communities. The majority of the leadership now are baby boomers who struggle to compete with modern social care agencies that emphasize freedom of choice and interaction with the wider community. Parents of children with disabilities have more community-based options, and children with less profound disabilities don't need to be sent away to get the support they need. Gen Xers and millennials are less attracted to life at Camphill as long-term coworkers because they are philosophically different from baby boomers and less likely to make a lifelong commitment to one community. Dan uses Heartbeet Lifesharing as an example of a diverse community led by young adults that successfully integrates Anthroposophy and modern life in a way that is attractive to young people.

All intentional communities are built with a vision. König believed that creating an open space for work and spiritual reflection would give people the freedom they needed to meet their potential. In reality, Camphill communities can be restrictive in their work and living conditions. Originally all the communities were income-sharing and required coworkers to live on site, but many communities have moved to paying salaries and allowing coworkers to live nearby. Most of the communities are on large, rural farms, though some are located in small towns and engaged with the larger community. The work that villagers and coworkers do mostly involves traditional arts like woodworking and weaving along with biodynamic farming.

Many people would willingly choose a more traditional rural life for the sake of community, but at Camphill its largest constituency isn't the one making that choice. Can an intentional community be intentional if people are placed there by the government or their parents? Once they're placed, long-term coworkers, not the people with disabilities themselves, make decisions about housing, meals, and support workers. Instead of full-fledged jobs with complete responsibilities, the villagers rotate through jobs such as digging holes, cutting wood, or stocking shelves. Two of

the people with disabilities described in the book had roles as "assistant" and "deputy" based on their interest in "real" work performed by non-disabled people. Dan told me of the rare instance where people with disabilities managed a workshop, but that is usually done by coworkers. The coworkers also speak for them when it comes to community life and reporting to government agencies. It was not clear that there was a process for villagers to express concerns and leave if they wanted to. (Dan described a process where coworkers could receive some "leaving money" upon departure; if there were a similar process for villagers I believe he would have mentioned it.)

In this way, Camphill is both a model for radical inclusivity and, I believe, an outdated and potentially harmful environment for people with disabilities. Dan revealed these views, which in my experience are harmful, in direct quotes from the coworkers. One said, "Normal people have problems to see (sic) other people. The guys with learning disabilities, at the moment they see you, they know how you are....They don't want you hiding yourself." Another said, "Maybe they are handicapped, maybe they don't talk so well or walk so well, maybe they need a lot of help, but what can I learn? What do they teach me about the joy of life, about being present...?"

To me, their comments portray people with disabilities as magical beings with a special insight into the world instead of humans who want to interact with the world in all its complexities and difficulties. By viewing them as either less than or more than human, coworkers ignore their very human desires and requests. In the book, Dan talked about the dismay coworkers expressed when villagers chose to buy a TV to furnish a new recreation room. Coworkers were similarly resistant to government requests to provide more choices—for instance, at meal times. It's true the people with disabilities have meaningful work and healthy relationships at Camphill, but, without agency, they are just at another form of an institution—"pleasant asylums," as one interviewee called it.

A movement that started as a revolutionary way to care for people with disabilities should be more open to input from the largest segment of its community. Dan mainly interviewed coworkers, so his book may not have had a clear perspective from children and adults with disabilities. None of the previous histories of Camphill records their voices either. People with disabili-





ties were more visible at the online conference, but very little time was taken to let them express their thoughts.

I found it significant that I rarely interacted with people with disabilities while I was at Camphill Copake. I met the ones who lived in the house I stayed in, but no one at the house invited us to sit and chat (due to my own difficulties with social communication, I may have missed signals of their openness to do so). We spent hours in the coffee shop waiting for vans and dinner, but the only people I conversed with were other conference goers and our extremely busy host. We went to other buildings only when escorted by coworkers as part of a tour or conference activity. It's possible that, like many communities, they wanted to avoid disrupting community life during the conference, but I was struck by the absence of the group of people that the community was supposedly centered around.

(The Editor informs me that his experience in the house he stayed at was quite different from mine—he felt included and welcome, and he also interacted with other villagers before, during, and after the conference. He also noted villagers' participation in some of the panels he attended, and felt it significant. This was not, however, my own experience of the place.)

I work at Gastonia Freedom School, an Agile Learning Center for children with disabilities. Our children have intellectual and developmental disabilities. Some don't have spoken language, some can't tie their shoes, and most of them will never live on their own as adults. And yet we give them the freedom to determine how to spend 90 percent of their day. Do they ever choose deeply engaging and thoughtful activities? Not often. More often, they watch silly videos on YouTube, make art projects of dubious merit, and stalk up and down the hallway. We provide them a safe space to be themselves, but we also prepare them to live as independently as they can as adults. No matter how they communicate, we can listen to what they want to achieve and help them get there.

If we can do this with children and teenagers, Camphill can do it with their residents.

Dan describes how the modern disability rights movement has challenged Camphill communities to do more to empower its residents, and it is clear that some communities are moving in that direction on the local level. The Mount Cohousing, a new cohousing community that is part of an established Camphill, allows residents with disabilities to decide where they want to

live and to co-chair community meetings. Another community has created a form of income sharing not just among the coworkers, but among everyone who is a part of the community. However, there is no agreement that people with disabilities should serve as leaders within the larger movement. In the book and at the conference, the coworkers expressed doubt that the villagers want or care to engage. It would require significant effort to help those who don't use verbal communication or with cognitive disabilities to take on leadership responsibilities, but Camphill coworkers clearly have the experience to support this work if they believed it important.

Dan has great insights about the Camphill movement in particular, but the book is also helpful for other intentional communities. He discusses how communities led by charismatic leaders can successfully transition leadership to a new generation, how cooperation with government authorities can help a community thrive, and how private ownership models like cohousing can be adapted in ways that are still supportive of what Camphill calls "lifesharing."

The clearest insight for me was how the needs of previous generations of communitarians are not the same for younger generations. Communities that continue to operate on an isolationist model of moral superiority are not going to grow as fast as communities that recognize the interrelatedness of the entire world and focus on inclusion of all forms of diversity. Camphill has elements of both types, and its leaders are keenly aware of their need to evolve to survive in the 21st century.

Intentional communities could be a shining example of how people with disabilities can live their lives to the fullest among people who view them as human and not charity cases. A close-knit, cooperative community is an ideal environment for everyone to lead in their strengths while being supported in their weaknesses. As König said but may have not perfectly practiced, "You are grown-up people trying to make your living together, somehow, because none of you can make your living individually." I look forward to seeing how Camphill's future unfolds. 🐾

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*Crystal Byrd Farmer speaks and writes about ways communities can be more welcoming to people of all kinds of backgrounds. She serves as a board member with the Foundation for Intentional Communities and on the Editorial Review Board for COMMUNITIES. Her book The Token: Common Sense Ideas for Increasing Diversity in Your Organization is out now (see excerpts in COMMUNITIES #188).*

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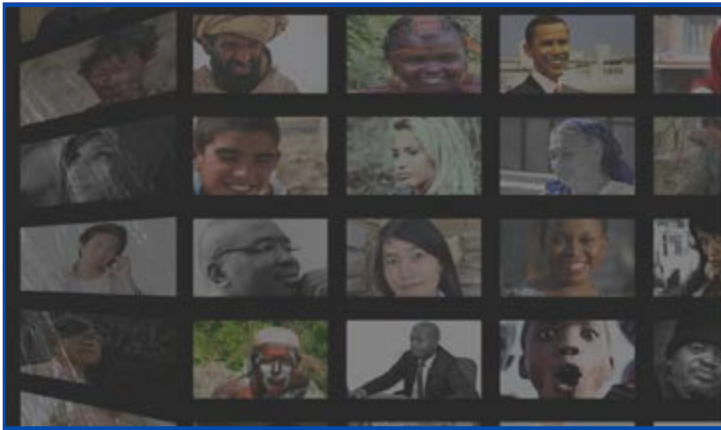
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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA-CENTER FOR COMMUNAL STUDIES (CCS) - The Center for Communal Studies (CCS) was created in 1976 as a clearinghouse for information and as a research resource on communal groups worldwide, past and present. Located on the campus of the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, the Center encourages scholarship, meetings, public understanding and learning about historic and contemporary intentional communities.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH COLLECTION: We invite researchers to use the Center's Collection of primary and secondary materials on more than 500 historic and contemporary communes. Our Collection is housed at Rice Library and has over 10,000 images and a reading room with an extensive library. Online resources may be found at [www.usi.edu/library/university-archives-and-special-collections](http://www.usi.edu/library/university-archives-and-special-collections). Email the archivist at [jagreene@usi.edu](mailto:jagreene@usi.edu) for information.

REGIONAL RESEARCH: The CCS is part of a rich array of historic communal resources within a 30-mile radius of Evansville that includes the famous Harmonist and Owenite village of New Harmony. New Harmony's Workingmen's Institute Library and the State Museum collection also offer unique research opportunities.

PROGRAMS: The CCS sponsors lectures, conferences and exhibits. The Center sponsors a minor in Communal Studies at USI.

WEBSITE: The CCS website ([www.usi.edu/liberal-arts/communal-center](http://www.usi.edu/liberal-arts/communal-center)) serves scholars, students and the interested public.

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tentional communities, and utopias. Deadline for submission is 1 March. The Center also annually awards a \$2,000 Research Travel Grant to fund research in the Communal Studies Collection. Applications are due by 1 March.

LOCATION AND CONTACT: CCS is located in Room 3022 of Rice Library at the University of Southern Indiana. Evansville has a regional airport with jet service from Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas and elsewhere. You may contact the Center by phone 812/465-1656 or email director Casey Harison at [charison@usi.edu](mailto:charison@usi.edu).

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

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# SPECIAL DIGITAL SUPPLEMENT



SPECIAL DIGITAL SUPPLEMENT • FAITH IN COMMUNITY

## COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture  
Spring 2021 • Issue #190 • Supplement  
[gen-us.net/190.1](http://gen-us.net/190.1)

The Queen, the Gardener, and Me  
Community Events: The “We” of “Me”  
Life Project 4 Youth  
College-Based Senior Cohousing

**Note from the Editor:** To accompany our Faith in Community print edition of COMMUNITIES, we've created this separate digital supplement containing four articles, available free to anyone for online viewing and/or download and printing. These articles are less theme-specific than the rest of the issue's articles. We welcome new readers who may be seeing only this digital supplement and hope you'll seek out the main issue (available in both print and digital versions) and consider subscribing at [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities). Thank you!

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### The Queen, the Gardener, and Me: Reflections on Community-Forming Processes

By Elizabeth Stone



**A**fter the evening of community-building activities, I felt a sense of... The Queen, the Gardener, and Me... This was a time of... I had been told that... I had been told that... I had been told that...

### Community Events: The “We” of “Me”

By Greg Stevens



**W**hen I think of community, I think of... Community events... This was a time of... I had been told that... I had been told that...

### Cultivating Community in the Neighborhood: Life Project 4 Youth

By Camille Dine



**H**ow do we cultivate community in the neighborhood?... Cultivating community in the neighborhood... This was a time of... I had been told that... I had been told that...

### College-Based Senior Cohousing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come



**Y**ou've heard about cohousing, but what about college-based senior cohousing?... College-based senior cohousing... This was a time of... I had been told that... I had been told that...

## TESTING THE FAITH

(continued from p. 68)

worst fears and impulses. In our attempts to address perceived threats to our well-being and find some kind of mutual reassurance, we can create a stampede. We can form amongst ourselves a shared story that does not reflect reality but which we reinforce to one another and ourselves through the “echo chamber” effect.

We each get positive feedback for contributing to that story; we each find ways to buy into it and buttress it. It offers certainty rather than uncertainty. We once again have a sense of control, of knowing what to do; and even better, we are part of a group that has pulled together to “solve” a problem. We belong. Unfortunately, our sense of belonging may come at the expense of the fundamental rights of others and even of values we ourselves hold dear, when not swept up in the temptation of “group think.”

• • •

I recently to my shame participated in such a process. I was part of a small group within my community holding major decision-making responsibility on fundamental questions at an organizational level. Another small group within the community, whose purview was con-

flict resolution and well-being, asked to meet with us in “executive session” (reserved for delicate personnel/legal issues) to discuss an urgent matter. This group’s internal meetings were always confidential because they were intended to create a safe space for people to bring their concerns, complaints, conflicts, without needing to involve the whole community.

This group told us they wanted our support in acting on concerns they had about an extended visitor who was preparing to apply for residency. They wanted to interrupt this process and require this person’s immediate departure because of communications they’d received from another individual who’d spent time in the community. This second individual had insisted on anonymity, did not want to be identified to the first individual or to the community, and only reluctantly agreed to be identified within our small groups. The details of this person’s concerns/complaints were also not to be shared with anyone else.

The group told us their desired outcome before telling us any particulars of the situation. The individual being accused was talked about in ominous tones. The matter was very “heavy” and this other small group was obviously quite burdened by it—it had absorbed much of their energy and time recently, though they had needed to switch focus for a number of weeks to address an episode of sexual assault (also involving extended visitors) whose eventual processing within the larger community had been, by contrast, very open and transparent.

This newly revealed episode was apparently even heavier than that one, but its processing needed to be the opposite to that one. Because of requests made by the person expressing concerns, we could not approach the accused about the “allegations”; we simply needed to tell them they needed to leave. We could tell the community only that serious concerns had been raised about this individual involving the violation of personal and sexual boundaries, and that the group had consulted a sexual assault expert, who had recommended this course.

• • •

While I tended to trust the members of this other small group, the “information” then presented to us raised major questions in me. It turns out that the small group had not actually been approached with the main complaints precipitating their action. Instead, those complaints had found their way into long emails exchanged over the course of many months with one of the group’s members, who moreover had shared some “sexual interest/energy” with this correspondent (something the group revealed to us at the end of their report to us, though they said it didn’t affect their deliberations), and who had brought them to the rest of the group’s attention. Sexual interest/energy had also underlain some of the uncomfortable interactions between the person complaining and the person complained about, which had taken course over much time spent together both at and outside of the community over several months, as described in these emails.

Most alarming within the set of email excerpts presented to us, the person com-



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**To some, it seemed the “accused” was already guilty, probably could not be trusted to answer truthfully if approached with the accusations, and might exact retribution on the accuser if anything was revealed.**

---

plaining had included in one message some wonderings/insinuations/fears about a worst-case scenario of boundary violation, involving a third party, which, however, they omitted in a subsequent revision of that same email. This passage seemed to draw more attention than anything else written, although it was based on conjecture, not repeated in subsequent emails, and what was observed could have had many explanations other than the probably unverifiable worst-case scenario suggested as a possibility within the retracted passage.

Nothing reported in those emails as definitely happening approached the severity of the sexual assault episode this other small group had just addressed in very public forums. In that case, all individuals involved had taken responsibility for sharing their stories—and the perpetrator had taken responsibility for the harm done, which seemed to have come from a blindness to the other’s boundaries rather than from a deliberate intent to harm. That individual had left the property and committed to a process of education about consent, boundaries, and un-learning privilege.

In this current case, trauma seemed to play a large role in the life of the person whose reports the recommendation to evict was based on. This had been evident from the person’s first arrival at the community. For many months, this individual had not felt safe coming to any community meetings to talk about themselves, despite our usual expectations/requirements for timely interviews and greater transparency. Other mitigating factors had led to an extended stay in the community nevertheless. My main experience of the person complaining had been of someone who projected fears that were not based in the objective reality of a present situation (I could imagine few safer containers than ours in which to share about oneself)—and who moreover in most circumstances did not find it possible to easily communicate their own reality with others.

The descriptions in the emails of uncomfortable interactions and of possible boundary-crossings all seemed to involve this difficulty in speaking the truth—a pattern of not being transparent with actual feelings much or most of the time, and moreover of having all of one’s experiences and perceptions possibly colored by the trauma of past situations, a trauma that seemed to replay itself in response to present situations even if these present ones were inherently safe.

• • •

**T**he “evidence” upon which to base an immediate departure notice did not seem sound to me, and I said so in our joint-group meeting. Yet I received pushback. This other small group was certain of their conclusions, and the small group of which I was a part also included members who understood how past trauma can lead to present victimization by others (not just projection of that trauma into the present); some members of our group could easily “imagine the worst” as well. To some of them, it seemed the “accused” was already guilty, probably could not be trusted to answer truthfully if approached with the accusations (something that the accuser had asked us not to do anyway), and might exact retribution on the accuser if anything was revealed.

I believed in transparency and due process, yet strong arguments were being made against them. I allowed myself to be persuaded. I also knew that if I, having seen the “evidence,” had trouble believing in the necessity for immediate eviction, then the wider community would likely be equally skeptical if not openly rebellious against this decision being made behind closed doors about someone who seemed generally well-liked. I said the case needed to be made sounder in order to “fly” in the larger group.

It turned out that another person had also very recently reported some boundary-crossing/unwanted sexual attention from this individual. This sounded damning, but I also knew from my previous participation in that small group that this second complainant had been the object of multiple complaints submitted to us about *them*, for this same thing: perceived sexual boundary-crossing. In those cases, which involved

members of a range of gender identities, we had taken a very different approach. We had engaged in our normal processes: mediation, transparent communication among the parties involved, helping the individual understand the impact of their actions and assumptions. In this new case, however, this same individual apparently did not want to be identified or talk about it with the person they were now complaining about.

A member of our own small group then volunteered that they had felt uncomfortable in some interactions with the same person. And the other small group reported having just received another message from someone about feeling uncomfortable in interactions with that person as well, though we did not hear any further details.

Moreover, the exact status of the extended visitor’s arrangements to stay on site was not clear, nor did anyone know if they’d received permission to bring their additional personal property onto the land. (It was also not clear that some of our community guidelines had ever been communicated to this person, as these events unfolded during a period of general upheaval, multiple statewide disaster declarations, and frequent staff turnover

## TESTING THE FAITH

(continued from p. 65)

in key areas affecting the experience of visitors—but at this point this didn't seem to matter.)

We added all of these elements to the “case” to be presented through an emailed letter to the community to justify this person’s “no-questions-asked” 24-hour need-to-depart notice (not technically an eviction, because no lease had been signed) combined with a “red flag,” an ongoing ban from the property after all personal effects had been gathered.

I was part of crafting this strategy and this letter. I was fully complicit in allowing a narrative to unfold in which it appeared that the person “accused” was likely guilty of serious, conscious violations of other people, and therefore posed such an imminent danger to the community that they needed to leave immediately. (Or at least they needed to leave immediately upon being told of the decision, which, once made, had taken nearly a week to actually communicate to the accused. It appeared that the insistence on immediate departure at that point was mostly to minimize the opportunity to stir up dissension on the way out.)

• • •

**I**t took me a while to come to my senses. Once informed and “shown the door,” the newly displaced individual sent an email to the community expressing shock and disappointment (they’d made many contributions within the community, were indeed aware of a couple uncomfortable relationship-attempts on their part and wanted to learn from them, had operated according to answers they’d received from various, named community members about group protocols related to visiting arrangements and personal property, and could not understand why they were not ever asked their side of the story about any of the accusations against them).

I thought about what I knew of our process and reflected on it further. I was not able to attend the subsequent forum in which community members shared their feelings about what had happened. But I did submit a letter to that forum. Here is some of what I wrote:

“I think everyone involved in the process was well-intentioned, and that the values they were intending to uphold (safety, freedom from danger, especially from sexual

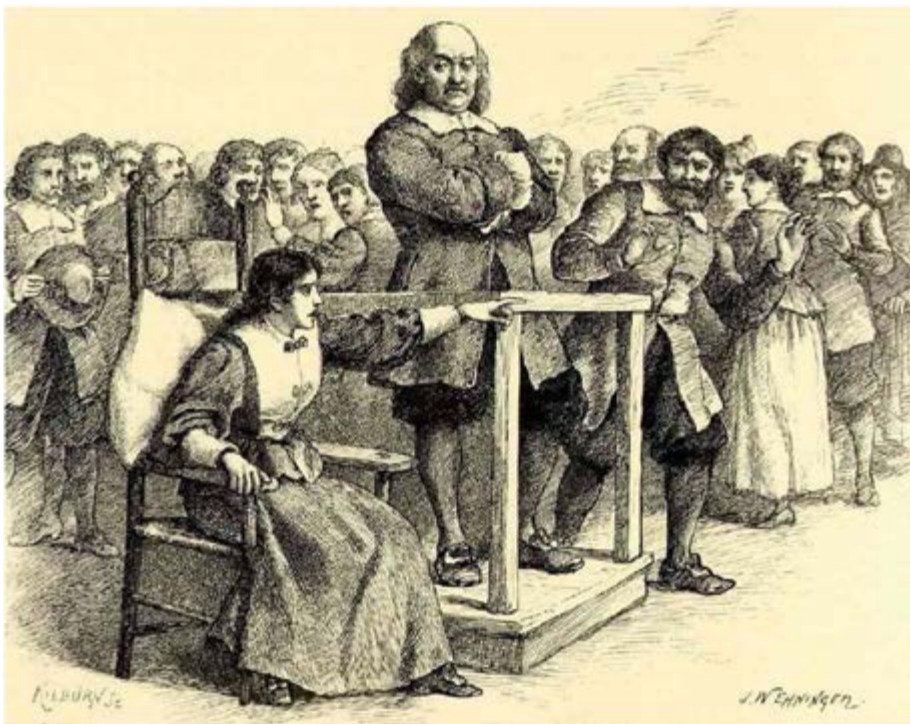
abuse, and especially of those who are traditionally disempowered in our society) are essential to uphold.

“I do not know if this person was a good fit for residency in the community—it sounds to me as if quite likely not right now, based on some of the discomfort I heard expressed. This is something that could have come out through our usual, inclusive, transparent community process.

“However, contemplating my role in all of this, I feel ashamed that I went along with and even abetted how this unfolded. I believe we fell prey to some major pitfalls of group process and collective fear, including an inherent desire to make complex, confusing situations more black-and-white, and also an unconscious impulse to project our worst fears onto people without checking in on the actual realities, without getting all sides of the stories.

“I backed down on feedback that I was trying to give, after getting pushback; my desire to be ‘part of the group’ and to believe in others’ good sense overrode some of my own core feelings about what was happening. I suppressed some of my misgivings and compromised my integrity partly out of my desire to ‘please,’ to not be shunned, to not provoke more negative reactions, to be a ‘team player.’ The direction of our discussions seemed to have already become a freight train that I was powerless to slow down, and in order to avoid being tossed off the train, I too became someone wanting to justify the direction of that train.

“I feel as if I have now had an experience that explains to me how some of the most shocking things in history happened—although fortunately in this case the result was not burning at the stake, lynching, or lifelong imprisonment without trial, but instead just a 24-hour ‘you need to leave’ notice to someone who’d never been questioned about any of the accusations. This was accompanied by a letter to campus (whose contents I was equally guilty of giving a stamp of approval to) that was quite convincing (at least to me) but that did not reflect many elements of the actual reality of the situation as I had come to understand them



through our discussions and through other experiences. I believe some of its phrasing implied a much more 'solid,' verified, more serious case than actually existed objectively, and evoked some of the same fears that overtook the group in what became, to me, a rush to judgment.

"The result in my experience was a dehumanization and demonization of the person required to leave, based on a process and set of 'evidence' that I am quite sure would never pass the 'sniff test' in a court of law.

"I don't think I ever before understood how something like, for example, the Salem Witch Trials could have unfolded—or at least I thought that certainly I could never be part of such a thing. Through this experience, I realized that I **could** have been, under enough social pressure (whether internally or externally generated) and enough collective fear. Thankfully, as I said, the result was a far, far milder version of what happened then, or under McCarthyism, or as a result of the kind of thinking and speech (also appealing to fear more than impartially-considered evidence, fully explored) that has resulted in MAGA-inspired violence.

"My 'aha' moment arrived when I recognized that, throughout the entire process leading to the delivery of 24-hour notice and a "red flag," three psychics were consulted, two dreams were cited as providing guidance or confirmation, and yet the object of all this focus was never talked to about any of those things listed in the letter explaining the action.

"I believe 'psychics' are far more apt to pick up on and reflect back the energies/feelings of the person talking with them than to pick up on the objective 'truth' about some faraway person or event. Likewise, I believe that once one forgets the insight that 'every person in a dream is actually a facet of oneself'—rather than necessarily an accurate representation of the person apparently being dreamed about—one can fall prey to the same capacity for projection of the 'self' onto the 'other' that allows us to project many things onto many people—things that originate not in them, but in us.

"We are not the only ones who project our realities and our inner selves onto other people. When we forget that, and even forget that we ourselves do it, and our desire to be part of a group (or another internal factor) overrides our own ability to bring impartiality and fairness to looking at a situation, such things as the Salem Witch Trials do unfold."

I ended by advocating revising our policies and understandings about how to handle complaints, to better balance the dual needs of confidentiality and transparency. I subsequently followed up with one of the "experts" consulted by the original small group and received some advice which apparently (if they'd heard it at all) had been overridden by other advice they'd received. This new advice rang much more true for me, and if enacted, it could help restore my trust in our community, and in community in general:

"I think the current culture really emphasizes believing the accuser along with painting people as all good or all bad. ... The person accused has to have a chance to explain their actions. Even when there is the potential for lashing out, you can create safe ways for people to understand what they have been accused of and to offer their interpretation of it. ... I think it's very important for the accused to know who the accuser is. It's understandable that they may not want their name out in public but it is incredibly unfair to hide from the person who harmed you. Can you imagine digging through your every interaction to try to guess if you've hurt someone? ... The accuser has to put some 'skin in the game.' They are responsible for what happens to the people they accuse. ... I know people going through trauma can be short-sighted, and that's why you have responsible leaders who are thinking of everyone's well-being."

I'm hoping for some positive changes, catalyzed by this latest challenging episode, so that my faith in community, as well as my faith in myself as a communitarian, can return more fully. 🍷

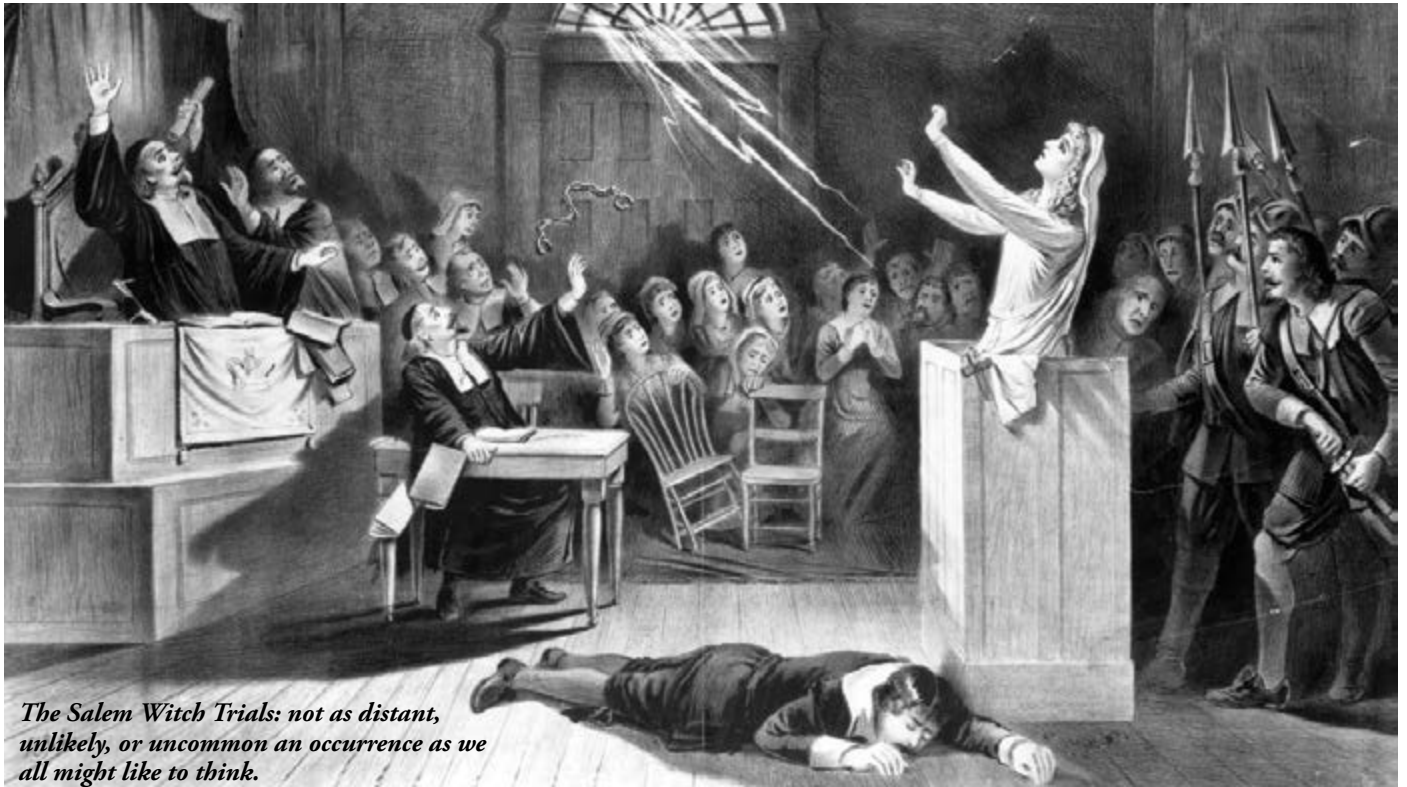
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**I don't think I ever before understood how something like, for example, the Salem Witch Trials could have unfolded—or at least I thought that certainly I could never be part of such a thing. Through this experience, I realized that I could have been, under enough social pressure and enough collective fear.**

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*Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES. He is still on an extended hiatus from his home community while sheltering-in-place with family in Oberlin, Ohio.*

# Testing the Faith



*The Salem Witch Trials: not as distant, unlikely, or uncommon an occurrence as we all might like to think.*

**I**n this issue on Faith in Community, some authors have addressed their personal faith (and/or loss thereof) in intentional community itself; others have described the benefits and challenges of living in religious faith-based communities; and others have fallen somewhere in between, blending the pragmatic and the secular with the spiritual in their treatment of the theme. Whether the resulting set of stories strikes you as a disparate grab-bag or a cohesive whole may depend on your own experience of “faith.” We welcome any feedback.

As I was assembling these stories, I received a message from a reader that very much pertained to the “personal faith in community” aspect of our theme. As a result, with permission of the author, most of this “Notes from the Editor” column, shuttled to the back of this magazine because of its length, is given over to these “Notes to the Editor” (abridged and reformatted for ease of reading).

• • •

**F**unny that your next issue addresses Faith in Community. My own faith in community has recently been shaken profoundly. I don’t think it has entirely vanished, but I do know that I intend to approach any future group deliberation and decision-making with a lot more wariness and hopefully aware-

ness than I have in the past.

For a long time I have believed in “group wisdom,” “collective intelligence”—the idea that together, we can come up with better insights and outcomes than any of us can achieve on our own. This is why I’ve often trusted group process even when I’ve found it challenging in the short term: time and again, I’ve sensed that decisions we reached together actually better addressed the situation than my own personal viewpoints, ideas, and proposals would have if simply imposed on the collective.

A single individual’s outlook can almost never incorporate the complexity of a shared reality. Everyone’s voices and participation are needed to arrive at what works best for the whole. I still actually believe this is true. But I also think it depends on how we define “everyone.”

If “everyone” means a small or insular group which achieves a single-minded purpose, meanwhile overriding some of the individual yet essential viewpoints and values of people both within and outside of that group, then the resulting “solution” is not necessarily better than one suggested by a lone voice. In fact, it can be far worse and more dangerous.

Instead of pooling our best wisdom and insights, which may never have emerged without hearing one another’s reflections, we can also, in a group, tap into and amplify one another’s

*(continued on p. 64)*

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2021 • Issue #190 • Supplement

[gen-us.net/190.1](http://gen-us.net/190.1)

**The Queen, the Gardener, and Me**  
**Community Events: The “We” of “Me”**  
**Life Project 4 Youth**  
**College-Based Senior Cohousing**

**Note from the Editor:** To accompany our Faith in Community print edition of COMMUNITIES, we’ve created this separate digital supplement containing four articles, available free to anyone for online viewing and/or download and printing. These articles are less theme-specific than the rest of the issue’s articles. We welcome new readers who may be seeing only this digital supplement, and hope you’ll seek out the main issue (available in both print and digital versions) and consider subscribing at [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities). Thank you!

Photo by Richard Getler



# The Queen, the Gardener, and Me: Reflections on Community-Forming Processes

*By Elizabeth Barr*



Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Barr

A few years ago I had the intriguing opportunity to study, observe, and “join” two very different communities at the same event site, while simultaneously going back and forth between them and the mainstream culture where I had been living for the previous few years. It was a fascinating exercise in watching groups form, or try to form, and highlighted important parts of the process.

## **The Queen (residential summer camp)**

That spring and summer, I worked for a youth agency summer camp. My title there was Camp Director, but during our last session when we used a medieval theme, I reigned as the Queen. It’s the same camp where I spent every summer as a child, had been on staff in the past, and was even director once before, five years previous. With the gap between the first time and the more recent year, though, it was a lot like starting from scratch. We had almost all entirely new people on staff as camp counselors in the new season, and in many of the supporting

roles, too, such as cook and nurse. In order to provide a great summer camp experience for the children, it’s critical that camp staff be able to depend on one another and work together exceptionally well, so we were faced with trying to bring cohesion, interdependence, and trust to a group of complete strangers within the brief few days of pre-camp training we had available. At the same time, we also needed to teach the staff all the camp skills they would need, such as cooking meals over an open fire, organizing canoe trips, teaching arts and crafts and nature, and managing a group of children 24/7 in a small group similar to many families. There was a lot of transformational change to be done, both personal and systemic, and only a short amount of time to do it.

## **The Gardener (LARP group)**

Live Action Role Play (LARP) was new to me that year and I was introduced to it when a LARP group arranged to rent the camp facility. In case you aren’t already familiar, imagine the





classic Dungeons & Dragons fantasy board game, but come to life. It's almost like Jumanji, only better. Throughout the spring and summer seasons, once a month, a weekend-only "small village" of warriors, tavern keepers, adventurers, bards, and various monsters would descend on the camp and play together in a storyline set up and managed by the King. My role in this group initially was as camp host during the summer, but as we entered the fall, I joined this village in the role of gardener.

### And Me (my "normal" life in town)

Occasionally on weekends between sessions at camp or when the LARP group was not having an event, I would return to my regular life to check the mail, pay some bills, visit with my housemate, feed the cats, and read the newspaper. It was surreal and I began to wonder—what is the "real" world, anyway? This certainly didn't feel like it.

As the weeks turned into months, some common issues crystallized. The need for common values that lead to a shared core mission, a sense of place and naming, and defined roles and leadership—each of these manifested both individually and comparatively.

### Need for Common Values that Lead to a Shared Core Mission

Even with a clearly identified leader to help organize the big picture, and people ready to work in all the individual roles, a group will still stumble if the reason for its existence is not clearly defined. A clear vision and measurable goals planned out in achievable smaller pieces provide the first key steps necessary to make progress towards realizing the big dream.

The organizational mission of our camp was in a transitional period, and had been for several years, and this was sadly all too apparent that summer. Some staff had the goal of "Let's party at camp!" and their work towards that goal often directly con-

flicted with those who had a primary objective of "help young children have a great experience while learning in the outdoors." The focus is different, inward or outward, and the outcome follows—either using up or building up. The year-round program was having a similar identity crisis, starting even from the basic question of should we try to rent the camp year-round, or not? The lack of an agreed goal resulted in awkward meetings, plans changing midstream and last-minute, ongoing gossip, undermining behaviors, low rate of camper enrollment and volunteer support, and general uncertainty about our finances and even our future as an organization.

The small city where I lived was facing a similar identity crisis, with the main question being: do we want to stay small and rural or focus on growth to become larger and more urban? There were vocal supporters for both sides, complete with protests in the streets and sternly worded editorials in the newspaper. Should we have more alcohol sold, or less? A new prison built, or not? A sporting complex or a farmers' market? The list goes on, but the lack of a shared vision for the city was clear.

The LARP group, in noticeable contrast, did not suffer from these same problems. The big group mission is clear: set up a LARP event every month and play ingame with friends. The smaller missions were equally clear: our small group will capture this monster or rescue that lost child or find the fabulous treasure. In nearly every interaction, everyone was clear on the goal and shared it. The general mood of the group was noticeably different, too, as they were upbeat and happy and friendly with each other. When faced with an issue, either ingame or out, they approached it together with a cooperative problem-solving mindset. They were not wasting any energy on "what should we do?" because they are already knew. Instead, they were focused entirely on "how shall we do it?" and they did it together.

### Sense of Place and Naming

Names have power—and the act of naming, as well. From earliest times, people have drawn maps, identified people and places, and given names to all; the same was true in all three places I spent time that summer. Camp cabins and trails and buildings all had names, some with important meanings (The Director's Cabin) and others with simple identification (Hill Cabin 1). Somehow, magically, the place was transformed simply by changing a name during a weekend LARP event. While summer camp just had a Kitchen, the LARP group had a Tavern—certainly more fun and a whole new reality was created just by the name. No matter that the same kind of work was being done in the exact same location, using the same equipment and the same supplies—nonetheless, everything was different.

Likewise, at home, I was dismayed by how much energy our household put into the question of what to call the room with the computer stuff in it? Is it an Office? Perhaps not, since we don't have a business. Maybe the Library? Since we keep our books mostly in our bedrooms, probably not that either. Since we'd been homeschooling several years, maybe it was the School Room or the Study? Again, the actual equipment, supplies, and work being done would be the same—but we were spending an excessive amount of energy deciding what to call the place!

And that's the easy part, since buildings and trees and rooms don't care what you call them. When my son decided to join the LARP group, we spent many hours (many!) of careful research and numerous considerations before he developed a name that he wanted to use. I would soon learn that this is very common and some people take years before settling on a LARP name that sticks with them long-term. Many people have gone through a similar process when choosing a name for themselves as an adult in the "real world" or when selecting a name for a new baby. The urge to name and identify people and places, even down to very small details of spelling or name order and reasons for selection, was evident in all three groups, and no wonder, since naming is one part of addressing the big questions of "who am I?" and "why am I here?" that we all share.

### Defined Roles and Leadership

At home, in the city life, it is fairly easy to completely separate roles internally, if you want to. You may go to work each day as a machinist or accountant, but you can leave that role at work, unless you deliberately choose to bring work home or tell people about your career. And, if you do eventually leave that job, your departure will be hardly noticed, or at most only briefly. Millions of people are actively seeking work today and a new person can soon be in your place. The business world is based on Positions, not people.

In the smaller communities of camp and LARP, though, it was not so easy. Each role was as well-defined as in any business, with a job description or character development sheet, but in many cases, only one specific person filling a position, with no back-up and no quick, easy replacement. If the Crafts Director were not hired or were absent one day, that entire activity area would suffer, with the rest of the camp soon to follow. If the Wizard did not come to the LARP event one weekend, all those adventurers who were counting on her spells for protection must adapt with other plans. In either case, the group was depending on the specific individual in an immediate way that I did not feel in my city life.

These differences led me to feel either too burdened or entirely inconsequential, depending on where I was. As Queen (or leader or boss), the weight of constant responsibility for many other people can begin to feel like a burden, even if you are well suited for the work and generally enjoy it. In stark contrast is the city, where my life as a cog-in-the-machine droned on, unnoticed and unremarkable. As the gardener in the LARP village, though, I found a perfect balance. My work was important, but not incessantly unending, and my days passed by easily, as other people in the village stopped by to pick up some herbs or leave a message for me to pass to someone else. I was involved, and mattered, but in a way that was balanced within the larger community. Of course I realize it was all pretend, "just a game," but yet the LARP group felt far more "real" to me than either of the others.

I look back tenderly at my younger self, who thought that everyone could (and should) help with everything, so that life would be "fair" and no one person would have an undue influence on the group. I have mostly given up on that type of imag-

ined equality and have come to a different understanding of and respect for how defined roles and different types of leadership can help a group work together well. I strongly believe that each person has an aptitude to excel at something...the trick is to figure out what, very precisely. Then, when each is doing their own work at a high level, everyone benefits together through interdependence.

Overall, the LARP group seemed to be "doing community" best. Their group size was small enough to be effective, but also large enough to be stable, and most people knew most of the other people, at least somewhat. Their mission was clear, their goals were defined and achievable, and everyone chose the work and role that suited them best, but helped the community at the same time. It's no wonder that of these three groups, I felt most at home with the LARPerS, even though we had just recently met, because they reminded me the most of my years in intentional community. The LARP may be set up as a game in a temporary village once a month, but the group work and communication skills they used and the environment they were creating was the kind of real community that I craved.

Going back and forth between the summer camp life, the LARP environment, and the home life in town was thought-provoking and entertaining. After I noticed a few similarities here and there, I started actively looking for common themes and was delighted at how quickly they became so obvious. I think it's wonderful that ideas about group dynamics and cooperative living, and the skills for developing community, are so transferable to groups of all sizes, in different types of places, whether temporary or permanent, old or new, or any other variation. Even if fate brings us to leave the residential community that was our goal, we can continue working wherever we end up with real hope toward real community, even if it looks different than we expected. 🌸

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*Elizabeth Barr lived at Acorn Community ([www.acorncommunity.org](http://www.acorncommunity.org)) in Louisa, Virginia during its early forming years and still misses both Acorn, specifically, and the dream of rural intentional community very much. For more information about her writing projects, please see [www.BigThicketBooks.com](http://www.BigThicketBooks.com).*



# Community Events: The “We” of “Me”

By Greg Sherwin



*Boulder Creek Community meeting.*

Photos courtesy of Greg Sherwin

**W**hat is the meaning of community? In the 14 years since I created Boulder Creek Community, I have wondered about and explored the answer to this question.

One thing that has become clearer to me is that community arises out of each community member’s willingness and intention to transform their relationship with other community members from “me” to “we.”

What do I mean by “me” and “we”?

In our busy American culture, we each are consumed with many daily choices and/or commitments and responsibilities to take care of, at least, “me.”

I am aware of three types of communities that draw us from the “me” to the “we”:

**1. The Family Community:** If we have taken on the responsibility of caring for our families, we have engaged in the “we” journey. If all goes well, it is a love-based community. Our active history of family participation together is a foundation for this community experience. It becomes a community based on necessity since we take on responsibilities of care for others whether we like it or not.

**2. The Work Community:** If we each have taken on the responsibility of working for others or employing others in our

own business venture, we enter into another “we” community. This community is often a money-based community where we each help each other to make money so that we can survive and, hopefully, thrive. In these communities, truly caring for others and being cared about by others is often a bonus. It is a community based on financial necessity.

**3. The Volunteer Community:** A third type of “we” community could be described as a “volunteer” community. It is based more on willingness and intention, because necessity is often lacking. Most cohousing and some other intentional communities fit into this category. Participation is optional and voluntary. These are often communities of friends who share proximity and/or, hopefully, a common larger service purpose and/or pleasure, such as meals, entertainment, discussion topics, and/or co-creating something of mutual interest such as a community garden. Boulder Creek Community falls into this category of community living.

I will focus below on this third “volunteer”-based community.

This willingness to volunteer begins with a growing personal commitment of each community member to take responsibility, and to be accountable, for the well-being of others (we) as well as for themselves (me).

While any individual can unilaterally begin this “we” journey

by bringing some attention also to the well-being of other community members, the experience of a collective community takes root when this responsibility and caring action is reciprocated by other community members. It is a give and receive process.

What is the evidence that this transformation from “me” to the community “we” is happening in a volunteer community?

**The Invitation:** I have learned that an early indicator that community is happening is when one or more members volunteer to create community events in service to the highest good of themselves and others in the community. Serving meals, sharing ideas, and working together on projects of common interest are some examples of community initiatives from one or more community members.

**The Response:** However, until other community members respond in a responsible, proactive, and caring way, the invitation initiative soon withers. Community is a function of participation. Participation is a function of responding and, when committed, showing up to the invited event or activity. Proactively responding, at least with gratitude for the invitation and the effort that the community member put in to create the community event is an important foundation for community creation. Taking responsibility to say “yes” or “no,” along with an expression of gratitude, such as “Thank you,” to an invitation encourages more community invitation initiatives by volunteer community members.

Saying “yes” is an implied promise and commitment to show up to the event commitment. Regardless of other subsequent, more attractive invitations or personal-interest preferences that may arise after saying yes to an invitation, each community member valuing their yes as a strong personal commitment to participate is another foundation to a successful volunteer community. It is supported by the integrity and intention of each person who says yes to show up to the event, regardless of other subsequent opportunities to do other things that may occur.

This “yes” commitment and promise has some implied or expressed flexibility to it. For example, emergencies and unfore-

seen circumstances, such as an auto breakdown or sickness, are usually reasonable pre-agreed exceptions to showing up after a “yes” response to an invitation. These exceptional emergencies rarely happen.

**Taking Responsibility:** The key discernment that distinguishes a joint (we) “changed agreement (to show up)” from a unilateral (me) “broken agreement” declaration to the host lies in willingness of the guest to ask the host for an agreement change, combined with a complete willingness to keep the commitment to show up IF the host is not willing, for any reason, to change the agreement that was previously entered into by saying “yes.” Any community that collectively agrees to this standard of commitment to their “yes” agreements is more likely to form closer community bonds of trust and caring as well as having more successful events.

**A Proactive “We” Participation Option:** The next optional level of community-building opportunity, for any community guest to an event, is to take personal responsibility for consciously looking for creative ways to support the success of the community event in service to the highest good of all of the participants. This level of individual commitment generally contributes to the success of the event. More importantly, it generally adds to the enjoyment and value of the community guest who is making such contributions. The attitude of these volunteer “we” event participants would be “How can I contribute to what is possible for this event?” both for myself and for the other participants.

This proactive “we” community event participation is beyond simply being willing to show up and waiting to be entertained by the event host or passively hoping that something personally meaningful will happen to make the time worthwhile for “me.” I can optionally show up with the commitment and intention to contribute to the event “we” possibility by actively looking for ways to help the community event be more meaningful to everyone as well as “me.” This is a “we” heart and a “we” mentality. It is an important ingredient for any volunteer community to survive and thrive.

**Self-Awareness and Self-Management:** Sometimes, this in-



*Boulder Creek Community  
outdoor summer concert.*

tention to serve the “we” community puts each of us in the uncomfortable position of noticing and, hopefully, sharing with the group our emerging personal states of inner dissonance about being present in that event at that moment.

This inner dissonance may take the form of a mental state of resistance, confusion, or boredom about what is happening, or may happen, in the community event. It may be the result of a personal state of hunger, fatigue, or physical discomfort. It may trigger associated inner feelings of frustration, anxiety, or sadness. These inner dissonance states of being represent an inner demand for more “me” attention. When this inner experience arises, the more I resist my “me” needs, the more it persists and increases my discomfort and disconnect from the other community members attending the event.

What do we do when this inner dissonance shows up in any one or more of us before or during a community event?

The answer to this question may be the most important personal-growth and community-building opportunity that each of us can experience and share as individuals and as a community. It is an intimate, in-the-moment, truth-telling opportunity. It is a wonderful way of concurrently taking care of my inner “me” demands and contributing to my “we” intention of service to the event and the other participants.

The transformation from my inner “me” dissonant disturbances back to my intended “we” level of community engagement involves a personal and hopefully collective **practice** of self-awareness and communication with the community.

At any community event each of us has the opportunity, at any time, to engage in this practice of authentic, intimate “me” sharing as needed to help bring ourselves back to full engagement in the intended community event possibility.

However, if we are not used to proactively embracing and sharing our uncomfortable inner experience of “me” needs with self or others, it takes courage and practice for any one community member to initiate this uncomfortable “me”-focused conversation, especially when it seems to be an interruption to the intended focus and energy field of the community event.

A pre-agreed community commitment to interrupt any community event, at any time, to honor any community member’s expression of inner dissonance can set a safer stage of opportunity for a dissonant “me” communication to be stated at any time during the event.

This agreement to interrupt a “we” event with a “me” communication can include an understanding and established agreement within the community that this “me” communication can, with practice in responsible communication, be brief and not become a therapy session. It is not the responsibility of the community to fix any individual’s “me” dissonance issues which may have a prior history of trauma. Just listening, without judgment, and simply being with one person’s declaration of inner dissonance, with loving kindness and compassion, is often enough to be supportive, in service to the individual and the whole community.

All feelings, fully felt (and responsibly communicated), lead, with practice, to loving. It is here that the “me” and the “we” energies fully merge in service to the highest good of the community and the community event.

**The Question Is...** What standards of community engagement are we, as volunteer community members, willing to personally and collectively commit to? 🐦

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*Greg Sherwin is founder of Boulder Creek Community in Boulder, Colorado (see [bouldercreekcommunity.com](http://bouldercreekcommunity.com)).*

## From “Me” to “We”

My awareness of the “me” to “we” community engagement possibilities arise out of my personal life journey from a life-long successful “me” focus to an emerging, sometimes struggling, “we” focus through my choosing to create and then participate in our volunteer Boulder Creek Community for the past 14 years.

In writing this article I became aware that I was describing my personal journey and my ongoing practice of learning how to not only honor my well-established “me” response to life but also explore and include more “we” focus in my life. As I often remind myself, “Suspensions of others arise from knowledge of oneself (me)”; or, “We teach what we most need to learn.” I personally live with the challenges stated in this article as I strive to become more of a “we” person. I often fail in my attempts. I know this when I become emotionally attached to having outcomes that satisfy “me,” such as receiving appreciation for my efforts and having people keep their agreements to show up to my events. Both the “me” and the “we” of me wrote this article.

My personal transformation started in 2006 with a vision quest that drew me toward commencing a personal exploration about the meaning of community living and sharing. That vision quest first led me to visit 55 cohousing and intentional communities, in

my VW Eurovan, with the wonderful help of my FIC Communities Directory. Failing to find a community-living fit for my life partner, Chrissy, and me in Boulder, Colorado, we decided to start a community in the existing Gold Run condominium project where we were living. I describe it as a cohousing community implant into a much larger, existing, well-located, urban, condo complex. We welcome both renters and owners. Most of our revolving-door members have been renters. A few became owners. We learned to collectively reinvent our community vision each summer after the new community renters arrive and begin to express their emerging community-living values with the existing members. Having an existing HOA to wrestle with the external “property” and “rules” decisions, we are free to explore our “we” and “me” relationship more fully in our limited volunteer time together. I and other BCC members have served on this five-member HOA board for the past 10 years to maintain a voice in those external decisions.

My vision statement is, “This being human is a playground for the unfoldment of the soul, for learning to lovingly accept what is, while adventuring toward what is possible, in community with others.”

I write this article in honor my life partner, Chrissy...the “we” of “me,” my love mentor.

—GS

# Cultivating Community in the Neighborhood: Life Project 4 Youth

By Camille Bru

*All the Youth from the training program  
in March 2020, Hlaing Thar Yar.*



Photos courtesy of Camille Bru

**H**laing Thar Yar, Yangon, Myanmar: one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of the poorest countries in the world. This is where I settled down for a year. When I arrived, I was a bit concerned about the possibility of connecting and feeling at home, so far away from everything I have ever known. To put things back in their context, in February 2020, I joined the international community of Life Project 4 Youth. LP4Y is an organization that sends professionals to volunteer all around Asia to support young adults from excluded backgrounds and guide them on their professional integration journey. When one joins the LP4Y's family, (s)he signs up for a challenge and a different experience, be it the youths who join the programs or the volunteers.

LP4Y aims to support excluded young adults (from slums or rural areas, with disabilities, orphans, etc.) aged 18 to 24 in their professional integration through a soft-skills training lasting three to nine months. Using a learning-by-doing method, the youth learn how to be reliable professionals, become profi-

cient in English, acquire basic computer skills, make a resume, and master a job interview. At the end, they exit the daily work-poverty spiral to enter the decent professional world, in which they will have a contract, some benefits, insurance, a decent salary, and more. We volunteers all have different backgrounds, but we have all looked for a job at some point and know how to behave professionally. We are not teachers; we are there to empower the youth and give them the tools they need to reach their full potential. We work together with them on their personal development and on their life project plan—they may need to start at the bottom of the ladder, but they set goals for themselves and imagine their lives in a different future where they can support their family in a better way. Some of them find work in hotels, international companies, shops, malls, places where they never before imagined to set foot.

As I walk through the crowded, colorful, and scented market, familiar faces smile as I greet them: "Mingalaba!" This always brightens the atmosphere and often engages lively discussions,



*Family visit in a nearby village, for the recruitment of new youth.*



*A busy market street in Yangon, Myanmar.*



*Ei Ei Theint and her family.*



*Nan Lone Hlaing with her Aunt and her cousins.*

most of which I have no clue about, but I feel included and part of a community—my neighborhood community.

As part of the experience and to connect with the excluded populations we work with, LP4Y made the choice to install all its training centers in the poorest areas of the big cities in Asia, close to the slums and where the living conditions are the most difficult. The volunteers (also known as catalysts) live close by and are encouraged to bond with the local population and to live as simply as possible. This enables them to understand the circumstances of the youth they work with and to gain the trust of the locals. It is true that if we were to live in a fancy flat in a high-end neighborhood, we would not be so credible in our job. So how do we create a sense of community in such conditions?

“Mingalaba, Cami!” shouts Ouma, the lady in the market from whom we volunteers buy our veggies. Since I arrived, we have gotten to know each other. She cannot read or write, but she is sharp and can communicate with me in highly creative ways. It took us about three weeks to learn each other’s names (we had

to agree on short nicknames to ease the process). With every Burmese lesson, I come to her with new questions and new vocabulary. She is a patient teacher even if I, most of the time, don’t understand her answers to my tentative questions. We laugh and share great moments. She teaches me the names of the various vegetables, she introduces me to all her friends and family members, and she always seems happy to see me, which makes me even more excited about going. This is one example, but the fruit seller, the coconut lady, the egg seller, the fabrics shopkeeper, the street food vendor, and all the familiar faces make this market feel like home. Because even though we don’t understand each other, “we all smile in the same language!” I thought that the language would be a barrier for my integration, but in such a different context, I feel less shy and more open to laugh at myself. People tend to laugh when they hear our French accent destroying their language, but laughing creates bonds and a bit of self-derision is always good! Using body language has become a second nature to make ourselves understood.

As part of our work, we visit the slums to create networks within the local communities. We mime our way around and invite young adults to consider a different future by joining the training program. We try to become mirrors for the people we meet, questioning them about their daily lives, their families, their work, their schooling, the things they like to do for fun. Although the communication is not always fluid, there are always many deep sharing moments that make the effort worthwhile. Most of these people have never seen anyone interested in their stories before and being there and listening to them is a first step to their integration. We also visit the families of the youth we work with. This creates a great link between the training center and the local community. We are called catalysts because as in a chemical reaction, one simple element can provoke a big reaction. We are like the stone thrown in the lake; we create the ripple effect. By creating a sense of community around our training centers, we create a general reaction. We try to be the extra push that the excluded community needs to spread its wings and become fully integrated in the decent professional world. It turns out that this youth knows that shopkeeper who knows this business, and that creates a chain reaction in the community. They teach and inspire each other to challenge themselves and fight for a better future.

This is what a neighborhood community can do in the slums

of Yangon, Manila, Delhi, or anywhere in the world really. We are shy to meet our neighbors in our own countries; we don't feel legitimate; we feel awkward because talking to strangers on the street can be seen as unusual, maybe offensive, and people are not ready to share their thoughts with us. But with some practice and a big open heart, there is no reason not to try. This may not change the whole world, but it may change one person's world, and that's why we catalysts love what we do and LP4Y has been doing it for the past 11 years! 🌈

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*Camille Bru writes: "After working for eight years in the pharmaceutical industry, I decided to follow my heart and my values to live a simpler life and bring meaning into my work. That's how I joined Life Project 4 Youth Myanmar (LP4Y—[en.lp4y.org](http://en.lp4y.org)) in 2020 after two years of community permaculture and nature work at Richmond Vale Academy in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. I can hardly stay in one place; sitting still is not really my thing! From the South West Corner of France, a little place where my heart always returns known as 'Colleignes,' I have wandered to amazing places, met incredible people, learned different ways of life, different cultures, different languages. And with every trip, either to settle down or as a visitor, close or far, in the next remote village, a megalopolis, or on a farm in the middle of nowhere, I have been practicing creativity by taking hundreds, even thousands of photos, and writing some articles for my blog."*



*Community visit in a nearby village.*



# College-Based Senior Cohousing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come



Photos courtesy of Charles Durrett

You need to build strong healthy relationships in good times, so you are ready for times such as these. And preferably relationships in a community that is very proximate—like a village—with common dinners, common workdays, common problems to solve, tai chi, common gardening, book clubs, yoga, and just plain discussing the issues of the day...you know, old-fashioned village-making, so when the s#\*t hits the fan, like COVID-19, community is in place! At Nevada City Cohousing, we get together each night at 7 pm to drum, even if it's on

the bottom of a five gallon plastic bucket, though we *do* have a great rhythm section with real drums!

We meet each other at the circle, drum, and then say good-night after we are done, which is particularly important to those who live alone. Social distancing, not social isolation!

While Nevada City Cohousing exercises extreme caution sheltering in place, in late summer we began having meetings in a 20 ft. round outdoor circle, about 7.5 ft. away from each other in the circumference, even sharing a few common meals in the

outdoor distancing circle. And thus we create some continuity in community, each day; to do yoga around the pool, harvest the gardens, and connect through group circle drumming just before dark at the “blue hour,” when moods can easily turn blue, and sometimes do. We do this to say hello one more time today, and to say goodnight.

• • •

Historically, “aging in place” meant that seniors spent their elder years in the home where they had lived and raised their children, and where extended family members could care for them. Families remained close by and often daughters or sons would stay at home to take care of their aging parents.

Back then—when we enjoyed close-knit ties with family, community, and place—nursing homes or caretaking facilities for the elderly were a foreign concept to most of the population. People would age in place within the community where they had built their lives and relationships; it was the natural thing to do.

In today’s world, few of us enjoy the luxury of that type of support network. Society is increasingly mobile, as a result of work and other pressures. As family members and friends move across the state, the country, or the globe, we find ourselves say-

ing goodbye more often, and those close, supportive relationships are not easily replaced.

These changes have led to a growing awareness of senior cohousing as an alternative housing model for active adults to successfully age in place. With over 150 cohousing projects built in the US, 20 of them for seniors, this form of community is well established as a custom high-functioning neighborhood. Senior cohousing is an ideal place for aging in place in community. For most seniors successful aging means maintaining control over their own lives, and Baby Boomers are redefining what it means to age successfully. As 70-plus million Baby Boomers reach their golden years, they are creating higher demand for affordable senior housing options that support an active lifestyle in a sustainable way.

College-Based Community Development is a future emerging trend among the retirement options available that allow for successful aging in place. College-Based Alumni Senior Cohousing is a trend in retirement communities for active adults that allows retiring alumni to engage in a lifelong exchange with their alma maters that significantly enhances the college community and the quality of life in higher learning institutions. This is a beneficial exchange for students, alumni, their families and friends, and ultimately for society at large. These retirees come to college towns with friends and family; some also bring



their continuing business interests with them. They are looking for ways to continue to have purpose and meaning in their lives and tend to be good tutors.

The connection between campus improvement and retirees may not seem obvious, but in reality they have a lot in common. Just as matured salmon return to their place of origin, it makes sense for retirees to return to where they came of age—their college communities. In addition, many elders are interested in moving back to college towns because of the active lifestyle and amenities they provide. College-based alumni senior cohousing communities can provide seniors access to continuing education, college events, facilities, and in some cases hospitals and campus transportation.

Likewise, universities benefit from the presence of the retirees. Retiring alumni contribute to the campus by volunteering, offering their professional experience and perspectives in the academic arena, as well as advising and attending cultural and athletic programs. Financially, the development of senior cohousing opens opportunities for the university beyond those of real estate investment; it also facilitates the creation of jobs and college growth. In addition to building stronger relationships with alumni, it keeps them connected with current students and programs, and as an added benefit, their career accomplishments provide inspiration for the student body. It all feels a little more like a village rather than just another institution.

Universities across the country have embraced the idea of associating themselves with retirement communities and found that there is considerable demand for senior housing near campuses. By associating themselves with these projects they can derive great returns, especially in strengthening alumni relations, while also enhancing campus life.

College-based alumni senior cohousing is the perfect model for active adults seeking housing within college communities. It promotes an active lifestyle and encourages continuous learning. Unlike assisted care, or even independent living, senior cohousing puts elders in charge of their own lives and focuses on

making the second half of life fun and engaging, while providing for their specific changing needs. Residents are especially complementary for a college or university and their towns because they are lively people who want to be part of an intergenerational environment where they can contribute to their college's culture. Senior cohousing can be created in the communities of institutions of higher learning, providing the basis for more diversified, educational, healthy, active, and sustainable college culture.

This will most certainly broaden yet again the possibilities for people to reside in a village setting where they know each other, care about each other, support each other, and are much more connected to not only each other, but also to the earth and the broader townscape. There is no better way to make a village than the cohousing concept. See *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities* and *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living*. There is nothing like impatient future residents to make it happen, and there is nothing like future residents who need it to be affordable to keep it in fact of affordable. Stillwater, Oklahoma is a good hometown/university example. The university took over 20 years to develop a very mediocre senior “community.” The Oakcreek Senior Cohousing (Stillwater) group took three years to develop a state-of-the-art community, where the love for each other and the earth is palpable. 🐦

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*A version of this article originally appeared in College Planning & Management.*

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*Quimper Village front porch.*



*Wolf Creek Lodge.*

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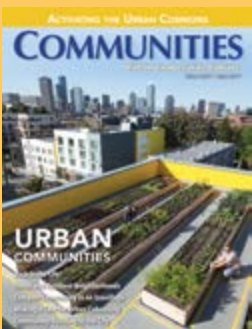
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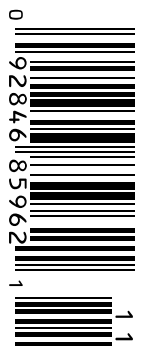
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